Masters of Scale Episode Transcript: Nancy Lublin

> **NANCY LUBLIN:** I went to see Ibsen's, A Doll's House, at the theater. 10th row center sitting to my left. Donald Trump. Sitting to his left some skinny blond I didn't recognize. And he's eating Milk Duds, like shoving them in his mouth. Fistful at a time and I look at him and I'm like, do you need to own the company or are those available in the lobby, and he says all Haw-Haw grabs the box from the skinny woman him and hands them to me because I don't think she's anything but tofu and water. And and so I eat the Milk Duds and we strike up a conversation and he says so what do you do.

REID HOFFMAN: That's Nancy Lublin. And what does she do? She builds non-profits the way Donald Trump builds skyscrapers. Her organizations are huge, tremendous, big-league stuff. Believe me.

When Nancy accidentally sat next to Trump in that theater, she had just launched her first non-profit, Dress for Success. The organization started as a clothing drive to help women on welfare dress for job interviews. She collected pantsuits, pearls, pumps. You name it, Nancy had it piling up in her tiny apartment. She figured Trump might have a spare storage room somewhere in his real estate empire. So she started pitching.

> **LUBLIN:** I talk about Dress for Success and how amazing it is. And he says, "Oh really? Do you enjoy it? And I was like, "Yes it's pretty amazing helping women like move from welfare to work." And he says, "Really it's not boring?" And I'm like, "No it's not boring." So I said to him, "So what do you do?" And he says, "No one ever asked me that before." And I said, "Well, what do you do? How would you describe it?" And he said, "I guess I'm a builder. I build things." And I said, "Oh, do you like it?" I mean like I gave it right back to him.

HOFFMAN: They're off to a rocky start. No matter. Nancy keeps pushing.

> **LUBLIN:** I call a friend and say you got to give me the name of his personal assistant. She says it's Norma Foerderer or who was famously his assistant for decades. I go to Blockbuster — again this is a long time ago — And [buy?] like a giant box of Milk Duds and I get in a cab and I say, take me to Trump Tower
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> Now I'm on the 26 floor and I look around it's all gold and glass and mirrors. Through the gold and glass and mirrors I see the skinny blond from the night before the theater and I waved my arms. She comes over. She's like, the woman from the theater. What are you doing here? And I said look I will give him a box of Milk Duds a week for the rest of his life if you can just find me like 500 square feet of space because everything's in my apartment. She says he's broke. And look around. I'm like I see times are rough and I shake her hand I say, OK well thank you so much.

HOFFMAN: You have to love this about Nancy: She doesn't give up easily.

> **LUBLIN:** Now again I'm an entrepreneur. I am bitten by that bug. I don't give up there. So I'm doing like Fox breakfast TV the next week and I look over and the woman sitting next to me and I recognize her and I say "Are you Liz Smith, the gossip columnist?" She says, "I am." I say you know I have a story you might be a interested in and I told the story. And that Sunday she writes it up in The New York Post and it runs in her column nationally and she tells it on TV. And so Monday morning I take that New York Post and I go to Trump Tower and I say to security please tell Norma Foerderer that Nancy Lublin is downstairs. And I go up and Norma Foerderer says it's good to see you. We saw it he saw. He thinks it's very funny but we have nothing for you.
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> So the ending of the story is I've got the most beautiful rejection letter I've ever seen in my entire freakin life. Like on Trump Tower gold embossed letterhead. As I've said before to you I could scrape off that logo and make fillings for everyone I know. I mean that the logo is like a quarter of an inch off the page. Beautiful, telling me that he had no money and sorry. And sorry, best of luck. I was working on something that P.S. is now in 120 cities around the world so like it would have been a safe bet to give me five hundred bucks. Instead, I've got a story that I tell everywhere.

HOFFMAN: The story isn't simply that you can't take "no" for an answer. Anyone can do that. And frankly, if you get too pushy, you're more likely to get a restraining order than an investor.

