Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to GWSB Proud. A podcast all about why are you proud of GWSB? My name is Liesl Riddle, and I am the associate dean for graduate programs here at George Washington University school of business. And I have the great pleasure of sitting down with GW alumni, faculty, staff, and students, to hear why they are GWSB Proud.

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm so excited to share with you today, my dear friend, LaJuanna Russell, who is one of our members of the boards of advisors at George Washington School of Business. When you're a student I think at GW, you don't often think about why you're seated there in the classroom, that you might actually come back one day and have a seat at the table in the boardroom where you're actually helping us develop strategy and outreach and really celebrate everything that is GWSB. So LaJuanna thank you for taking time out to join me today.

LaJuanna Russell:

Thank you so much, Liesl. I am so excited for this conversation and of course, anything to support GW and to give others the opportunity to have an amazing experience. I am a hundred percent there for.

Liesl Riddle:

Well that shows through in every meeting that we have in all of the ways that you give to the institution. It really does make a really major impact on the school. So before we jump into that, why don't we introduce our audience to your very inspirational story? Tell us, how did you get from the classroom in GWSB to the boardroom?

LaJuanna Russell:

That is a very interesting story. I think my mom would always describe me as scrappy. Right. Always having some kind of gig on the side, even through undergrad. So I went to GW for grad school, for my MBA. And even as I was getting my MBA, I had a gig kind of on the side where I was working, consulting, doing some stuff, really just to get myself through school. And when I graduated, I started working with companies doing government contracting. And one day I sat myself down and I had about 500 bucks and I said, understand this, I can do this. And so I always say that me, myself and I, and a bottle of wine sat down and started business management associates. And here we are, 16 years later still providing human capital support and process improvement to federal government clients across the country.

Liesl Riddle:

It's such an incredible, incredible story. What come back, you're so busy being an entrepreneur and really leading such an incredible organization. Why spend time coming back to GWSB?

LaJuanna Russell:

Because I want others to have that opportunity too. I will tell you that getting my MBA, especially when I got it, was hard. And there were times that I thought, dang, what am I doing? Why am I doing this? And there is probably not a day that goes by now that I'm like, man, I'm so glad I got that MBA. I'm so glad I went through with it and finished it. Not because of just the mechanics of it, the book learning, but the experience, understanding how to deal with others, just taking your general skillsets and elevating them into a different place. And I want others to understand that. I want students to see that from that moment, from that time, while you're sitting there in the classroom, you have the opportunity to start thinking about how I can create something from nothing. I'm sitting here listening to a professor tell me about economics, but wow, this is going to one day help me create something from nothing. That's a beautiful gift to give someone and inspire them to move forward and to do that.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. I mean, I so agree. I mean, it's the reason why I love teaching so much. You're always in, you share a moment with students where they're in the art of both [inaudible 00:05:05] always say. And it's priceless. It's really priceless to witness it because it is such a magical time of life, whether it's graduate school or undergraduate. And then later when you get to have contact with the alumni, and they come back and share their experience with the next generation of students. Yeah, it is. It's addicting like a drug in that way. It's just such a wonderful thing. So you keep coming back, coming back for more.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah.

Liesl Riddle:

Now as you know LaJuanna, we're very proud of the fact that GWSB has a significant number of female students in our MBA programs across all of our MBA formats. And we're really unusual in that way. So I wonder, do you feel like the experience for getting your MBA or the benefit of it is somehow different for a female student?

LaJuanna Russell:

Well, first of all, we all know that women do rule the world. So let's just [crosstalk 00:06:10] as a baseline.

Liesl Riddle:

Oh, yeah. It's a given.

LaJuanna Russell:

I would say that maybe it used to be a little more different. It used to be where the expectations may have been lower or different for women just in general in education. Now I think that women and our numbers at GW are kind of proving this. Women are, we're coming into our own. We're starting to realize that, yeah, we are moms, but we're also entrepreneurs. We're also the CEOs. We're also on the board. We are also XYZ, right? And so I love that we are embracing that kind of movement of women coming into their own as well, because we had to get over some of the societal norms that were placed on us. And now we're like, hey, we can do this. We can change the world. We are changing the world. And I'm so happy that so many women are coming to GW to study and understand how they can take the fire that's already in them. You have a fire lit yeah, go run, burn with that.

Liesl Riddle:

Yes, no, I agree. And you can see that on the board as well, because of course our board has significant female representation as well, alumni that have coming back and really giving up their time and expertise for the school and just have done phenomenal things in their respective industries and careers and really do, like you, enjoy giving time back to the next generation of managers, but specifically also sometimes too the female managers as well.

LaJuanna Russell:

Exactly.

Liesl Riddle:

But so I think that's really an interesting part of your story. What I'd like to switch a little bit to though is kind of looking retrospectively back at your career. What have been some of the major challenges or bumps in the road and how did you respond?

