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Sarah Petty:

One of my favorite things to do is to share stories of what my students have overcome in their wins to inspire you to keep going. Today, you're going to meet Carolyn Slavenas, who started out as a mall portrait photographer, and eventually ended up working for herself and selling digital files. Then in May, she decided to go all in on the boutique model. Within a few weeks, Carolyn had gotten over \$9,650 in orders, and she was new in town, having recently moved. The thought of ditching digitals can be scary when you have a ton of competition giving them, right?

Carolyn:

Yeah.

Sarah Petty:

So I want you to hear what happened to Carolyn when she became a boutique photographer. It is incredible.

So the real question is, how are portrait photographers like us able to run a profitable business and still put our families first without selling digital files for cheap and working all the time? I'm Sarah Petty, your host of The Worth Every Penny Joycast, and I went from a stressed out, overworked mama with three babies to being named one of America's most profitable photographers, without working my kids' lives away. Each week I'll show you how to find and serve boutique portrait photography clients in a world where we compete with free, thanks to everyone having a digital camera in their pocket. Take the first step to adding more joy and profit to your life by downloading your free photography business tools at joyofmarketing.com/podcast.

Welcome, Carolyn.

Carolyn:

Hello.

Sarah Petty:

I am so stoked that you are here talking to me because your story is not unlike a lot of people's stories, right?

Carolyn:

Oh no. I am like every single one of the people in this group right now. And I was there five months ago, six months ago.

Sarah Petty:

Yeah. Let's talk about where you were before you were sitting in their chairs. So you'd been a mall photographer. And then what made you say, well, I think I can create a business?

Carolyn:

Well, I was a mall photographer for about a year or so, and I learned a lot. I actually have my marketing degree, and I loved marketing and I love all things creative. I was originally a lyric opera major. That's my jam. I love all things creative and decided that I did not want to do that for a living. And then one of my friends who worked at a mall was like, "Oh hey, just come in here and do

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this part time." And I thought, oh, whatever. So I did and I fell in love with it. I love meeting people. I love new adventures. So this was totally right up my alley. And then I had left there. I went back into marketing and then was just kind of there a little bit part time. And then I was miserable. I was miserable. I was working for a local ABC affiliate, and I loved buying the advertising, but I didn't like selling it.

And so my grandma called and she said, "Why are you so upset all the time?" And I said, "I don't know." She's like, "Well, if you could do anything, what would it be?" And I said, "Oh God, I have my own photography studio." She's like, "Well, how much does that cost?" And I was like, "Well, I don't know. Let me get back to you." And so I did. And she was like, "You can quit on Friday. I'll put a check in the mail." And so grandma bought my first camera and my first light and my first backdrop.

Sarah Petty: Grandma. I like that word, it's in my heart.

Carolyn: And that was 16 years ago.

Sarah Petty: Okay. How old were you, do you mind sharing, 16 years ago?

Carolyn: Oh, I don't know. 41 and a half minus 16 years. I don't know. I was in my thirties.

Sarah Petty: Okay. So you weren't a teenager, you were an adult at this point?

Carolyn: Yeah.

Sarah Petty: Yeah. Did you have kids yet?

Carolyn: I did. I had two children. Now I have five.

Sarah Petty: Okay. And so you were thinking, Okay, I can do this. So you started offering high res digital files for a fee?

Carolyn: Absolutely.

Sarah Petty: Okay. And how'd that go for you?

Carolyn: It didn't. It ended up being like part-time hobbyist. It was never a legit business. I was never making enough to call it an actual business. And I tried everything. Because I had done marketing, I had friends that were in radio and TV and I was like, Oh, I can just. Like, "Hey, we have a radio promotion? You want to do it?" "Yeah." No, nothing worked.

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Sarah Petty: What else did you try? What else were you doing? Did you do mini sessions?

Carolyn: Oh my gosh, yes. Stinking mini sessions were killing me. Like, what am I doing? Because I was offering them about what everybody else was offering, like \$50 a session, come on in. By the end of the day, I was exhausted, I had left two or three days away from my kids. I was like, what am I doing with my life? And so I ended up, it was just a little hobby for me for a long time. And then I moved.

Sarah Petty: So you moved, So this is when you moved. So you moved from Illinois to Georgia?

