

Inspiring Open : Episode 1 : ANIE AKPE

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TRANSCRIPTION

Rachel Zadok

Betty Kankam-Boadu 00:00

Anie, let's start by getting to know what your childhood was like, and how you would describe your upbringing.

Anie Akpe 00:07

Well, my upbringing is so interesting to me, because whenever I look back on it and reflect, I think about the fact that my parents left Nigeria when I was 12. They were both students, and they brought us to the US. It was my aunt and I, we were close in age, because we tend to get married younger, so your mother could still be having kids, and then you'll have one. Nevertheless, I was with my aunt and my mother and my dad, and that's when they received their sponsorship to come to the US. But, in that, I was 12 when I came here. So my memories of the US, between the ages of 12 and 15, wasn't all that clear. I just remember that. I couldn't really speak English well, and the kids here, children will be children, they're not used to hearing accents. So, I remember growing up those years trying to get the accent just right. Trying to get my English perfect. Which, of course, now I sound like an English perfect person.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 01:21

Yeah. You do.

Anie Akpe 01:22

But, yeah it was just a crazy part. But then, the flip side of that is, my fondest memories are when I was growing up in Nigeria, and my mother's surprised that I remember the street that I lived on, I remember all the streets we used to run through when we're little children. Because in Nigeria, where we lived, children could just run anywhere. And I remember when we went to the village, and how we'd... there was a river nearby, we'd go to the river, we'd pick fruits along the way. Those type of memories are long standing. And I feel like they're the ones of the most fun for me, and the one that I'm most fond of. In all the years, I always reflect back on my childhood memories of when I was in Nigeria, and the memories of the US, I just remember I was a teenager. Which is the age, around that age, but I find it to be interesting.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 02:18

So as a teenager, Nigerian living in the US, what was your experience like? Would you say you also experienced racism?

Anie Akpe 02:35

I don't think it was so much racism, it was more, because, well, we grew up in different types of neighbourhood. And when you're younger, and you're growing up around more white people, I didn't feel that type of racism, because children aren't necessarily always racist. Right? It could be their parents, but with them, they're more interested in, wow, we have black kids in our classroom. Because, I pretty much lived in an all white neighbourhood. But when my parents first moved here, we lived in, areas that were predominantly black, because they were students. So it's like married student housing. We were around a lot of international people, and then also around a lot of black people just because of where the schools were located, community wise. So the experience of racism wasn't there when I was younger, only because I truly do believe that most people, when they're younger, don't think about it like that, unless the influence is from the parents, and then that's how you have it. But the kids that I grew up with, they didn't have that. But the teenage years were, again, interesting, just because going through and experiencing things that in Nigeria you're used to going to ... I'm used to running around, going wherever I wanted to go, doing things. And then here in the US, I was restricted. I couldn't go as many places. My parents were like, "Where are you going and with whom?" So it just went from total freedom to let me get a list of all the people you're going with. So it was a different type of upbringing altogether.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 04:23

What are some of the things your mom and dad taught you that still ring true for you today?

Anie Akpe 04:29

My mom and dad taught me hard work. That will be forever ingrained in all of us. I'm 16 years different than my younger siblings, my brother and sister, and we all have the same work ethic. And I say that hard work, only because the end result of all of that hard work is me being in banking. My brother is, at IBM. He has a management role there. And my sister's a doctor. So when I look at my parents and the things that I became, I also see my siblings in them as well, in terms of the hard work driven, focused type of mentality. One thing about my parents is that they drive education. So no matter what you do, you can be whatever you want to be, but if you don't have your education, to them, you're nothing. Right? That's number one. The second thing is, okay, so it was great, you have the education, can you pay for yourself? Oh, okay, good. You pay your own bills. Perfect. So that's number two. The third one is, if you could do number one and number two, then then fine, you could go dance on the street, if that is what you want to do. So long as you could do those things, they're happy, because to them it's like you're accomplishing, you're loving what you do. And my dad used to say all the time when we were growing up, "Oh, I love you, dad." And dad's like, "Listen, let me tell you this thing about love. Because you're telling me you love me, then I know you love yourself." So, besides that work ethic and my father always saying that about love, is a trigger that a you have to focus on what's important, and accomplish your goals. And then you can have fun.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 06:16

Yeah, and I bet they're very, very proud when they look at their children now.

Anie Akpe 06:21

Anie Akpe

Yes, they are. But they're typical Nigerian parents, abeg. They will find something. And so, they're happy, but A, where's this... my son's girlfriend, like they... please, they will find something.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 06:39

Anyway, can you take me through your educational process, and then the very first job you had after school?

