

Saskia Epstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Saskia Epstein, Senior Vice President Client and Community Relations at PNC Bank in New England, alongside my co-host Carolyn Jones, Market President and Publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Saskia. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently. Our guest today is Colette Phillips, the CEO of Colette Phillips Communications.

Saskia Epstein:

Colette, welcome is so great to have you with us today.

Colette Phillips:

And I'm excited to join two of my favorite women leaders in this Bean Town.

Saskia Epstein:

We have a lot to touch on, but let's begin with your journey starting your company, Colette Phillips Global Communications. That was in 1986 when few women were starting businesses, let alone women of color. Tell us about that.

Colette Phillips:

Oh my goodness. I had people try to talk me out of doing this, not because they didn't think that a black woman should start a business, but because Boston was a very different city than it is today. And just the struggles of starting a business, and in particular, I check a lot of boxes. I'm an immigrant, I'm a woman of color, and I'm female. So it's like that was... But then I come from a culture and parents who were both successful entrepreneurs on the island of Antigua. So for me, struggle was not a deterrent. I felt that very much like the quote of Frederick Douglass, "If there is no struggle, there's no progress." And I feel I am a person who always sees the glass as being half full as opposed to half empty.

And I believe that there is always good people around. And I was blessed that I did have some very good people who were supportive and helpful. And that journey I will not say was easy, but it was worth it. And when you have a vision and a passion, and I was very much focused on being very mission driven, that I would only work for companies and organization whose values were aligned with my own and whose products and services were ones that I could feel really proud to represent and to tout. So that to me was easy.

Carolyn Jones:

Colette, you've always been that proponent and leader in doing good is good for business and good for the bottom line, which you've proven true, and plus even the relationships that you've built. But you've done so much more. And in looking at the screen behind you, you started another journey by launching Get Konnected!, and that impact and the reach of Get Konnected! continues to grow and you continue to innovate. So can you talk a little bit about that and the inspiration behind starting Get Konnected!?

Colette Phillips:

It's been 15 years. If you remember, 2008 was the last year of George W. Bush being in office, and the economy was literally in the tank. People were being laid off. It was a really tough time. And I also had just realized that I was going to a lot of events because I am a chronic networker, but strategically not everything all the time, just really strategic in my networking.

And one of the things I observed as I would be at events, whether it was the Chamber or other organization, New England Council or any of these, I noticed that there was a dearth of people of color. And I'm like, "I know a lot of high achieving, high accomplished people of color. Why aren't they in the room?" And they weren't on anybody's either radar, in their database, or back in the day we would say in their rolodexes, but they were in mine. And I said, "Wow, if I could create an event in 2000." And this is how my mind worked, and I thank my father for that. My father always said, "If you're going to complain about something, you better have a solution because when you complain, it's a whine." Nobody listens. But if you complain and say, "By the way, I want to help to solve this problem, and here is my idea."

So in 2000 I realized that there wasn't a directory in Boston. This was pre internet, where people of color, if you got dropped into Boston and you're a black woman, you needed a place to go to get your hair done. There were no salons on Newberry Street at the time that served black women. They were all in Roxbury, or Dorchester, Mattapan. But how do you get there and how do you know what organizations are good and what are not?

So I decided what I was going to do is put together the first ever multicultural directory that I am willing to say in the country. There were Latino yellow pages, the Asian directory, the Black book, but there was nothing that sort of brought all these groups together in one place, a repository. And I at the time, was able to go to Verizon, which was then New England Bell, because one of my mentors and friends, Wayne Budd was the president. So I called up Wayne and I said, "I have an idea for you that I would like your support on. Can I come in and meet with you?" And he said, yes.

So he brought in his chief of staff. I had my little presentation and I said, "Look, everybody needs the phone to make a call, to interact, to connect. I'm putting together a directory that covers a wide range of people from all cultural backgrounds, listing organizations, listing where to go for personal care, where to go to get your license, where to go to get to register to vote, places you can go to run, to play golf, if you're not a member of a club for free like Franklin Park and other places." And so I put this directory together by sections. And I said, "I would love Bell," now Verizon, "to be a corporate underwriter for this."

Saskia Epstein:

I feel like we should do a little service interruption to share with our younger listeners that people used to look up information in what was called a phone book.

Colette Phillips:

Not Google. There was no Google, and Bing, and Yahoo, any of the [inaudible 00:08:21] search engines.

Saskia Epstein:

That's right. So the idea of a printed, or even a-

Colette Phillips:

Directory.

Saskia Epstein:

... Digital directory, right? It's a novel idea-

Colette Phillips:

It's novel idea. [inaudible 00:08:29].