Carolyn: Yes.

Sarah Petty: And then what in your mind, because, were you confident? Were you like, I'm awesome, I'm a great photographer, I can go do this? Or were you like I was, like I'm not, I just feel like a fake?

Carolyn: Oh, absolutely. I had major imposter syndrome. I was like, I'm a photographer. I mean, even in the way I was talking to people was like, are you? It was more of a question than it was like a statement, I'm a photographer. So when I moved to Georgia, I sold everything but my camera. And I thought, there's no way. I mean, if I couldn't build it in a place that I had lived for years, there is no way I'm building a business here.

And then I met the dance studio owner. And I was here for a month. And she came up to me and she said, "Now I know that you've only lived here for a month, but you're way more outgoing than I am, so any chance you know of somebody who can do head shots for our company girls?" And I thought, Do I even say it? And I was like, "Well, actually." And that was it. And that was kind of my moment where I was like, I'm either going to speak up right now and say, hey, I can do this, and really go all in on myself, or I'm going to tell her I don't know anybody. And I was like, you know what? I'm going to take a chance on me and I'm going to do it. And so that's kind of how it started.

Sarah Petty: Do you feel like that was the universe talking to you? Because I believe that, call it whatever you want. Call it God, call it the spirit. Call it whatever you believe, the universe whispers to you, "You can do this, you can do this." And that was the voice that you're like, I can do this.

Carolyn: Yes. Everything in me was like, now, I'm a photographer. It was like I couldn't not say it. And I just felt like all of the things that I was putting out into the universe, and just praying for it, and wanting so bad. It was like, here's my moment to say yes. And so I did. And what she paid me basically paid for the lights and a new backdrop and backdrop stand. And she said, "I barely know

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anybody." That was such a lie. She knows everybody here. She's lived here her whole life. So then it went to, "Can you take my kids' homecoming pictures?" "Yes." "Can you do my kids' senior pictures?" "Yes." Her daughter had a baby, "Can you do the newborn pictures?" "Yes." And then they would tell people about me. And the next thing you know, I found Sarah Petty.

Sarah Petty: So hang on a second, I want to jump in here. Because you have a marketing degree, you have all this experience, you have the most outgoing personality. Because I'm sure a lot of people listening are saying, "Yeah, I'm not that outgoing." Grandma bought you equipment. All the money you were making, you were buying more equipment and still, were you profitable at that point?

Carolyn: No. Because you can talk to a million people, but if you're doing it wrong, you're not going to make any money.

Sarah Petty: What was your husband saying in all this?

Carolyn: Honestly, I have the most amazing husband, and I'm so thankful for him. He's my person, man. He is behind me no matter what. So he was like, "If your soul is telling you that this is what you need to do, then this is exactly what you need to do." So that's what he did.

Sarah Petty: Whoa. Keep him. So you came across a challenge that we were having.

Carolyn: Yeah.

Sarah Petty: You came in. And what were the biggest ahas when you're learning about this other way to do business that no one else is really teaching? You probably picked up a few random things or looked at competitors. But when you sat down and looked at the whole system, what was your biggest aha moment of like, oh my gosh, I'm missing this piece or this piece or this piece? What were the pieces?

Carolyn: Oh my gosh, I didn't know anything. I mean, really. And I've always been pretty introspective. So I can come out and say, "Wow, I'm terrible at this." Or, "I really need to learn this more and take more time." So I realized, right away, that I did not have a system. If you have ever read how to make money, you know that there are four ways, legal or illegal, to make money. And what was I doing? I had no system to go from. So when I found you, I realized that she has a system in place, and if I want to have a business, then I want to take the fast road to do it. And I need to follow somebody who has a system that's already there in place and is proven.

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Sarah Petty:

Why do you think, I just am curious what your thoughts are, because I know a lot of people listening are feeling this way. I'm just going to try guessing at things for a while and build my business before I invest in it. And I'm wondering what your thoughts were there. You're just trying all these things, you're sort of copying what you think other people are doing. Mini sessions is what I should do. And then you get this imposter syndrome because you're like, I'm a fake because they don't know what I'm doing. I don't know why. I did it too in the beginning. And I don't know. Why do we do that? We're setting ourselves up not to succeed.

