

Episode 79: Emily was caught as a drug mule

With the worldwide pandemic going on for the past year, chances are you haven't been traveling as much as you normally would. But think back to before Covid, and whenever you may have traveled outside of your home country. Maybe you flew to another country for business, or just for a vacation.

Like most countries, here in the US, we have a process you have to go through when you come back into the country. You have to talk with someone, and show them your passport, tell them where you've been and for how long. And you have to tell them what you're bringing back into the country.

This conversation makes some people really nervous. And I'm talking about people who haven't done anything wrong. Just being questioned can make some people uncomfortable. The US Customs and Border Patrol have even created a presentation to let travelers know what to expect, so people don't freak out.

CBP Audio

(Upbeat music) Welcome to the United States! US Customs and Border Protection officers take the arrival process very seriously. We are responsible for everyone's safety and security. Because security is so important, your immigration status may be subject to further review or you may have your baggage or personal items inspected. This is a routine process to ensure the integrity of our nation's immigration, customs, and agriculture laws. During every step you are free to ask questions of any of our officers. So let's get started. CBP wants to get you on your way.

A while back, we hosted some exchange students for a year, and they were from Ecuador. They're back in Ecuador now, and we've traveled there to visit them a few times. They're kind of like our second family.

But the weird thing is, I know that when we come back to the US, when I show my passport and the officer reads my name, there's gonna be a delay. My wife has to wait while I get shuttled off into a separate room for a secondary questioning, and the officers there look up some stuff on their computers. After about 45 minutes or so, they tell me I'm free to go. They never tell me any details about why I'm detained. I assume it's because someone with a similar name is on the no-fly list, or something. But it's kind of a stressful time until they tell me I'm clear, and I know I haven't even done anything wrong.

My guest today is Emily. She lives in Toronto, Canada. She was flying back home after spending some time in the Caribbean, and she too was subjected to questioning by Customs, and Immigration and Security. Like a lot of people, she was really stressed out by this process. But in Emily's case, she had a good reason to be stressed.

Strapped to her body was about \$150,000 worth of cocaine.

That was a bad day for her. She told me all about that, as well as how that experience led her to what she's doing today.

Scott

This whole thing started when you were running a social media company. What is that and what did you do?

Emily

What our social media did out of Toronto, Canada, was create content for businesses to use in their online platforms. Whether that was photography, video, even creating captions for them to help them reach their audience through social media, namely, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Scott

So those are the 3 primary ones, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Emily

Yeah, and TikTok wasn't out then so we didn't have to worry about that. (laughs)

Scott

Okay, and this involved traveling all around the world?

Emily

Yep it did. I traveled a lot for my personal life but then by traveling personally I was also able to meet so many people abroad so I would get contacts in places where I would travel and then do the work from Canada.

Scott

I've seen a lot of your stories online in videos and things, and it seems like this whole thing kind of started when you met a client named Noah.

Emily

Yep.

Scott

How did you first connect with Noah?

Emily

I met Noah through my social media company. His business had sent us a message saying, "We'd really like you to help us build out our business." I said, "Ok, well tell me some more about it." He did and then I went out and met him at his place of work. That was one thing I loved to do was get out there and go and meet people face to face. I find it's a huge asset and people don't do it enough, they want to do everything from the computer. Now it's a different circumstance, but that was something I loved to do because I felt it really personalized the relationship.

His business was buying and selling cars and also detailing them and putting on really unique paint colors. It was a different kind of business but it was cool and I liked it. They even had some race cars. I'm a car person so I liked going out there and seeing the new cars that were getting work done. It was cool. He's a really really nice guy.

Scott

You and Noah then developed past the client relationship?

Emily

Yeah we actually grew kind of close really fast. I was going through a personal challenge within my family and I was drinking a lot. He actually was one of my confidants in this and he knew that I was trying to- I don't want to say get on a better path because I wasn't on this road of criminality. I was drinking heavily and it was starting to affect my work and motivation. He actually told me that he had struggled in the past and that he had been sober, so I felt really close to him because of that. Living in Toronto I was a party girl. I still got my work done, I was highly functioning, but the people I would meet along the way would want me to go drink tequila with them and do drugs until 3 in the morning. So meeting someone like him, I thought he was someone of a little more substance than the people I was spending my time with at that time.

Scott

What made you think at some point that something was not quite right with him?

Emily

The first thing that wasn't quite right was that he kept lying about his personal life. First he said he was separated, then he said he was divorced and then he said I couldn't come to the business at certain times because his ex-wife was there. There were just too many mixed messages, but I kind of just put that aside.

Then he started getting me all these presents that I never asked for. Don't get me wrong I'm a girl and girls love presents, I mean everybody likes getting nice things from someone they are involved with. They were just things that I never really wanted. The first thing was like a sound system, and I lived in a tiny condo. I thought, "Okay, I already have my little condo-sized one, I don't know why you got me this." Then he got me dessert wine, which I never ever drink. In fact, I hated dessert wine. Then he also got me a Michael Kors watch, but there was no battery in it. So they were just very odd gifts to get.

Scott

Some guys just don't know how to buy gifts, but it was more than that with him?

Emily

Yeah, like he also helped me walk my dog when I had to be places and he would lend me cars when I had car problems. Eventually I ended up buying a car from him. He said, "Oh I found this really awesome car and I'll go in on it with you. Then we can fix it up and have it ready." So I actually gave him the money but never got the car. There was always something going on, like a flat tire, or something with the engine, or the ex-wife would be at the shop and I couldn't come.