The real story is about the power of persistence AND a good Plan B. Or rather, Plans B. Just consider Nancy's multi-channeled charm offensive. She deploys jokes, multiple boxes of Milk Duds, letters, surprise visits, and a New York gossip columnist. This is what we call grit. And GRIT is every entrepreneur's trump card.

[**THEME MUSIC]**

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, investor at Greylock and your host. I believe successful entrepreneurs need ideas, money, good timing and a hefty dose of luck. But none of those matter if you don't have GRIT.

Some people mistake grit for sheer persistence. Charging up the same hill, again and again. But that's not quite what I mean by the word "grit." The sort of grit you need to scale a business is less reliant on brute force. It's actually one part determination, one part ingenuity, and one part laziness. Yes, laziness.

You want to conserve your energy. You want to minimize friction and find the most effective, most efficient way forward. You might actually have more grit if you treat your energy as a precious commodity. So forget the tired cliche of running a marathon. You want to be more like Indiana Jones, somersaulting under blades, racing a few steps ahead of a rolling boulder and

swinging your whip until you reach your holy grail.

If you ask me, Nancy Lublin is the entrepreneurial equivalent of Indiana Jones. I wanted to talk to her for this episode because she is a 10 out of 10 when it comes to grit. And she also does her work in the not-for-profit sector, which has even more landmines than the commercial world. Capital is harder to come by, talent is harder to recruit, and our overall society — at least here in the U.S. — broadly rewards commercial people more than they reward non-profit people.

Before we get to our guests — the entrepreneurs who put the “grr” in the word grit — I’d like to open, a bit uncharacteristically, with a quote from the Bible.

> “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, or bread to the wise, or riches to the discerning, or favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.”

Time and chance happen to us all — except Nancy Lublin. Time and chance don’t happen to Nancy. Grit happens. And once this quality kicks in, she’s unstoppable. Get her thinking about some social problem, and she gets restless. She can’t tolerate it. Take, for instance, her not-for-profit, Dress for Success. You’ll recall, she wanted to help women on welfare enter the workforce in style. Entertainingly, Nancy never cared much for fashion. If anything, she finds it ludicrous.

> **LUBLIN:** My father growing up was a lawyer and he used to tell me that when he was hiring secretaries he'd look out the window and watch them go from the car to the building and then he'd know before they reached the building whether or not he'd hire them. So I thought was the worst thing I had ever heard. I was like that's you just described discrimination to me. That's horrible. And he said and it's the truth so go comb your hair. And so I mean I just knew that the world works this way we discriminate based on a first look on everybody. And so-that's where Dress for Success came from.

HOFFMAN: So Nancy has just identified a huge problem. Employers judge job applicants— especially women — based on their physical appearance. She might have valiantly struggled for fairer hiring practices. But that’s a struggle for activists — the sort of people who can tolerate an incremental battle with history and human nature.

But Nancy wants a solution now. She can’t change the way bosses think overnight. But she can level the playing field by giving women access to professional clothing. She has an idea. She has $5000 in seed money from her grandfather’s estate. And she’s about to get her first unlikely collaborators.

> **LUBLIN:** And so I was in law school I went to my law professor and said hey I have this idea what do you think. And he sent me to Sister Mary Nurni in Spanish Harlem. And then she brought in two others. When I went to meet them for the first time I fully expected them to meet me in like in habit with locked arms singing like the Sound of

Music...and instead they're really cool. They're like kind of like social workers. They're really cool women. The drawback was I took financial advice from them. They told me to put the $5000 into a six month CD in the bank, which meant we start with no money. So like don't take financial advice from people who take an oath of poverty is like the lesson there.

Whenever I have done a startup, the first thing I actually do is call my family and friends. Because you think "They love me, and I love them." That doesn't mean they're going to love your idea.

And the thing about the nuns is I really had no relation to them before. But they knew fucktons about moving people from welfare to work. They knew exactly what was going on in New York City and how to make this happen and how to get it started. They were they were actually the exact right people to start this with.

