Jerry Colonna:

Hey, Jean, it's really, really wonderful to see you again and to have you on the show. I'm grateful for your coming on the show with me and taking a little bit of time to talk about things. Before we jump in, why don't you just take a moment and identify yourself, who you are, how you see yourself, and what role you might play in the world at large.

Jean:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you, Jerry, for having me. It's awesome to be here. I'm a little nervous, but that means it's a good sign. Nerves are good.

So I am Jean Smart. I'm the founder and CEO of Penelope. We provide streamlined 401k plan services, retirement services for micro small businesses. And when I say micro, we're focusing primarily on small businesses with under 50 employees, which is almost 90% of the 36 million companies out there. It's a big group. And I started this journey from Wall Street of all places. I've been in financial services for the bulk of my career, always working in workplace benefits to some extent, whether it was retirement plans, stock plans, and financial wellness, but primarily for the Fortune 500, Fortune 1000.

COVID shook me up, pretty much. Shook up my husband and I, both of us. He was a professor and I was in banking, pretty traditional and longstanding conservative large institutions. That's what you get when you're an immigrant or product of immigrants. You take the safe traditional route. But we made a that was very different. He's actually back in school to become a psychotherapist focusing on young adults, still college students. And I started this fintech company. So you could say we're having a revival of sorts. It's not the great resignation, but for many of us who've been doing one thing, it's been about the great reinvention.

Jerry Colonna: A great reboot?

Jean: And it's been... Reboot, yes.

Jerry Colonna: He's always on brand.

Jean: It's never too late, it's never too, it's never too, it's never never.

Jerry Colonna: Right,

Jean: It is all of those things, yeah, absolutely.

Jerry Colonna:

That's wonderful. I didn't realize that you had made that shift and I'm fascinated by a number of things. Relationship to this mutual choice that you and your husband made. The experience of being the child of immigrants and being a founding CEO and what that means, the work. But you tell me, what would be helpful talk through for you because this is as I said it even before we did the recording we like to think of this as a kind of time for you as well as anything else.

Jean:

Yeah. Yeah. So a couple of things. One is last Friday, I just learned that we, the company got accepted into a very competitive accelerator. It's not public yet, otherwise I would talk about it. It's a great honor. There was a all-day sort of live pitch day last Tuesday, and it was thrilling. Who are servicing our clients who helped me put all the materials together. And I was super excited for like five minutes. And then I immediately went into targets and goals and the next thing, the next thing.

And so part of it as a founder, I've been on this journey for about a year and a half. And for about a year, we've roughly a year...we had a first client last April...I really want to find more joy. I really I think I have some I mean, Wall Street was very good to me and in many respects. It very good. It afforded me a good life, good opportunity to help support my family, my parents, and really take care of others.

But you're left with I did there's a little bit of PTSD. There's a little bit of things I'm unlearning, like really unlearning and starting from scratch. And then this whole journey is so intense. And then the recent banking crisis. But even before that, COVID, it just seems like it just happens all the time. So that is a challenge that I really just want to be and live differently. Because that stuff isn't going to go away. It's always going to be hard. There will always be milestones. But I would like to have more fortitude and not go sideways so quickly, I think, and just savor these wins a little bit more. Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

So congratulations on getting into the accelerated program. That's really wonderful. And what was it that... I'm imagining, and you can correct me if I'm wrong here. I'm imagining that there is a little bit of a space between the elation that you felt. you've been accepted and the planning. What was in that space? What was the emotion that was in that space?

Jean:

Um, God, that's a good question. And next time this happens, I'm going to think about that period a little bit more.

Jerry Colonna: Hmm. Jean:

Quiet? I was with my family this past weekend. I went to see my parents for Easter. And so it happened Friday afternoon. And I was really excited and then immediately just almost frozen a little bit. Just quiet. Just open. Quiet. I can't think of anything. But then I almost intentionally needed to fill that void with a list of things to do over the next two days.

Jerry Colonna:

And what was feeling behind when you start listing out to do's? What's the feeling there?

Jean:

I'm thinking of the next board meeting, the next target, the Monday, meeting, the call...

Jerry Colonna:

With happiness, with sadness, with anger, with fear, what feeling?

Jean:

Like it's hard or it's a feeling of it's weighty, responsibility...

