

TRANSCRIPTON OF COMPLETE INTERVIEW WITH JUSTINE PRINGLE

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AS: So today is Earth Day, the 22nd. Tell me about the leap you made from your previous life to this. I mean, the reason I'm asking is because a lot of people who are would-be entrepreneurs or wanna-be entrepreneurs are often not doing the thing they'll ultimately do. They are busy doing things that they may not like to do, or fell into, as the case may be. It sounded like you made a conscious decision to leave what you were doing. Can you talk a little about that?

JP: Yes. For a long time I did float along and just work in places because I wasn't sure on what I wanted to do. I did a degree in Environmental Management and Technology, which concentrated on waste management, which led to an intern ship at a country club in Austin, Texas. So I did waste management in a country club in Austin for two years. (laughs)

After two years I moved to New York, but my student visa had ended by then. That was part of my university degree. My student visa had ended. I was married then. I had to try and find a job and at the time there was a hiring freeze on anything environmental, so I got involved in the healthcare industry as an administrative person.

AS: When was that?

JP: That was 2001. So since 2001, I'd been working within the healthcare industry, trying to find what I wanted to do, what my passion was, but not wanting to leave the security of the job.

That marriage ended and I carried on in the same job, still thinking, “Where should I move? What should I do?” I met my current husband now, who is a musician. I had this idea about the chocolate, let it grow while I was still working and worked full time up until October 2008, to the point where [I felt], “Now is a good time to stop. I feel secure in the fact that chocolate is going to be strong enough to sustain itself.” What gave us the final kick in the rear end to give up my job was being accepted to the Union Square Holiday Market.

I don’t know if you know anything about the Union Square Holiday Market. It’s a month at Christmastime, seven days a week, from 10AM to 10PM. So there was just no way of being able to carry on a 9 to 5 job. That’s when I gave up my 9 to 5 job and took on chocolate full time.

AS: How did you come to pick chocolate? I mean, I could guess, but, please...

JP: It was the first and only thing that came to mind. There was nothing else that was even in the running. I’m not quite sure why. I’ve always been a food lover. I’ve never loved making food, though.

But chocolate is very scientific and I think because I have a scientific background I love the actual process of making it. I love the fact that I’m trying to figure it out. It’s very sensitive to temperature. It’s very sensitive to humidity. You think you can control it, and you can’t. You have to manipulate it. So I think that’s what appeals to me. And then the love of chocolate comes second to the making of it.

AS: Let me ask you this because, I can understand that. I mean, I don't make chocolate, but I can imagine how that could be true. But a lot of people would say to themselves, "Well maybe I'm a scientist and I think scientifically about lots of things, but I don't always probe it or analyze it."

But what prompted this leap from being in a very different business? In other words, sometimes people are told, "You make the best pies." Or, "You do this really well." And you're given encouragement. And then you say, "Okay." And you almost have built-in customers who are very small [in numbers] but real ones and you're sort of encouraged by their interest. But that's not what you're describing. You made a decision, it sounds like.

JP: It was a decision that seemed to click into place.

Chocolate's hard to manipulate, but the recipes seemed to come very easily to me. If I can fixate on a flavor or something that I want to do, it just seems to come naturally. It seems as if it found me. I didn't find it. And now that I've found it, it just flows really well.

I suppose there was that sense of encouragement initially, that our friends loved what I made and had specific flavors that they loved. Like Salt Caramels with Fleur de Sel on the top. People became obsessed with them. That was the first thing that started selling really well throughout all the shops and it became an encouragement in itself.

AS: I'd like you to tell a little, though, about this leap of faith thing that is a big part of being an entrepreneur, that is very personal -- because it is -- but it seems to be fairly universal because you can't know many things before you do it. I

mean, if you did, you wouldn't be an entrepreneur. There's an inherent risk element, but not gambling risk, either.

JP: And I think also if you knew everything you were getting into, one wouldn't do it. And it would be intensely overwhelming. I think maybe the leap of faith thing is lack of thought. You just want to make it happen. Because I know if I thought about it too much, there's no way I would do it.

AS: The mother voice in you or the father voice in you would go, "Are you kidding?"

JP: Yes. Yes. And also, it clicks into place. When you start saying to people, like for instance, parents. You just triggered that.

When I said to my parents, "I'm thinking about doing this," in the past, they would have said, "Are you sure about it? Here are the pros and cons. Is this something you want to do?" And things seemed to click into place.

When I mentioned, "I think I want to go into chocolate and get my diploma as a chocolatier," there was no apprehension on their part. There was full encouragement and full appreciation of what I was trying to do. So maybe things just have – everything comes together: lack of thought, timing and encouragement.