HOFFMAN: So how did Nancy and three nuns manage to scale this idea worldwide? They didn't have much money. They didn't have connections to wealthy philanthropists. And they certainly didn't have staff. Their only asset was their knowledge of the welfare system. That system included a vast network of government and private agencies dedicated to helping women. Nancy simply built an organization that could tap into this talent network for free.

LUBLIN: The challenge originally was we have these people who are moving from welfare to work. How do you get them into the system without passing a judgment on individuals. And then how do we solve our labor problem in the shop? So we combined that. And what we did was we screened agencies. We would approve domestic violence shelters. We would approve job training programs. We would approve homeless shelters. And then they could send whoever they wanted to the shop. As a barter we required them to send someone to staff the shop one day a month.

So we got free labor and high quality referrals and didn't ever have to pass any judgment on the individual so everybody who came to us was worth dressing because one of our employees essentially had referred them.... And by the way this model of staffing the shop and referring stays today in over 100 locations around the world.

HOFFMAN: Notice what Nancy did not do — she did not try to build an entire system from scratch by herself, which is a trap many entrepreneurs fall into. She looked around her for other sources of energy. Like a tiny jiu jitsu artist, she redirects the energy of stronger, heavier fighters. And this way, she channels the collective strength of the existing welfare system toward realizing this idea with her.

You can think of this technique as a magnificent shortcut. And it's the kind of shortcut Nancy finds again and again. She darts ahead. She finds quick, systemic fixes to big gnarly problems. It's a pattern throughout her story of grit.

And the same quality that helped Nancy navigate the welfare system, worked just as well as she worked her way through New York's upper crust of donors.

> **LUBLIN:** So in the early days of Dress for Success we would do these clothing drives. So women would give us clothes so we would do a clothing drive at like Goldman Sachs when they go corporate casual. And so we get beautiful beautiful suits and like the largest suit would be a size 8 and the average size American is actually 14 and the average size Dress for Success client was a 22. But we always did those suit drives anyway because once you gave us your Armani suits you gave us money.
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> So we would take those suits and we might warehouse them for two years but we were happy to get those suits from those women at Goldman because then they would write us checks because they felt closeness to us because we had that suit that they like interviewed somebody in or that they you know like went on CNBC the first time they were wearing that Armani suit. Now we had it and so it was actually kind of a donor mechanism. It was part of the whole cycle of Dress for Success, of kind of wealthy business women connecting with women who are going to go out and land their first jobs. That was the trick of the trade.

HOFFMAN: Notice how she keeps turning problems -- in this case, piles of useless clothing -- into solutions: a source of funding. It's why I call the best entrepreneurs "infinite learners". The more thorny patches they hit, the more effective they become at hacking their way out. The only problem is that some CEOs — like Nancy — get a bit addicted to problem-solving. If there's no problem to solve, well, they create some.

> **LUBLIN:** I'm a wartime CEO. Once things get good and it's peacetime I get bored and I either want to like do something else wild to it or I'll fuck it up because I'm like no but we can do blah blah blah. And and so I get bored and I move on.

HOFFMAN: This is one of the byproducts of grit. It's a sort of restless energy that eventually compelled Nancy to leave Dress for Success, once it had scaled.

> **LUBLIN:** Have we talked about Scooby-Doo syndrome? Have I talked about this with you?
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> **HOFFMAN:** No.
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> **LUBLIN:** OK so you've seen Scooby-Doo?
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> **HOFFMAN:** Mm-hmm.
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> **LUBLIN:** Every Scooby Doo episode is the same. There is a church or a movie theater

it's going to be torn down to become a strip mall OK. And there's like a zombie or a ghost that's haunting it. And so a mystery team gets called to find the zombie or ghost and Shaggy and Scooby are somehow the ones that always find the zombie or go even though Velma knew it the whole time which is totally weird but whatever.