Jerry Colonna: Responsibility, that's the word.

Jean: It's weighty.

Jerry Colonna:

The word responsibility and obligation was sort of hanging on me, does that resonate? Obligation, oh yeah, see, now if this was video, you'd see her eyebrows just popped up. Yeah.

Jean:

It's like you're a daughter of immigrants, you're an immigrant, you're the oldest, you're a mom, you've got a bunch of people who've taken big salary cuts, you've taken venture money, and you're trying to be the best steward of it. You can't mess up.

Jerry Colonna: You cannot mess up

Jean: No, I cannot.

Jerry Colonna: Which is...

Jean:

Nope.

Jerry Colonna:

...so notice that, how brief was that moment that you could just feel the elation and the pride, before the sense of obligation and duty, and dare I even say perhaps even representation.

Jean: Fully

Jerry Colonna: Yeah, there we go.

Jean: That's a newer one. That's a newer one?

Jerry Colonna: What do you mean, representation is a newer one?

Jean:

I think, you know, I've been in financial services, but I had not been in this sort of venture, private equity investment arena. They're really different. It's almost like you can be a doctor, but you could be a cardiologist or podiatrist. They're very different disciplines. There's the same thing in this whole space. And just, I think, going into even initial fundraising, I didn't fully understand the stats around women founders, funding, minority founders. I didn't have the full, I knew high-level, but I didn't know how minuscule. I don't think I understood the full weight of what that meant. And so as there aren't that many Korean women, mom, founders in this fintech space. I think there are a lot of women in commerce, or maybe packaged goods, consumer goods. They're more and more happening for sure. But the representation in what we've done in some of the emails that I get, just blind emails on LinkedIn, from younger Asian women or Asian women in larger organizations wanted to start there, company, it's like a little fan club. It's awesome. It's awesome. So that representation I feel, I feel the weight of that as well as taking this big, sometimes I feel selfish that I'm doing this versus the traditional route and just doing, completing what I would have done for my family. So that, those things.

Jerry Colonna:

I just want to pause and acknowledge that. I want to string together some things that I think I heard you say. So I think I hear you identifying as the child of an immigrant, possibly an immigrant yourself, as Korean, as a woman, as a mom, as a fintech executive, as a founder, was something of a role model perhaps. That was my word not yours. Yeah, you just took a deep breath. Yeah, there's a lot in there isn't there?

Jean:

Yeah, it's a little, if I knew then what I know now, I would have told my younger self 20 years

ago, go for it, you can do it. You've got the confidence. There's a lot of adjusting and calibration as a founder in general and to pivot, but yeah, that resonates a little bit...yeah

Jerry Colonna:

So I just want to acknowledge what you've accomplished already. And the statistics are against you in that regard. And without making too big of it, too big a deal of it, but I also don't wanna underplay it.

Jean:

Yeah, yeah. I have other founder friends, black founder friends, Latina founder friends, and they're experiencing, those numbers are even worse. So I've got that cohort. I know our country's founded by immigrants. There are a lot of immigrants. I had the fortune of birth of parents who loved me, who took care of me, who stayed together. many, many things. So it's hard to sort of receive that sometimes because there's just still so much more to do. But I appreciate you saying that. So I'm going to take a moment to just say thanks for that. And I'll take another moment to just kind of receive that.

Jerry Colonna:

You know, as at least in this moment, in this bubble of this video call, I'm your coach. And part of what our experience, you know, as the, I'm not just an old white guy, an old straight white guy, but I'm a coach. And part of my job is to help people be able to withstand the vicissitudes of what they've stepped into. And, you know, I often speak about the roller coaster experience of up, down, up, down, up, down. I'm elated. Yay, we just got into this program. Holy shit, what did I just sign up for?

Right? Like up, down, up, down. And part of the tool set that I would give you, is the ability to pause and recognize what you've accomplished, the extraordinary experiences in which you find yourself operating. Not to hold yourself back and stay stuck in that space, but to just take a breath and realize, this shit is hard. Like hard in a way that the media doesn't talk about. I cut you off. You were about to respond to this.

Jean:

No, I was, you know, I, fortunately, or better for worse, like it for women, it's always been hard. So it was hard before too. This is a different hard.

Jerry Colonna: You mean it was hard when you were on Wall Street.