AS: Now, you're with your husband doing this. Often a partner is a big deal. He's not only a business partner, but a life partner.

In fact, one of the people that was written about in this book was a person you may have read about – The Woodman. I recently met him. He's a very

interesting man, but one of the interesting pieces about his story is, it was his wife who not only encouraged him, which is nice, but more importantly, has subsidized this venture for him.

Can you talk a little bit about the role that your husband, plays in this?

JP: He's played an absolutely huge role in all of this: emotionally, financially and professionally. He's now an equal partner with me. He knew that I wasn't happy in what I was doing before, but also knew that I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do. So as soon as I clicked onto something like that, there was a huge amount of encouragement -- in the form of tasting as well. With everything. He physically helps. He emotionally helps. He's is a very good listener and gives incredible advice. He's a very good businessperson. I'm not a very good businessperson. I would jump in feet first without thinking and not really think of the consequences. And he's great at saying, "Step back a minute. Are you sure this is the right thing to do? How about doing this?"

AS: Yet what's interesting is that you're acknowledging that there's an element of this that is diving in, not knowing how deep the water is. So you have to have that willingness, but yet to go beyond a few feet out, there has to be something else. You're describing what would be called a partnership/relationship, putting aside the legal part, but the idea that there is someone who is, if nothing else, watching your back or your butt or whatever you want to call it. Because it's hard for one person, usually, to cover all that and to see all the angles.

JP: And it goes both ways. He's a musician and actor, so from day one, I've shown that support to him and since I've started the chocolate, he's shown that support in return. So it's kind of, we know how each other feels in each passion. And that maybe has worked, that you kind of know the importance of knowing that somebody's there supporting you and pushing you.

He's also very good at pushing. Because I don't know, sometimes, my own limits or what I'm capable of and he can see or has experienced what I am capable of. And even if he says something and I go, "No, that's not possible. I can't do that," within a few hours or a few days, I will say, "Oh, I think we should do this." And he's actually planted the seed and pushed.

AS: That's a very honest statement you're making about yourself. I'm married myself, and I'm very taken by the degree of willingness to change that you're talking about.

JP: Yes. Well I also have faith that the advice he's given me is good advice. He would never do anything negative or detrimental. So he's only trying to help and encourage and push the business because now it's our business. If he gives me some kind of push, it's not going to be a negative one, so I should think about it.

AS: So obviously, trust is the number one word.

JP: Yes. Yes. Yes.

AS: Let me just switch gears for a moment and go back to when you were doing the Brooklyn Flea Market. How did you go from being the

experimenter with friends to that? Can you tell me a little bit about that transition?

JP: Yes. I think I had made a small batch of chocolates. I had made nine chocolates and I walked into Bierkraft, the beer, chocolate and cheese store on Fifth Avenue and said, “Do you want to try my chocolate?” (laughs) And they said, “Okay,” and I was extremely nervous, but I called them back a week later and I said, “Are you interested in carrying my chocolate?” They said yes and that was the first shop to carry my chocolate.

AS: Let me just stop you and ask you about that. That was a very big move on your part.

JP: It was terrifying.

AS: I can imagine it would be, because they could have said, “Honey, you’re very nice, but no.” How did you get over that anxiety?

JP: I don’t know, because I can’t even speak in public. I have no idea. I think it was sheer determination to make it work, more than anything else, to prove to myself that my chocolate was good enough to be in a store.

AS: But you did believe it was good.

JP: Yes. But food is such a subjective thing. I don’t know if you know the product called Marmite. Do you know Marmite?

AS: I do, actually, and I happen to like it.

JP: You do like it? My husband won’t sit next to me if I’ve had it.

AS: It's interesting. It's like a sweet-savory thing. And I do like it. I don't eat it that much. I ate it when I lived in England for a while. I found it to my liking, but it's very strange.

JP: And there are people that hate it intensely. And just because I like it doesn't mean that other people are going to like it.

AS: So that was the big market test. When people take classes in building a business, what you often have to remind them of is, at the end of the day, if people won't buy it, it ain't a business. It's a hobby.

JP: Yes. And also, even though I had the sheer stubborn determination to try it out, I also never, ever took for granted that it was going to work. And I didn't get too attached to it. I was thinking if no one buys it, that's fine. I'll try something else, because you can't force people to buy it. You can't force people to like it. So I was prepared to think, "This is not the thing."

AS: So when you say that, meaning that you would have a different blend or a different product. What did you mean by that?

JP: I don't think I'd even thought about it. I just thought, this is something I'm going to try. If it doesn't work, don't take it too personally. Don't lose faith. Something else will happen.

