



WOMEN IN BUSINESS WEDNESDAYS INTERVIEW

SARAH MCNALLY
FOUNDER AND CEO
MCNALLY JACKSON

WF: What inspired you to create McNally Jackson?

SARAH: I was 29 when I opened my first bookstore. I had been working in publishing, and I felt driven to start something of my own. It was 2004 and I didn't have any innovative tech ideas, because then, as now, I thought mostly about people and books. A bookstore was the least innovative choice I could have made, especially as my mother was a bookseller before me. I opened a bookstore that didn't reinvent the business model, at a time when the business model itself seemed to be failing, with Barnes and Noble closing dozens of stores each year. It goes to show that even if you fail to be original, you can still be great at what you do.

WF: What are your responsibilities as the Founder and CEO of McNally Jackson?

SARAH: We have 6 stores, and my job is keeping them all inspiring. I choose most of the books and displays and I oversee marketing and design. I have worked with our Director of Operations, Alison Glasgow, for 16 years. She and I divide, confer, and conquer.

WF: Where have you found your support systems and how crucial have they been in your career as Founder and CEO of McNally Jackson?

SARAH: My parents have been very supportive. They founded and grew a small business, so they understand my excited expansiveness, and my ensuing regrets as my problems grow vaster and more varied with each new store. My sister is an HR consultant, which I think might be the worst job in the world, but she likes it. She is my sanity when talking through personnel management. My closest friend is, like me, a creator and a workaholic, and when things get rough we fantasize together about a simpler life, perhaps opening a bar in Mexico City and making small talk with strangers for the rest of our lives. My team at the bookstore is very stable, most of us have worked together for many years. When I feel deflated, I think of the talented, kind, conscientious people at my side, and I know that I must be doing something right to have such a team.

WF: What is the impression that you want people to walk away with upon visiting or shopping with McNally Jackson?

SARAH: I want everyone in my stores to feel that paths through the history of human thought are branching out on all sides of them, and they can be wildly intellectually curious and ambitious. They have to go home and read in the silence of their minds, but in my stores I hope they are inspired to pursue new journeys.

WF: What is your most memorable experience with McNally Jackson?

SARAH: Time Out once put McNally Jackson on its cover, featured as one of the 50 reasons why New York is the "best place in the world." The endless work in progress that is McNally Jackson felt briefly static. Having

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stores open to the public 363 days a year makes me feel like we're at near constant risk of making fools of ourselves, like we're dancing on stage 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, at risk of a wardrobe malfunction. What if we forgot to reorder Proust? What if a bookseller is playing cheesy pop music very loudly? When I saw that magazine cover, I knew we had created something that can endure quotidian humiliations.

WF: In what ways has your business been affected by COVID-19 and how have you adjusted?

SARAH: Oof. Well, we have strengthened many systems that needed strengthening, as we no longer have time or money to waste on any sloppiness. We rebuilt our website and opened a warehouse to deal with internet orders. We are paying more attention to marketing--before COVID we were amply rewarded for simply opening our doors and letting people come in. We reconfigured our stores for the security of our staff.

Before COVID, I started projects that excited me. I didn't do cost analyses, I cared only whether an idea had intellectual and cultural integrity. I believed that bookstore succeed in mysterious ways, with the unprofitable initiatives incalculably augmenting the profitable ones. Now, we can't risk losing money on anything, which disciplines my creativity.

WF: What are some tips or advice you would give to aspiring business owners?

SARAH: I have many friends who talk for years about starting a business, but never make the leap. I wonder sometimes if starting a business has to be an act of informed passion, not unlike falling in love and committing to a person. It's always going to be a little scary. There will always be reasons not to do it, or to wait, if you come at it purely intellectually. If your passion is truly ignited by a project, then game out the worst case scenario. Can you tolerate the worst case? If so, you can let yourself get excited. When you throw yourself into something, your wits, courage, knowledge, and stamina will increase. You'll be able to figure it out as problems and possibilities arise. You can't figure out everything in advance, and you have to trust that you will learn and grow, you aren't yet the person you will become. When I was pregnant, a friend told me of a sculpture in India with the inscription: The child gives birth to the mother. In the same way, the business gives birth to the entrepreneur.

WF: What was the first book you read that left a lasting impression on you and why?

SARAH: The chronological first is probably *Winnie the Pooh*. Dostoevsky writes in *The Idiot* that great characters in fiction are found in diluted form in any reader's life. That is certainly true of Christopher Robin's entourage. I don't know when exactly I realized what books can do, and how far a serious reader can travel into herself and outside of herself.