06:47

Anie Akpe

My very first job was actually being a babysitter at a married student housing complex. And married student housing in the US, sometimes it's an apartment complex, or sometimes it's just an area that is nothing but married students there that the university has purchased. A lot of the married students are international students, or people that

definitely don't live in that particular state. So what happens is, a lot of them had kids and they needed a babysitter. And I lived in a complex, and along with a few other girls. So when the time came, I would advertise that I could babysit for them. My parents taught me, "Well just put up a sign. People will call you." So I put up the sign, and sure enough, people called me and my babysitting job was my first job that I ever had. And with that job, I worked a lot. Especially during the summer. It felt like I was doing a full-time job, but it's different people calling. But it was great, because it saved them money, because I was there and they knew my parents and everything. And so that made it a lot easier for me. And I couldn't believe, after a whole summer that I had made \$2,000, I think. It was like \$2,300 or something like that. That was a huge accomplishment when I was 14, 15. I couldn't believe I made so much money. I was super happy about that.

Anie Akpe 08:23

Education wise, I've always been in school, but I never knew what I truly wanted to do. I had no clue. When they tell people, okay, pick what you want to do, I just knew that I wanted to help people. That's all I ever said to my parents. And they said, "What do you mean you want to help people?" I was like, "I want to help people." My mother's like, "You will always be poor if you're trying to go down this route of just helping people, because that means that you'll not look for the success of it." I said, "I don't think that's true, mom." And sure enough, it wasn't true for me. Because even though I didn't know what I wanted to do education wise, so I wasn't really into it like that, I went to school at two different universities. And I didn't... I just wasn't feeling it. It wasn't for me. So I felt like, you know what? I'll continue for a little bit, but this isn't it for me. Let me just explore the world a little bit. And I did do that. And my mother, every year for the rest my life during that time, would remind me that education was the number one thing. So eventually, I landed in banking, and then that's when I've had three years of education. But in the industry that I was in, you didn't need your degree, so I was able to get my degree after I landed in my field and surpass expectations in that field. And then from there, they paid for everything and I was already a vice president.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 09:55

So before you got into finance and mortgage and all the wonderful things that you doing now, you started from the restaurant business. Tell us about that?

Anie Akpe 10:05

Here's what happened. So, at the time, my husband and I, we were looking to purchase property. We lived in Atlanta, and I knew that they had these special programmes where the bank gives you money to buy houses in certain neighbourhoods, and you can fix them up. So, because we saw the other houses, and I was like, I really can't afford those houses,

but we can afford a house that needs renovation, so long as we can get this specific loan. And that loan was called a 203K. To this day, they still have that loan programme. Nevertheless, with that loan programme, I went to the mortgage broker and I gave them the information. I said, we're interested in this programme. They said, "Yes, we can do it." I said, "Okay, no problem." Once we submitted all the paperwork, I thought it was interesting that each time we'd call she said, I really don't know this question. I don't know that question. And each time I asked her a question about the programme, she didn't know. So I said, you know what? I knew where to go find the information, let me keep researching. I went and I pulled as much information as I could pull about the programme. So at this point, I know more information than she does. I went back and I said, "Listen, the programme offers a six months forbearance where you don't have to pay anything while the house is getting renovated. can you make sure that we have that?" "Oh, sure. No problem." And then other little details that she just didn't know.

Then I felt like, you know what? If I know these little details and I'm not in your industry, I can do your job. From there, I started asking her more questions, but she still couldn't answer my questions. So I said, you know what? Let me close on this house. And then once we close on this house, and I really wanted to do something different, this is the industry that I want to go into, because my husband and I were both in the restaurant business. And I was a manager and he was a manager, and the hours can be very grueling. So he was like, "Look, one of us needs to be not in the industry, whether it's you or me, there has to be a choice, and I'll let you make that choice." I was like, "Alright, fine, it should be me because you're the chef. This is your specialty. I'll look for something that's not in industry." I felt like this was my perfect opportunity. When I actually looked for a position in this, they were like, "Oh, you have no experience and also the job, mortgage loan originations job, can be a commission only job, which means that you're not going to get paid, unless you have closed deals." So I said, "Okay, no problem. I know how that goes." I went to a mortgage broker, and I told him, "Look, I don't have experience, but I want to learn." And he said, "Okay, but I can't pay you until you close deals." I said, "Okay, that's not a problem." Then he started to teach me how to put the deals together, how to structure the loans, what information I wanted to learn, gave me all these books and said, "Here, go study." So me being me, because I'm a nerd. I said, "Okay, no problem." I went and studied and I learned the system on my own through all the books that they had. Once I did all that, then I said, "Okay, now I'm ready." So then he said, "Well, now you need to go get business." And I said, "How do I go get business?" He said, "Tell other people that are interested in getting a mortgage or look for groups and go advertise with people that need investment groups or houses renovated just like your house that you just went through. There's people like you that exist." I said, "Okay." I started looking from an investment group, people that buy and fix up houses, they always

need a mortgage person to help them out. Once I joined that investment group, I was able to meet maybe 15 different people. Those 15 different people were able to help me close out three to five deals within a month.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 14:13

Wow.