AS: That's really a very interesting comment. In my opinion, that reflects a kind of confidence, but almost a sense of a karma of the world kind of confidence. Meaning that it will come. It's a little bit to the analogy of if you build it, it will come.

JP: Right. Which is bizarre, because I've always been very competitive and very sensitive to things. But with chocolate, I haven't been. I don't have that sense of cut-throat, in a way. I do in the sense that I want this to work, but I'm not going to force you to eat my chocolate.

AS: As well you shouldn't.

JP: Does that make sense?

AS: It does. It's very interesting. What I'm hearing is this rather elaborate dance that people go through to become... this. And everyone's is a version of this, but it's interesting to hear how you did it. So they took the product. That obviously was a big stamp of approval.

JP: Yes.

AS: They began selling it. At what point did you take the next step?

JP: The next day I went to another shop.

AS: So you didn't wait.

JP: No. I thought, "If they're going to like it, I'll go somewhere else, too."

AS: And at no point did you have a conversation about where your product would be sold. They didn't ask you that question?

JP: A couple of shops did ask how close was the next shop where it was going to be sold.

AS: And?

JP: And I hadn't really gotten anywhere yet, so I just said, "You're the only one so far." And then the next one would say, "Well, that place has got it." But they decided it was far enough away, so they took it on, too. I only

had one shop that didn't take the chocolate on, that I approached within that first year. And that's because they had their own chocolatier and their own exclusive contract.

AS: So you said that for a year this was your method? You were working full time, still, so I guess after work and weekends, you were making product.

JP: Do you know Sheep Station, the Australian bar at Fourth Avenue and Douglas? Well, I nagged them and put them in the position to where they had to say yes to me using their kitchen from 1AM onwards, because you can't make chocolate at home. So I got my liability insurance and joined their kitchen.

AS: So when you first approached Bierkraft, you had done it at home? How did you first do that?

JP: No. We had rented commercial kitchens.

AS: I see. So you had already invested.

JP: Time.

AS: And money. You rented a space. So that was kind of your start-up concept. You couldn't do it any other way. There are stories, and I've actually spoken to people who do attempt – maybe not with chocolate – but I've heard of people working out of their kitchens.

JP: I think baking is different. I'm not quite sure. I've heard that you can get a home pastry permit. But I'm not 100% sure.

But chocolate is different. Chocolate you can store at home and package at home, but you can't make it at home.

AS: Can you say why that's true?

JP: I don't know why there's a distinction. I can understand why it shouldn't be done at home, because there's no regulation at home. There's no inspector that can come into your home and say, "This is hygienically acceptable. You're running a good kitchen." And it's not a commercial space, so it can't be regulated.

I'm not quite sure why you can do baking at home, because I would assume the same things would apply, but I don't know.

AS: I thought you were going to say something about equipment and temperature and that sort of thing. But it's more about regulation. That's interesting. So one of the things you had to find out was, what was the regulation, then.

JP: Yes. And then I became an LLC.

AS: And I'm guessing that was done because you wanted to protect yourself.

JP: Yes.

AS: And what made you decide to do that? That's a very interesting choice, by the way, because many people stick to being a sole proprietor for a while because it's cheaper and it's also less cumbersome in the sense of some of the requirements. But you were advised to do that, I'm guessing.

JP: I was advised to do that, and also I thought to myself, "If this is going to work, if I'm going to be creating a business, I want to get everything sorted out in the beginning. I don't want to be a few years down the road and I don't own an LLC. I don't have my accounts in order because I didn't think they were big enough to start with to get a proper accountant."

_____ So from day one, I became an LLC. I got an accountant. I got a lawyer. From day one, even though I wasn't making very much money. I think the first year, we made \$3,000. And I know the accountant was like, "Are you serious?" (laughs)

AS: He said, "I'm not sure this is a business. It may be a hobby."

JP: But legally, if you make more than \$300, then it's not a hobby anymore.

AS: I want you to tell me a little bit more about this, because not everyone does that. Most people would wait until they had to, or if not had to, but they were closer to having to. Meaning, they couldn't produce quantity until they had the facilities, so therefore, they had an order that prompted them to branch out. Or they had a service where they were working with people, that is employees for whom they had responsibility and possible liability. In other words, there's usually a trigger that makes you do things.

But it's interesting because you describe yourself as someone who didn't come out with a business head, but yet you made these choices.

JP: Yes. And I don't know if it's because of my scientific background, but if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it properly, even though I don't know what's going to happen. Then at least I did it properly.

AS: Do you recommend that?