And they unmask the zombie because it's not a zombie or ghost. It's like the granddaughter of the founder of the movie theater or like the past the janitor of the church. It's the fucking founder, the founder is the zombie or ghost haunting the building it doesn't want to leave. I had no desire to be a Scooby Doo villain. Right. So I leave things I build things and then I move on. I'm not particularly sentimental

HOFFMAN: And clearly you watch a lot of Scooby Doo.

LUBLIN: I mean come on I'm an 80s kid. We all watched a lot of that.

HOFFMAN: So Nancy found a new problem, a nearly bankrupt organization called Do Something dot org. Do Something mobilizes young people to volunteer for worthy causes. Back in 2003, it was nearly defunct.

HOFFMAN: And so what was the state of Do Something when you arrived?

LUBLIN: Bad. It was on fire. Andrew Shue started it when he was on Melrose Place but then he went off air and had three kids in New Jersey, and Do Something fell on really hard times. When I got there they had just laid off 21 out of 22 people. They had lost their office space, and everything was in boxes in storage in Queens. They were $250K in debt and had about $74000 in the bank it was totally totally fucked.

HOFFMAN: Nancy was smitten.

LUBLIN: I thought the name was great. Do Something was great. There was no organization that was cool and fun for young people and it was there needed to be something that made volunteerism and social change fun and energetic and so to me it was like a ficus plant you know like the leaves fall off all the time. But like if the roots are good you can probably bring them back. And I thought this is interesting. I've also just turned 30 and I was getting headhunted for a number of very serious roles.

But what I realized was that the headhunter was only bringing in me to make the headhunter look good, like here's one crazy outside the box candidate. Look we're bringing you a 30 year old entrepreneur. No one was taking me seriously and I wanted to take something that was totally screwed and prove that actually yeah I'm an entrepreneur and I'm also really smart. I think sometimes entrepreneurs are written off as wacky visionaries. You know we we can be more than that. We are systems thinkers.

HOFFMAN: Before long, Nancy got that ficus plant flourishing. The breakthrough moment? When her team identified a crucial shift in technology that made all the difference in reaching their adolescent audience. If you know a teenager, you probably already know: To get their attention:? Text them.

> **LUBLIN:** I think probably the biggest epiphany was the pivot to text. And the best thing that I did was get out of the way. So I was on a conference call and I saw through the glass door people in my office high-fiving each other. and I was like, "What is going on? Why are you all so happy?" And it turns out that two like entry level employees had polled 500 defunct users — like people we hadn't heard from in six months probably email them 20 times and pulled their mobile numbers and text them about a campaign we had done. And in nine minutes I saw a 20 percent response rate. Holy crap.
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> And I was I was smart enough to say "Let's do that." And also I guess I was smart enough to create an environment where entry-level employees felt comfortable experimenting. And like that's what you've got to do as an entrepreneurial CEO is get out of the way sometimes. And then when you see someone do something really smart: Grab it and elevate it, and be like, "Let's do that." And so we pivoted and we became a membership organization and we did everything around text, and grew rapidly thanks to that.

HOFFMAN: Nancy's ability to tap EVERY resource around her — including her entry-level employees — is one of her hidden strengths as a scale leader. Under Nancy's guidance, Do Something adds nearly 5 million teenagers as members. And then she does something truly daring. She hatched an idea for a third not-for-profit called Crisis Text Line. And she goes ahead and launches it, at the same time.

> **LUBLIN:** I don't recommend having two full time jobs.

HOFFMAN: Notice how Nancy doesn't relish holding down two impossibly demanding jobs at once. But you have to understand her motivation. When she sees a problem, she wants to solve it fast. The bigger the problem, the gnarlier the solution, the more she wants to solve it.

Her irrepressible urge to launch Crisis Text Line began with a single text from a single teenager. You see, Do Something sent all its communications by text message. And their volunteers would respond by text as well. Each campaign would unleash a wave of goodwill and cheer, for the most part. But there were always a few teens who replied to these texts, asking for help.