Saskia Epstein:

... back then.

Colette Phillips:

Let me see. I can show you guys because I'm now getting ready to turn it into a digital-

Saskia Epstein:

To describe what Colette is showing us right now would be a feat.

Colette Phillips:

Yes. Exactly.

Saskia Epstein:

Many, many pages. That was an early iteration of what we now sort of know is this very robust network, Get Connected! and the GK Fund, which we'll talk about a little bit later.

So it's not surprising. This is something that you were doing long before there were social media influencers and long before you had the opportunity to ignite a network online in minutes.

Colette Phillips:

Right.

Saskia Epstein:

So it's not surprising that the Boston Business Journal named you to its Power 50 list as a movement maker. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about your work and the mission that has called you. You've touched on it a little bit. In the broader context, what is it that you are after? What's the change that you are seeking to make? And how can you inspire others to do the same?

Colette Phillips:

Great question, Saskia. I didn't set out to be a movement maker, but what I am is someone who always strive to make a difference. In the Jewish faith, there is a principle called tikkun olam, repairing the world. And I believe very strongly that we are all here to live a life of purpose. And so I live my life with what I call the peace, passion, purpose, positivity, and to really kind of move the dial in the right way. And for me, I wanted to make a difference and decided that the way to do that is to get involved.

I think young people tend to think if they're on social media and you've got a thousand people following you, or you hooked up with 500 people on LinkedIn, that you are an influencer and you are connected. No, you are not. You don't even know half of those people really. And until you have had a real life sit down, face-to-face connection with another person, you haven't made a connection. You have made a

connection virtually and superficially, but you don't know if that person is catfishing you. That person could be in Walpole, they could be in Sing Sing, they could be anywhere. Now the prisoners have computers. They could put up a profile.

So you need to know, get to know people. And there is a saying that people do business with people they know, people they like, people they trust, and people who they feel can add value. And so for me, I think that helping younger people connect with each other, get to know each other, helping companies to understanding that they can diversify their workplace and engage their employees at the same time, and also learn something.

The principle of the three stools that hold Get Konnected! together is one, networking, bringing people together cross-culturally, regardless of your cultural background, black, white, Latino, Asian, straight, gay, middle of the road, right wing, left wing, doesn't matter. The whole idea is when people get to know each other, they realize that there is more in common, they have more in common that brings them together than separates them. And so Get Konnected! was purposefully designed to do that. And then we always have a programmatic aspect to it so that people who come learn something, they learn something new, they get to hear from somebody, a thought leader on a subject matter that they probably didn't know about and wanted to hear more from. And they also get to meet people that you just don't walk down the street and run into them.

And then the third stool for people who are serious about retaining and attracting talent that's diverse. Here's a venue you can send your employees so that they don't feel like, "Oh my goodness, I am this lone wolf in this big company and there are so few of us." They can connect with like-minded people. And then if you have your recruiters, because I've known that HR people come to the Get Konnected! so they can interact and meet people.

And so those are the three stools. And it contributes to making Boston a more inclusive and welcoming city because I got tired of hearing, when I tell people I'm from Boston, they looked at me like I have three heads, "Oh, that's city [inaudible 00:14:21]." and I felt if we could begin to change the image of Boston by creating a venue where everybody felt like they belonged, no matter what they looked like, or where they came from, or what position they held in a company, that to me would create a new vision and a new way to see Boston through a different lens. So that was what my impetus was, and that was for me creating a movement. We now have a database of over 30,000 people.

And in addition to that, the other problem I noticed and through Get Konnected! was there were many lists that were being created. And I would look at those lists and see the same people over and over and over. And I would say, "ell, what about, we are a city that's over 50% people of color. We can't just have five people of color on this list. I know at least a hundred people who are doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists. Why aren't they on the list?" And so rather than accuse people, or attack them, or criticize them, I thought, well, I'm going to create a list of the 100 most influential people of color in Boston so that it eliminates people saying, "We can't find anybody. We don't know where to go." Here they are.

Carolyn Jones:

Colette, to follow that, what advice would you share with C-Suite executives who are leading companies in the current environment? We're all interconnected in some way. So what lessons translate?

Colette Phillips:

My advice is something that I give to my CEOs and C-suite executives that I interact with. I call it the 4 Ls. Lean in, listen, learn, and lead from behind, particularly if you are a white male or a white person. The last thing anybody needs is to feel there is some maternalistic or paternalistic approach. If you listen and

you learn, and you allow diverse voices to guide you through your decision-making processes, you are going to come out on the right end of the solution. Because the people who are most impacted, whether it's gender equity, whether it's women, or it's people of color, or it's people of different abilities, they're going to tell you what they need, and they're going to tell you exactly what you need to do to make it happen. And so sometimes as a leader, what I say to C-Suite executives, "This is not about being ego-driven. And this is not about recognizing that you're not a good leader. A good leader is willing to listen and learn, and that's how you grow." So that would be my advice to C-suite executives

Saskia Epstein:

The last few years have impacted our businesses and community in so many ways. How have these challenges influenced or shifted how you look at things?