Jean: It was, it was, that was hard.

Jerry Colonna: Yeah.

Jean:

That was hard too. Yeah. Um, there's the hard, the work it's, it's always never the work too. It's sort of the things that are...you know, you can run a meeting, you can work on a project, you can crunch numbers, you can present it. It's, it's the dynamics, right? It's the, uh, sort of all the layers and all the in-between. So yes. So it, it, it, it's things are. So okay, things are hard. So leave that at the door and you move on to the next thing. I think the surprises are how it does push you and it's just, it's intense. It's just intense.

You know, everything's set up around incentives and those behaviors are created based on those incentives and there's a lot of structure around it. So you can imagine it gets that way. This feels lean. This feels definitely, agency, more control, more opportunity to cultivate and really change the game. But there's a bigger system. You are one startup, one founder within the venture, within the investor, the LP, and the institutional. It's a whole ecosystem. So you don't ever escape it. It's just finding more of who you are and leading with that. And that's, I feel like I have the opportunity to do that now than before.

Jerry Colonna:

I appreciate the fullness of that response. I really do. I mean, what I'm hearing you say is that you're able to extract out the opportunities that are implicit in the hardness that is now. And I really love that framing of the agency that you have as no longer being constrained, say, by larger, more conservative institutions that you had to work with before. And...you know, when we endeavor to launch something brand new, and we convince people to take a pay cut to come join us on this crazy journey, we implicitly...

Jean:

Hahaha!

Jerry Colonna:

sign up for a certain kind of responsibility for their well-being. Even if we lay it all on the table, it's like, yeah, we only got funding until X, and what we're trying to do is Y, and it's hard. But what I'm appreciating, Jean is that you are defining in so many ways what the journey of entrepreneurship for everyone is like. And then simultaneously identifying what the journey for you in your identity, in your body, in your experience has been like. And in both ways, there are both differences and similarities for others who might identify similarly or identify completely differently. And yet, there is the similarity of that experience. Why 401k? Why retirement planning? Why Penelope?

Jean:

So I spent a big chunk of my career sort of in this space, not just most recently in my last role, but earlier on in financial services, sort of fell into it. So I've actually seen over the last decade, two decades, when a client, you sell into a company, and when an employee or worker starts saving tax-deferred, earning compound interests over time, you don't think about it. It grows,

grows tremendously. So it's, and knowing a lot of stats on it, it for many sort of middle-class or Americans writ large, it is the core part of how they retire. It is their nest egg. So a significant portion. So I had experience with it. I personally made my first sort of million in it, but because I started so early at 21, putting a little bit over time, it wasn't because I was a Founder, I got crypto really early, or it wasn't anything other than the really boring way of just working, which most of us have to do, right?

And so, part of that is, I think, watching my parents and their journey of being immigrants and all of their sort of degrees and their professions that they earned in Korea being non-consequential, having to start from scratch. I suppose they could have gone back to school, but they had three little children under five, so they needed to work right away.

Jean:

So, in watching them say, not say, their retirement plan was basically us, which is pretty consistent with their generation. And if I still ask you, if I ask my father today, I just saw him over the weekend, Dad, if you had \$100,000 and you could put it, take it out of the bank and put it in the stock market and earn 8% vs the versus the 2%, maybe it's a little bit higher now because of the way credit and markets are going right now. Would you? Absolutely not. He would say, absolutely, no amount of math because it's embarrassing. It would be personally sort of humiliating to go to a bank and say, I need money.

So there's a culture, there are all these sort of dynamic elements and I'm a product of small business owners. They had a grocery store, a restaurant. So I kind of grew up in it. And so I think what COVID launched for me was around, you know, you have PPP loans. None of our clients were looking for PPP loans. Broad-based, middle-class, high-net-worth individuals, all of our clients were doing great.

Jerry Colonna: Mm.

Jean:

And there's this sort of rallying cry around small businesses. And I believe that. I think they are the heart of America. I really do. I love all of the small stores in our neighborhood here in New York. And so that's why it's giving people who have jobs, just workers, it could be retail, creatives, restaurant, construction, these are all the kinds of clients we have who make under 100K have a shot at having a million dollars after working for 40 years. And I feel like you ought to, you earn that right, quite frankly, You should.

