

FROM PART-TIME FREELANCER TO BESTSELLING BOOK COLLABORATOR WITH ALLY MACHATE

Hello and welcome back to another episode of She Means Business! In this episode, I was joined by the lovely Ally Machate. She's the founder of the Writer's Alley. She's a best-selling book collaborator, award-winning editor, and expert publishing consultant. You can find her at AllyMachate.com. All the links are in the show notes. In this episode, we talk all about how she got started in business and how she's grown into a success. It was so cool to hear what she does to market her business. Honestly, it's so much goodness. I really hope you enjoy this episode.

Ally, it's so good to have you here. Welcome to the She Means Business podcast!

Oh, thank you so much for having me, Carrie. It's really my pleasure.

I am so excited to chat with you. We did a 10-minute master class on the Female Entrepreneur Association. It seems like years ago now; actually, it wasn't. I think we filmed it at the end of 2015. I'll leave the link to it in the show notes. We talked all about writing a book and writing with the right book for you and your business. I remember it's very good. I'm really excited to have you back and to be talking about you this time, your story and your entrepreneurial journey. Hopefully, we're going to go behind-the-scenes a bit. You can show us the good, the bad, the ugly — whatever you want to share. In this podcast, I like to pretend there is a movie coming out. Every week, it's a new She Means Business movie. This time, it's starring you. You are the star of the show. This movie is all about your entrepreneurial journey and how you turned your dreams into reality. To set the scene for everyone listening, what kind of vibe would your movie have?

Ooh, what kind of vibe would my movie have? I think it would probably have one of those she's at loose ends and trying to pull different threads of her life together. She's doing well, but something's missing. What is that thing that's missing? And then moving into this great opportunity and turning out all happy and awesome at the end.

Oh, I like it. I like happy and awesome movies. The movie begins and this is the scene right back at the beginning of your entrepreneurial journey. What is going on? Why did you set off on your entrepreneurial path?

I've always been a very independent person. I'm fortunate in that there were always a lot of business owners in my family not doing the same kind of work that I do. It was always very clear to me from a young age that owning your own business and being self-employed was an option, was a possibility, something that you can make work. The idea of running my own business was appealing and something I always considered, but the piece that really fell into place that launched me out of corporate America and into being an entrepreneur was pretty circumstantial. I was working at Simon & Schuster. I had been going part-time for several years to finish a master's degree. In the early 2000s, we had the dot com bust. Of course, a lot of different industries took a beating in that time. The economy was shrinking. Publishing, like so many others, was shrinking. Within about 2 years, my department had been reduced by a little more than a third of the staff, but we were still publishing the same number of books. The workload really became oppressive. The climate had become very conservative and cautious as far as new projects. People were a lot more nervous about taking risks on new, interesting and different books. There were really very few opportunities for young editors like me to move up into those middle and upper range positions. I felt very frustrated. I looked around and I thought, "You know what? Let's just take a chance. I'll take a year. I'll go full-time and finish up my degree and start freelancing on the side." I figure in another year or so, the job market would have opened back up as the economy stabilized. That didn't happen. A year later, I was doing really well as a freelancer. I really loved the work so I just kept going. Here we are.

I think it's so interesting the way people get into their entrepreneurial journey. Sometimes, it ends up becoming so organic. When you got actually started and made that leap, how were you feeling about it? Did you feel apprehensive? Did you have any doubts or were you just like "Woohoo, I'm going to do this"? How did you feel?

Oh gosh, I was very nervous. It seemed to make sense at the time. I was really excited about the work, especially because in publishing and under those conditions, there were a lot of meetings, there was a lot of paperwork, and there were a lot of other things going on, basically other than working directly with authors. I was excited about the idea of being able to do the same kind of work but have the proportion shift — have a lot more of my time be spent working directly with authors on their books. Not knowing for sure where your next check is going to come from, not knowing for sure how much you're going to be able to make — I think I'm not alone in that a lot of young women especially take advantage of the opportunity to become independent when they get married. I needed health insurance and I was fortunate that the timing worked out. My husband and I just got married so I had that cushion and I had that support, which made it a little bit easier. I really wanted to prove to myself. I really wanted to be able to prove to myself, to my family and to the world that I could build something out of thin air, as it were. It was really exciting to have that challenge and scary all at the same time.

I love it. What were the first steps that you took to get it off the ground?