> **LUBLIN:** But there would be a couple of dozen messages out of flow saying things like I'm being bullied. My best friends are addicted to crystal meth. And we would triage them

HOFFMAN: One day, Nancy read a text message that she couldn't stop turning over in her

head. It was in response to a Do Something campaign.

> **LUBLIN:** And then we got a message that put me on this other path, that literally said he won't stop raping me. It's my dad. He told me not to tell anyone. And then the letters R U there. Can you imagine? You're the CEO. Someone brings that and puts it on your desk and says I don't know what to do with this. It's like being punched in the stomach. So horrific. I couldn't believe it was happening to a real human and then … How bad does it have to be to share that, like to be so alone that you share that with an organization like this, and you don't know where it's going. And so we built Crisis Text line really for her.

HOFFMAN: Here we come to the wellspring of grit. You have to have a mission — a calling that's so powerful, it makes you want to run through a minefield, on a foggy day, with your shoelaces tied together.

Nancy envisioned Crisis Text Line as a hotline that would funnel text messages from distressed teens to crisis centers around the country. It would open up a whole new line of communication for teenagers who preferred the convenience and anonymity of writing from their phones. Nancy figured she could earmark some portion of Do Something's budget for the cause. They were averaging $6 million a year in corporate sponsorships. There was just one problem. A service for suicidal teens was not a natural fit for corporate sponsors.

> **LUBLIN:** I went to the board and said I want to do this and you guys I think rightly said, brand confusion with Do Something. Do Something is hope hopeful hopeful happy volunteerism. Crisis Text Line is a different thing. Like we'll give it our blessing. But you've got to do it on the side. And so I did it at the same time for a long time. It was harder than I thought it was going to be. And it was maybe harder than it should have been. The truth is it took me two years to secure the funding to do it. I would dial for dollars.
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> And I found one a friend that was like you'll come into my office every week for an hour and go through my Rolodex, and on the third week I spoke to someone and in five minutes I described it, and he said, "Stop, stop, stop. I'm going to give you $50,000 because someone needs to give you money to see if this will go anywhere. And I may never see you again but it's worth putting this money down. And I want to be anonymous."
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> So I refer to him for a longtime as Mr. X. He's now fine being known. It's actually, it's Peter Blum, who is the board chair of Donors Choose, who has done this. He has made bets on people like that, not expecting any return these early bets on social change ideas. That's awesome. And with that money it became real. I had to really do it. I hired our CTO and our Chief Data scientist, even though I only had $50K so that wasn't going to keep them very long. And so then it meant, shit I really had to find the rest of the money and make this happen.

HOFFMAN: So Nancy, once again, was scaling on a shoestring budget. She figured Crisis Text Line could piggyback on a patchwork of crisis hotlines across the country. She would supply the text messages, the counsellors would supply 24-hour support. It was shaping up to be another one of her clever jiu-jitsu moves, until Nancy found she was channeling their energy to the wrong teens. Crisis counsellors tend to specialize in specific issues, like suicide or sexual abuse or eating disorders. And this led some counsellors to write some rather awkward scripted responses.

> **LUBLIN:** We originally built this thinking we would just be the pipes we would be the technology and we would farm this out to other crisis centers to do the counseling. And we kept growing like fast fast fast and we went from 3 to 11 in like six months crisis centers what we noticed was that they were incredibly diverse. Like one crisis center would ask every single texter are you feeling suicidal today? No. I have a calculus final this afternoon. Should I be feeling suicidal? Like the quality was all over the place wasn't great.
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> So we culled best practices from the platform and said well what if we trained our own people based on what we're seeing. And so we trained this magic 12 cohort and quickly saw that they outperformed on every KPI and pivoted. So we dumped all of the crisis centers who we were paying. So we saved that money. Moved instead to a volunteer model and basically became a marketplace.

HOFFMAN: Nancy has made a hugely risky decision, here. She's scrambling for funding. She's just jettisoned her partnerships with the experienced counsellors who were supposed to help her scale. And if she has any chance of keeping her idea afloat, she has to now train an army of novices in the art of texting with distressed teens.