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah. When you're an entrepreneur and you're kind of going from nothing to something, you really have no idea. People say that you are fearless, and in some respects you kind of are because there's that unknown that you're just waiting into. But what you don't know, you don't know. And so the challenges will come at you all of the time. I speak a lot now on an element of entrepreneurship, especially for minority business owners in of access to capital. And when you were really starting that enterprise, understanding how money works in a commercial business way is really different than, I bought a house, I bought a car, I doing these personal things. But commercial understanding is very, very different. And thankfully I did have the baseline of my MBA so I wasn't walking in there kind of cold or blind and not understanding the language. But really understanding how finance works when you are on the ground and pound to pavement. It's definitely a different experience.

LaJuanna Russell:

And I mean, just people in general, right. You're not in a vacuum when it comes to having a business. And you are the entrepreneur. And it took me a minute to realize that, oh, everyone here is not going to work seven to 9:00 PM because they don't own it. They're not going to stay in there with me for all of those hours all the time. So how do I then become that leader where they would want to, where they feel like they have that same mission and passion for the organization that I do that they'll say, oh yeah, we need to get this done. So now we're going to do it. And we are a team and we're getting it done. And that is an evolution of you. That's a complete evolution for an individual to start thinking about how to lead and how to have others want to follow you.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, talking about those long working hours and needing to pitch in sometimes over a course of several days, how have you managed work-life balance with all that you have on your plate?

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah. That is a good one. I think it is just with help. With others who I know I can rely on and in developing the team. With the company, now I have a great team that I know I can rely on to perform. We have about 80, 90 employees across the US. So obviously I can't manage all of those individuals myself. So I have a team that understands roles and responsibilities, and we're able to just jump in, almost like family, and get stuff done.

LaJuanna Russell:

Luckily, I don't have any young young kids right now, even though I did, I started the company when my daughter was three, but now she is 19. And so she's in college and doing her own thing. And so I have a little fewer basketball and volleyball games to go to right now. But yeah, managing that, you have to be, I use the word a lot, but you have to be intentional about taking care of yourself as well, because you're right, the long hours, will get to you and burn you out. But if there is no you then there's no business in many cases. And what they say on the airplane, put your mask on first.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. Yeah. Well I want to underscore because you said it really fast. But I want to make sure the listeners understand. You started a business when you had a three-year-old. And I think, because a lot of students, I have conversations with them and they segment their lives into, I'm going to focus on this part of my life and then I'm going to focus on that part of my life. And some people can do that in that their life works out and so on and so forth. But for so many of us, life happens while you're having your career. Right. And you have to, there is no choice. You're kind of having to do things in parallel. But I want people to understand that you can start a business when you're a, you have young kids at home.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah.

Liesl Riddle:

And you can grow that business as well as that child. It's not easy, right.

LaJuanna Russell:

Right.

Liesl Riddle:

It does require a lot of juggling, whatever. But I want them to be inspired as I am, by I think your journey on that.

LaJuanna Russell:

And they can start a business while they're at GW.

Liesl Riddle:

Exactly. That's right.

LaJuanna Russell:

You could start a business while you're there. While you are learning, there's not one of us... I tell this story all the time about my mom. Years ago, my mom, we love dogs. We've had about 739 dogs in my lifetime. And years and years and years ago before it existed, my mom said, you know, there should be pet insurance for animals. And we were like, there she goes. She's just as crazy as she wants to be. And we didn't think about it. What do we have today? Pet insurance for animals. And it is a huge, huge business.

LaJuanna Russell:

And so I go back to trust yourself because if my mom has said, I'm not listening to you guys, I'm going to go with this idea and see where it gets me. we would be in a different, whole different place right now. Right? So as you're a student, as you're sitting in class, you have thoughts, you have ideas. There's nothing to say that you can't say, huh, I wonder what that would look like. I wonder how that would play out. And start doing it right there. You really might be surprised at how far you go.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. And is that one of the things that motivates you to support GW's new venture competition? Tell us a little bit about that from your [crosstalk 00:14:48].

LaJuanna Russell:

I absolutely unequivocally love that program. I love the encouragement. I love the creativity. But of those students, it's like, I want to say the kids, but that's just wrong. But [inaudible 00:15:09] they're coming in with these ideas of, yeah, I just decided we're going to do that. And I'm like, yes, you did. You go. You do that. It's amazing. And I love it. And it energizes me because when you're in it, as I've been, some days are like, oh my goodness, what am I doing today? But then when I get to go and listen to the students talk about their great ideas and what they want to do and where they want to go, and I can give them a nugget because I have done some things.

LaJuanna Russell:

So even if that day is hard for me, I'm giving them a nugget of advice and I'm like, oh, that makes sense. I should try that. I should go over there. I should do that. And it just, it pulls it all together. I love, love, love, love, love that program. I will work with that as long as I am able. It's amazing. The creativity, the support, helping these students get on their ground. I wish I had it.