I was very fortunate in that I was able to negotiate a deal with my editor-in-chief at the time when I left. The first few projects that I did as an independent editor were actually projects I had already been involved in on staff assignment. They paid me as an independent editor and they paid me as an independent editor to do that. That bought me a little bit of time. I used that time to reach out to the people in my network to let them know that I was now independent and looking for work. I put up a very simple but attractive website. I don't even remember which service I used at the time, but I just took advantage of one of the basic templates. I started to join a couple of organizations where if you were a member, you could be listed in their public member directory. The

Editorial Freelancers Association was one of them, for example. You could fill out your listing and people could come on the site and be looking for editors or writers and therefore, be able to connect with you. I did all those things really quickly. Work started to come in from that network of people that I had nurtured over the years of being in the industry. My first ghost-writing project came that way from an agent that I had worked with previously acquiring his books when I was at Simon & Schuster. Now that I was independent, he paired me with some clients of his for that first ghost-writing project.

Cool.

Yeah. I kept doing that, basically.

How long ago was that now?

I went freelance in 2004.

Oh wow. How have things grown and developed from then? It's so interesting. When I do these interviews, I realise how many people just got out there and started connecting with people and networking and how that just transformed and became launch pad for their business. A lot of people just stay around their home thinking something is going to come to them or the opportunity is going to arrive at their door step when they got this idea.

Yeah. You have to be able to deliver, right? You have to have the skill set. You have to be able to perform whatever tasks are necessary to do the kind of work you are trying to market, whatever it is you want people to pay you for. Surely, you have to be able to do that thing very well. But, ultimately, they have to find you first. Things are a little bit different now. We had the internet then, obviously, but the way people connect, like social media, was definitely not a thing back then. Networking was much more, at the time, an offline activity than it is these days perhaps. I would absolutely agree that networking was a huge part of why I was able to get the business off the ground. Really,

it's still a big part of it. I still have routine activities built into my business. For example, we always follow up with clients after a project to get testimonials. Social groups are so important — you can use that in so many different ways. I send out an email on a quarterly basis asking for referrals from clients. I travel to New York a few times a year to have lunch and meet with people that I've known for years and years now to keep those relationships strong. I send out gifts around the holidays. I make phone calls. A lot of business still continues to come from some of those very early clients and even some co-workers, people that I once worked with who are still in the industry.

That's so cool.

Yeah, they still send me stuff. I think the reason it's so powerful, that networking plays such a role in most people's business journeys is that what's more powerful than having an individual you know and trust recommend you to someone that they really liked?

Exactly. I love that you just gave us a massive download of cool things to go and do. That was amazing. Are there other things now that you are maybe more focused online that help you grow your business, obviously since social media and what-not have taken off?

In addition to the networking which I still do, I started to do article marketing. There is basically nurturing the industry connections and getting that, but also wanting to connect directly with my clients, with the authors and writers. I would publish articles in places like *Writer's Digest*, *The Writer Magazine*, and things like that. I do a little bit less of that now. These days, instead of trying to publish in magazines, the emphasis had shifted on other people's blogs. Doing guest posting has become part of our strategy and that often drives people to our website because they read the article and they really like it so they come and check us out. I do a lot of speaking as well at writers' conferences. That's a live thing but there is an online component because sometimes, those organizations have webinars for their memberships. I've done a lot of webinars for writers' groups online. All these different groups use social media to promote their events. Whatever activity

that I do with my social media platforms to help promote an event that I'm a part of helps raise visibility a little bit and it connects me to new people there, too.

It's so interesting to listen the different things you do to help grow your business, but I feel I have to ask you this question. What would be your top tip or piece of advice for people who are looking to write their own book?

As far as growing a business or just writing a book in general?

Using a book to grow your business.

I think we talked a lot about it the last time so I'm not going to repeat that too much, just the nutshell version of that. I hope you guys who are listening will go back and listen to that 10-minute master class because it was really info-packed. When you're writing a book with the intention of using that book to grow your business, it's really important to write the right book, and also to publish it at the right time. By that, I mean just because there's something you want to say or maybe there's some information that you think is what you want to put out there, it may not be as well-aligned with your business goals as you think. Sometimes, the thing you want to do isn't necessarily the idea that's going to get you where you want to go. Being really strategic about that is very important. The second piece—the timing—is also really important. There seems to be—in the online world, especially—this growing idea that when you want to launch a business, you have to launch a book and that somehow launching a business and launching a book go hand-in-hand. While you definitely can do that, I think most people don't realize when they hear success stories from people who have done something similar, they're usually actually people who already had a business, already had a mailing list and a following and they're using the book to shift their business and pivot into something new. That's very different from starting from scratch. It's very hard to write a book when, for example, you don't have any client stories. If you have a brand-new business and you haven't actually been serving clients and doing whatever it is that you want to be doing out in the world, you can't really pull from your own experience and showcase that in the book, which of course is a major reason why books can be such an important part of

growing your business because they showcase your expertise and your experience. You have to have expertise and experience to showcase first.

