



Kelly Scanlon:

Welcome to Banking on KC. I'm your host, Kelly Scanlon. Thank you for joining us. Our guest on this episode is Hailee Bland-Walsh, the founder of City Gym. Welcome to the show, Hailee.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Thanks Kelly. I appreciate it.

Kelly Scanlon:

How are you doing? You're in an industry that's been really hard hit by the Coronavirus pandemic and the shelter in place. What have you been doing to make your adjustments during this period?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

How I'm doing today, I feel probably more hopeful and cautiously optimistic than I have in what feels like a few months or many lifetimes lived since the stay in place order went into effect. So we actually officially closed March 17th, which was just a little bit before the actual stay in place orders, but just based on our industry and the way people access our business, we felt like we were perfectly positioned to really lead by example and show the community how we could act on our values when we say we really care about Kansas City's health by saying we were going to close as a way of demonstrating to others the potential for an outbreak scenario. So we were really serious about trying to be as proactive as possible. I just couldn't imagine being reactive to an outbreak situation. So in the beginning it was, I think I was feeling a pretty intense sense of grief and just uncertainty, but after some time and a little bit more information and just the way things have sort of been able to shake out, I'm feeling some glimmerings of hope again.

Kelly Scanlon:

You talk about grief. I've heard that from many people. You're feeling it personally, I suspect you're feeling it on behalf of your employees, on behalf of your clients. How are you doing as a leader to work through that, your personal grief, your personal uncertainty, to keep everybody around you going that is dependent on you? And even more so during this kind of a situation.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I really had to prioritize my own self care. The adage that you can't pour from an empty cup really revealed itself to me. I had to really be mindful of what I needed to do to feel okay and to feel a sense of

capacity before I could go around making others feel okay. In the very, very beginning, it was very much triaged, so I was spending a lot of time giving and supporting and inspiring and empowering folks. But then after a couple of weeks rolled on and that initial support began to fade and it was just sort of a quiet time, if you will, I had to really come to account with myself on a lot of different things. So prioritizing my own self care in very radically different ways that I have cared for myself in the past.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I'm very much a busy person, a schedule person. I'm an efficient person. Even my workouts are packed with efficiency, and what I really uncovered was I needed just a lot of space and grace and expansiveness, so instead of efficient workouts, I was moving to two hour walks while listening to podcasts and books and things that I would have never given myself the time and space to engage in before. It really became healing and soothing for me, so that I could keep my head above water and feel like I could love and support those who rely on me.

Kelly Scanlon:

Business owners are notorious for going at the speed of light, practically, and not giving themselves time and that self care. What did you learn about yourself that you think you'll be able to carry over even after, if we can call it normal activity, resumes?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Yeah, our new normal. I think one of the things I'm going to be really mindful is building in time for not doing anything, allowing myself just to have space to be creative. I will say that while things have felt really sad and hard, I also have kind of an emerging creativity happening. That having the space to think, to really sit and feel and think that I was definitely not giving myself the space to have before, has stimulated my creativity. It's also really reminded me why I do what I do. It's gotten me connected to at the end of the day, if all else fails, what are the most important parts of your life or the most important values in your life? It's reconnected me to those things, and without this real dramatic pause, I wouldn't have had the space to uncover those things and also to make a commitment to myself to prioritize that going forward.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I mean, I think people would ask me, how do you feel today? And I would say, "Oh man, I'm so busy." And then I'd list my schedule. One of the things I've really uncovered is that busy is not a feeling, right? Busy for me was maybe a way of being productive, but maybe hyper productivity was also a distraction in some ways. So getting connected to what were the ways in which I wasn't truly feeling through some of the work that was mine to do, and the ways that that was keeping me from being really connected to my mission and my vision and my creativity?

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah. Let's talk about that mission and vision and creativity, and go back to the decision that you made to open City Gym in the first place. Why did you decide to open a gym?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I had worked in the fitness industry since 2004. I was a college and professional athlete, and truth be told, I knew I could not sit still at a desk job. So I thought, "Well, I'll work in fitness for a while." I had

coached and obviously trained as an athlete and I thought, "Gosh, how hard could fitness be?" So I fell into it as a, "I'll do this for a while," kind of gig.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Why I stayed was what I saw happening first in my group classes and with my personal training clients, was when I created a space for those folks to feel safe enough to try to do things that were outside of their comfort zone, and they were happening in the incubator of a gym environment. But really what we were accomplishing were just, it was just a metaphor for doing hard things. So they were showing up. They were accomplishing things they never thought they could, and I would watch the way that that would change their entire life, and the ripple effect that that would have in their relationships and their jobs and the way they showed up in their community, and that's why I stayed. I stayed for the transformation piece that I saw happen when people had the space to feel safe enough and inspired enough to change.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

So really, that's why City Gym was born. I thought, okay, well, I've been creating this for my clients and in my classes, and then I had worked in management. But I was working for other organizations who were amazing but weren't mine, and I thought, "What if I could create an entire organization based off the same ethos, that the people who need us most are the folks who feel most intimidated to come to the gym? What if we create an environment built on the idea that when people feel safe and inspired, they transform their lives? And then by in virtue change their families, their work, their communities, and eventually the world."

