

The Maverick Show Episode 14
HOST: Matt Bowles GUEST: Stella Airoidi

Matt Bowles: Hey, everybody. It's Matt Bowles. My guest today is Stella Airoidi. She is the founder of 22 Stars Jewelry, a product based business model, which empowers local Ugandan artisans to rise above poverty. She is also the founder of the 22 Stars Foundation, a donation-based model, which carries out social development programs in Uganda, on a larger scale. She also runs Social Impact Workcations for location independent entrepreneurs and change makers to experience Uganda through fun and adventurous activities and to participate in the 22 Stars projects first hand and learn how to empower people on the ground with dignity and respect through skill sharing.

Her jewelry designs are inspired by her nomadic travels around the world and, in particular, her adventures in more than 20 African countries. Stella holds a dual master's degree in international law and human rights and democracy. She has been a digital nomad for over eight years, having spent time in over sixty countries. Born in Germany and raised mostly in the Netherlands, Stella speaks fluent German, Dutch, and English, her third language, in which we'll be conducting this interview today. Stella, welcome to the show.

Stella Airoidi: Thank you, Matt. It's a pleasure to be here today and be on your show.

Matt: Well, I am super excited to have you here. And we should just set the scene for people, at the moment. We are doing this interview in Barcelona. And we have a bottle of wine already open on the table. And this is a Catalonian wine, from this particular region. It's interesting. I went to the wine store today, of which there are many here in Barcelona, and I was looking around. I was looking in the Rioja section because the Rioja wine region of Spain is a region that I've spent time in and did a wine tour there earlier this year. And I was asking the woman to recommend a wine to me.

And she steered me away from that section and towards this particular Catalonian wine. So, this is actually my first time having this, but so far so good. What do you think?

Stella: It's a really nice wine. I already have half the glass finished.

Matt: Awesome. Well, we'll be drinking through this bottle, during the course of the interview. And we are, actually, here in Barcelona together as part of the home base global work travel program. And

we're both about to embark on the nomad cruise next week. We're going to go from Barcelona on a Transatlantic cruise to Brazil. And this, I know, is your seventh nomad cruise. They have done seven so far. No. 6, the previous one, was my first time going on the nomad cruise, and I'm going on this one as well. You, however, I understand, are the veteran of all veterans. You have been on all seven nomad cruises since it began.

Stella: Yes. On all six, and I'm going on my seventh. And I've been on all of them. That's true.

Matt: So, let's talk a little bit maybe about that to start. And then, I want to get into your story. But in terms of the nomad cruise, as an example, they do about two per year. So, why do you come back and make it a priority to go on both nomad cruises per year? And maybe you can talk a little bit about how you structure your year and your integration into the nomad social ecosystem.

Stella: So, I go to the nomad cruise for several reasons. I would say, for most of them, is that it's just like an amazing experience. I, literally, go there for my friends that I met throughout the last years and who also come back. So, for me, that's the No. 1 priority. I really have fun over there. I feel happy, relaxed, and just everything comes together. The second one is also, for my own social business foundation and vocation; it has been very beneficial to connect with the other people, brainstorm, and exchange ideas. It has been super inspiring, basically, working together with other people who are also extremely smart in what they do.

Matt: Yeah. It's really impressive. And just to contextualize for people, the nomad cruise is, basically, a business conference, on a boat, with location independent entrepreneurs. And we come together and do presentations, workshops, talks, and interactive mastermind sessions and everything else on issues ranging from building businesses to my presentation, on the last nomad cruise, was about minimalist packing and how to travel the world with carry-on luggage only. There's another presentation on how to hack, basically, frequently flyer miles and do that sort of stuff.

So, it's everything from travel hacks to business building, to all sorts of personal development and other types of things. And so, it's been really cool for me to see about the nomad cruise. One thing that stood out to me, on the last one, was the diversity

internationally. So, the last cruise had 250 people on it from 42 different countries, including countries like Uganda and Kenya and Nigeria and countries all over the world. It wasn't just Americans and some Europeans. So, that, for me, stood out and was particularly cool. It's also cool for me to see how much it's growing because the last cruise, which was just six months ago, had 250 people.