Anie Akpe 14:13

Exactly. So from that, then I started hosting homebuyer classes and doing things along those lines. And those are the things that actually got me further into the business. The long run of it is that, given an opportunity, you have to take it and run with it and learn as much as you can. Because, remember, it's something that you're choosing. So when you're choosing it, the more you learn, the more you are, the better you are. I mean, as we speak right now, the title of where I am from to where I started is vastly different. But it allowed me so many opportunities from it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 14:51

Yeah. And I love that when you started in this business, you were willing to do the work even when you were not getting paid. Because a lot of people who are starting out, I know that, of course, times are hard and you'd want to get paid for the services you provide. But I think sometimes if you really want to get into a certain industry, you probably should be willing to take on a free job so that at least you can get your foot inside.

Anie Akpe 15:22

Exactly. And that's what I tell a lot of startups. People are like, "Oh, you're a startup, you have value bla bla bla bla." Yes, you have value. But do you have a market? Do you have a group? And I'm not saying that you should give away your shot, because that's just not the way to go either. However, be targeted with what you're doing. If you know that you're going to do something free, choose to do it with an organisation that gives you a return, right? So my return with the mortgage broker was that he gave me that opportunity and that ability to learn and give me access to everything. I had access to things that I probably would not have had, if someone would have paid me, because then they would have expected a certain type of expectation. But because it was free, then I was open with what I had to learn. I think that if you're willing, most things are usually open. But you also have to be clear about what you want as well, because I knew that I wanted to be in this industry. So because I knew that I wanted to be in the industry, then I knew what my boundaries were. I knew what my goals were, and I knew what I had to do. And I knew that I had to research it to be much more successful at it. I was basically learning as well. I think that when we think we know things is where we become a hindrance. It's great that

you have the ability to set up your business, and you're smart, and you can run with it. But at the end of the day, you have to still learn people. Still have to learn your clients. Still have to learn your client's needs, still have to be able to pitch your business to market it, and know that you're hitting the right target. So for that, I'll always be grateful for that opportunity because it set me on a path that forever has allowed me to impact so many people, just because I learned that early in my career.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 17:14

When you had your nine to five job, you still made time to be an entrepreneur. And then when I look at your resume, I can assume that that nine to five job was paying so well to make you comfortable, why did you decide to explore entrepreneurship?

Anie Akpe 17:34

It's funny, because most people think that that I don't have a nine to five, but I've always had a nine to five, and my entrepreneurship. The key is that it's the passion. When you have a passion for something, and you've been consistent at what you've been doing, it makes your job a thousand times easier. So within being in the business that I've been in, each loan file is different. Each case is different. However, the end result is the same. So that you can set up things that allows you to have flexibility in anything else that you want to do. The other thing is, most people think that when you start your entrepreneurship, you're going to get funding right away. You're blessed if you do. More power to you. But the average business is not set up like that, you have to self-fund. A lot of projects that I've done, it started with self-funding. And even if I did receive like scholarships, and things like that, or sponsorships from big corporations like your Googles of the world, the bulk of the money still had to come from me. But that's the essence of the passion project, is that you are funding your own projects, and you're making an impact. With it being any other way, I don't see how it could have happened. That's why when people talk to me about entrepreneurship, I always tell them, the first investor is you. And if you leave this job and jump into something that you're not sure what those salary returns are, then you're actually missing out on being able to fund your own business. When you start to fund it, it grows, it's going to have more of an opportunity. I just think that you should always be able to leverage yourself and from that leverage, be able to grow any brand, because you're the one that's self-funding it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 19:20

Now let's talk about your side gigs, as I like to call them. So tell us about IBOM LLC and how the idea came about? But before that, what does IBOM mean? Is it an acronym?

Anie Akpe 19:36

Okay, so I'm from Akwa Ibom State, Akwa Ibom. And the word Ibom means universe. That's why I gave my business name that, only because, ultimately, I wanted it to be some type of universe where I knew I'd be global in the very beginning. I said, "Well, let me let it represent something that I have future goals on." And those future goals are all business related and being able to take my business global. And that was what I was taught the diaspora, if you can, take your business global. I said let me give it a name that I knew would be it. And I didn't want to say universe in America. So I said, let me do it in my language. It always ties me in, and keeping me focused that Africa is always in my heart. And this will make life easier if I actually focus in on making it specific to that. So that's what made me name it that.

The thing about IBOM is it started with me being in a vice president role that I said, okay, I finally made it to this role. I'm doing fantastic. I'm doing great. But this isn't quite where I wanted to land and just be comfortable. One thing about corporate America is that you will get to a certain point where you're not moving as fast. Because once you get to a certain point, some people have been there longer than you. They're not retiring anytime soon. So because they're not retiring anytime soon, then it's like now is your opportunity to say, "Well, what else can I do?" Well, you can't do anything else at the job, but why not start something? Why not return back to the community? Because that's what I kept asking myself, what else can I do? And who could it benefit? When I started to think about those things, that's what made me want to create a IBOM LLC. Now, when I created it, I said, well, what was the biggest challenge that I've had, that I felt like I could share information on? And I felt like the biggest challenge was technology. And then the second biggest challenge was knowing business. I knew business because my parents were always self-employed. My dad was 100%, self-employed, while my mom kept the nursing job while they were slow. I learned business through my parents, and then business through banking, through some of the banks and some of the mortgage brokers that I worked for. So with that business knowledge, then I realised that whenever I would go out to networking, people would always ask me questions about business, even though they knew I was on the residential side of mortgages. And I was in banking, but they still would ask me a whole bunch of business questions. And then also, from that business question, no one ever asked me about technology. The only time anyone had ever asked me about technology, during those times, is if they were wondering what they could use to automate certain things, but not really thinking of actually creating their own. So I said, let's focus in on technology, because, without technology, you can't have the efficiency no matter what type of business you are. And if it's even better for you, why not create the technology?