Fortunately, Nancy has a gift for recruiting and celebrating volunteers. In fact, the greatest shortcut Nancy has ever found — the one she turns to again and again — is the almost bottomless well of human industriousness. What Nancy understands so well is that people love to help. Sometimes all you need to do is ask them.

Nancy is so confident volunteers will answer her call, that she envisions a marketplace for crisis hotline volunteers — much in the way Uber built a marketplace for drivers or Airbnb built a marketplace for home rentals. But how on earth does she match supply and demand? She can't offer surge pricing to volunteers during a spike in teenage need. She can't offer any pricing at all. What she needs is a surge of good will.

It's a bold vision. And there are a handful of other scale leaders who will tell you that this works.

> **GREG BALDWIN**: I think as a rule we tend to underestimate people's hunger and desire to be helpful.

HOFFMAN: That's Greg Baldwin, President of VolunteerMatch. Their website matches millions of volunteers with more than 100,000 organizations that need their help. The most scalable non-profits, he says, start with a plea for help that's ambitious — verging on unreasonable.

> **BALDWIN**: When you know when Habitat for Humanity got started how unreasonable is it to think that you can invite millions of people to help build homes for other people. It's a crazy idea. When you think about it but it took somebody to ask to see how powerful that ask is to bring people into doing something that they think is important.
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> Crisis Text Line is another amazing example of that. It's so unreasonable to think that people would willingly take time out of their busy lives to be on their cell phone texting with kids in crisis. It just it almost doesn't make sense why someone would do that. And certainly you can imagine being reluctant to ask somebody to do that. But what we find so often is it's in those big bold asks, those unreasonable asks, that some of the most amazing things happen.

HOFFMAN: For this episode, we did a flash poll of the VolunteerMatch community — the managers at non-profits who are on the front lines of these crazy requests. We wanted to know just how hard they'll push their volunteers. And how far was too far? So we asked, "Have you ever heard a volunteer say, 'You're asking too much of me?' More than 400 volunteer managers responded. And statistically, speaking, it was a resounding "No."

> **BALDWIN:** Only 11 percent of Volunteer managers have ever heard that, which is fascinating.

HOFFMAN: And then we asked whether they thought they could ask MORE of their volunteers.

> **BALDWIN**: And 70 percent of the users said yes. So the real question is: What's keeping people from making these requests that are you know somewhat outside the norm?

HOFFMAN: It's a good question. And John Lilly, the former CEO of Mozilla, has a theory. Mozilla is an open-source web browser powered almost entirely by volunteers. They do everything from coding to marketing to translation — and John actually believes these volunteers, working for free, can run circles around paid professionals. You just have to know how to work on a sliding scale.

> **JOHN LILLY:** So there are ways for people to contribute an hour a week, to 40 hours a week, or 80 hours a week. And it kind of scales up and down, which most organizations don't know how to do. They know how to have you be an employee or not, so sort of binary. Open source, the successful ones, figure out a way to be on a spectrum. Volunteers is not a homogenous category. It's all sorts of different types.

There's a guy I remember from Ulan Bator, who translated for Firefox into Mongolian. And for him he did it because if he hadn't done that his parents wouldn't, who only spoke Mongolian, wouldn't have been able to understand software to access the Internet. And so for these people they do it as a labor of love. And you know you'll know this since you learned Latin, but like the root of the word amateurs is omma which means I love. And I think that amateurs and volunteers in many ways are more powerful than professionals because they do it for non-monetary. They do it despite all the challenges and all the hard parts.

HOFFMAN: And Nancy is an expert at whipping up that inner omma, that inner love. She starts from the premise that she's not unique in caring. Plenty of other people could care as much as her. She just has to find them. And sell them on her cause.

And if you want to know what true grit sounds like, just listen to her multifaceted approach to recruitment. She sounds a bit like a gold prospector who knows exactly where to pan along the river.

