



Launching a Start-Up by Faith

Have you ever wanted to go out on your own and launch a start-up or non-profit; or realized the need for a “rebirth” in your organization but wondered if what’s needed is refinement versus a reset?

Imagine the kind of boldness and faith needed to find the way through these situations.

On Tuesday, July 10th, a panel of mission-driven leaders – including Karen Huseby, Founder of Forefront; Marian Liou, Founder of WeLove BuHi; and Kari Love, CEO of the Atlanta Women’s Foundation – shared from their experiences on this and more in a discussion around “Launching a Start-Up by Faith.”



When asked, “What do you believe faith has to do with launching a start-up?” Love shared that the Atlanta Women’s Foundation has been around for 20 years. Though it is not a start-up – it is reinventing itself.

“It’s interesting how God has brought me to where I am with all the things in my background coming together,” Love said. “A lot of my background was in radio, and then I spent 4 years with the Atlanta Women’s Foundation leading all the development efforts, before stepping into the role leading the Foundation.”

Even further back, however, Love shared that as a 10-year-old girl, she would collect contributions in a Pringles container to take to Lenox Square for the Jerry Lewis telethon, so the Spirit of service and caring has always been there.

“The Atlanta Women’s Foundation raises money in the community and re-directs it to non-profits doing work in the community focused on women and girls – including those facing poverty,” she said. “Professional development training is now something the Foundation offers for women as well.”

Huseby then jumped in to share that she sees faith not just in where she is going, but how.

“We need to center ourselves often,” she stated.

Huseby’s desire to work with young people is centered in her own experience – including how her educational experience was a good one, but in the end she didn’t feel it prepared her for life.

“Along these lines, Forefront mirrors the idea of being at the forefront to address this,” she explained.

Liou, who lives in the Buford Highway community that WeLove BuHi is focused on, commented, “Faith comes through not just thinking but speaking. I’ve been saying the same thing over and over and over. Then I see how people respond. I’d hear narratives in the Buford Highway community, but I’d feel they weren’t complete.”

She then added, “First I spoke to nobody – it was just my Instagram account. When you start, there’s zero – no one’s listening. Then when they follow, you’re working for each person one at a time. Then after people follow, people ask questions on what you think.”

As Liou further explained about how WeLove BuHi is capturing an oral history project of the community’s long-term residents to celebrate the diversity of the community, tell the history of Atlanta, and strengthen the multi-cultural history of BuHi through storytelling, Julie Donnelly, a regular at BELIEVES, asked her, “How are you archiving all this?”



Liou responded, “At first it was just my notes, but I realized that wasn’t responsible. So just recently I asked Georgia State University Libraries to own it. In the end it will be theirs given people allow it.”

Donnelly then said glowingly, “You’ve kindled an old memory called the ‘Foxfire’ series.”

The Foxfire series began in 1966 when a new teacher at the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in Northeast Georgia’s Appalachian Mountains was struggling to engage students in his high school English class. In frustration, he asked them what they thought would make the curriculum interesting, and from that they decided to create a magazine honing their writing skills on stories gathered from their families and neighbors and producing articles about the pioneer era of southern Appalachia as well as living traditions that still exist today in the region.

In hearing what Donnelly and Liou were discussing, Liou was asked, “How does all this hit you?”

“There is a tremendous responsibility felt,” she replied. “It is extremely gratifying.”

The dialogue then shifted back to Love when she was asked to share how the process of listening and curating has been for her in her role leading the Atlanta Women’s Foundation through the process of being reinvented.

“It took about three years, but from listening to our partners, it was clear they wanted to plug their folks in women’s affinity groups into the community,” she explained. “We also looked at donors and realized you can’t just have ‘founding mothers.’”

Love went on to say that after hearing what they had, she sat down with her team – which happened to be around the time of the #MeToo movement bubbling up – and saw there was a need in the community for women to become their best selves.

“So we started up Inspire Atlanta, a seven-month program to develop women. We had 46 women complete the program in the latest class.”

The impact and meaning of the program has already been noticeably meaningful to the women, partners, community, and beyond.

Love recalled, “We had a woman in the program who is already on a Board and she told me, ‘I was the most prepared person in there.’”

She then restated, “It’s really about listening and hearing what the needs of the community are. All these affinity groups were so different and had been around for a while, so we pulled them all together to find the common thread.”



Huseby’s years of experience in both the film industry, and education, gave her a unique perspective on the question surrounding listening.

“In addition to experience in the film industry, my background includes being a youth minister, a substitute and full-time teacher, and confirmation teacher for five years,” she said. “So I could answer this two ways.”