Colette Phillips:

Wow. Well, one of the things that I would say that I have begun to do is really what I call legacy thinking. And I encourage people, particularly those of us who have reached the ripe old age of 50 plus, to really begin to think about what is your legacy going to be? If you were to depart this world at this moment, what would people say about you? How did you make a difference?

And one of the things that I really wanted to be cognizant of is am I leaving a path to help other young entrepreneurs who look like me, who are women, who are people of color, who want to start a business? And I created during the pandemic, recognizing that we were in danger of losing another generation of black and brown, and Asian, and women entrepreneurs because some of them were in accelerator programs, and they're now graduating, and nobody wants to invest because everybody's a little skeptical pre post pandemic.

And so I decided to launch a fund, and the idea is that I could have said, "Well, I don't want to do this till I have 5 million, till I have 20 million, till I have a million." Well, I reached two 50 and I said, "I know I can get to the next 250, to the next 250, to the next 250. In the meantime, there are people out there who could benefit from this money that I've raised, that I'm raising." And I am proud to say that we launched the GK fund as a 501(c)(3). I wasn't doing it as a VC fund so that I could become the next Bane, but how can I help other companies? Maybe I should think about that. Become the black Bane.

Saskia Epstein:

There you go.

Colette Phillips:

So that's what I did. And I am proud to say that PNC have been there standing in the breach with us. They were one of the first corporations to really make a hefty five figure contribution to the first 250. And in 18 months, we have given \$180,000 to 18 entrepreneurs. So if you look at it, we have sort of given money to almost an entrepreneur a month. We have had three grant cohorts. And now we are out trying to grow the fund even more.

And the focus of this is not just startup companies in the tech space, but there are companies that are in the traditional business model. One of our entrepreneurs that we gave a \$10,000 grant to was a mother-daughter partnership that started a grocery store, an African grocery store in Randolph, because they noticed lots of Africans live there, but they couldn't get the food that they're used to and like at their local supermarket. So they created their own supermarket grocery store. And the GK fund believed in their mission and funded them.

Saskia Epstein:

Colette, what's next for the GK fund, Get Konneted!, Colette Phillips Communications? You have a lot of balls in the air.

Colette Phillips:

I do.

Saskia Epstein:

You seem to be at the cutting edge of every major trend or movement. You are helping to shape Boston. What does the future look like for our city?

Colette Phillips:

Well, I think the future looks very bright. If you look at the people who are in positions. And I'll tell you something, I feel like a proud mama because I look at somebody like Segun Idowu, who is our Chief of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion for the city of Boston, was another person that I picked out as the 25 top millennial. Sophia Hall, who is at the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Social Justice was another one. She's now the number two person at the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights. John Borders IV is now the head of tourism for the city of Boston. So when you look at these young people, many of whom are under 40, making great strides, these weren't people I saw 25 years ago when I was in my thirties and early forties. They are now the leaders. And I see that as a really good thing for our city. We have had in the last 18 months, two mayors of color, first black mayor appointed, and the second mayor of color Asian American elected. And that to me is a signal and a sign of how Boston has changed.

And the Boston business community, think about it. I just did a list recently of the most influential men of color, the Head of Children's Hospital, a man of color, the head of Brigham and Women's, one of the largest hospitals in the region and the country, a man of color. Converse was just recently, he has moved now up the ladder to Nike, Nike has pulled him out to San Francisco, Scott Uzzell, a black man, was the head of one of the largest and oldest athletic wear and footwear companies in the world, Converse. And you think about the people who are in positions, the CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank is a black woman. And you have Vertex, Asian American woman, Takeda, the largest employer in the Commonwealth, an Asian woman. So this is the new Boston, and I am so excited.

And I mean, you look at somebody like even Saskia who is under 50 and is a-

Saskia Epstein:

Only for Colette, I hate to disappoint you, but by the time this podcast airs, that may not be true anymore. I think what you're saying is-

Carolyn Jones:

She didn't say I was under 50. I'm not.

Saskia Epstein:

It was something we're all hoping for and we're here for it, that the changing demographic and the landscape.

