

EPISODE 211**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:02.9] PF: Welcome to episode 211 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. If you're a regular listener to our podcast, we already know that we're fond of talking about work. This week, we're taking a slight different approach to the topic.

As founder and board chair of the Skees Family Foundation, Suzanne Skees has worked in developing countries to support innovative education and job creation programs. She's compiled the stories of the fascinating people she has met around the world into a book series called *MY JOB: People at Work Around the World*. She says that along the way she's learned a lot about the way our jobs affect us and what we can learn from them.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:45.3] PF: Suzanne, thank you for joining us on Live Happy Now. It's really a pleasure to have you as a guest today.

[0:00:50.1] SS: I'm happy to be here.

[0:00:51.7] PF: Well, I think a great place for us to start is for you to tell us first of all what the Skees Foundation is all about.

[0:00:58.7] SS: We call ourselves the world's tiniest charitable foundation with the mightiest ambition to end poverty around the world within our lifetime. We come with the premise that there are enough resources for all, but that equal opportunity for all is not being implemented. We really are in terms of our budget and our staffs size tiny. We're always the smallest in the room.

It's all family, a couple of family are working as part-time staff members and the rest of us are just volunteers on the board, or helping with events, or grant partner selection, but our specialty over time, we've been around for 15 years and we've come to realize that to end poverty, it's not

about giving out food. You have to of course, relieve human beings of disaster and hunger in the moment.

Long-term in order to achieve sustainable change, you need to work on systems change. Two very simple ways we feel to do that are through education and jobs. You give someone a chance to study, a skill, or study toward a degree, that's something they'll have for the rest of their lives. Then conversely, if they have the education but nothing to do with it, for example, in places in the US and elsewhere that have pockets of huge unemployment, then you need to create jobs in order to employ these newly skilled workers or even unskilled workers.

Schools and jobs, those are our niches. We work with very, very young startups who are looking at a different innovative way to solve an old social problem, often with young social entrepreneurs. We work about 85% outside the US and 15% in our own backyards believing very, very fiercely that all humans are created equal and all deserve the chance to build a life of self-determination and freedom.

[0:03:04.4] PF: That's an incredible mission. It's as you said, it's very ambitious. One thing that you have done, you've written your second book in my job series. Obviously, that speaks to the job portion of your mission. Can you talk about what the my job series of books is and then tell me why you launched it.

[0:03:25.8] SS: We are just such ordinary middle-class Americans. It's funny, if you saw – you could go to our board page and you'd see myself and my mom and my sisters and my nieces. There are 40 family members across three generations from ages 9 to 91. Guess what? We're all working people ourselves and we feel we're just trying to help in whatever small way we can, right? Because we didn't have really sharp MBAs, people with graduate degrees in international development on the board, what we did have was in the early days, I had a background in journalism and writing and editing.

This morphed into supporting our partners by writing about them. Oftentimes, they were creating jobs or giving micro-loans for people to be able to start or build small businesses. I was writing hundreds and hundreds of stories about these unsung heroes ending poverty through the toil of their own hands and the creativity of their own minds.

It occurred to me that these stories could be linked together into a book and that if you balance them out with stories of people working for some of the huge companies, like Xerox and Google and wealth investment companies, that it could be quite entertaining to look at the range of jobs from say, a banana farmer in Uganda, to a wealth equity manager in Hong Kong, to a woman who teaches teenage girls to ride horses in Kentucky, to get them out of risk and through high school, to look at all kinds of jobs that maybe I've never had exposure to. Maybe you haven't either.

We're living in a time where geography still really matters in terms of our careers, where we grew up, what options we have is still quite distinct, but because of telecommunications we can learn about each other. The stories I was writing morphed into this book series, which features people from our partner programs, but also people from the dot-com side of industry. It's just a continuation. It's a callback to Studs Terkel's bestselling book from 1974, *Working*.

[0:05:46.6] PF: Is it just a series of stories? Can you tell the listeners what they can expect when they pick up this book?

[0:05:52.9] SS: That's right. Each book has 15 chapters and they're each narrated by that person. In this case, I felt strongly that my mission was not to tell their story for them, but to listen. I would interview a person, just like you're doing with me now and record it. Then edit the chapter, rearrange the content sometimes. My personal job was to take the stories of the MY JOB book series and arrange them into a beautiful mosaic of who is this person, but retain their own words.