JP: I do, in the sense that I've been around a few of my peers who are at the same level as me, business-wise, who haven't done that. And you're so busy now. You don't have time for anything else. You're working seven days a week. You're manufacturing. You're billing. You're delivering. You're

following up on phone calls, emails. You don't have time now to create an LLC. You don't have time now to go through all the legals and the accounts and all that kind of stuff. Get that done beforehand, because in my mind, I wouldn't have been able to give the time and the research to it. So in that way around, yes, I'm really glad all that's done and it's sorted.

AS: So then you were free to focus on making better chocolate and selling more chocolate.

JP: Yes. Because then I had my sales tax ID. I had a legal standing. If people asked me, "Do you have liability insurance? I can't have you in my kitchen unless you've got that." Yes. I've already got it and I can start manufacturing right now.

AS: So you did this work from a rented kitchen for a while, getting more accounts, but you were not yet in the Flea.

JP: No. We'd been going for a year before the Flea started. The Flea started last April for the first time.

AS: April '08. That's very recent. And that's why you did it that December '08.

JP: Yes. Well, Brooklyn Flea and the Union Square Holiday Market were two different things.

AS: So was the sequence of events was that you went from selling to small stores to...

JP: And doing the Brooklyn Flea every Sunday from last April. The Union Square Holiday Market we did from November '08 to the end of December '08.

AS: And so the store only happened really recently.

JP: It did. We were approached by our landlord in October '08 at the Brooklyn Flea, and she said, "Would you be interested in a pop-up store for the holiday season?" And we said, "That sounds great," because we had not been accepted to the Union Square Holiday Market yet and didn't know whether we would be accepted.

So we got accepted to the Union Square Holiday Market, but she was saying at the exact same time as we signed, "The pop-up needs to be here," which was a terrible idea because we were getting married in December, as well. So we ended up not opening the store until January. We totally missed the holiday season because of the Union Square Holiday Market.

AS: But you made money. One could argue you made more money since you had fewer expenses.

JP: But we were still paying for the lease.

AS: Oh. But it wasn't in moving shape. Those were the terms you had to live by. You were paying for the lease in December when you were still there.

JP: Here.

AS: You were paying for it here, but you weren't working here.

JP: This is all totally homemade. This counter here was our counter at the Union Square Holiday Market. So we were doing it at the same time. But every time we'd filled up the store with product, we ended up taking it all away to the Union Square Holiday Market.

AS: So talk a little bit about this opportunity that you were presented with.

That's very unusual, I would think, to be approached in that way. And you also then decided to come to Brooklyn.

JP: We had been living here already.

AS: But had you thought about where you might have a venue?

JP: It didn't even occur to us to have a store. It was totally inconceivable.

AS: So that was not in your thinking?

JP: Not yet. Not for the next year or two.

AS: So you imagined that you could continue working in versions of, I guess, temporary markets, so to speak.

JP: Right. And we also sell wholesale to about 16 stores. So we thought, "We'll stick with this and let it grow on its own." And then we were approached.

AS: That's a really big decision, to go retail. It means you're taking on all sorts of new risks.

JP: Yes. And then there's the fact that you think, "We're just selling our stuff. How are we going to survive with just selling our stuff?" We'd been selling our chocolates to shops that sell all sorts of things.

AS: And you didn't have to deal with all the other responsibilities or expenses at all. So how did you evaluate this opportunity? Or did you dive in?

JP: I think initially, it was more the space that got us, because this space is special. It's a lovely shop. It's not very big and it has a lot of personality. And we thought, "If we don't take the chance..." It was a very short-term lease. We signed a lease from November to the end of February as a pop-up lease, as just

a holiday season lease to see how it goes, with the option to negotiate for a longer lease.

AS: That's what they presented you with.

JP: Yes. So it wasn't such a huge, huge, huge risk.

AS: I have never heard of that term before.

JP: No, I had never heard of it either.

AS: That's really interesting, because in that sense, both of you are potentially hedging your bets. Because they could say, "It was nice, but no," as could you. But at that point, in order for you to be here, did you have to do much renovation?

JP: I don't think we did anything. We painted the floor and we painted the walls. That's it.

AS: So there was a minimal move-in requirement. That was an inexpensive move, but building awareness in a community takes time.

JP: Brooklyn is amazing. Everyone knows everyone within the food industry. It moves very quickly. And if you've got the support, there's no underestimating local support.

AS: What do you mean by that?

JP: We finally opened in mid-January, because we went on our honeymoon for two weeks after New Year's Eve. So officially, we opened mid-January and the amount of local support was amazing.

"Oh, you're finally open! We've been waiting for you to open for months!"

We'd already had a pretty strong following from the Brooklyn Flea, so now people could buy the chocolate any day they wanted to. It was very welcoming.