From her background in film, Huseby mentioned that she believes the industry is dying.

“In 50 years, it’ll be gone, or vastly different. Things aren’t being reinvested into the industry.”

She also believes #MeToo has shaken things up some.

From her education background, Huseby stated, “No one knows how to listen to young people and it’s frustrating because it’s not that hard.”

One time she was teaching a classroom of young people on Internet security in chat rooms. All of a sudden the kids asked what a chat room was.

“I looked online and realized chat rooms no longer existed,” she recalled. “I feel like we’re not even keeping up, and I’m on a sinking ship at times.”

What that means for her personally is that she feels she has to listen to herself.

“I had no idea how much I’d have to listen to my internal compass. Part of my life journey has been looking into the mirror to see what other people see that I can’t see.”

One time an older woman told Huseby that she had passion and mission but didn’t fit in the environment she was in.

The woman then told Huseby, “I wish I had your passion and mission.”

“This was nice,” Huseby said, “but I was just worried about losing my job at the time, so I couldn’t receive it. All these experiences were really negative, but God was really moving me forward and ‘promoting me.’”

All the panelists then shifted gears a bit to provide their views on a topic often faced when launching a start-up – the possibility and presence of failure.

“I love failure,” Liou said strongly. “I think I started with a toxic relationship with failure. I grew up with ‘tiger parents’ – anything less than 100% was failure to me, but now I realize failure’s amazing and the only way to grow. Failure is the way to solutions, and sometimes it’s helpful to reframe questions to ask the right ones.”

Liou then told everyone that she was fortunate in recent years to be chosen as a Sara Blakely fellow.

“One thing Sara said that always stood out was that her dad always asked her, ‘What did you fail at today?’”

“Failure means you’re trying, and learning,” Liou said as she brought her remarks on the topic to a close. “Failure’s not the end, it’s the beginning. It can lead to learning to ask better questions.”



Love felt like with her remarks, she didn’t want to just focus on failure, but on obstacles.

“Everything prepares you for where you are today,” she said. “All my difficult times led to a moment when my predecessor was in place and the organization was going through a lot all at the same time.”

Love conveyed to everyone that her predecessor was a marketer, and a wonderful person, but didn’t get that stuff takes time. So when failure hit, she had never faced it and didn’t know what to do.

In contrast she said she thought, “This has happened to me a number of times ... this is fine.”

This year the Atlanta Women’s Foundation’s budget was \$1.3 million, but Love said they raised \$2.6 million with \$500,000 in the bank – and it’s the first year they took nothing from the endowment to operate.

So amidst all the obstacles, renewal, and failure, how did these women discern the peace to have faith?

“I’ve been on a lot of retreats but the one I went on in almost a year ago here in Atlanta with Cristo Rey High School teachers was one of the hardest because it hit me with a sense of a lot of failure,” said Huseby. “I’m having to continually reinvision everyday what the life I have is. Every day is a renewal.”

Liou commented, “For me, I think the one moment was when I was getting separated in 2013-2014. I never make resolutions because I’ll never keep them. There’s a Walt Whitman poem – *Song of the Open Road* – that has a line which says ‘Forever alive, forever forward.’ If I can smile at someone today, it will be a good day. I decided I’d do the things that scared the crap out of me and say, ‘Yes.’ In Him is the Amen. In Him is the ‘Yes.’”

Finally, as the session neared its end, the leaders were asked what they intended to “put out to the world” with their organizations, how was it received, and how did the response cause them to go back and refine or “rebirth” what they had intended.

“I first started to focus on religious education,” Huseby stated. “Soon though, I discerned that God wanted me to be in the secular world, but I realized I didn’t want to abandon religious education. It was really trying to be attentive to what’s in my heart, and the people, places, and experiences God has me encountering.”

Liou reflected on the question, and then shared thoughts that turned back to focus on listening.

“As a founder, when you’ve identified a problem, it requires lots of listening,” she told everyone. “When I moved to Buford Highway, it was changing. When I saw this, I thought it was great. It’d be safer. There’d be bike lanes. Things like that.”

Some of WeLove BuHi’s first programming was around bike lanes, but the events held attracted people not from Buford Highway.

“The concern was for Buford Highway not to redevelop, and not be for those who were already there. So we had to clarify and refine our mission and who we served – the people who live on Buford Highway.”

Love then provided the final remarks, describing how she and the team at the Foundation refined their purpose and what success looks like.

“Success could be money. It could be numbers. It could be a room full of people. However, I shared with the team to look at success by what you’ve inspired others to do – not just what you accomplished. That’s always been my prayer – that God uses me to help others.”