Carolyn:

Right. And I felt like all this time, all of these things that I was trying, I knew who my target audience was. So I knew who to target, but I was doing it all wrong. And I was like, I can keep doing this for another 14 years and it can be a hobby and I can make Christmas money in the fall, or I can really find a system that works and I can bet on myself and stop looking at my competitors and just go all in for me. And that was really it. It was like, what do I want in life? Am I okay with just having some part-time hobby, being a hobbyist, or did I really want this for me? And so I had to pick me and believe in me.

Sarah Petty:

I love that. So you were sitting there with the opportunity to make a significant investment in yourself when you realized, okay, I found this Sarah Petty. She has this program. It's a legit investment, right? So the opportunity to build a career, how did you justify that? Were you like, I have to do it or I'm going to just not do it anymore?

Carolyn:

Well, I really came up with the fact that my kids are going to have heroes. Your kids are going to have heroes, so why not have it be me? They can pick Superman, they can pick whoever, or they can pick me. And they can see me making a decision, admitting what I'm doing wrong, going for it and putting my effort into myself. I want to be my kids' heroes. They're going to have them, and I want them to have me.

Sarah Petty:

Wow. Who else wants to be their kids' hero? That is so powerful. That literally gave me chili bumps all over my entire body because it's so true. Our kids, we always say that, they don't always listen to us, but they watch what we do. So they're watching you do this. So I really want to walk through all the things you did in your business as you were becoming boutique. Okay. So I'm going to just throw questions at you as far as which parts were hard for you. Because I find every student, as they're learning these things, based on whatever skills they have, you clearly are an extrovert. We work with a lot of introverts. But then they have strengths in places you don't. So it's always like, everybody has a different story. But first thing we did was we got your legal. We scrubbed through your brand and got you crystal clear there. How did that feel for you? Did you have a lot of bumps there?

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Carolyn:

Yeah. I think part of it was that I had to take that step back and realize that, okay, I obviously am not doing everything right, and I need help. So I had to be open to the critiques and open to, Carolyn, this is wrong. The thing that I found so powerful was that no one really put you down. Nobody put me down. Nobody was like, "Wow, your pictures are bad." Or, "Oh, you're not legal? What have you been doing?" Or, "Oh, this is all you've done in the past? Well, you're going to be on the slow track, Carolyn." It was just like, here we are. This is where we want you to go. So I think clearing my own head of all the head trash that I had, that was the hardest part for me really, was just being like, scrub it. Just take it and scrub it. Because if what I was doing was working, I wouldn't need the system. But clearly I needed it, so bring it on.

Sarah Petty:

How did you describe your photography skills going through this process? Are you a trained photographer? Do you have a degree in photography?

Carolyn:

I don't have a degree in photography. No. I played around with it a little bit in college, but definitely not a degree. And then I worked at the portrait studio at the mall, so I learned a little bit more. But I would say, a good chunk of what I learned, I learned probably at the studio and then just on my own, learning angles. And I knew just kind of, from marketing and design and things, what's more appealing and what's not appealing. So that helped out a little bit. But I've grown so, so much.

Sarah Petty:

And when you learned, when we showed you things that are selling, that clients are buying, was it more simple than what you thought, getting into products and prices?

Carolyn:

Oh my gosh, it's a system. It's a proven system. And I think that's super important. I was terrified for my first sale, but it was incredible. It was everything that I had heard that should happen. If you follow the system, it works. It works. It was amazing.

Sarah Petty:

One of the things we talk about and we teach you is your what and your why. And then that fits into when you're talking to a client, that's part of the seven Bs, and that step of learning how to create value for what you are charging. So once you learn how to charge profitable prices, it's like, okay, now how do I go out into the market and talk about that? I would guess that maybe was an easier step for you because, was it just the matter of like, okay, now I know what to say, now I can go do it, versus some people might be a little more scared?

Carolyn:

Yeah, I mean that was huge for me because, really, I have two whats and two whys. So really, for me, it just depends on who I'm talking to, which one I'm really going to focus on. But writing that down and reading it, and reading it,

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and putting it up and seeing that every day is so motivating. It was a game changer.

Sarah Petty:

Yeah, for sure. So you're learning how to talk to people and you're starting more conversations. You start doing marketing activities. And were you able to stay up as you're learning these things, or did you have any life things happening during this? We were together eight weeks as your job is to go on and get a client.