When we first applied for our beer and wine license, we had to have people sign a petition that they had no objections. And when we went to our Community Board meeting, one of the members of the Board looked at the list and he said, "But these are all local. All of these signatures seem to be within three or four blocks of the shop. Did you walk around?"

And I said, "No. Those were purely signatures from people coming into the store." So we had such wonderful support.

AS: This is a very interesting fact for you because, I remember about two years ago, a woman was asked to do a presentation about a store idea that she had. It was a very small clothing store that she was going to do for kids and she had some really interesting ideas. It included a play area so that parents could shop, which is not that new, but it was not that common in a small store. She was attempting to not be seasonal, meaning that you could buy rain slickers, for instance, at odd times, because often that's what parents need. I'm telling you all this because she sounded incredibly organized, very thoughtful and she's out of business. Her shop was on Seventh Avenue. It was called Maggie's something.

Now it's a totally different business. I get that. But I'm saying that to you because what comes to my mind when I think of her is that she spent a great deal of effort strategizing and researching and attempting to be what Target was

not, because Target is there. There have always been a few children's clothing stores, but she seemed to have some differentiation.

I don't know if part of the problem was that the landlord upped her rent in some astronomical way, but my point is that the best intentioned people can...

JP: What I would add to that is that if we solely relied on this store, we would probably be out of business as well. Our wholesale is established enough to keep everything going. As a new store, I'm not quite sure if we would have been okay without the wholesale because it takes time. It takes so much time.

AS: Exactly. And it's a very different situation in terms of customers. Because then it's about street traffic and comfort with that very fact and where are you in relation to where people are going? Are you in a destination area or not? There are many other issues at play.

So right now, your revenue is split. It's more weighted toward the wholesale end.

JP: Definitely. Because we are still so new. But we have become a destination place for mums coming out, that just want to go for a walk. They will walk here and then walk home, so that's kind of fun. So we have become a little bit of a destination and not just en route to the Atlantic train stop.

AS: So would you say that you're well known?

JP: Within this area, I would say.

AS: How did that happen? When you say that got these people to sign, or when you say that people came from the Brooklyn Flea, did you let them know that you were getting the store?

JP: We didn't, because we didn't know and the Brooklyn Flea had already ended. It ended in November.

AS: So had you collected email addresses? Had you done anything to prepare?

JP: No. (laughs)

AS: No. Right. So how did they find out?

JP: You know who we have? We have Time Out, New York Magazine and The New York Times and Edible Brooklyn to thank for it. They have been wonderful. And the amount of people who write extremely fantastic blogs, like The Gothamist and Sweet Freaks(? – 34:34) -- people have been great at writing about us and our store.

AS: Talk a little bit about that. Do you know these people? How did they come to do this? Why are they doing it?

JP: I don't know. I ask myself that as well. I don't know. We went on our honeymoon for the first two weeks of January. We came back and the publicity was non-stop up until after Valentine's Day. I'm not quite sure what happened and I don't know why, but I'm extremely thankful for it. And we've met such incredible people that we'll stay in contact with.

AS: One could say, and we haven't talked about this very much, that the product is the key. In other words, it's you and your husband, but obviously it

must taste pretty good. It must be at a price that's affordable. Do you know Mariebelle?

JP: I don't know her, but I know her product.

AS: Then you might also know the price point of her product. It's unbelievably expensive. I only know this because she was in a business networking group that I was in and I with her at her newer store in SoHo, before she opened the one on 57th Street. And it's unbelievable. I'm astonished. I hope she's still doing okay because of the economy. But, whoa! We are talking high end, at least price-wise. I'm not going to speak to its quality, because I don't know. Do you think that's something that you have an advantage in?

JP: I do think people think we're expensive, as well. Not as expensive as her, but expensive in the sense that we're a start-up. We're new. But we do get the reaction, "Oh okay, well this isn't that bad. It's not that expensive." But it's 50/50, because you've got other people saying, "Are you kidding? You're a start-up and you're charging this much?" But people don't understand that it's me making it. It's just me making it and it's local. It's not being made somewhere else and being shipped in, so it's extremely labor intensive.

AS: Do you talk about that? Is that part of the way people learn about you?

JP: No, I don't.

AS: So you're saying, just so I'm clear, that you went away on your honeymoon and in that rather small period of time, Time Out did a piece on you? They must have interviewed you. They would have had to visit.

JP: Yes. I think they interviewed us for a couple of things. We were in it about two or three times.

AS: Would you say there's an editor? I know a little bit about this because I had a client who was involved with the Time Out Kids thing, which is a separate publication. And they have different issues related to different topics related to kids, but they also have roving people in different neighborhoods who kind of keep up with things. It's kind of their job.