By this point it was really starting to annoy me and I was getting ready to just end it. Then again you can't just take someone's 10 grand, that's how much I gave him, and just expect me to go away, that's a lot of money. I was a millennial living in downtown Toronto. He kind of had me, I don't wanna say by the balls, but he kind of had me in this position where I didn't want to walk away, but I knew that something was off.

Scott

Do you think the deal with the car- You gave him \$10,000 and that was supposed to be you guys going in half and he was going to pay the other half and get you this great car. Do you think that was just a complete scam? What was his incentive for that?

Emily

Honestly, after everything that happened, I fully believe he used that money for something else and that was to get us on this trip.

Scott

You know, I've found that a lot of times, women have sort of a sixth sense about guys like this. Were you feeling that?

Emily

Yes and no. I'm someone that always gives someone else the benefit of the doubt. At the same time I'd also invested so much in it and I didn't want to let go. It actually taught me a lot about loss and losing money. Sometimes we don't know how to lose and at that point I didn't know how to lose so I didn't want to let that go.

Scott

So he invited you to go to Saint Lucia, what was involved with that?

Emily

It actually started a week before that and he said, "Oh I wanna come talk to you." I said, "Ok can you just text it?" He said, "No, I don't want to talk about it over the phone." I just assumed maybe he was with his ex-wife or whoever and that's why he didn't want to talk over the phone. So he came over and said, "I want to go on this trip with you, I know you're having a really difficult time. We can just go out and escape all of this. There's just something I have to do while I'm down there." I asked, "Well what is it?" He said, "Well I'm gonna bring some drugs back and you can do it too if you want." I said, "Absolutely not."

I'd traveled a lot prior to that and never for nefarious reasons. I was almost offended that he would ask me that. He left and I thought that was the end of it. Then he messaged me a couple hours later when he knew I was out, I would go out 3 or 4 nights a week. He said, "Forget I ever said anything about drug smuggling. Me and you. Let's just go on this trip." I thought about it and after 6 drinks I thought, "Ok I'll give him this one last chance." I did say, "I don't want to go on this trip before I get the car." He said, "I promise the car will be ready when you get back." So I believed him.

As soon as I got home that night he asked me to send him my passport information and he booked the tickets that night and we were leaving 2 days later.

Scott

He just sounds like an expert manipulator.

Emily

Yeah but at the same time I was someone who was spontaneous. I'd booked tickets to Indonesia before and gone places just for fun and not planned everything to a T. So the spontaneousness of this trip was normal for me but there were other parts of this that I shouldn't have ignored but I did because of my drinking and drug use at the time.

Scott

So what happened when you got there?

Emily

We got there and it was an all inclusive vacation for 7 days. We got there on a Friday and we were coming back the next Friday. The first 3 days were really fun and completely normal. It was actually strange because he was drinking on this trip and he was getting me to drink too. I thought, "Well I guess if you want me to drink, sure I'm not going to turn it down when it's all inclusive." So that's when I saw that his wish for me to get sober was kind of an illusion, but I didn't care I just put it under the guise of living it up on vacation.

He also asked, "Hey do you want some drugs?" I thought it was kind of weird but I said, "Sure, ok." So he got us cocaine. So we were not sober for the first couple of days. The third morning was sober and I was about to go down to the pool when he said, "Hey, don't go down to the pool because today our friends are coming to pick us up and you're going to get in the car with me." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Did you really think this was all fun and games? We're here to work." That's when I knew what was going to happen, but I still didn't believe that I would have to participate at that point.

Scott

That must have hit you by surprise, but still not a complete surprise.

Emily

Yeah it was in the middle ground. I thought I could still weasel my way out of it. I was still shocked but not mad yet. I said, "Ok, ok yeah whatever" but I did get in the car with him that afternoon. I thought maybe I was just going along for the ride. I did know that I was on a trip with only one person I knew, I didn't know anyone else, and I was in another country. Everything just kind of came rushing back on me.

We always say that we should've known better, but sometimes we ignore those thoughts because we like to be happy and take shortcuts and take the easy way out.

Scott

I get the impression from you that you're kind of an optimist, that you were thinking everything was going to still turn out ok.

Emily

Always. I've always been an optimist and I've always believed that people were generally good. At that time though, he was not good. I also realized that I had been tricked and I didn't want to believe that, so I was bound and determined to not do it. As the days and weeks progressed, we ended up going to a house and meeting these people and getting my measurements taken. That's when I knew that I was kind of in it because they knew everything about me, he was even using that as leverage. He was making threats about what would happen too, so I didn't want to risk not doing it.

So it was kind of a 2 step process. Wednesday we got in a car and went to a house and met the people who told us exactly what we would be doing. I found out that day that he had told them that I was going to be doing it with him, so they had all my information and everything like that. I got my measurements taken and then I had to go to a mall with this lady and pick out a dress.

She said, "Pretend to pick out a dress that you like but I'm actually going to pick out the one that you're going to wear." So it was like a charade of shopping for this drug smuggling operation. She picked out a couple and I picked out one, then eventually we left and got back in the car to go back to the house. She kept the dress because she actually sewed it custom to fit my body,

and then also customized underwear like Spanx. That's what taking my measurements were for and that's where the drugs were going to be concealed.