So those were the two areas that I decided to focus in on. And I wanted to train the diaspora with the ultimate goal of being able to do it in Africa.

I said, okay, let's start this way, then. So I started to host events, bringing in people that I knew were subject matter experts. Being in the US, when you get to certain positions, again, you just tend to meet a lot of people. And with those people that you're meeting, you can now bring in those subject matter experts to train people because they're already there. They're in that industry, or they've funded certain projects, or they're the ones that's coaching. It made it easier for me to bring in subject matter experts to train people.

So that is why I started IBOM LLC, was just to train us because I feel like one of the things that we're always missing, I don't care, even to this day, is that business. Business skills. A lot of people don't have business skills. And with not having business skills, that is where we tend to fall. That's why accelerators are always important. Training and development, go through... even if it's not an accelerator type programme, go to anyone that's offering business training for you, that's not trying to pitch you something. Because in the US they have business programmes set up here for entrepreneurs, and they're free. It's the same concept. Only difference is that you have to take the interest and initiative and want to learn in order to set up your businesses in order for it to be successful. All I did was offer the same things that they were offering here, but specifically target the diaspora. And that's how it started.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 24:33

I completely agree with you about taking a course in business skills. A lot of the times we think that is the preserve of people wanting to be entrepreneurs. But, aren't we all selling something one way or the other?

Anie Akpe 24:47

Yep, you are. You're always selling and especially in anything that you're doing, even at the job, selling our skills, or selling our ability to want to get promoted. And it should be a focus, it should be a goal. There should be something no matter where you are at. Whether you're at an employment or an entrepreneur, what exactly is your goal? What is the end result of where you're going? Each year, you have to establish those things. And when you establish them, that's when you start selling yourself, because then you got to get there. Those communications that come along the way allows you to figure out which way to go, and how to best position yourself. And I think I'm always selling myself or always selling a product or pushing something, even if it is more of a conversation within it. It's still something. I think that we should never dismiss that aspect or that component of sales.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 25:46

As you've mentioned, you started your business from the diaspora. And then there was this need to extend it onto the African continent? What was that move like? And, in terms of need, were there differences in what you saw in the diaspora, and what you saw on the African continent?

Anie Akpe 26:10

There are huge differences. The needs were similar, but there are huge differences, depending on the country. So initially, the first place that we went to was Kenya, and Kenya was a no challenge for me. And I'm so glad that one of my friends said to me, because when you're from your country, you want to do whatever you want to do from your country first. She said to me, "Listen, I'm going to tell you. You Nigerians are something else, you're always taking things and trying to go back to Nigeria first. Why don't you think about Kenya?" I was like, "I don't know anyone in Kenya." She said, "You know me." From there, from meeting her, I started to meet a whole bunch of other people from Kenya, I think maybe because she said it. Sometimes people say things, and then next thing you know everything about it appears. When she said it, I said I'd be willing to do it if I knew people. Then all of a sudden, I just started meeting people left and right, and most of them from Kenya. When I went into Kenya, the business needs were similar, because yes, business skills is what's lacking. But one thing that they had, that was far above all the other places I've ever been, was that a lot of the women that lived in Kenya were already trained in coding. They were super versed in coding. Most of them had coding experience, even though they may not be within a career field that they want it to be, or with entrepreneurship goals that they wanted to have. That difference is still the same globally, it's business wise.

And then also, the same thing that was vastly different is that soft skills are typically taught here in the US. Such as putting together your resume, how you communicate, the way you communicate, those things, and your perspective of thinking. Those things are generally taught here more easily within US, but throughout Africa, you're not always able to find them, because what they focus in on is just getting you through primary and secondary school, but they're not really coaching you, per se. So by the time you get out, you're having to learn. And that's what I feel like is the is the difference, you're learning on your own. And if you're fortunate, you actually land someplace that actually teaches you these things. But a lot of times you're not. So here comes the NGO that's filling in the gaps, and trying to do that type of training and development for you.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 28:35

Great. So under IBOM is Innov8tiv. Was this an online magazine to complement the on ground work you were doing?