JP: But I think a lot of people live in this area. I think that helped, because a lot of the people I've spoken to, whether it's New York magazine or Time Out or The New York Times, they're local people, so they see what's happening. They've been to the Brooklyn Flea. They were at the Union Square Holiday Market. I think we have a lot to thank for with those markets. They really do promote your brand. They get your name out there. People buy those things and send them all over the country.

AS: This is interesting, too, because one of the things that is often suggested to people who are contemplating some business is to do it in such a way that the focus is on the product and not all the accoutrements of it. Because that's where you can sink yourself. It can be very expensive to set up shop. And there's no reputation, there's no brand and you're really forced to then pay out a lot of money out of your own pocket or someone's pocket because the bills have to be met. Whereas, you kept it to product cost.

JP: And we became branded very early. We met a wonderful lady through Union Market. Her name is Valerie English. Union Market started carrying

our chocolate. I went to Union Market one day and the owner called me over and he said, “People really like your chocolate, but they don’t like your packaging.” It was pretty homemade. It was just my own ribbons and stickers and ingredients labels. And he said, “I can recommend somebody for you.” She’s the same person that did our logo.

I got in touch with her. I looked at her website and I thought, “Oh! How much is this going to cost?” I looked at the website as she answered the phone, and as she said hello, I said, “I don’t think I can afford you.”

And she said, “Well, tell me what you want and then we’ll deal with it.”

And I told her what I was about and I went in and spoke to her. She was very fair. When we broke up, she let me pay her over time, and she created an extremely strong and recognizable brand. And I think people remember it.

AS: But she didn’t come up with a different name. You use the same name. It’s just the look.

JP: Yes. Which is pretty bold.

AS: That’s interesting. So you feel that’s an important element in this process.

JP: I do. Because when we started at the Brooklyn Flea, we were already in about 10 shops. And people would see it at the Flea and say, “Oh, I’ve seen this before. Where have I seen this?”

AS: So you had the brand at that point?

JP: We did that pretty early on.

AS: I'm sure that you couldn't rewind this tape of your business and re-do it in another order, because you can't make things happen that way. You're clearly supporting the idea of why identity is important, but would you agree that no logo will overpower the product inside?

JP: Oh, no. But it will draw somebody in.

AS: Right. So the pop-up lease here came to a close and then you guys sat down and were you able to negotiate a multi-year lease?

JP: We're still in negotiations, so nothing's been finalized yet, but we're still here. We did do it at the same time as another company who they did the same thing. They did a pop-up, as well.

AS: In this row?

JP: Yes. And they did the Flea and they did the Union Square Holiday Market and they didn't find the same kind of reaction. So they thought, "We're going to cut our losses and we're out."

AS: That must have been pretty sobering.

JP: Yes.

AS: You must have felt lucky.

JP: I think we were too tired to even think about whether we were lucky or not at that particular time. December was pretty nuts. We were very exhausted. We were just going day by day.

AS: Let me ask you a couple of things about that, because you've said it a few times and I think I know what you're going to say. But you've been at this now for how many years?

JP: Officially, we've been an LLC for two years.

AS: Just two.

JP: Yes.

AS: And you did that early on.

JP: Yes.

AS: So how much time prior to that was this still in the thinking process?

JP: It was just under a year. I did my chocolatier's diploma about 10 months before.

AS: I have to say that the idea of that word chocolatier cracks me up, because I'm of the age of Mouseketeers. Who came up with that? It's so silly.

JP: (laughing) It is. How about "chocolate maker"?

AS: That would be a lot more grown up than chocolatier. I can just imagine, you walk into the room and we're all playing and finger-painting with chocolate. That's me, probably.

JP: Funny you say that. I've been wanting to do chocolate finger-painting with kids since I started this. And when we get our tavern license, that's one thing I definitely want to carry on with.

AS: That's great. Good luck. You're going to have to wrap people in plastic.

JP: I found a company that makes kids lab coats out of the same material as the Fed Ex envelopes, so that's what they're going to have on. Initially, I wanted to find kids forensic science suits, you know the little white suits? But there's only one company that makes them in Australia, and it's a little extreme to get them

shipped over from Australia, so lab coats was the next thing. So we'll be doing lab coats.

AS: The question I was going to ask you has to do with the commitment to this. As of three years ago, you were no longer working in your other job.

JP: I was working in my job up until October of last year.

AS: Really.

JP: Yes.

AS: You said that's when you had to give it up because of the time commitment.

JP: At the Union Square Holiday Market.

AS: So since then, what kind of time do you put into this?

JP: About 14 hours a day, I would say.