So after this whole shopping charade episode happened they dropped us off back at the resort on Wednesday afternoon. Then on Friday when our flight was set to leave we were to go to that house again and get strapped up basically.

Scott

So you knew from Wednesday that this was going to happen. How scared were you to think about what was going to happen?

Emily

I was scared and I was mad and I kept telling him that I really didn't want to do this. I feel guilty enough flying even when I haven't done anything. There's just that feeling you get when you're going through an airport like, "Did I do something wrong?" At the end of the day I didn't know the consequences fully, but I also knew that it was really really bad. I also didn't want to put anything else at risk, I thought this was the safest way out so I just wanted to obey what they wanted me to do. I didn't know how they would retaliate. I had an idea, but I wasn't about to put my family at risk too.

Scott

Oh yeah because he knows where you live and all of that stuff.

Emily

Yeah exactly. I also blamed myself. I thought, "You got yourself into this mess, you better just get yourself out. At least out of the country." So on the final day after crying and telling him that I didn't want to do this, he told me it would be fine and that he'd done this before and that the domestic airport already knew what we were doing so they would let us through. He just gave me what I call little verbal vodka shots to try to make me feel calm. He even said that he would take the drugs off me at Pearson so that I wouldn't have to face customs with drugs on my body. So that gave me a little bit of relief, that was, until we landed at Pearson.

Scott

You had to get through 2 airport securities right? First the one in Saint Lucia. Did they have dogs there? Obviously that must have gone ok.

Emily

Yeah, they had a metal detector. You just walk through a metal detector and then put your bag through the screener. Apparently they knew, but I can't say for sure and I don't want to make allegations that aren't true. That was probably something that he just told me. I was still nervous obviously.

The plane ride home felt so long and so short at the same time. I was excited to land but I was also nervous as heck to land.

Scott

Aw man I just can't- I'm feeling a little nervous just feeling what you were feeling on that flight. I mean this whole time you had- how much cocaine did you have on you?

Emily

It was 2 kilograms of cocaine.

Scott

And basically it was just stuffed in your underwear?

Emily

Yeah it was 2 bricks and these Spanx were like little bike shorts with a pouch and 1 brick was shoved in the front and 1 was shoved in the back. On my petite body it was pretty obvious that something was there. I felt so ridiculous traveling like this. I even had a cardigan on which is another odd thing to wear home from a tropical destination. So there were just a whole bunch of red flags.

Scott

Yeah you would think that in training that would be something that customs people are trained to look for. Somebody wearing clothes that don't make sense.

Emily

Yeah absolutely. The plane landed and we had our carry on and we had to go through the first checkpoint which is where you have to give them your immigration form. This is after he's told me, "Oh I'm actually not going to take the drugs from you and keep them in my backpack." So I was furious. If I was nervous before, I was just ringing off alarms left right and center. My loyalty to him ended there 100%, but my loyalty to the task at hand did not, and that's because I didn't want to be responsible for sabotaging this operation willingly. Then he could just blame it all on me and then I would really see repercussions.

So we went through the first checkpoint. They give you a piece of paper and they scribble a little number on it and you don't really know what that means until after you collect your bags and then there is one last checkpoint where you have to show your cards. They saw our cards with our number on it and they said, "You have to go into secondary." That's when I knew it was over. I felt a sense of relief. I truly truly did. I thought, "We're going to get caught. I'm not going to lie, but I'm also not going to create a scene."

Scott

Had you planned ahead of time with Noah about what your backstory was so they would be matching?

Emily

No. He'd given me no coaching to who I was that day, my identity was so lost. He was so disillusioned in the sense that he thought everything would just go as planned that he didn't even plan for us to get called into secondary. When we got called in he was panicking 100%. I was panicking too but I also felt relief because I knew that I was in my home country.

Scott

Right, at least you had made it back to Toronto.

Emily

Yeah, in one piece.

Scott

How would you rate yourself on how good you are at lying?

Emily

5. 9 if I'm heavily intoxicated but I wasn't that day. Normally around a 4 or 5. I just can't do it. I took an acting class and I failed. I was assigned the role of an extra because I just couldn't keep a straight face.

Scott

Here you've got all this adrenaline going through your body, it's not really the time for your best improv performance.

Emily

Yeah exactly. I couldn't even hide the fact that I was so mad. I had gotten the bait and switch not once but twice. So there was the anger from being tricked again and knowing I was doing something very very wrong and trying to hide it. No matter if you can lie with your words, you cannot control your body language sometimes when you're in these very very high stress situations. I'm glad I couldn't control it. My body was telling the truth and I didn't have to say a word.

They immediately separated us and put us each with a border agent so that we couldn't see each other. They look at your passport and ask you pretty simple questions about where you're from, how long you were away, how much money you make, and then they get into the more nitty gritty stuff. They ask if you like to drink and party, and I was like, "Yeah I do." They ask, "When was the last time you did?" I said, "Last week."

Then they said, "Ok. So Miss O'Brien, we just have to ask you a couple further questions. Do you have any drugs in your suitcase? Ok well just to check we are going to send it through this x-ray and then we're going to scan it." They scan it with an ion scanner, and it came up clean. So I could kind of breathe a little bit but I still couldn't look him in the face. Then he asked me, "Ok, Miss O'Brien, we're actually going to have to do a body search. Is there anything you want to say before we do that? Do you have drugs on you right now?"