Anie Akpe 28:44

I initially started it because, when I was doing IBOM LLC with the event series, I was running out of subject matter experts that were focusing on Africa specifically. And the work here is fine, and we can stabilise you here. But if you now want to take that jump from here to Africa, how do you do that? I said, okay, I'm having a hard time finding people that are actually here, because they're not always here. They travel a lot. Then I said, let me start writing content about the continent and then see what people I could meet from that content. I started creating content that's specifically focusing on events and people throughout the continent. And from that, that is when I started to attend events in Africa and started noticing what the events had and what they didn't have. Of course, at that time, it was 10 years ago, a lot of the stuff was male dominated. So 10 to 15 years ago a lot more male dominated than it is now. A lot of the speakers at events would be men. And not so much of women. You'd see women here and there. So it led me to then ... that's where we got into African women and technology. But the blog specifically was to do that, was to connect me to the people that I couldn't reach. It also gave us a voice. When I initially started it, that was the goal. Now there are many people writing about it. It's like, we're just one. But then we pivoted to just doing how-tos and then covering some events now, and, of course, we grew the readership from zero to half a million a month. So by being able to use that to connect to people, that is what my goal was, ultimately, and I did ultimately connect it to the African Business Angels Network, ABAN, which does nothing but angel investing. And at the time that I met them, I think they only had maybe four or five locations that had angels. Now they have, I believe, over 80 countries that have Angel networks that specifically work with entrepreneurs. So they're not the only ones. VC for Africa, they were already throughout the continent, but their presence now is global. So organisations that are now quite big and have been around for a long time, those organisations were there when I was beginning. So that Innov8tiv blog allowed me to meet these people at the very beginning stages of their organisations as well. And then also meet a lot of people across networks, so that it made it easier for me when I finally started doing projects in Africa.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 28:58

Can you tell me more about the operations of African Women in Tech?

Anie Akpe 31:17

Africa Women in Technology is still going, and it has been. Pandemic is the only thing that slowed us down because we couldn't travel. The countries we've been to has been Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique. And then we've had off site participation with other parts of Africa, but not us physically being there. The goal, before the pandemic started, was to go throughout the different countries and do a training and development. And then when pandemic hit, of course, we just went to virtual. So now, pandemic is something that we know it's going to be here, God knows how long, however, we're starting to put on more events. And what's going to happen is that we will work with more NGOs, which was always the intent. The intent was that we started it, set it up, establish, meet the communities, and then from there become almost like a parent to the other NGOs that were working with women, or training and developing women specific to technology. So that's where we're at. And we're having to just pivot in that direction now, because we're not able to be on the ground with a team. I wouldn't want to put anyone at risk. Therefore, the event side is not really the type of events where we would want, we'd already have to have people that are on the ground, established, or work with an NGO in order to make it happen. So that's been the shift now. But if, all things being equal, and there's not this big COVID scare, then it makes it easier for us to say, okay, let's travel to these locations, let's bring in our experts. Whereas we've always drawn the experts from the countries that we go into, 80% of the people from the countries who we would use for training and development, because once we leave, they'll still be there. Why disrupt their ecosystem by bringing in too many people from the outside who will not be there to watch their development? Let's work with the people on the ground, so that this way the programmes that we've established and the things that we're looking forward to people already know. This is what our goals are. If your goals are in alignment with our goals, then we can work together. But that makes life easier, because then we know we still have the impact that I wanted.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 34:04

When did you get confirmation that you are onto something big with African Women in Tech, for instance? What are some of the success stories?

Anie Akpe 34:15

Well, one of the things that I noticed is that a lot of the women that I actually worked with, because they still kept in contact with me or they follow me on Facebook, I mean, on Instagram... a lot of the women have gone on to their tech careers where they're data scientists. A couple have been featured on Forbes, where they started with us and they weren't there yet. They weren't doing speaking engagements, and they had an interest in that particular field. But through some of our training and development, which is "Hey, be

forefront, come to the forefront, let people know who you are, write blogs, advertise yourself," because I find that, unless we're into a chosen career field that puts us out besides entertainment or an athlete, where women are naturally used to being in front of the camera, the women in tech are not. They're not that type of personality generally. I'd say 80% of the women that are in tech are like, "Please, I'm just trying to do my job and get paid. Leave me alone." We have to actually push them forward. And within the women that we encountered, and pushing them forward, that's how we were able to see the successes of them being featured in Forbes and doing speaking engagements across the continent, are starting their own NGOs. Or even, one of the other girls the other day, I had to reach out to her because we're in partnership with the United Nations for Girls in ICT Day. We're picking women throughout the continent, one woman to represent each country. And I had to go back to some of the women that were part of our programme, and one of the woman who is winning an Entrepreneurship of the Year award, and not only that, but she's also a data scientist. I found it interesting. And I circle back around to her, I was like, "Your life has changed since we've met, even though you were in the field." She said, "Yes, I know, I'm doing more speaking engagements. I've done this, Anie, I've done that, blah, blah, blah, blah." It's great to see that type of impact, because she was actually one of the ones that I selected for the United Nations programme. It's great to have that impact and be able to reach out to them and say, "Hey, you're doing something amazing. We've partnered with this organisation, we want them to feature you because we think you're amazing." So COVID has slowed down activities, but women that were actively involved, they're still following our pages, because we're still doing educational things. Right now, the focus is on blockchain and cryptocurrency. So that's the next project that we're working on. And we know that a lot of our women that were interested will come just because, for some of them, this will be the first time truly being in sessions where they can learn about it. That's the key. Is offering things that make that type of impact towards their careers. And the end result is seeing some of those girls and the things that they've accomplished within their chosen field or their entrepreneurship journey. And then being able to mark that as well. This was impactful. This made a difference. And I helped make that difference, so my job is complete, because now I have essence of self gratification. And that feels really good.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 37:38

Tech, for many people, can be complicated, and feel even daunting for people to entertain the possibility of creating platforms to meet the needs of society. Can you demystify tech, so people know there could be so many ways to engage with it, without necessarily learning how to code for instance?