Carolyn:

So three weeks of it, I was out of the game. My daughter was graduating from high school. Because of when we moved here, she stayed back in Illinois to finish at that school. So I had to drive across the country and go and see her. I was there for a week. Then my mom, who I hadn't seen since the beginning of the pandemic, came out for a week and a half. I was really gone for about three weeks out of it, but that's okay. That's okay because the system is there and the system is in place. So I knew when I was out that it would still be there when I got back. Everything would be there. The support was there, the lessons were there. It was amazing.

Sarah Petty:

Yeah. Isn't that interesting to have that mindset of family first? That's what we talk about, is family first. But then it's like, but I can't look away from my business or it'll be gone.

Carolyn:

No, I'm looking away from it Wednesday, Thursday, today. This is my kids' fall break. I'm not doing anything. And that's okay. Just to be able to say, you know what? My kids are at home. These three days are about them, and going apple picking and fun things like that. It's their time. It'll be here.

Sarah Petty:

Yeah, we shouldn't have to pick. I just believe that so strongly. No way. So let's talk about marketing, going out and getting clients. How many leads did you get? Did you get a client right away? Talk about that.

Carolyn:

Sure. So I did one of the marketing activities, and it was actually overwhelming how many people I had. So I came up with something just kind of general to narrow it down. And out of that, I got my Julie.

Sarah Petty:

So you got a client, you set up the appointment?

Carolyn:

Yep.

Sarah Petty:

Okay. So you booked them. Were you still nervous about price or you'd already covered it on the phone call, which is where you're supposed to cover it?

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- Carolyn: Oh no. I covered it on the phone call. And I even covered it in the message that I sent out to everybody. I was like, "And let me tell you about the investment." So it kind of weeded out the freeple, cheaple people right away. So I was stuck with people who could be my ideal clients. It works. Follow the system and it works.
- Sarah Petty: Okay. So you get the client.
- Carolyn: Yes.
- Sarah Petty: And you're having this session, you do the pre-planning meeting where you're showing big, there's seven different things that you're doing, and you're covering price again, making sure they're crystal clear on everything. You're planning this session. Who was the subject? Was it children, pets, family?
- Carolyn: This was actually couples.
- Sarah Petty: Really?
- Carolyn: Yes.
- Sarah Petty: Your first Julie was a couple.
- Carolyn: Mm-hmm.
- Sarah Petty: Wow. So you went out into the market looking for couples, married couples, or any couples?
- Carolyn: Any couples.
- Sarah Petty: Okay.
- Carolyn: Any couples. I did a Creekside photo shoot, Summer of Love, is what I called it. And it was awesome.
- Sarah Petty: And so you got a lot of love. So you did this first session and then you went and you sat down with them and you presented their images with them. Because that's how we serve, we are serving them. It's not pushy. It's not pressurey. So as you're going through that appointment, were you the duck on the pond looking smooth and freaking out underneath? Or were you calm at this point? I think it's different for everyone. What was that like?
- Carolyn: Oh, I had a 35 minute drive to their house. And the entire time I was just talking myself up. I'm like, "You're amazing. You've been doing this for years. What are you talking about? All of your clients spend thousands of dollars on you." I

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mean, these were the things that I just kept going over and over and over in my head. So when I presented them with their total, they were like, "Okay, sounds good. Can we do two installments?" And of course most of my clients do. I didn't let on at all. And it was amazing. And I served them. And it was the first time that I had done a session and walked away and felt so good about it. I didn't feel bad about taking anybody's money. I was like, yeah, I made this because I served them and I gave them what they needed.

Sarah Petty: So tell us how much was the order? Because a Julie, my first right-fit client invested over a thousand dollars. So in our community, we celebrate that first order that's over a thousand dollars. So is it like \$1,001? What was it?

Carolyn: \$4,147.

Sarah Petty: Shut the front door.

Carolyn: Yeah, it was amazing. And I got outside and I'm talking as I go. But I think for me, the biggest thing is, see, if this were an introvert would be even better because I can't shut my mouth. So where an introvert could sit there and be quiet. I was like, "So what are you guys thinking?" And I'm just like, don't talk, don't talk, don't talk. And that was the biggest thing for me. Show them the price and let them talk first. So it was incredible.