I stared at the floor, and my ears were ringing so loud. It took me so long to answer that they had to ask me again. That's when I looked up at him straight in the eye and I said, "Yes." I knew at this point that lying to a border official's face would just dig me deeper into this mess. I wanted to tell the truth but for obvious reasons sometimes you have to think about the safest way out. At that point however, telling the truth was the last option and it felt really good to tell the truth.

Scott

Looking back on it though, I would think that you know now, when they asked you the first time and you didn't answer that was really the answer they needed.

Emily

Exactly. They said, "Ok, well we're placing you under arrest." I said, "Ok." At that point I thought I could still just explain what happened. I didn't research the criminal code or research this whole debacle. So I didn't truly know how serious this was. Ignorance is not bliss I can tell you that. Sitting there in the holding cell waiting to be processed, I was then arrested by the RCMP which is like the police for Canada. Then I was sent to a local jail.

I was told, "You're not getting out until your parents come and get you out." Your friends can't just bail you out in these situations, it's an offense so serious that you are placed on a high bond. My bail was set at \$50,000 and I would only bail out if someone that they approved would let me live with them throughout the duration of the case. That's when I was granted bail and went to live with my mom.

My mom was actually on vacation when she got a call while she was on a dock at a cottage with her friends when they told her, "Your daughter's been arrested at the airport." So she came back. That's one thing that I appreciate to this day is the unconditional love that my parents have for me. They knew that I was struggling with certain things and they knew that something might happen but they didn't know it would be this. They were just glad that I was alive.

Scott

That is not a phone call that a parent wants to get.

Emily

Absolutely not.

Scott

What was her initial reaction when she got that call?

Emily

She was scared and nervous but just wanted to see me. So that's what they did. Her and my dad were separated at that time but they both came to my court hearing. They were both there and they got me a lawyer and they worked together to see what the next step were going to be. It came as a shock to them; this type of arrest at least.

Scott

You were on 2 ½ years of house arrest. Why so long?

Emily

That was actually kind of short compared to some of the other people I talked to when I was inside. With my case they wanted me to prove that I was willing to change my habits that got me there. I had to go live with my mother and then we basically had to wait for the first court date. There's all kinds of hearings, there's preliminary hearings and I can't keep track of how many there were. I knew that right away I wanted to plead guilty. If I had actually fought it and pleaded not guilty it would have taken even longer because the court systems are so backed up.

So throughout that 2 ½ years I was on house arrest and going to rehab programs. I knew that my substance use had played a pretty significant role even though I didn't orchestrate it. Even though I never intended to profit off of this trip, I could have never gone on it if I had addressed that I was struggling. Yeah so 2 ½ years of that was probably the toughest period for me because I still didn't get sober. I spent a lot of time being mad. I just got to a day where I didn't want to be mad anymore, I knew that I could really make something good out of this situation. That's how I was raised and I knew that I had potential. After the 2 ½ years that's when I was finally sentenced. We had a court date set for January 16, 2018.

Scott

So for 2 ½ years, you were on house arrest, were you still able to work at that time for the social media company? What did you do?

Emily

Yes I was. I was able to go to and from work and that was about it. Luckily my work brought me to a lot of places so it was pretty flexible, whereas if I had worked at one place I could have only gone there and back. Having that entrepreneurship part of my life actually let me do a lot more than a typical house arrest situation and I was also able to get creative. I would create more work for myself so that I could continue to live and meet more people. It was eventually people who were going to be on your side because they know the real you and they know your reputation and all the good you're capable of doing.

It was still a nightmare, I was very paranoid. Everytime I would see a police car or officer I would have a panic attack. There was just so much that I didn't know. I didn't know if people were going to come after me. It was very very challenging.

Scott

When did you find out your actual sentence?

Emily

I found out I would be going to prison for sure about a year and a half in, and then it was about 6 months before we agreed we would submit a joint plea bargain between the prosecutor and the defense lawyer. When there is a joint submission judges very rarely disagree. It was a plea of 4 years and that doesn't include my time on house arrest. With 4 years in the Canadian prison system, you're eligible for parole after $\frac{1}{6}$ of your sentence, which is living in a halfway house, and then full parole after serving $\frac{1}{3}$ of your sentence.

Scott

Wow, that's not much right? I mean to me it seems like for a 4 year sentence you could get out fairly quickly if you did it right.

Emily

Yeah so I was out- but being on house arrest felt like more of a prison because you can't move forward and you don't know what is happening. You're draining your bank account, your emotions are a trainwreck, your family is walking on eggshells and dealing with being really badly hurt and trying to heal. So that was the worst part that felt like more of a prison. Going into prison I had a way better perspective one it because I knew there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

Scott

Ok, now it makes sense. I remember you saying in one of your videos that once you were sentenced to 4 years and found out it was a relief to know there was an end in sight.

Emily

Yeah exactly. Everytime you go to court you have to pay money and everytime I leave the house I would be paranoid and what have you. There was just so much unknown that it was debilitating. It was paralyzing, the unknown, while I was on house arrest. I felt like, "Ok I want to go. My family is struggling with this and worried. We know that we can make something good out of this." At this point I did have time to do my research so I was able to plan a lot more and harness my resources. I talked to people who had been incarcerated before and got as much ammo as I could to prepare myself to come out on the other side stronger, and not go in angry and bitter and trying to get revenge. That really doesn't get you anywhere.