Anie Akpe 38:04

Well, that's the key to our events, is to actually create sessions where you're learning about different aspects of it. Because technology is the sum of so many different categories, that it's not even funny anymore. But the key is just innovation, right? So when we're talking technology, we're talking about you being in a finance sector. The finance sector has a whole bunch of different technologies that they use all day, every day. So if your career is in finance, you need to learn as much of technology as you can, because each company may use a different system. But if you have business skills that is teaching you about the different software systems, or just teaching you about how computers are programmed, you're walking in with basic knowledge, of understanding that this is not what I learned in school, because they're not teaching you that. But they are teaching you about computer science. So once you're walking into a place, you're not unfamiliar with it. Also, the key about a lot of people's successes is being able to understand how that technology works, and what kind of benefit you can have to it. As an employee, you're restricted on the certain access that you may have within the computer system. But if you're interested in it, and you ask your manager, well, how can I learn more? Or, you know, how can I be a better service to you, they'll give you projects that gives you a little bit more access to their systems. And those systems allows you to learn more about the company. So if your goal is to develop up into the company, the more involved you are, the more you get to learn about it. But it has to start with a basic knowledge of that computer science. So you have to start earlier, in your college years. It's even better when we can start our children earlier, you know, training girls early to code training girls, how to build websites. Things like that. If you're able to train early, great, but we all don't get so fortunate and we're getting there early. Most of us get there later in our lives. So because we're there later, then anything that offers training, on whether it's basic website, those things are helping you to function at your nine to five. So when I say the word technology, I mean anything that involves a computer. Anything. Social media is a technology. And most of the things that most entrepreneurs may develop could be social media driven. But that's an aspect of technology. So anything that we're using, that has to do with a computer, that's innovation, that's technology. And even us talking now, we're using Zoom. So the Zoom, where we take for granted of like, "Oh, we're just going to go on Zoom." But Zoom is a technology. It's allowing us to have a conversation where you're in Ghana, and I'm here in New York City. So we're able to, you know, record it, and then put it out into the digital space where someone will access it. So someone created the podcast system, you know, someone created the ability to have things on the web. So anything that has innovation, and that touches a computer, or your phone, that to me is innovation. There's other aspects of innovation that may not be computer systems driven. It could be whether you're in agriculture, and agriculture is just like, "You know what? I want to see when's the best time to water my crops, and when to, you know, when I should be looking to pick the crops. From that you may invent something that it gives you

a you know, certain schedule, but you're still ultimately may put it into some type of digital aspects within it. So it still ultimately boils down to that. So innovation just goes from computer systems to the computer system that's in your car, you know, to the computer system, that's a vending machine that allows you to buy drinks. So it could just gets transferred. But your basic knowledge of understanding it should come from your younger years or your college years. And if you're past your college years, continuing education also has it. Don't miss out on opportunities to learn, because it's always there.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 42:10

True. It's always there. How do you keep yourself centred in your work? Because at this point, you do a lot of things.

Anie Akpe 42:21

The key, I've found, is being able to delegate. The first thing I said was that you need to keep your nine to five, because your nine to five will fund projects that, you know, no funding will give you. So if you have your nine to five, that allows you the ability to say I want to hire someone to help me do some of these things. So you know, there's, there's companies like Fiverr, there's companies like Upwork, or whatever the case may be, where you can now bring in one or two people to help you. Even if not, there's universities with students that are looking for internship opportunities. And if your business is something that they can actually see the structure of, then guess what? You can advertise that you're looking to hire a person that does XYZ. So that's how I'm able to stay grounded, is through delegation. I am not a one man show. I think I tried to do that years ago and realised it's not gonna work. You have to find a different approach, you can never be a one man show. It just doesn't work, you burn out. And burnout is just not the way to go. Because guess what? You make no impacts when you're burning out. So with that being said, then I was able to fund, you know, some of the employees that I would use, based on what's going on. With African Women in Technology, if we received funding, then I would bring in people to help. The same thing with Innov8tive, it's a blog, it has advertisements, so then I can bring in writers to do that. So it's not necessarily me writing, I have people. That particular business is supporting those employees. So they're on contract. And then I try to just, you know, go from there. But I think the strategy is that you don't try to do everything and you try to delegate. There are times you have to initiate what that work is, because once you're initiated, then you're able to write it down and give it to other people to do. So if you're able to write it down and give it to other people to do, you can then regulate the number of hours that you yourself will spend and the number of hours that they would spend. So if it's like a 40 hours a week for you, because you're an entrepreneur, 20 hours to come from you, and then 20 hours should come from the person that you bring on board. That money will come from your business. So if you think

of it that way, your business will become more successful, and it allows yourself to be in a better position to be funded, because you're now positioning it. But it's the way you think about how you function. And that's what moves you forward.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 44:53

Fantastic. And as a personal philosophy and even in your work, what does Being open mean to you?