And the reality is that's just not where we are as a culture. We've done a tremendous job of teaching people to buy now, pay later, spend, put on credit, go buy more, buy, buy, buy, but not to, at first I wanted to turn them to savers, but it's not even savers, invest and just get started. So a big part of this journey is just trying to create more relief and do my small part. And both my husband, he was a teacher now, we both come from very sort of service-oriented,

service-minded households. And so I think for the second half of our life, we just wanted to live a little differently.

Jerry Colonna:

Well you know, it's such a joy and pleasure to talk to you. I really had no idea of this background. I really didn't. But we've been doing this podcast now for nine years. I've written books, and I talk to entrepreneurs all the time. And oftentimes, just as we were referencing a few minutes ago, I talk about the experience of withstanding that rollercoaster ride, or as I often say, not getting on the rollercoaster, but actually being able to be with the rollercoaster...

Jean: Mmm!

Jerry Colonna: ...right? And one of the tactics,

Jean:

I didn't know you didn't have to get on the roller coaster, okay.

Jerry Colonna:

No, you do not have to get on the roller coaster.

Jean:

All right. I'm like, let me buy that ticket. Let me be the first in line. I don't even have to buy the ticket, okay.

Jerry Colonna:

No you don't have to buy the ticket. You can just enjoy. There's a line in my book, *Reboot,* where I say Coney Island Cyclone is best admired from the ground. But the thing I was saying before was to just be able to pause and recognize what you've accomplished. I'm gonna give you another tool, which you already have, which is to remember why you did this thing in the first place.

Because that experience of elation obligation and the weightiness of all that, can in some ways be made lighter if you do what you just did, which is to recognize, why am I doing this in the first place? To be a little prosaic about it, you have created Penelope so that you could go back in time and give your parents the ability to put retirement savings. That's really what this business is about.

Jean: Kind of. Yes.

Jerry Colonna:

And there are how many millions of people who are just like your parents?

Jean: 60 million.

Jerry Colonna:

That's all. That's all. 60 million people who might have the capacity to look to the future and not be freaked out. Right? That their child, my youngest son, is getting married this December. That their child, starts to want to get married, and you can reach into savings and give them a gift that makes it a little bit easier. Or you can give them that starter loan that helps them buy their first home. Or you may be able to help with tuition in some capacity. I mean, this is what the post-World War II middle class was supposed to be about for everybody.

Jean:

100%, 100%, 100%. And that is the thing post-World War II for Americans, Gen Z, or boomers in Gen Z. It's been, you know, personal finance has been broadly sort of for the post-World War II white middle class, professionals, doctors, lawyers, dentists, middle, the world looks different 50 years later, you know, 60 years later, it's, it's dynamic. It's operating differently. And it creates this groundswell for so much more opportunity to help more people.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah, look the role of racism in this, one aspect of racism is that there's the structural racism where, if I look at my grandparents' journey, my grandparents who were immigrants, were in some ways similar to your parents' journey. They came, they have the privilege of being identified as white, even though perhaps 30, 40 years before, as Italians, they would not have been identified as white.

But suddenly, World War I comes along, and it starts to shift the dynamic. Who's white? Who's acceptable? Meantime, millions of immigrants from South Asia and from Asia broadly are not identified as white. And so there's this conflict going back and forth. Or you look at the inherent racism in the federal housing programs and ways in which segregation was maintained through housing programs. And my ancestors were able to move through that middle-class experience with structural support from a society that welcomed them because of how they identified and how they were racialized. And they moved toward that American middle-class dream, and they benefited from that.

Jean: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

And then, so you have this parallel process of structural racism, institutionalized racism, basically identifying who got the American dream and who didn't get the American dream. and we now have a shift, who is the middle class? And who is the, you know, and it feels like you're

leaning into that without it being say that the strategy or the mission of the business. Am I seeing that right?

Jean:

It, yeah, I, you know, I, um, a large portion of our clients, I would say, or a number of our clients are minority businesses, women-owned businesses for sure. And we talked a little bit early about representation and that being one option. Um, just maybe we have a, a different lens in which we talk about it, reducing so much more jargon, simplifying the onboard, and the choice options, we consciously really think about all of those elements and setting up the plan. So that's one. The other one is I never intended to create a pink brand or a rainbow brand or any... I think it's broader, I just wanna make sure that what we provide will have the best outcome for the lowest-paid person at the company or the organization.