AS: And that includes being here.

JP: As well as going to the commercial kitchen that we hire in Long Island City.

AS: So you moved and you're going to a different one. A bigger one, I would guess. So that's more than half the day. Do you have employees now?

JP: No.

AS: So it's still just you.

JP: And Andy.

AS: Where do you stand on that? Usually, when one thinks about sustaining a business, this topic must have entered your head. The idea of getting people and training people.

JP: In my mind, I want to find somebody that I can really teach, somebody that I can really get involved in the company. We're not at a position where we can pay anybody a decent amount of money, and I don't believe that I will get a dedicated person or somebody that's willing to work this hard for no money.

AS: I understand. It's usually a personal sacrifice when people are starting.

JP: And it's not their company. Why should they?

AS: It's an interesting question. Even though that is true, what you just said, I know of people who find people you wouldn't call employees, but you might call them interns. You might call them people who, for whatever reason, maybe they just love chocolate, and they would be willing to do other things that need to be done here. It could be any kind of administrative task. There are places that you can get interns or hourly people.

In fact, as a Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce member, I know one of their programs is very much about getting people help. They actually have a service that they do. Now, we're not talking professional people, but my point is that lots of small businesses need assistance of different kinds, even though they're not that established. You see, it's only interesting because at some point, you run up against that wall of I-can't-get-any-bigger-unless.

JP: But we're going for the next step soon. We are going to get a kitchen built here and a bar built over there and we'll have chocolate and beer and wine served here. This will be a production facility that people can come and look at. When that gets done, that will be the push.

AS: How did you come up with that idea?

JP: Needing a production facility of my own.

AS: Because it's not convenient to go to Long Island City.

JP: The shifts are 6:30 PM to 2:30 AM, which is not great.

AS: Not good at all.

JP: No. So that's the push.

AS: You are devoting pretty much your whole life to this right now. That is often the case, because it is. Maybe you can just talk about that for a moment or two. What must a person be willing to do or not do if they're going to be serious about something?

JP: Be willing to give up your social life, give up everything to get this going, because it's so worthwhile when it's going. Be willing to take on all aspects of the business. Not just, "Oh, I only want to do this bit. I only want to make the chocolate." You've got to be willing to take on everything, whether it's doing the shipping or doing the packaging and then the shipping, then the delivering and all the accounts that go with it. So you've got to be willing to take on every aspect, as well as be willing to give up a lot of other stuff.

AS: But you would probably say you know it's a sacrifice, but it's a passion, as well.

JP: Yes.

AS: I would imagine you'd certainly be one of those that would say you ought to be passionate.

JP: Well, yes. Otherwise you wouldn't be going into it. You can't go into it half-hearted. No. But yes, definitely, it has to be your passion.

AS: I say that because it is the passion that perhaps gets you through.

JP: Yes, to a certain extent. That's probably about 95% of it. And then 5% of it is, "Now that I've started this, I'm so stubborn, I'm not going to give in. I'm going to make this work."

AS: Since you've said that word, I'll just say that there literally are lists of what dooms businesses, and one of the items on that list is being stubbornly married to an idea and not being willing to be flexible. Some people would say, "If I were flexible, I wouldn't be the brand I am."

JP: I think we're very flexible. I think I'm stubborn in the sense that I want to make it work, but I'm open to any way of making it work. Obviously it's got to moral and ethical and all the rest of it.

But another thing I would say is that Andy has given up a heck of a lot of his social life and his hours in the day and he has been very dedicated. You can't assume going into it that your partner is going to be that supportive. I'm very lucky.

AS: That's interesting too. I mentioned The Woodman. That business is still being proven, but part of what makes that business work is that there was a breadwinner. In other words, she does not do the work of The Woodman. He is a partner, but they do happen to have three children.

JP: Holy moley! I don't know how anyone can do that.

AS: Well, that's the way. You see, she's not running the business. She obviously has a good job. But it's a very different model and that's the point. That's literally how they're doing it. When I advise people, one of the things I ask about is, what are the other things in your life that you cannot step away from, that must be cared for because they exist. Or it might not be a person. It could be a debt. You owe money. You have to pay it and therefore it will affect everything about the business or lots of choices that you make.

The nice part or maybe the luxury part of your story is that, it is the two of you in it together, equally or sacrificing and getting the rewards. But that's not always possible.

JP: No. And there's a fine balance, because Andy's passion is music. He has his own band. He's a singer in the band. He writes his own music and he's had to sacrifice a lot of his passion for mine because I needed his help. So there is a fine balance on what you can ask of people or take for granted. And we've made it work and we've talked about it a lot, but it has been a huge sacrifice on his part.