LUBLIN: So recruitment sure. Zeroing in on like who are our best crisis counselors and figuring that out was key and now finding more of them. Turns out that it shifts. LIke post-election, sad liberals are great. We're loving sad liberals. People really want to feel like they're they're having an impact on something and what's better than talking to another stranger in the most dire moments of their life. It's a real impact. Moms of a certain age, love them. Deaf and hard of hearing. Phenomenal. Most organizations don't know what to do with them. Hard to volunteer if you're deaf and hard of hearing. We love you. Veterans. I love veterans, especially when the heat is on and we're spiking. The veterans are like "We got this. We can do it. Let's go."

HOFFMAN: This swell of of volunteers allowed Crisis Text Line to scale quickly and meet the growing — and spiking — demand.

LUBLIN: We've done zero marketing. We've done over 700,000 conversations since launching. That works out to be close to 30 million messages exchanged.

HOFFMAN: But those 30 million messages didn't arrive in a steady stream. They would spike and dip, regardless of how many counsellors were available at the time. So she started triaging the messages through a combination of grunt work and big data.

They had to identify the key words and phrases that teenagers use in times of distress, and then rank those words on a scale from worrying to let's call 911, immediately. They started with the obviously distressing words**.**

LUBLIN: So we originally put into the algorithm words like "die," "suicide" or "overdose."

If you text in those words you're number one in the queue. And then we added a machine learning layer and said well what really ends up in a high risk case. What are the words people use? And it turns out that there are thousands of them that are more high risk than than suicide. Apparently it's 16 times more powerful, not six times more powerful, 16 times more likely to end up calling 911 than the word suicide which I know I've already read this you know but whatever listeners can guess and it's it's actually it's ibuprofen, aspirin, tylenol, advil it's the most common drug in your house.

So you not only have the idea and the plan but you've the means and the timing because it's right in your medicine cabinet. So those words and the unhappy face crying emoji is four times more powerful four times more likely for us to end up calling 911 than the word suicide. The hashtag KMS. Any idea what that stands for? Neither did we. The algorithms discovered that's kill myself. This is a perfect example of science of data, of technology making an organization faster and more accurate.

HOFFMAN: Before long her team was equipped to handle huge influxes of messages. Soon she was detecting waves of anxiety rolling across middle schools nationwide. The data was unprecedented in its scope and timeliness.

LUBLIN: Oh gosh. So the hard thing about marketplaces. So you don't control supply and you don't control demand. Every once in awhile there'll be an unpredictable event. Now if I ran Lyft I can put surge pricing in place and so you can handle that. So unpredictable events for Crisis Text Line are things like Zayn leaving One Direction. And we had just tons of people texting in with serious anxiety.

HOFFMAN: For those listeners who haven't heard of Zayn or One Direction, I'll translate into old fogie terms — Zayn would be Zayn Malik, a British singer for the boy band One Direction. And when he left the band, it was a bit like Justin Timberlake leaving 'NSync or John Lennon leaving the Beatles. It may not sound like a big deal to people of a certain age. But to a lot of teenagers at the time, the news was shattering. Nancy calls the surge of texts following his departure, "the Zayn spike."

LUBLIN: I mean the hashtag "cut for Zayn," trended worldwide for almost three days when Zayn left One Direction. These are girls cutting real skin hoping that he would see this and rejoin One Direction. And that sent real traffic to us. That was rough. The election night. At one point we saw eight times normal traffic mostly LGBTQ texters, children of immigrants and immigrants themselves texting and asking if their family was going to be deported and then sexual assault survivors, including survivors who had been assaulted years ago but also had been assaulted in that 24 hour period saying should I bother with my court case, should I bother going to police. Who's going to believe me now. Feeling triggered by the election of Trump.

HOFFMAN: And how do you build the capacity for that?

LUBLIN: Again as a marketplace.

HOFFMAN: And what's the size of the volunteer number?

LUBLIN: Yeah. That's over 3000. And and they take a lot of time and caring and love and that's actually my primary focus. I mean they are who we are. And can you imagine, they do it all for free like they're giving us time at two o'clock in the morning. They're incredible, incredible people.