We'd like to talk a little bit more about your leadership, and your experience as a leader, and what shaped you. What is the best advice that you've been given from some of the mentors that you've had

along the way? What's your best advice for the next generation of under 50, let's say, leaders as they're coming up, and those of us who might be over that line as well?

Colette Phillips:

I would say one of the best advice that I've gotten, because I think in some ways I have always felt like I have to do things for myself and by myself. And one of my mentors said to me once, there are lots of people that are waiting to support and help you. Don't be afraid to ask. People love to be asked for their advice, for their help, for their wisdom. And it's such an easy thing to be able to pick up the phone, to be able to shoot an email.

And I would say to young people, one of the things, and I have had this conversation off podcast with Saskia, that young people, they want to have what they refer to as agency. They want to be in control. But I want to say to them, "You don't know everything and you don't know what you don't know." And you still need to have the guidance, the insight, and the input from people who are older and wiser, and who can help you navigate the turbulent waters because we've been there, done that. And you don't have to repeat the same patterns that I did, or somebody who is in my age group or older did. We have sort of cut a path and we can help you get there and avoid those. So just be willing to, no one wants to take your agency. We want you to succeed. And you should look to your wise councils, your sages. I tell people all the time, "I'm not aging. I'm saging."

Saskia Epstein:

Hear hear. I like that.

Carolyn Jones:

Colette, you have so much insight, and I understand that you're working on a book that really shares your advice and insight for inclusion in the community. Tell us about it.

Colette Phillips:

It's called The Includers, the Seven Trait of Culturally Savvy, Anti-racist Leaders. And people who are culturally savvy and anti-racist leaders have certain traits. And it just happens that those traits begin with a C like Colette. They have character, they have courage, they have cultural intelligence, they have conviction, they have commitment. They know collaboration is very important. You can't do it alone, as I mentioned. And the seventh is communications. You have to be able to interact across cultural lines, across gender lines, across sexual identity and orientation, and religious lines. So communication is vital. So that book is going to come out. And I am going to say that I'm going to work hard to make it a bestseller.

Carolyn Jones:

Can't wait. That's exciting.

Saskia Epstein:

Congratulations.

Colette Phillips:

Thank you.

Saskia Epstein:

We like to close each episode with some rapid fire questions. So off the top of your head, you're involved in so many things with your businesses, plural. What do you do for fun?

Colette Phillips:

What I do for fun is I escape. I go to the Caribbean, or I go lock myself in a nice spa and take care of my body, and mind, and spirit.

Saskia Epstein:

That sounds nice. Carolyn and I are nodding in agreement. Take us with you.

What's something that people might not know about you?

Colette Phillips:

Oh my goodness. Believe it or not, I'm a loner and I am very comfortable being by myself. And to be honest with you, people don't believe I can be extremely shy.

Saskia Epstein:

Really? Wow.

Carolyn Jones:

I get that. Totally. I get that.

Saskia Epstein:

Well, Colette, when you're alone, you might be reading or watching, what's on your list?

Colette Phillips:

Well, I have to say that I am a binge watcher of, because so much of my life is so serious. I love Bridgerton, Succession, the Lincoln Lawyer, the Beauty Queen of Jerusalem, and I am just a big... I just saw a movie called, from Denmark, Sleeping Dog, and brilliant thriller. I love Thriller. And I just went to see Indiana Jones, not the best one.

Saskia Epstein:

That's great. That's a pretty diverse watch list. I'd love to see your algorithm.

Colette, this might be a hard question. What's been a best moment in Boston for you?

Colette Phillips:

Ooh. I would say there are a couple of best moments. One of my very best was Nelson Mandela's 1990 visit to Boston that I had the honor of working on. And there were 350,000 people on the Esplanade, not one negative incident.

Saskia Epstein:

Oh, it was incredible, incredible.

Colette Phillips:

That to me was one of my best moments. And I would say perhaps the all inclusive Boston campaign, being able to sort of put and see all the things, the vision that I have had and held for Boston come to life on the big screen, on posters, and all over to me is just a beautiful thing.

Saskia Epstein:

What is your wish for Boston?

Colette Phillips:

Oh, my wish for Boston is that we can get past that old image that people have held for so long. Rodney King, the late Rodney King from the nineties. Can we just all get along? Can we just all get along?

Saskia Epstein:

And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Colette, and for sharing your insights. It was wonderful to have you here.

Colette Phillips:

And it was wonderful to be with two of my favorite women in the city of Boston.

Carolyn Jones:

You're amazing. This was fabulous.

Saskia Epstein:

I'm Saskia Epstein.

Carolyn Jones:

And I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. Our guest today was Colette Phillips, CEO of Colette Phillips Communications.

Saskia Epstein:

You can find PNC C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston or on any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.