Anie Akpe 45:01

When you say being being open, the first thing that jumped out at me without clearly knowing, you know, where it stands, is like being open to learning, being open to creating opportunities, being open to being a person that could be a subject matter expert that other people rely on at your company. A lot of times when we don't see ourselves progressing, we don't offer anything. We're like, we're just here. But the end result is, you know, be someplace where you want to be in terms of your job, when you have the ability to be there. And if that ability is not there, then be open to learning about where you could take what you're currently doing, and allow it to work for you. I think that the perception of what we do in life, it's all based on us. Could be the worst job ever, but it's our perception of it. And our perception will make it that much more positive, because we put that positive spin on it, because we're the ones that determine it. Even if it pays your bills and, you know, you're like, I'm not happy about this, you know, again, it's your perspective. you know, Your perspective has to change in order for you to truly appreciate it. And appreciate that opportunity it gives you. And that's how I've tried to always look at anything that I've done, whether I was happy in it, or whether I, you know, wanted it to go a particular way. And it didn't, I had to shift my perspective, in order for me to be okay. Being open allows you that ability to shift your perspective. Because in order for you to accept it, you first have to accept the fact that you are allowing things to happen because it has an end goal. And that end goal is where you wanted to land in the first place. So why not create that opportunity for yourself by being open?

Betty Kankam-Boadu 46:49

I love that. And Anie, throughout this conversation, I think, I've just been reflecting on all the things you've said. Everybody wants to be an entrepreneur, and it's not a bad thing. It's absolutely not not a bad thing. But sometimes it's almost I see people who have a nine to five job are not innovative enough. They're not business savvy, they're stuck in a nine to five job and people make it seem as though there's this freedom in entrepreneurship. I mean, you've been doing this, and you're very experienced in this, would you want to comment on this?

Anie Akpe 47:28

Yeah, I definitely want to comment on it. And I think that when people look for freedom, everyone looks to say that I want to be my own boss, because I don't like my current working conditions. Or I want to be my own boss, because I know how to do it better. Or, the last thing is, I want the availability to create the type of hours that I want to create. The thing is, with entrepreneurship, you still end up being... you still have bosses, because your clients are still bosses, right? So that's one perspective. The other thing is when you work the nine to five, and most people are saying to you, you know, I can't wait to quit, the rat race doesn't do this, it doesn't do that. No, the the nine to five is really your stepping stone. Your nine to five should be the place where you gather as much information as you can, if you want to be successful in your business. Whether it's how not to do things, or whether it's a structure and you have all the books and all the information that you need, you know, you learn, you have the opportunity to learn and grow. Take the opportunity to learn and grow, it'll only make your business that much more successful. A lot of people see a nine to five as I always will have a salary for the rest of my life, I will only make this and I'll never surpass this amount. Okay, so if you feel that way, then what is your goal yearly? If you know that you want to do entrepreneurship, what goals have you structured for yourself that allow you to take that stepping stone and go to the next step? What monies are you're taking from your entrepreneurship and setting aside for your business goals? Because a lot of us will go into the business, which I find, whether here or in Africa, they'll go into the business already ready to spend someone's money? Well, guess what? That's your boss. Whoever invested in you is still your boss. And that boss could be sometimes worse than your current nine to five boss. So know what you're stepping into. But more so, you should be in a position where you can also tell that person no, because they may not be the right fit for you investing in your company. They may have too much of an expectation, you know, from you that you wouldn't have had if you would have just built it out yourself with a little bit more patience. So when people look down and frown upon nine to five people because of the freedom that you see from entrepreneurship, then I really question, do they really know it? Because if you really knew it, you'd respect the people that work nine to five, just because you knew that they have their stability, which is a good thing. You know, People have obligations, and kids, husbands, bills, you know, things along those lines, so they can't just jump. So when the time comes in, they need to jump, a lot more people are more ready than not being ready. I just have never looked at one over the other and glamorised it. I've always looked at it as like, they both had a means to an end. My nine to five actually funded all of my side projects. And it allowed me to have the flexibility to be creative. Because at the end of the day, I think the word is that we're all creative. And we all have an avenue of creativity that we want to expand on when we're doing our entrepreneurship. So it's just a matter of how are you funding this creativity? You know, what are you doing now to ensure the success of the