Scott

So you had time to think about it and plan before you went into prison. What was the worst thing you imagined about prison before you went in? What were you worried about?

Emily

I think the worst thing that I was worried about was being away from my boyfriend at the time. We ended up breaking up while I was in prison, which was hard. Going through that breakup sober and not being able to retaliate with a drink or a random hookup then you actually become stronger. So I left prison single but it was awesome and I'm so glad I did.

Scott

Wow. I mean most people when they're headed to prison they're worried about having to join a gang or getting beat up everyday or what their cellmate is going to be like. All these things that go through your head, but you weren't really thinking those things?

Emily

No, because I wasn't really afraid of risk. I've never been afraid of risk and I've never been afraid of people. People do horrible things inside prison and outside prison. People are violent inside prison and outside prison. I knew that I could defend myself and that I was feisty enough, but I also knew that I was someone that wouldn't instigate things. I was someone that listened but not someone to be walked all over. Also I wasn't going to get myself in trouble in prison because I wanted to get out. I also had a lot of support, I had my family and friends and people who were so excited for me to get out. The gangs and other activities that go on in prison are for people that don't really have anyone on the outside and that's become their home.

Scott

Yeah, that is their life. Take us through your first day in prison. What was that like?

Emily

My first day in prison was actually kind of 2-fold. I had to spend 10 days in a maximum security unit. So there was the first day there, and then you get a cellmate and you don't get let out for 10 days at all. Then we got transferred to the federal prison. It takes 10 days to get processed and then you get shipped off to prison camp. That one is you in a paddy wagon with 10 other girls, it's hot, you're shackled on your hands and feet and to the person next to you. As they open the back door you have to shimmy off the paddy wagon. It's pretty barbaric.

The sun was shining and I breathed in the fresh air and I thought, "Ok this is it." I even told my parents. "It's just like I'm going to camp." If I can take a trip abroad knowing nobody and going somewhere people sometimes tell you not to go because of risk, which I did all the time, this was just like that. I was never scared to travel so why would I be scared of this. I also knew that I could learn something.

Scott

I love that you decided ahead of time to make that time a positive experience.

Emily

Yeah. Negativity and hate are just exhausting and I don't like being tired because I have a lot of energy. I had to appreciate the support I had as well because my family had put so much into

this as well. I had to pull my sock up and let them know that I was committed to change and committed to a success story.

Scott

Take us through the scene of when you first got this business idea while you were in there.

Emily

Going into prison, I was annoyed at first to have to leave my business and I didn't want to have to throw it all away. When I got to prison though, I saw so many other people who had the same anxiety as I did but also had so much talent. We just wanted to figure out how we were going to reenter the workforce. There weren't very many good programs in prison and we felt so misunderstood. We are put in the box as being bad people, but there are so many other people who make those exact same decisions and don't get caught, or have the resources to hide it. I wanted to break down those barriers and break down the myth that people in prison are bad or worthless, because it's not true. 80% of women in prison are mothers who have done something just to survive or have been through incredible trauma and suffered tremendous abuse or addiction. They really just want to start over and feel like they were worth something again.

In prison, food was something that really brought a lot of people together. Whether that was through themed nights or birthdays or in this case the superbowl, we were having a superbowl party. This was very PG of course, we basically just made food and watched the game. Popcorn was being shared and people were sharing their stories and putting all different toppings on it. I saw how people get creative and would forget they were in prison and also find joy and laughter.

That's when I thought, "Wait a minute. Why aren't there more popcorn companies out there that do more than just pop popcorn?" I thought about all the popcorn companies that I knew and they weren't really healthy and there wasn't a story to them. I also thought about the price point of popcorn. I knew that from a raw material perspective you could get it for relatively inexpensive. So I put 2 and 2 and 4 and 4 together and I was like, "I want to build this into something." That's when the idea was born. I wrote it down in a little notebook I kept beside my bed. I would always have these thoughts at night and I just remember turning on the light, opening the notebook and writing this down.

Scott

What were you writing in the notebook? You knew you wanted to start some kind of a business that involved popcorn, did you know what it would be like at that point, or how did that come about?

Emily

I didn't at that point but everyday in every activity I was involved in, I found a way to get inspiration from that and incorporate it in. I really wanted to help not just myself, but other people find work. That was something I was taught at a really young age, that helping others is so rewarding. We can work at jobs where we're making a ton of money but if it isn't helping anyone then what's the point? I've always been taught that giving is really important and forgiveness. So combining all those things that I learned helped. Also knowing that society doesn't do a good job of helping reintegrate people who have been locked up; that they are essentially misunderstood.

I knew that I could do it. I don't want to say I'm unstoppable because we all are stoppable in different ways, but once I put my mind to something, good or bad, I will put all my energy into it. Everything that happened after that day made me think, "How can I incorporate storytelling, writing, flavor development." Even the name was decided by me and my former residents as a collective decision. So the ideas just kept accumulating and I would write down each thing in a separate notebook, which I still have today, and I would check off those boxes of things I wanted to do and how I could help people get on the right track.

Scott

Obviously you had the advantage of already running a business before, so you already knew what was involved. Were you able to do re-business planning or research while you were in there? Did you have internet access? How did you make plans for when you were gonna get out?