Kelly Scanlon:

When you say on your website, and I'll just read it, "We're whole person focused, with a desire to make Kansas City and the world a better place by what we do inside and outside the gym walls." What is it that you're doing that allows you to achieve that higher purpose that you're talking about, though?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I think it really starts at the front door. We hire folks to work at City Gym who share our vision for the bigger vision that our space isn't just about getting in shape, that our space is truly a place where we support people, meet them where they are, remind them how great they are, give them an opportunity to show up for themselves. So everyone we hire at City Gym, they buy into this same belief. So when you're walking in and you come to the front desk, often the person who's working the front desk has been a member of City Gym and felt some sort of a change in their life because of City Gym or shares the same belief, so that when you come in right away you're connected to somebody who is bought into what we're doing.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Beyond that, beyond some of just the feel good stuff of the front desk, we work really hard to be very intentional about our values. As a small business, we try to do as much as we can in the larger Kansas City community to support other businesses or initiatives or movements that align with our values. For me, that's been one of the most powerful parts of small business ownership. I think that there is a tendency to maybe not act on your values because you're worried about potentially losing members who may say, "Why do you support this thing? Why do you do this thing?" But for me, what I have

found to be so powerful is that ability to act on our values. So we look for those ways in those companies in Kansas City to amplify what we're doing in other ways.

Kelly Scanlon:

One of the things that I love to talk with business owners about is their influence. A lot of business owners don't recognize the tremendous amount of influence that they have. So at what point did you realize that influence, and what are some of those causes and initiatives that you were just speaking about that you support?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I mean, I think that one of my ... I call it a super power. We all have these things that we're sort of imbued with, right? I think they're really important to uncover, because once we know what they are, we can really harness them. So for me, I'm a connector. I am a collaborator. I'm a momentum builder. So I'm one of those folks, when you need something done, you call me, because I can get a hundred people on the corner of [74th 00:10:08] in [Warnal 00:10:08] in 20 minutes. I make it a priority to connect to people, to collaborate with others. I think from the beginning I knew that that was the power of what I was going to be able to do through and with City Gym. Working for other organizations, really amazing organizations. I worked for the YMCA for six years. Amazing organization. Love that organization. One of the strengths is that it's 160 year old organization. One of the drawbacks was that it was 160 year old organization.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

So sure, I knew going in that I was going to be able to be nimble and responsive and to quickly respond or collaborate with folks who I felt like were trying to accomplish what we were going to accomplish. So I knew right away. I mean, that was part of the motivation for wanting to do my own thing, was knowing that I could amplify and collaborate with folks in the larger Kansas City community and beyond. And some of the initiatives that we take really seriously. We are really focused on supporting organizations that support folks that sort of lie outside of the traditional access systems. So I'll be at the black community, the LGBT community, women. We're really looking for organizations that are amplifying those folks who are traditionally left outside of some of the resources that other folks have access to and find ways to amplify them.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

So sometimes it's wellness related and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's an organization that is, it's an educational organization. For example, Junior Achievement is an organization that we collaborate with. They are an entrepreneurial based education program that goes into middle schools that empowers young people to know the power of their ideas and their potential. City Gym supports that, because we think more people, especially young people, need to be empowered from an early age to say, "Hey, you can be something big and beautiful."

Kelly Scanlon:

Let's talk about lessons learned. You opened a second location, and you had to close that about eight months ago. Talk to us about that. That was a really hard decision for you to make.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Before the most recent pivot, I would say the closure of our second location was by far in a way the hardest series of events that I had to face as owner of City Gym. I mean, the biggest lesson learned was opportunity costs. I mean, it's easy to say that from an outsider perspective. "Hey, something's not working. Quit pouring time, resources, and energy into something that's not working." But when it is a part of you, when it is your blood, sweat, and tears, when it is your vision, when you feel like you have done everything you can possibly do to get it right, it feels so much more personal than just an easy evaluation from a spreadsheet. So I think there was a real acknowledgement for me there that it was okay that it felt personal. I probably worked harder and longer on it than I should have because of that, but also I feel a sense of resolution that I did work harder and longer on it than I had ever done before.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

And also acknowledging that all of what I was putting into something that wasn't working, when I pivoted and put it into something that was, which was our Waldo location, what was already working really, really well started to become exceptional. So it was a good reminder to me about that opportunity cost. Where to put your time, attention, and energy, and how to know when it's time to let go of something. Because the biggest lesson came in the letting go. In terms of how that has influenced me today, when we closed the downtown location, I had a lot of people say to me, "This is just a part of entrepreneurship. This is just a part of a success. You got to refine and you got to fail." And I just thought, this is a bunch of hoaky. You know what I mean?