Yeah, definitely. Obviously, you're the star of the show so let's get back to your story. Along your entrepreneurial journey, have there been moments that were difficult to deal with, anything that you didn't expect to happen?

Yeah. Gosh, I think one of the earliest lessons I learned that was very unexpected — looking back, it seems like such a common advice now— I didn't realize that learning to say no was going to be such a crucial skill. When you're first starting out, you're saying yes to everything. You're trying to make the rent, so to speak. I was no different. I found myself a few years in exhausted and overbooked, which isn't a bad problem to have necessarily because you've got business, of course. But it wasn't so good to be so stressed. Even though I loved what I did, I wasn't loving doing it anymore. Why freelance if you don't feel free? That was really an unexpected moment to come to and to understand that the way out of that was to start being more selective and start to draw some boundaries around what it was I really, really wanted to do. The first thing I did was I started to specialise. I made a choice of all the different kinds of books that I had been trained to work on that I really preferred working on prescriptive nonfiction. I said, OK, I'm going to focus on working on prescriptive nonfiction and I'm going to bring somebody on to the team who's going to work on fiction and memoir. It gave me an easy way to start saying no because I drew that line in the sand about categories. Expanding the team in that way, I hired a virtual assistant first. Then, I started working with subcontracting editors to do that fiction and memoir that I no longer wanted to work on. It really completely changed how I was thinking about where my business would go and what kinds of things I can do.

That's so interesting to hear behind the scenes of how you did that. I think a lot of people suffer from the whole overwhelm because they say yes far too much. A lot of people don't really know how to get their way out of

that situation because they're afraid to say no. I love how you expanded your team and the business and cater to the change you needed to make.

Yeah, I think there are probably a lot of ways to address that. For me, it just seemed to make sense to specialise and go deep. I could have very easily stayed by myself and say I only work on nonfiction. I didn't necessarily have to grow the team, but I liked the idea. I liked the idea of building something that's a little bigger than myself. I liked the idea being able to serve my clients who are writing different kinds of books. Self-publishing has become more and more popular. We're seeing a lot more of that — people who don't feel hemmed in to one particular category so they're being more exploratory and writing different kinds of books. Having a team allows me to continue to serve those people even though what they're writing might change. It's been really interesting.

Obviously, you have created such a successful business. What does your life look like now?

In what way?

In terms of what it's like to be an entrepreneur, what it's like to be you in your life right now, how your days look.

Gosh, how my days look is always changing. I'm very much a productivity geek so I'm always looking at new ways to structure my schedule and experiment with different things. What I've been doing very recently that I think I'm going to stick for awhile because it feels really good to me and that's when I get up in the morning, I've been giving myself a little bit of time to read in bed before I get up. It's one of my favourite times of the day. I'm definitely not someone I would consider a morning person. I also have lots of cats who I love very much. They like to snuggle in bed with me. I'm trying to start off the day with a little bit of personal joy and just spend a little bit of time in bed reading with the kitties. I also found as a nice side effect is that it gets my brain going in a really creative way that I didn't expect when I'm reading something really good, whether it's a novel or a business book of some kind. It's giving a whole new energy to the beginning of my day that I really like. The rest of the day, I have an office here in my

house. I work from home. I try to schedule lunches and occasional outings with other people that I know who are self-employed. I get some company sometimes. I go out there and talk to people. Mostly, it's just me in the house and speaking to clients. I do a lot of sales calls — sometimes, through Skype; sometimes, just by phone. I work with clients all over the world. Technology is amazing. You can be on a video call with someone on the other side of the planet and be face-to-face. It's not exactly the same as being in person, but when you're working on a project together, it's still nice to be able to see their faces. It's been a really nice evolution. I try very hard to keep a normal schedule. I know some people enjoy working at all hours. I don't have children so I'm not restricted by a school calendar. I can work a normal 9-5. My husband has a regular job so I also try to keep to his calendar in the sense that when he has days off, I can take those days off, too, so we can spend time together.

That's a really good discipline to have as an entrepreneur. Otherwise, there's a tendency to just want to work and work and work and think you can't take time off.

Yeah, absolutely. I have definitely fallen into those periods. I think it's something you have to be constantly vigilant because when you run your own business, it's also more than just work. I think some people don't understand when they are not self-employed, they can leave their work at the office and they come home. For us, it's not just about "I have this deadline for this project." It's also about "I'm working on something really exciting that I want to develop for my business." I may be perfectly happy spending a Friday night doing just that. If I am on my own for the weekend, I very well might spend the weekend on the computer writing new content or working on a new presentation or doing something that's for the business, but it's also really creative and fun and engaging for me.