Jerry Colonna:

Tell me, did 21-year-old Jean start thinking about, "I better put some money away." Because I don't know many 21-year-olds who start thinking like that.

Jean:

Yeah. So my first job out of college was at Goldman. I had a boss. So I was in financial services that said, put your money in your 401k. Just put it in this, et cetera. So it was just, it was probably that. I didn't understand really. And so I did because my parents certainly didn't have one. But all of my cohorts or that class, they certainly knew what to do already.

Jerry Colonna:

That was the feeling they had. They came from families that...

Jean:

Absolutely. They knew what mutual funds were, what equities were, what stuff they were. Yes, it was a conversation. This is the benefit my daughter has also the company is named after her. Her name is Penelope. So she is literally the direct beneficiary of all the labor of my husband and me as well as our parents combined.

Jerry Colonna:

Well, what she is, is the descendant of your parents, her grandparents on both sides, and all of those ancestors who put you and your husband in New York City so that Penelope can be born there or grow up there.

Jean:

Yes she is. So it takes, you had mentioned your grandparents coming. It takes generations. It takes time.

Jerry Colonna:

I want to go back in time, though, because I always find these stories fascinating. So mom and

dad immigrated to the United States? Is that right?

Jean:

Yeah, and my siblings and I, we came just shy of maybe eight, nine months afterward. They thought we were young, so we immigrated too. They were really concerned about finding a job, finding an apartment, and taking care of three kids. It would just be too much. So we stayed with our grandparents and then we came afterward. Yes.

Jerry Colonna:

And what did your grandparents do?

Jean:

My, on my father's side, my grandfather passed away when my dad was 16, and my grandmother passed when I was very young. So my father had been sort of working and building and sort of on his own. On my mother's side, my maternal grandparents, my grandmother didn't work. Most grandmothers didn't work. So they didn't work. My grandfather had a publishing company in Korea that fell on hard times. So it was sort of sold. And then when he retired, they both, my mother brought them to the States and my grandmother pretty much raised my siblings and me.

In fact, she spent a big chunk of time raising all of the grandkids. She raised her six kids and raised probably about 20 grandkids. So that's what is work and labor in and of itself. So that's a meaningful labor, big labor. So that's what they did, yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

I'm imagining grandparents on both sides lived through the war, the Korean War, and lived through maybe even being born during the Japanese occupation.

Jean:

Oh, yeah, a little bit. Yeah, they might have around that period. Definitely lived through the Korean War and even thought through those machinations. But for sure. Yeah, I think that hits it right there. Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

There is, I often encourage folks to hold an awareness of what their ancestors went through. Because they teach us in subtle ways, like you better put money away because the publishing company can disappear, or you better put money away because...

Jean:

Oh, yeah for sure there's still something about balancing everything to the penny. I'm a little bit past it, but for a long time, I was very, I just needed to know where everything was and even in starting this company, you know, there was going to be no rock that I didn't look under I there, I was just going to do it all way, not with leaving the role that I had leaving, putting my daughter's

name on the company. I mean, so many different things that are, it's, it's, it's this personal odd thing that's happening that wasn't fully designed this way, but here we are.

Jerry Colonna:

Well, it was I would argue it was fully designed by your unconscious. It wasn't it wasn't consciously designed, but there's a part of you that and I'm going to argue it's a superpower. There's a part of you that needs to know what's under every one of those rocks that needs to know where every penny is. And, you know, as you as you grow the team. I would argue that something to pay attention to is to not let the dark side of that superpower take over, where it shows up as a kind of controlling versus the strength of it, which is we are thoughtful, we're methodical, we're meticulous in the way we plan.

Jean:

Yeah. Yeah, it's interesting. So, Jerry, I would ask you, this is a good question because there are a couple of learnings that I had in the past where you bring people on on resume, the companies that they work at that were all et cetera. And so, or you leave it alone, you're like, they've got it. Because I would love it if someone could tell me what to do all the time, including eating breakfast, and even make every single decision. I will just show up and work.