AS: I say this, because I understand this from many people, but here you are on April 22, 2009 with some really positive, rather exciting prospects. You have a brand that is growing and your plans include really leveraging it to this new level of some kind. Do you have particular goals? Do you set financial goals for yourself? Do you do that now? I'm guessing you didn't do it before.

JP: I have no concept of numbers.

AS: Really.

JP: Yes. I'm not very good at them.

AS: I find that hard to believe.

JP: I might understand in the sense that maybe this isn't a good idea or maybe this doesn't make sense business-wise, but I'm not very good in that department. Andy is very good in that department.

AS: Let me just make sure I understand you. I believe what you said, but if nothing else, you're a person of proportion, of ingredient, of measurement. That's literally what you do, and in many ways other people don't who have small businesses. You literally measure, and it has to be exact, otherwise it won't work. So you have to have X-amount of sugar and cocoa and that has a price. You have to buy it and you probably know how much it costs to make X-amount of product.

JP: Initially, I did not.

AS: I see. So it was very experimental.

JP: Yes.

AS: But now you do.

JP: Yes.

AS: So for instance, this is something that often is done with people who are thinking about business. You say to yourself, "What must I sell and at what price point to make blank?" In other words, how many of these or these and those and those and those equals enough?

JP: To be honest, I didn't do it.

AS: Right.

JP: I was working full time at the same time.

AS: I understand. But now, now that you're about to take on a significant outlay, I don't know if you're going to finance it yourself, but that's a few dollars I'm guessing, to do this. So have you now reached that point where you say to yourself where the payback period is, blank? (laughter) I'm scaring you. I don't mean to. But you understand my question?

JP: Yes, of course. And we have spoken about it. We don't have a set plan because we haven't priced everything out perfectly. We need to price out our equipment and get an actual quote from architects, which we haven't gotten yet. So we're on the way.

AS: Believe me. There's no right or wrong here. The only reason it's brought up is because I'm literally going to a class tonight. This is a class that's taught not in the business part of NYU, but it's taught in the arts and humanities section. These are people who want to start some kind of art business.

Now the reason I was asked to teach this is, I spent many years as a fundraiser in not-for-profits in arts organizations, so I have a certain feel or sensibility. However, what I talk about in class and what they are asked to do for their work is to think that through. Because the not-so-funny joke is, "Well, it all works together. We just have to work 26 hours a day and we're fine." And you can see the problem. You can't work 26 hours a day. That's the joke part.

But it's not funny if it's true, because then you'd be in trouble. What I find interesting about your story is that, maybe it was your husband who was doing this and you don't know, but I'm not so sure about that. I suspect that you had a

lot of this sensibility in your own head, anyway. Maybe it's your science background or maybe being cautious.

JP: I think that's probably it.

AS: Some of this sounds fortuitous, but some of it doesn't. Particularly that you had it set up at first. That is a very interesting choice.

JP: I'm very organized, but I don't have a concept of mathematics, if that makes sense.

AS: It does. And maybe that's it. I'm really just interested because you're a successful entrepreneur, to the extent that you've gone as far as you have. I'm trying to get that out there, to hear how you've done it, what the assumptions were or not.

So asking you in the straightest way possible, if somebody came to you today and let's say that they know they want to start a business of their own. Maybe that's as far as they've gotten. What do you say to them?

JP: I'd say two things. Don't think about it too much. Just do it. Secondly, if you do do it, get all your fundamentals done straight away, because I'm really pleased that we got all our fundamentals done. But I'm glad that we didn't think about it too much because it is way tougher and so much harder than we thought.

AS: It's really funny because the analogy – and I'm not the first person to say this – is to having a child.

JP: Oh my goodness! Chocolate is our child. It just doesn't talk back to us.

AS: But the point is, if you really thought about what it is to become a parent, all the dimensions, no one would do it.

JP: No. You're right.

AS: Because it's very overwhelming. It's quite frightening. The responsibility is daunting and the future is a big question mark. All of these things would suggest no way, but of course everyone does it. But not everyone is an entrepreneur.

That's interesting. That is different.

JP: I do believe some of it is genetic. I'm very similar to my mum in that respect. She was very good at what she did. She was a social worker in South Africa and created three child homes for kids in rural areas.

AS: So you're saying she's an entrepreneur, not just a social worker.

JP: She was. She raised the money and got it done and got them built.

AS: What would you say about that? Did you ever think about that as you were going forward?

JP: No. I just thought of it now.

AS: Interesting. The reason again is, from an academic point of view, when people who are entrepreneurs are asked to talk about their past or their families, not always, but many will say or reveal that there were elements of this in their lives that must have percolated in.

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