Emily

That was the fun part. I had no internet. That actually taught me a lot about what you need to do research and start something important. You don't need all the fancy bells and whistles. You just need the raw organic material and grit, drive and purpose. I had all of that in there, so I was able to do recipe development from inspiration inside prison. Even the names and the branding, we took slander that was used against us and put it into the branding to empower people. So our slogan, "Popcorn so good it's criminal" was something that was developed on the inside. Then I had my friends on the outside send me market research. I also worked with the prison librarian who was a staff member and she would print me off scholarly articles from databases and give them to me so I could really start making a case as to why people who were incarcerated needed to be supported in employment initiatives from corporations. It wasn't just the popcorn, popcorn was the vector to this bigger mission of equal opportunity.

Even with recipe development, I had a friend who would send me food trend ideas. The first thing that I did with my friend from the outside was to start a blog and start writing different stories. So I would write stories and mail them out to him and he would upload them to the internet. We were building this brand before I was even out of prison.

Scott

I like the idea that while you were in prison, you weren't just planning to start a business, you also had in mind to hire people who were either in there with you at the time, or other people who were formerly incarcerated. It seems like what kind of gave this a big purpose.

Emily

Absolutely. I knew that I could prove people wrong about myself. I also knew that I had a lot of support. I wanted to help instill confidence in others. Family has always been important to me and prison was a family too. I have so many great friends that I still talk to from there that are doing so well now.

As the brand has grown I have actually hired people who I had been in the same prison with, as well as people who have been in different prisons. The more people that you hire you create this army of proof. That can show employers that it's not just doing the right thing, it's actually doing a helpful thing for society, the economy and the individual. It's like this trifecta of social good.

Scott

How long were you in prison?

Emily

I was in the penitentiary physically for 10 months and then I was in a halfway house for 6 months. Then I got full parole in July of 2019. I'm still currently on parole, until January 2022.

Scott

I would think from the parole board standpoint, you were like the ideal person. You already had all these plans for when you were going to get out. You were on the right track and it's not like you were trying to deny your guilt or anything like that. You must have been the model person there.

Emily

Yeah, and I think if prison actually worked then I wouldn't be an anomaly. By me doing this and showing how it was done and why people struggle so much, it's all showing that the prison system doesn't actually work for most people. It's making a point not just about me but about what is really missing.

Scott

So you get out and what was your first step? How did you proceed from there?

Emily

I had to go to the halfway house and when I lived there I got started right away. I went on the radio because I had written a letter to the local station and told them that I loved listening to them in prison. He loved it and invited me to come on. Then I had written some letters to some authors of books I had found inspiration from and they wanted to meet me, so I went and met them. Then I started speaking at local events at things like Toastmasters and started sharing my story. I volunteered to speak at schools and started practicing the craft of storytelling in an impactful way.

I also shared the story with the media. I knew that this was a risk because not everyone was going to like it. Some people would berate me, but I didn't care. I'd been berated for the last 3 ½ years by the system. The importance of telling the story to make a good impact as opposed to being afraid, was way more important than worrying about people's comments.

As the years have progressed these comments have died off. The proof is really in the popcorn. So as these stories were shared in the papers, people were interested in helping because people found it relatable. It's not just about having a crazy criminal lifestyle, it's about how this can happen to regular people. It's probably happened to you or someone you know and we all have to embrace love and forgiveness and second chances.

Scott

Were you already selling products during this time?

Emily

I couldn't sell it while I was in prison because you're not allowed to conduct business as an inmate. I started as soon as I got out. The local grocery store actually let us pop the popcorn in there. Then there was another company that gave us like \$2500 dollars for free labels for bags. There were tons of volunteers that just donated their time and money to help support the growth of the business, so it really is a community built business in the sense that people really saw the potential.

Scott

When people see something like this happening, everybody just wants for you to succeed. I can see why people would want to help you with that.

Emily

Yeah! I found out too it was because I'd actually helped them. Everyone that helped us was someone that had experienced something similar, or had shared the story with their family and it had helped them. It was very reciprocal in the sense that it is inspiring people and it is helping people get through adversity, or rectify difficult situations, or even just make new friends and gain new perspectives.

Scott

Do you remember your first big order?

Emily

Yeah I actually do (laughs).

Scott

What was that?

Emily

It was so funny because I was living in a halfway house. I told them I was going out for a friend's birthday and would be back by 8 o'clock. For my friend's birthday I actually brought her a bag of this popcorn that I'd been making in the halfway house. She had had a couple drinks at dinner, not me because I was not allowed to drink, but then she went up to the table next to us and said, "This is my friend's popcorn company and she was in prison." Turns out the people at the table next to us were billionaires. One of them had also been involved with the law.

So he came up to me and said, "Really? You started this in prison? What's the biggest order you've had?" I said, "I don't know, maybe \$300 or \$400." This was only about a month out of prison. He said, "I'm gonna triple that." Then he took out like \$1400 dollars cash and just gave it to me at the table. I said, "Holy shit this is insane. What flavors do you want?" He said, "I don't care, just send it to this address." So then I had to explain to the halfway house why I had all this cash on me. Normally if you're an inmate coming back to your halfway house with \$1400 cash it would be really sketchy.

Scott

They would know something was up, yeah.

Emily

Yeah, but it was just so exciting.

Scott

Was he buying it just for himself?

Emily

He bought it for his friends and people that work for him.