But as a founder, and this is what everyone has told me now, it's bearing out that way, is I have to know every single detail, even if that is not my expertise. I am not a developer, I'm not a digital product lead, but I have worked with my team and gotten really comfortable. I'm still not able to code or any of these things, but they couldn't be things left alone. Or even sales. I have not an official, I've never been a professional salesperson, but I've got to understand every lead that comes through, where it came from, what it costs. So what's happened is when I hire for, and you always say, I'm going to hire people or smarter, doing more. And they still are, but you have to know it. So I am finding myself just way in the weeds to get a pulse because those are just all different areas. So we're in a good groove right now with the team, most except a few have been here from the very beginning and we're getting a good flow, the second hand of how we're communicating about things. But that took time to cultivate. It didn't happen in an instant.

So it how... I don't want to go into I would love to just say, here you go. Have at it. But you always want every person to know it's gonna think about it, worry about it. And 24-7, like a founder, it is just very different.

Jerry Colonna:

Right, so you're really touching upon a number of issues, a number of facets of what makes the job of being a founding CEO so challenging. One is that no one is going to feel the business the way founders feel the business and have this sensibility about what's going on. Moreover, you're no longer treating things like a job, meaning, right, these are my set of responsibilities. I'm going to stay in my sandbox. You need to know the whole playground, not just your sandbox. And the downside to that is you could stand in the way of the business scaling. You could stand in the way of the business being able to grow.

Jean: Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

So the challenge is hard, but not as complicated as people think it is. The first step is to make sure that you're exquisitely self-aware, just as you are, so that to know that you have this capacity to need to understand the programming that goes behind that little tool, that app that you all have built, or the thinking behind the design, and that you're going to have a point of view about that. And to know that that point of view is informed by everything that we've been talking about.

The ancestors and the obligation from them, the sense of responsibility that comes from representation, the sense of ownership when you've asked people to join your enterprise. All of that is at play, at least unconsciously, if not unconsciously and consciously. And to know that that's operating and that when your breath gets caught and you're like, fuck, why did they change the pixel on that left-hand side of the page? When that arises inside of you, know that that's what's going on.

The reason it's so important is what we have to activate is a discerning capability. You're going to get triggered in that way. You're going to get pulled into worrying things. And so what we want to do is activate the discerning part of your brain that says, yeah, actually, I don't need to know that. Or to look across the aisle and say, OK, John over there in development, he's got it.

Jean: Yeah.

Yeah.

Jerry Colonna:

But equally important, Jean, is the ability to give your team the awareness that, hey, this is how I'm wired. This is what I'm carrying. My first impulse is going to be to double-check things. not because I don't necessarily believe in you, but because I'm trying to quiet some anxieties I've got because I'm carrying this boatload of stuff. So I'm gonna lean in.

Jean: I'm just...

Jerry Colonna: You're laughing. Which.

Jean:

Now I'm imagining having this conversation, but they're, they're, I love my team. They're so good. They'll get that.

Jerry Colonna:

Yeah, look there was this one time when my now oldest son, or he was my oldest son at that time, announced in like September that in October he was going to China to study Kung Fu. OK, and, you know, he was like 22, 23 at the time. I was like, oh, my God, you're going to China for months, right? And so, of course, I then freak out and I make this long list of all the things he has to get done before he goes. But wait, Jean, here's how crazy I got. I then did half the things on the list, right? And I gave him the list and I said, this is your father being crazy, okay? Ignore this. You can get it done. And in that moment, I gave him permission to not take in and internalize my anxiety, right? I gave the skill to be able to push back on me.

Jean:

It's a note, so funny.

Jerry Colonna:

That's what I'm saying. It's like you can say to the team, look, what we do is really important. That's activating purpose. And what you're doing is really important. And sometimes you're going to be a little nuts as a consequence of doing this. So you just take a deep breath. You give them the skills. You give them permission to say, Jean, we got this.

Jean:

Yeah, yeah, they're there. Yeah, we're good. We're there definitely there with a couple of them for sure. It's a process. We're all figuring it out. And again, I feel fortunate to have these young, awesome people. They're really great. They're why we got our product or clients are being served. We're growing and all of those things. So yeah, I will tell them.

Jerry Colonna:

Well, I hope that's been helpful. I really want to thank you for coming on to the show and sharing a little bit of your journey. So thank you again for coming on the show. It was really a delight to meet you and we will talk soon.