HOFFMAN: “They are who we are.” That one sentence sums up the approach to scale that Nancy has taken throughout her career. She identifies the people and organizations who can take her idea forward, and she makes them her own. There’s a lot to be said about sticking with a vision, and adapting it through the years — weathering the rise and fall of luck.

But I don’t want to overstate the power of grit. Ultimately your plans are subject to luck. You may be thinking, I thought grit was my superpower — my opportunity to overcome time and chance. It’s a little more nuanced than that. I like the way Sam Altman, president of the Silicon Valley’s most successful accelerator, Y Combinator, unpacks this problem.

SAM ALTMAN: The way I have always tried to think about it for myself is that luck is a big factor but I'm going to keep working and eventually you know because it's a random variable it's going to swing my way. And I think that's roughly the right mindset to have. If you don’t acknowledge the role of luck at all like I think you're Wrong in a dangerous way where you sort of just are not a great human and you can't look at — I got really lucky at some points — that's probably bad.

But if you're also like well it's all about luck and you know I have no chance. The world is against me and I'm just going to sit here and complain that's not going to work either. So I think the roughly correct mindset is luck is important. But I'm eventually going to get lucky and I'm going to just work really hard until I do

HOFFMAN: That may be the one of the better definitions of optimism I think I've heard.

HOFFMAN: And to see how this interaction between grit and luck really works, I want to introduce you to one last entrepreneur. Sara Blakely, the founder and CEO of Spanx, a $250 million a year undergarment industry heavyweight. On the one hand, she had the ultimate lucky break. She sent a prototypical pair of Spanx to her television hero. She tells me she was hardly prepared for what would happen next.

SARA BLAKELY: So I invented this product and I sent a gift basket to Oprah of the product with a note in it and found out Andre who dresses her put it in her wardrobe and she put it on and loved it and basically has worn it everyday since.

HOFFMAN: That's awesome. And then what did the show. How did the show impact your business?

BLAKELLY: Oh it was unbelievable. I mean I had no money to advertise I was running it out of my apartment and Oprah held it up and said, “This is my favorite product.” So everything started going berserk.

HOFFMAN: But this sensational appearance is actually just the tail end of her journey to Oprah. Sara had been doing everything she could to appear on Oprah for the better part of a decade. You probably haven’t heard about her failed attempts. Sara ticked off a few for me.

BLAKELY: Well when I was in my 20s in college, I had a visualization that I created for myself that would mean that I had arrived. And my visualization was me sitting on the Oprah Winfrey Show because in my mind, if I was sitting on her show it means I had done something really right and done something amazing with my life. And I had no idea how I was going to get there. But I was 100 percent sure I was there.

I mean I was so clear seeing myself on stage and then I called the next 10 years of my life filling in the blanks I was always thinking is this what's going to get me on the Oprah show. You know I take the LSAT and go to law school because I thought maybe I'd try a famous case and that's how I end up on Oprah. But then I failed the LSAT twice and couldn't get into law school. And then I did stand up comedy for a while and I thought maybe that's maybe something here is how I end up on Oprah so I was consciously and subconsciously pursuing things that I thought could ultimately get me to that that snapshot that meant success for me.

HOFFMAN: Now before I leave you — Sara is offering you, the listener, a test of your own mettle. You can speak to her, personally, about all of her plans B. She’ll call you, on one condition.

BLAKELY: And you know the scrappy side of me can't resist but I you know I told you I just started Instagram and I would love for the people listening to follow me on Instagram and I'm going to choose one of your listeners if they put #Masters of Scale in my latest post that they see and I'm going to call them and do a private 20 minute call with them where they can ask me anything.

HOFFMAN: Gritty listeners, the race to a master class with Sara begins now. And if you can’t get Sara on the phone, don’t worry. You have countless plans B, so long as you have the grit to see them through.

I’m Reid Hoffman. Thank you for listening.