Sarah Petty: This was a couple, you got a \$4,000 order of a couple? They weren't even married. Maybe they've been in a long term relationship?

Carolyn: No, they were married. They were married. They don't have children, they have dogs. And they had moved into this house and it was so beautiful. And the first thing I said, I'm like, "Oh my goodness, can you imagine all the beautiful artwork of you guys that we can put all over these walls? This is so exciting." And when we talked about it before I even sat down and showed them, I was like, "Oh, show me where you think you guys are going to put this artwork." So we were already like, "Oh, this would be great on that wall. This would be great on that wall."

Sarah Petty: Yeah, we call that a parachute, the little things that reinforce that you're going in the right direction. As the planes going up, it's like, Oh, we're talking about wall portraits. We're considering wall portraits. We know the pricing. That's so exciting. I mean, everybody listening, I want you to ask yourself, does that sound salesy? Listen to her talk. She's like, "Oh my gosh, we can decorate your home." And she's just really being excited. She's not like, "You need to have this now."

Carolyn: Oh no, no, not at all. It was awesome. It was so cool to just do that.

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Sarah Petty: Yeah. Have you ever tried selling prints before you learned our system? Had you tried it at all? Did you think when you were selling digitals people would buy prints, or were you just resigned to giving them all the digitals? I'm curious.

Carolyn: No. So I had tried and I had made some money, but I didn't have a system in place. I wasn't doing it the right way. And now I can serve so much harder. It is so awesome.

Sarah Petty: Yeah. Did you probably feel though, back then, if we would've talked to the Carolyn back then, you probably thought you were serving your clients hard, really, too hard?

Carolyn: Yeah. I thought I was. I was like, I'm doing a good job. I mean, I'm offering them prints, and if they get the digitals too, that's okay. But I was really short cutting myself. And what I realized doing boutique breakthrough was that I can serve them so much better, and at a much higher level if I just follow the system. And they get more out of it too. It's win-win. I never feel like I'm pushing anybody ever.

Sarah Petty: Yeah. And don't you feel like, at least this happened to me, the relationships I have. Like with the couple that gave you \$4,000, they probably hugged you, and thank you. Did your digital file clients ever feel that way? I mean, they're going to go home and put it in a drawer.

Carolyn: No. I laugh now because I'm like, I make grown men cry. When I show seniors' parents their pictures and the dad is crying, or I show this husband and wife their pictures and he's crying. I'm like, I make grown men cry now, in a really good way.

Sarah Petty: What do you say to your past self, before you even knew about us, who was out there grinding, feeling bad about yourself, having imposter syndrome, telling yourself, you're not good enough, you can't do this, you don't have a photography degree, no one's going to pay you what you're worth. What do you say to your past self?

Carolyn: Oh my gosh. Just believe in yourself and do it. I am so grateful for the boutique breakthrough opportunity. I just wish I had done it like a year or two earlier. And I look now, I'm like, where would I have been? My biggest regret is not believing in myself and going all out two years ago.

Sarah Petty: That gave me chills. It's like in the Wizard of Oz, when he tells Dorothy, "My dear, you had the power all along."

Carolyn: And you do.

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Sarah Petty: And you just had to decide for yourself. You had to pick you instead of waiting for the world to pick you. Carolyn, thank you so much for being here and sharing your story with everybody.

Carolyn: Oh, thank you so much for having me. It was awesome.

Sarah Petty: Probably one of the most fragile phases of going boutique is that tender spot where you're fired up about the possibilities, but you don't have a ton of income coming in yet because you haven't gotten your first thousand dollar client, the person we call your Julie. Going boutique really turns your business upside down in a good way, with new systems for selling, for marketing, and for pricing. And it really can be heart pounding and nerve-wracking. Well, one of the ways I've made the transition easier for photographers is my 60 day online workshop called Boutique Breakthrough, where we scrub through your prices, your photography, your brand, and your selling system to make you boutique. We only open this course up a few times a year to a small group of photographers because my team and I literally hold your hand through your transition. A new class is starting soon, so if you're interested in learning more, go to boutiquebreakthrough.com for a free training to see if boutique breakthrough is right for you.