Yeah, I love doing that stuff, too. It makes such a difference, doesn't it?

Yeah.

To close out your amazing movie, let's end with a profound statement or maybe just the biggest lesson you've ever learned in business.

I think the most important lesson I've learned is —it sounds really negative but I don't mean it in a negative way— that we are our own worst enemies. Human psychology is a very funny thing. I've learned that a lot of the problems that people struggle with in business and even in life are problems we create for ourselves sometimes, consciously; sometimes, unconsciously. Sometimes, it's emotional; sometimes, it's something manifesting in the real world. Learning to be more aware and more conscious of how we self-sabotage, ways that we allow fear to stop us from taking necessary risks, expanding our boundaries, trying new things or learning new skills. It's a constant struggle, but once you become aware of it, you have a lot more success.

What are some of the things that have helped you to overcome that stuff?

I've read a lot of really great books. The one I read recently that I continue to go back to is *The Big Leap* by Gay Hendricks. It's become a real favourite of mine. That talks a lot about mindset — that idea that we're all humans so we have some common ground no matter what we're doing or what our background is. We all operate in the same way at a basic level. That book really taught me to recognise certain fear-based reactions that, if you learn to recognise them, become positive signs instead of red flags. You start to realise when you're feeling that way, it's because things are changing. It's because something exciting is about to happen and you're about to break through to something new, which your brain interprets as being scary and that's why you feel fear. But it's actually a really good sign because it means you're about to break through into something awesome.

That's literally how I spend my entrepreneurial life. "Carrie, the reason you're feeling this is because you're on the edge of a breakthrough. Just keep going. Just keep going."

Exactly. It's counterintuitive but once you learn it, you get in that habit of recognising those reactions. It's a funny quest.

We have to honour the process of being an entrepreneur, don't we? There are ups and there are downs. There are a lot of moments of uncertainty and you just have to go with it, enjoy it, and see it as one big adventure.

Self-sabotage is probably one of the biggest challenges. Some people would answer finding new clients, making money, finding better clients or what-have-you. I think almost any problem you can identify that business people have in common ultimately will come back to that same idea of fighting against ourselves.

Exactly. When people say "My biggest challenge is time or money," there's a quote by Viktor Frankl that said "Everything in life can be taken away from you except your freedom to choose how you respond." I think that's so empowering. Even when you're saying "I don't have the time," what you're really saying is "I am not making the time and I'm choosing to let this block me." Instead of "You know what? I'm going to figure this out because I'm going to make this happen." You're in that mindset to succeed and achieve something. It makes such a difference. Nothing is really stopping us other than ourselves and how we respond to the obstacles we find surrounding us.

Yeah. I think some people misinterpret that to mean that it's easy, and it's not. Sometimes, making a choice can be a very, very difficult thing. It can be the hardest thing — making a choice that you know you need to make. You have no time and you have to make choice between activities. Or you have to restructure your life in some way. You might have to give something up. You might have to make sacrifices. It is still ultimately a choice and that means it is still ultimately under your control.

Definitely. Ally, it's been so good chatting with you. I'm so happy we had you on to hear all about the behind-the-scenes of building your business. Thank you so much for coming and sharing all that with us.

Oh my gosh, thank you for having me. I hope it was helpful for everybody.

It definitely was. On a very, very exciting note, if you would like to be in with a chance of winning The Way of the SEAL, which is a book. It was a best-seller you collaborated on, isn't it?

Yes, it was a national best-seller.

How exciting! Can you tell us a little bit about what it is?

The Way of the SEAL is a collaboration with a Navy SEAL commander Mark Divine who is an absolute expert in helping human beings achieve their full potential. The subtitle was *Think Like an Elite Warrior to Lead and Succeed*. That's very much what the book is about. We distilled 8 principles based on Navy SEAL training and also Mark's experience as an entrepreneur. He's been a very successful businessman as well. We took those 8 principles and translated them for a leadership/business audience. Things like goal-setting, how to remain focused and basically, so you can learn to think like a Navy SEAL and take charge of your destiny at work, at home and life, in general.

I love it. If you want to be in with a chance of winning, all you have to do is head over to the website, go to this podcast episode, leave a comment and let us know with your biggest take-away has been from this episode. We'll be picking a winner. Ally, thank you so much for putting that as part of the giveaway.

Absolutely and my pleasure.

This has been so much fun that. I really hope you have enjoyed listening and I will see you soon for another episode of She Means Business.