A reader just told me a couple of days ago that she's immersed in MY JOB book too. She says, "You know, I feel when I'm reading a chapter, I'm sitting with that person and they're telling me their story one-on-one."

[0:06:44.3] PF: Wow, that's a huge compliment when you can actually put yourself and the reader in their shoes. That's an incredible feat.

[0:06:52.1] SS: Thank you. What I do as the editor is just to frame the story. I could go on and on and on about the narrators, because they're amazing people, but I've restrained myself to

about a page where I'll give an editor's note and frame it for you. I'll tell you a little bit of what was my perception of this person. I just give you tidbits that they wouldn't say about themselves.

[0:07:15.8] PF: Now let me ask you, is there a common theme that you find that runs through all of these stories?

[0:07:21.6] SS: Here's the common theme; everyone needs to work. You think we need to work, because we need a paycheck, right? The average person spends 90,000 hours of their life, a third of their life working. We have 7.7 billion people on this planet right now, over 5 billion of us are actively working. Maybe we don't want to be, but every single person I've interviewed has wanted to provide for their families, has wanted the dignity of being able to earn some paycheck, even gig jobs, even in the informal sector, that feeling of being able to produce.

I'll tell you, from all of the narrator's, all except one told me, "If I had all the time and money in the world, I would be doing what I'm doing right now." Only one narrator would not be doing the work that he's doing now. That was the first man that I interviewed in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He's a rickshaw puller, which means that he pedals a bicycle taxi in the dusty packed streets of Dhaka.

Muhammad is in his early 50s and he's exhausted. He said his body is spent. He cycles about 12 hours a day in order to eke out money for two meals for his family. He's the only one who said, "No, this is not the profession I would have chosen in a million years. I would have liked to be a banker." He said, "When I was a kid, I was very good with numbers." Because of the civil war in Bangladesh, he had to drop out of school at age 10. His father was killed and he ended up being the provider for the family. He began work as a migrant farmer.

Muhammad haunts me, I think about what it would have been like for him if he had been able to go to school and become a banker. Instead, he's out there on the rickshaw and what he's done is he's given his children a chance to go to school. He found a free school that's one of our education partners called Jago. His children are going through elementary and high school and planning to – for college and planning to be – one's going to be a doctor and then the other is going to be a dentist. Muhammad says, "It's too late for me, but I want them to have the life that they want."

[0:09:41.4] PF: It's really like, he sacrificed his passion and his desire to be able to give his children the life. We do see that. We see that especially with immigrant parents, where they might come to the US and maybe left a position as a surgeon and will work as a janitor, but they're doing it because they want their children and all the children that follow those children to have the opportunity that we have here.

[0:10:05.2] SS: This is a key part of the spine of America and the character of America, which is this diverse immigrant story. It's also something that we see all over the world is that parents want a better life for their children. This is why we in my Skees family believe that we're all kin. I'm glad you asked me about these key learnings that have woven together through all the chapters. The theme is well, how can you be happy at work, right? 75% of people in the world who are not working in agriculture are working gig jobs, like Muhammad. They had no choice. They're selling. They're hawking goods on the side of the road, or they're migrant farmers.

How can you be happy if you don't get to choose? The first way – I think there are probably five ways to be happy at work. One is if it's possible, you do look for a job that fulfills you. You look for a job like the one that you have where you're writing and you're interviewing people and you get joy from the process, whether it's building things, or serving people.

If at all possible, you find your gift. If you can't work that full time, then you look if at all possible for a side gig, even if it's a volunteer couple hours a month, or being an artist a couple of hours, creating music, what expresses who you are at the depths of your being. I think the second way to look for happiness at work is to be open to connecting with your co-workers. What I found in collecting these stories is that oftentimes, people's team at work knew them better than the team at home.

[0:11:49.8] PF: Well, it becomes your family. Absolutely.

[0:11:51.4] SS: It really does. There's a strength and a co-support that's possible. They're not with everyone, but to look for that and lead on it, because it is such a huge portion of your time in your life.