Kelly Scanlon:

I'm never going to be comfortable with this.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Yes, exactly. But one of the things that I have realized is that they were right. In looking back on the closure, I'm able to really see now the gift in it, because had I not closed that location, when we had to make the decision to temporarily close our Waldo location, and I made a decision to be able to continue to pay staff and do some things that I felt like were the right things to do, I would have never had the ability to make those decisions if I was trying to float a location that wasn't as successful as we needed it to be. So while at the time it felt so personal and I felt, "Gosh, this will never feel better." I felt such an overwhelming sense of relief, that I'm so glad that that weight is not also on my shoulders.

Kelly Scanlon:

You were talking about when you made the decision to close the downtown location at the Pickwick building, that you were really full of a lot of angst about it, but you also said you looked at the spreadsheets, you looked at the numbers, and you often hear entrepreneurs talk about going with their gut. So what are your thoughts? When it comes to decision making, that particular decision or others that you have made, even the decision to start your company? Do you go with your gut, or do you go with the numbers and the hard data? How do you make decisions?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I'm an intuitive gut first type of creator. But that said, you got to do your homework, and you can't put your head in the sand when it comes to the data and the numbers. Even when I was opening the Waldo location, I did a ton of market research and I did all my due diligence when it came to a business plan. While there was a lot that I didn't know, and it was a competitive field in Kansas City, I knew my intuition was that I could do it differently enough that it would be successful. So that was the intuition, but I

didn't just go into it blindly. I did my homework first. The same is true about the downtown location. I felt like we made a really great decision about our location, et cetera, et cetera. A lot of things happened outside of my control that I could have never anticipated.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

I think in the very beginning that was the initial catch for me, was, "Wow, did I get it wrong? Is my intuition wrong?" And then in evaluating what was out of my control, I could step back and say, "You did everything that you you could be in control of." And once I really came to terms with that, it was easier to look at the data and to be realistic and to think through what the best decision was going to be. I had some really great advisors. [Bridget Grahams 00:00:16:58], who's a City Gym member, she does this professionally. We did an exercise, she took me through a process, and at the end it felt less emotional.

Kelly Scanlon:

So where do you go from here? What's the next phase for City Gym?

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

So we are going to reopen as thoughtfully and as carefully as we possibly can. We are going to phase our reopening. So we're saying phases one through four, one being the strictest, four being back to normal if you will, but one of the things that has been become really clear to me through this whole process is the importance of trust and rapport with our members. So they have to trust that we are doing right by them. They have to believe that we're being thoughtful in our decision making, and I think being transparent about your decision-making and communicating over and over and over and over and over again with them as clearly as you possibly can has really bought us a lot of goodwill.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

We may open in a different way than other gyms and studios. We may open after them. We closed before some of them. Our standards might be different than their standards, but I have never used another business's decision-making to make decisions for City Gym, and I'm not going to start now. Your health and safety, the health and safety of our Kansas City community is the utmost important to me, and so that's how I'm going to be making decisions.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

The thing that won't change for us is our core value of community. We have to be as thoughtful as we possibly can about ways that we can continue to create community, because at the end of the day that is what City Gym is about. It's about be fit, be well, belong. That community piece is a part of our ethos. It's why we're here. City Gym is more than just a gym or a place to workout, it's a place to belong. So no matter what, no matter how we deliver services, no matter what phase we're in, we are going to continue to center our Kansas City community and the health and wellbeing of our Kansas City community, because that's why we exist.

Kelly Scanlon:

Hailee, thank you for all that you do for Kansas City. We wish you success on your reopening, and we appreciate you being with us on this episode of Banking on KC.

Hailee Bland-Walsh:

Thanks Kelly. I appreciate you having me. Stay well.

Mary O'Connor:

This is Mary O'Connor, executive vice president for Country Club Bank. Enhancing community and creating positive change is something we live by here at Country Club Bank. Hailee Bland-Walsh strives to create community through her company, City Gym. She launched City Gym to give members a safe space to gather and be inspired to change, to create a place where they could move out of their comfort zones and transform themselves. Not just physically, but in ways that would change their entire lives. Now, nearly a decade after launching City Gym, she sees the ripple effect those changes have in her client's relationships and families, their jobs, and ultimately in their community. Hailee's entrepreneurial journey hasn't always followed an easy road, but transformational change rarely does. And just as Hailee coaches her clients at the gym to achieve breakthroughs, at Country Club Bank, we're here to help our clients and the Kansas City community reached their new heights too. Thanks for tuning in this week. We're banking on you, Kansas City. Country Club Bank, member FDIC.