Scott

Wow. Your objective initially was to get this on grocery store shelves right? Was that your primary distribution plan?

Emily

No, it was our eventual distribution plan, but our first plan was to be a cottage industry. That's truly how you build connection. If you go to a big grocery store there's not going to be someone on the floor that is talking about your product. You really want to talk with small business owners and people that are holding events. We did so many events. We did movie screenings, hockey games, or after I would do presentations at schools.

There are a lot of rules when it comes to being on the shelf. Over the years we have had to improve the product, its shelf life, the legal requirements, labeling and everything like that which all takes time and money. So we built up some financial cushioning from all of this stuff that we've done and because of that we've been able to hold 100% ownership. We haven't had to have any investors.

Scott

Wow, that's great. If you can do it that way that is ideal so you're only accountable to yourself.

Emily

Yes, and the people you want to serve right? Also your goals too.

Scott

Exactly. What are some of the popcorn flavors you offer? These are different, you don't find these flavors in other popcorn.

Emily

We have done so many iterations over the last couple years. Currently we have a lemon meringue caramel, peanut butter caramel, cheesy caramel that is getting relaunched in a month and a half, a sweet and salty is getting launched in 2 months and a lemon pepper dill, salted chocolate caramel and double coated caramel.

Ooh and we are launching a peanut butter and jelly caramel in about a month. This one has been my baby. Peanut butter and jelly was something that was really high worth in prison so we would trade it for things. So I really wanted to incorporate these themes from prison into the flavors. Lemon pepper dill was also a prison inspired recipe. So these are very prison inspired and can help tell a story while invoking nostalgia and feel good feelings.

Scott

Well I have to tell you, I've tried your popcorn. I incorporated that as part of my research before we talked. I'm not even a popcorn eater, I rarely eat it, my wife is the real popcorn aficionado in the family. We ordered the lemon meringue caramel and man, it was really good!

Emily

Awesome!

Scott

I mean you already know that (laughs), but I was surprised because I don't really eat popcorn, and my wife loves it. She was kind of disappointed to find out that I liked it because that means

less for her. I know you sell this online through your website and it's in a lot of local grocery stores in Canada right?

Emily

Yes. We also work with a lot of subscription box companies. We filed our trademarks for the US. We're launching with a major Canadian retailer in August. We also just got picked up by a national distributor to go across Canada, and we will be making that announcement May 3rd.

Scott

Is it growing as quickly as you expected? What did you expect when you started as far as the growth trajectory?

Emily

I knew that I would be so bound and determined to make it a success. I honestly didn't see it being involved in so many different areas. Subscription boxes, events, birthdays, there are so many different ways that people have connected over this popcorn. Even at AA meetings and things like that. Just the whole theme of a comeback. So I hear everyday how it helped someone or how it was shared.

We do so much corporate stuff now, especially with Covid-19 and people going through adversity, because people love to hear about how someone else has made it through adversity. That's the one thing I like to encourage is to make a comeback and let people know they can do it. Even when it seems like the end or there is so much out of your control and it's exhausting, reminding people that it will come to an end.

We've been doing just so many awesome things. I've met some fantastic people. I know it's just going to continue getting more impactful, and that's really what we want. I'm even working with government MP's now and working with bigger institutions that I think need to take responsibility for the change that's needed as well.

Scott

You're doing all of this and employing the formerly incarcerated. How many employees do you have now?

Emily

We have 4 right now, which is amazing. Another thing that I do is workshops with other employers and chambers of commerce to encourage them to do the same. Like I said the proof is in the popcorn. You can walk the walk and talk all you want in the beginning, but now over the last 2 years I can say that I have a very loyal hardworking staff. People from prison don't just want to steal and not show up for work. They are a major asset for your business and their family as well. You have to really work together and know what everyone's needs are and make it a safe environment for them and learn how to really help them and make them your family.

Scott

I can really picture how that would be a successful combination. When somebody comes out of prison there's not a lot of places they can go to find a job. When they can come to you and find a job and you're happy to take them in and give them a second chance. I can imagine they really don't want to mess that up.

Emily

Yeah, or if popcorn isn't for them we also work with so many different organizations that have an ecosystem of other employers too. It's just so important to be connected to organizations that do that as well. There's definitely room.

Scott

You're helping them have a much better chance for success when they get out. What is your website, how can people get this popcorn?

Emily

You can order it at www.combacksnacks.com/shop or if you just want to check out the website just head to comebacksnacks.com and see the different kind of work that we do, how we've gotten involved and the impact we're having on a local, national and global scale to support reintegration and second chances.

If you want to follow Emily, and maybe even try out some of her amazing popcorn, she's on all the socials – Instagram, Facebook, YouTube – and I have all of those links in the show notes for this episode. Or you can check out her website at ComeBackSnacks.com.

And if you like first-hand stories of smuggling drugs, you should also check out my episode with Luke. That was episode #2, way back in the early days of this podcast, when Luke told me about the time he swallowed a bunch of bags of cocaine in order to pay off some student loan debt. He got through the airport okay, but then one of the bags burst in his stomach. Here's a short clip from that episode.