Part of that is my third point, is to share the story of your job; how incredible would it be if the grandmas and grandpas in our society would tell us about the work they did when they were a

kid? My father growing up on a farm in Kentucky and he has memory loss now. Sometimes those are those only stories he remembers. How wonderful if the people in your life knew a lot more in depth what you do and how it impacts you, rather than just who you are in the function of their life?

What I found was I would sit down with people and I would start with a set of 25 standard questions. What do you do? What skills does it take? What was your educational background? What's been your best day? Your worst day? Etc. What money do you make? What would you do if you didn't need to earn money? Every narrator would veer far off topic and end up just unfolding in front of me and becoming quite intimate about whom they love and what traumatized them as a child, or what they fear now, or what they visioned for our world. I think this is true for us as well in conversation. The story of our work becomes the revealing of who we are as a human person.

[0:13:23.7] PF: What's so much of what we do? I mean, our work does become us and vice versa a lot of times, especially when we're passionate about it.

[0:13:31.8] SS: That's right. That's right. You're leading into my fourth point, which is as much as possible, to bring a certain mindfulness to our work. I was really struck. Last week, I was in a sushi restaurant for lunch and there was a man sweeping the floor and wiping the tables. He moved slowly. He moved as if it were a privilege to be there, wiping the tables and refilling water glasses and asking, "Would you like more?" There was just something about the humility of him, that it looked almost like a dharma, a meditative humble service, rather than just, "Oh, I got to sweep the darn floor again."

I wanted to remember the vision of him and bring it home to my piles of papers that need to be cleaned out and the dishes that need to be washed and the laundry and the cleaning. I wanted to approach my work, whether it's high-level creative work, or whether it's just all the grunt work that the other 95% of our jobs, and keep this mindfulness with me that he exuded.

[0:14:37.4] PF: Yes, because your approach really can change your reality, when you do it with appreciation and you do it with intention. That really does change your experience.

[0:14:47.3] SS: That's right. I think it's also a keeping in mind that we all need each other. We need our undertaker, we need our garbage collector, we need our neurosurgeons, we need our journalists. Society can't really function well without everyone doing their small piece. That if we honor ourselves in doing that small piece instead of worrying, "Should I be doing something else, or something more?" Knowing that this is our contribution to the people around us, even if they don't see it.

[0:15:20.2] PF: Absolutely. Absolutely. You said you had one more thing, the fifth thing. What is that?

[0:15:25.6] SS: Yeah. The fifth point. The fifth point would be as much as possible, and I know this is hard for most of us is to find a work-life balance, so that you're getting up once an hour and taking a little walk around, or you're standing working, or you put a treadmill under your desk, or you get outside for lunch, or you don't take your work home with you when you go home to dinner with your family. Just any small ways that you can be present at work and then not be present not at work, will recharge your batteries and help you to come back the next day as a fully engaged, honorable and humble servant to the world, which is what we're all here for.

What I found is that people need to work for purpose. Even if we were all – let's say we all had universal basic income and it was a huge amount. I guarantee you, we would still find ways to give. We would still find creative art to express. We'd build things, we would serve each other, we'd take care of our elderly and our sick, because we have to be connected. It's too isolating not to be part of the world as a working person. It's the glue that holds us together. It also happens to be our common denomination as a human species within a world like now that's so divisive and you feel people are focusing on tribalism and what separates us and what's different about you and me, work is our common ground.

We all work. We know what it's like to stay up late, getting a project done. We know what it's like to have a headache or backache and work through it, to have nobody appreciating what we're doing. We also know what it's like to have a really inspiring boss, or to have a great day where we are applauded for what we do. This is this universal factor and that's why my job is the place we come together to talk about not just our work, but our humanity.

[0:17:33.2] PF: Suzanne, this is a great series that you've started. We're going to tell our listeners how they can find it. We're going to link on our website to give them a page to go to where they can purchase your book and learn more about the Skees Foundation and the work that you're doing. Suzanne, thank you. Thank you again for the work that you're doing and again, for sitting down with us today.

[0:17:55.0] SS: Nice to meet your readers and thank you, Paula.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:18:01.4] PF: That was Suzanne Skees, author of the book series *MY JOB: People at Work Around the World*. If you like to learn more about her books, download a free chapter of her most recent book, or learn more about the Skees Family Foundation, please visit us at livehappynow.com.

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That is all we have time for this week. We'll meet you back here again next week for an all-new episode. Until then this, is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]