Liesl Riddle:

Telling you. I do too. I wish we had had something like that when I was in school. And I really loved the fact that it's actually not just, it's not really embedded in the business school. It's at the university level. So students from around the campus, whether it's engineering or liberal arts or Elliot School of International Affairs, at business school, et cetera, we have so many different approaches to solving problems and innovating. And then to see the student teams there are combinations across the school.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yes. [inaudible 00:16:42].

Liesl Riddle:

That's really cool.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah that's beautiful. And that is what life is. You're in business school doesn't mean that your business as an entrepreneur is just going to be about business. You're going to need an engineer. You might develop something that's art. You might develop something that's pulling over here, pulling that. You're going to need all of that. And you're going to need to understand whether you're starting a business or in a career working for someone else, you still need to understand what resources do I need to solve this problem.

Liesl Riddle:

Right.

LaJuanna Russell:

That is one of the great things that you learn while you're there. I'm going to need seven different resources to solve this problem. How am I going to go about getting them? Where do I pull from? What's my network? How do we get these altogether? And then when I've pulled all of these resources together that I need, how do I lead them to solve this problem so that we have a positive outcome. Those are lessons that you have to have that are hard to come by.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right. And we're just fortunate that you do spend time talking with those students, because I think it's a great example of you were once where they are now and it keeps you kind of in touch with, I think, right? Doesn't it? How far you've really come and so on, but also [inaudible 00:18:05] sort of that inspiration to push through the challenges.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yes. Yes. Because there's light. May not always see it, but there is light on the other side of that. You can get through the challenges. You can think creatively and get through it.

Liesl Riddle:

So let's talk about the light. What have been some of the highlights of your career experience? What are some of the major accomplishments or were there some surprises along the way?

LaJuanna Russell:

So yeah, accomplishments, for the company, we have won a lot of awards, which is wonderful. We've been on the Inc 5,000 list about three times and growing the firm and developing new methodologies and ways of solving problems. That's what we do a lot of every day for our clients. We solve people problems. And so to be recognized for doing that is always a wonderful thing.

LaJuanna Russell:

But I got to tell you some of the best times that I have are when I'll get a note or I'll see it in person where, or especially LinkedIn, I'll get a note from someone who's moving to a new job. And I remember, oh, so-and-so used to be an employee of ours. And I'll just reach out and say, congrats on your new job. And that person will respond to me and say, hey, LaJuanna, I wouldn't have this job if you hadn't given me that opportunity to do that back then.

Liesl Riddle:

Wow.

LaJuanna Russell:

And that's enough for me.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. Yeah.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah.

Liesl Riddle:

That's powerful.

LaJuanna Russell:

Yeah.

Liesl Riddle:

That's really powerful. Well we've talked a lot about who the audience is for this podcast. And it's varied. We have prospective students, current students, some of our faculty and staff, but also a lot of our alumni. So I'm wondering, you've had so much experience with starting a business, facing challenges, making an impact on others. If you had to leave our audience with say two or three LaJuanna nuggets of wisdom, what would you recommend that they sort of think about and maybe start to practice in their life?

LaJuanna Russell:

One would be to be your authentic self and not let others pull you away from what that is and not try to be something else for someone else. Be your authentic self. Be who you are. That is where you're going to get your most joy. That is where you're going to get your best outcomes, right. Is when you're being true to who you are, you're trusting yourself. And the other would be to never, ever, ever, I know Churchill said it best, but never, ever, ever, ever give up. Never give up. There's always light. College is hard for prospective students and current students. College, some of those long nights and working and trying to figure it out, it gets hard. But yeah, you'll get through that and then you'll have the next challenge, you'll get through that and you'll have the next challenge and you'll get through that. So just never give up if there's some kind of fire that's burning in, never give it up.

Liesl Riddle:

I think those are really important words of wisdom. It's just one of the many types of ways that LuJuanna Russell gives words of wisdom and strategy as a board of advisor at GWSB. We're just so fortunate to still have you in the GWSB family and very active and helping us grow our family and our network. Thank you so much for taking time to share some of your story with us in the podcast today.

LaJuanna Russell:

Thank you. This has been awesome. You can tell, I just have such a passion for bringing wonderful students in to GW and for enhancing the lives of the students that are there. It's a wonderful place. There's such an opportunity. Take advantage of every single opportunity that you have while you're there and come back to Liesl and I and tell us all about it.

Liesl Riddle:

Oh, that's right. That's right. Because there's always another podcast, always another podcast on GWSB Proud. Thank you so much, LuJuanna.

LaJuanna Russell:

Thank you. Thank you.

Liesl Riddle:

That's all for this episode. Thanks for listening today. Shout out for music credit, to Plantain Papi, also known as Michael Ferrier, GW class of 2020. See you next time to learn more ways we are GWSB Proud.