Luke

I actually did go into the restroom temporarily whenever I first started to dry heave. I knew I needed to get out of the hotel and it was bad. The hotel clerk/receptionist asked, "Do you need me to call the hospital?" It was really bad I couldn't even talk to her. I said, "No, no." I basically just rushed out. I went over to the subway across the street because I was afraid that these packages being the size that they were, would come up in my esophagus and start choking me. Being by myself was not a good scenario. So I went into the subway, managed to maintain myself enough to buy a couple bottles of water, went outside to the parking lot and just sat down. I was feeling so terrible.

And before we get to the Listener Story, I wanted to let you know that Raw Audio episode 14 is now live. The Raw Audio series are BONUS episodes available to anyone who signs up to support the show for \$5 a month. In this new episode, a young man calls 911 for his father –

911 Operator

Ok tell me exactly what happened there.

Caller

Somebody has entered my house while I was away and they have shot my father. He is dead

A man calls when his BMW gas pedal gets stuck at 100 miles per hour –

Caller

Yes ma'am I believe my gas pedal is stuck in my car and I'm on I-95.

And a young woman calls 911 while hiding under her bed during a home invasion –

Caller

Please hurry. Hurry.

911 Operator

Who's robbing you?

Man in background

Put it down right now.

Caller

A whole bunch of people.

To get all the Raw Audio episodes AND the ad-free version of this podcast, sign up at WhatWasThatLike.com/support.

And now, here's this episode's Listener Story. I hope you enjoy it, and I'll see you in two weeks.

Caller

When I was 4, my mother and I lived in a one bedroom apartment in downtown Vancouver. In the summer there was suddenly a smell. Then it was a bad smell. Soon after that it became unbearable. My mother called the landlord about the smell and they didn't do anything.

The smell got even worse until one day my mom had enough and went to examine the cause. She sniffed and smelled around on each floor of the building until she got to the apartment directly above ours. She knocked, then banged, with no answer. She came back for 2 days every few hours and banged on the door, still with no answer.

She then wrote a letter and tried to stuff it under his door, but it wouldn't squeeze through. The space between the floor and the door was so narrow and the hallway carpet was blocking the way. She went to put it in the unit's mailbox in the front area of the building. When she got there the mailbox was stuffed full with a sticker on it from the post office, probably saying that mail could not be delivered to the box because it was so full.

When she discovered the mailbox full it dawned on her that something might be wrong. She and I went back to our apartment and she called the police. Within the hour 2 police officers showed up and started banging on the upstairs apartment door. The building was so old and run down that we could hear everything. Every bang, the dispatcher on the radios, every step and then them coming back downstairs to our unit.

They asked my mom where the landlord was. She explained that he lived elsewhere and that she had called to complain repeatedly, only to be ignored. The officer then asked my mom to call the landlord and give him the phone. The landlord answered and the officer identified himself to him and asked for access to the unit, or for the landlord to come do an emergency inspection. The guy was there in 10 minutes. As soon as he got to the building my mother grabbed me in her arms and we followed the landlord and the officer upstairs.

The landlord banged on the door and announced he was doing an emergency inspection, then unlocked the door. I really wish that my mother would have just left me in our apartment watching TV or something. When that door was opened, directly across from the entrance to the apartment was the guy who lived there, dead. He had slashed his own wrists and taken a bunch of pills while sitting at his kitchen table. He had been dead for weeks and was bloated so bad that his skin was splitting and he had maggots coming out of his mouth and his nose. I saw it all.

Everyone in the hallway was completely stunned. My mother couldn't even process what she was seeing, nevermind what I was seeing. If we thought the smell was bad before, we were immediately proven wrong the second that door was opened. It was such a horrific smell and sight that the landlord ran outside to throw up, multiple times. The police called the coroner and they took the body out of the building. After he was out, they were gone and never came back, as it was clear what had happened.

The landlord came to our apartment a couple hours later as my mother was looking at the newspaper for a new place. He offered her a deal. She could have the next 3 months rent free if she cleaned the apartment upstairs out and got it ready to be repainted. She reluctantly agreed but got to it that day. She took me upstairs and instructed me to sit in this person's living room while she started to clean up all the blood and other miscellaneous dried bodily fluids off of the kitchen floor.

After she did that she started going through his possessions to see if there was a family member she could call to come collect the deceased belongings. She sadly found no such information. She contacted one of the officers that came to our apartment to see if they knew of anyone. Unfortunately he had no known living family that they could find. She waited a week, just in case somebody showed up, before she cleared the belongings and furniture out of the unit.

She eventually got everything out and scrubbed that place as best she could, but the smell just would not go away. We went to a store and bought this stuff called 'Nill-odor.' It was a spray can that was supposed to remove any odor in the places it was used. My mother used 6 full cans over 4 days. Not only did it not remove the smell, but it mixed it with its own smell and created a whole new level of awful. We went back to the store and explained that it didn't work at removing the smell. They explained that we didn't use the right kind and that she should have used the odor drops. She used the entire bottle over a few days and still could not get the smell of rotting corpse out of the apartment.

It now just smelled like chemicals and death. The smell was still so awful and she couldn't take it anymore. We moved about a week later, as it was just too much. She stayed in contact with someone else who lived in the apartment and found out that the building still smelled of the noxious awfulness 6 months later.

To this day, if I smell Nil Odor I have vivid flashbacks to that door being opened, with me in my mother's arms, staring directly at this festering mess of rotting death. Then the terrible realization that his whole life was shoved into bags and thrown in the dumpster and there were no loved ones to remember or mourn him. This was my first experience with trauma that even 35 years later, still haunts me to this day.