journey that you're getting ready to make as an entrepreneurship? Most entrepreneurs don't make any money the first two years of business, generally. You make money, but you're making money to pay off bills or you're making money to maintain the business, or you're making money to put right back into the business. So that's not what I mean by you, you know, you don't make money. You made money to cover it. But now you need to make money for yourself. So if you want to continue, most entrepreneurs when they're struggling, take the money and they pay themselves. Well, how are you marketing the business? You know, what things are you doing now for the business? It just depends on your drive and your motivation. And I think that looking down on one over the other, it has no purpose. Which is why, when working with women, in African Women in Technology, we don't give one preferential treatment over the other, because we believe it could be simultaneous, just based on how you're structured. It could be that you use your business as your stepping stone to launch your, your employment as a stepping stone for your business. And with that being said, then you're going about it totally different automatically. Because now, your thought process is okay, this is my means to an end, because I'm getting paid. But my creativity resides on my entrepreneurship, and I want to use that creativity to impact the world. Well, this is the best way for you to do it. So I don't agree with statements of, you know, or looking down from one, you know, the nine to five, because the nine five will actually fund your business better. Because guess what? You have control over it more so than when you bring in other people. And when you bring in other people, it's a good thing. However, just remember, they're now your boss, they're clients.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 52:45

Thank you very much for this Anie, I think it's really needed. People need to hear this, including myself. you know, Thank you for that. So how do you relax? You know, with all the things you do, what is the typical relaxation moment for you?

Anie Akpe 53:04

Well, before COVID, my idea of relaxation was sitting in front of the beach and not doing anything at all. So I love the water. And if I could be a beach bum... You know those people that you see that just wear swimsuits all the time, and they do nothing in life, they have no purpose, and they just have a hat, and every day they get up and they sit in front of the water? That's me. I have no purpose. When I take a vacation, I have no purpose, I don't want to sight see. I don't want to see anything. you know, All I want to do is sit in front of the beach, you know, with my book, or with my sunglasses and fall asleep, you know, do nothing. Totally detox from the world. And I think that that, to me is the best form of relaxation. When I can't do that, because I live in New York City, and I was already complaining to you that it was freezing cold here, which is not freezing cold, a little bit

warmer, but 50 is still not, you know, 80 or 90. But you know when I'm not doing that, I meditate. So I think that meditation helps me to focus. And I think that anyone has not done meditation should do meditation. Only because meditation calms you down. Your creativity only grows when you're able to have a calm mind. You get solutions in a calm mind. And those solutions are impacting and long lasting. When your mind is filled with anxieties and fears and doubts, and you know, all these things that we create for ourselves, just because we're trying to be successful, then we start to create the opposite of success. Failures. We don't recognise that's what we're doing. But essentially, we do do those things. And we make those decisions from that mindset. That mindset has to change and then the only way to change it is when you're doing meditation. Meditation takes you out of that mindset of just fear. When you're able to let go of fear and doubt, then you're able to see better results. So then you're able to accomplish more. That's not just for your business. On the personal side, meditation allows you to be relaxed, it allows you to calm yourself down and not create anxieties for yourself. And it just allows you to have peace of mind. Because ultimately, no matter what we do in this life, to have a peace of mind is a free gift. And that is the one free gift that you'll always treasure for the rest of your life. So why not create opportunities for yourself, to where you could sit down, you can meditate and catch up with yourself. I think that self awareness is the key to anything else that you do in life, no matter what business you go into. Self awareness helps us to, you know, not cry so much about something that has happened, because we tend to put a positive spin on it. So long as you're able to stay in those mindsets of like acknowledging what that is because you have to acknowledge the emotion, but then be able to go into a meditative state, or do meditation until you're able to grieve yourself out of whatever thing that you're fearing, or whatever thing that is hurtful. But, you know, give yourself patience. Then I think that that's what has made me successful. That's what I've used in my daily life. That's what has helped keep me grounded. Even when I forget that this is there. Someone will remind me in the first meditation I do, it's not as easy, but I still do it. But by the third or fourth meditation, I'm a lot more calmer, and I'm a lot more ready to just jump in, you know, get into things and then be able to look at things differently.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 56:45

Fantastic. Anie throughout your work journey, have you found mentors on the way?

Anie Akpe 56:53

Yeah, sure. I have received mentorship through one of my uncle's who, to this day, is my mentor with everything. I believe that you need different types of mentors. I don't think that a mentorship should just be one person. And I think that mentorship should be based on what your areas of interest are. And then also, one that is not in your area of interest, that has a broader view. I believe that mentorship is the key to life. I don't think

that anything, that we should be the first one to learn about it. I think that with mentorship, it takes the guessing game out of it. A lot of us tend to go into things thinking that we know so much because you know, that's what we are, humans. But when you're actually able to take yourself out of the equation, people have experiences and those experience could save you thousands of dollars, you know, or a very good lesson which could actually help your business grow even more. I think that we should always keep mentors in the long run, especially when we do our endeavours. Find someone that already has done it, or find someone that is in the business of doing things similar or just in business in general. I think that with anything that I've ever done, I don't remember not asking a few people. But the key has always been I've always kept a mentor. And that mentorship has gotten me to where it has and has helped me to accomplish the things that I have.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 58:26

Thank you so much Anie for your time.

Anie Akpe 58:29

Thank you. I really enjoyed it.