This one has 500 people on it. So, to see how that is growing is really exciting. And it's really cool. And I agree. Seeing a lot of the friends that I've made just in the last nomad cruise, again, is an amazing experience. But also, to meet all of the new people and to see it grow is really, really awesome. So, let's start off a little bit. One of the things that I want to mention about you up front and allow you to speak to, particularly to this audience, is that you have decided that real estate investing is a primary strategy of yours.

And you've, actually, been able to and chosen to buy rental properties and finance most of your international travel and lifestyle expenses with your rental income, which is amazing. And can you just speak a little bit about that, at the beginning here, in terms of why you chose real estate? You could have invested your money in anything. Why did you pick real estate? And where is your real estate located?

Stella: It's, actually, my mom who is the big brain behind a lot of things. Unfortunately, when I was 19 years old, my stepfather passed away. And then, my mom and I, we inherited some things. And my mom was actually the smart ass, I would say, of our family. We immediately said you should never have money only sitting in a bank doing nothing or just invest in only one country or one thing. So, then, she, actually, together with me, bought apartments in Italy and in Germany. And I also already had a house, basically, in the Netherlands, which I inherited to spread risks because, if something goes down, then, at least not everything goes down.

So, it was, actually, my mom who set it up. But, in the beginning, I never really thought about it because, of course, it also costs a lot of money. It's not that you just invest in something, and you immediately get money out of it. So, I kind of completely let go of this whole idea. Also, because, of course, my mother always told me that I should find a stable job, have financial independence and security myself through finding a job. Yes, of course, I also agree

with it. However, at one point, in my life, I just found out that I want to invest more time in my family. My parents separated when I was a child.

So, I was in between several countries traveling between my family members. Then, I started to work for international institutions abroad. So, I didn't see my mom anymore as often as I wanted to, neither my real dad. And then, I came back to the Netherlands, at one point, a bit lost about what I should do. I also didn't like the way that international development was organized, but I will come back to that later. Yeah.

And then, at one point, by talking to other people and also my mom, I actually realized that, if I would just keep my own costs low and would just rent out the property, then, I would have this passive income, which would at least enable me to really start my own business and take that risk. Because, for a lot of people, it's a very hard decision, if you don't have enough savings, or you don't have this soft background to fall in, as I have to really take that step. So, I took that step about four years ago. And then, I, basically, left the Netherlands. And, so far, I have never returned back long term.

I'm there in between because I'm officially still living over there. So, I am there in between my traveling.

Matt:

Right. But you don't need to live near your properties to rent it out. And you're collecting the passive rental income, which finances your world travel and gives you that coverage of your living expenses, so that you can experiment with different business endeavors, and you can focus your work on charitable stuff, and you can do all of those things and have the rental properties finance your lifestyle, which is totally amazing. And so, let's talk a little bit about your entrepreneurial journey and your connection with Uganda, which, by the way, I just went to Uganda for the first time two months ago.

And it was so amazing. I was so impressed. I was based, for the month, in Nairobi and Kenya. And then, I took about a long weekend, went for like four nights, I think it was, to Kampala, Uganda, the capital, and stayed with a mutual friend of ours who I actually met on the last nomad cruise. Shout out to Brenda who hosted me there. She's born and raised there. And so, she said, "If

you're going to be in Kenya, you have to come to see Uganda. You can't come to East Africa and not go to Uganda." I was like, "Fair enough." She was like, "Just come stay with me, and I'll show you around."

So, I did. And it was just fantastic. I was so impressed. The nightlife was unbelievable. She would take me out to these different Ugandan clubs and just the music, the stuff the DJs were playing, which was, I would say, probably about – the clubs that we went to were there's no cover charge. Most of them were open-air clubs but with DJs, amazing sound systems, and just incredible music, most of which I had never heard because it's probably about 70% Afro beats, probably about half of which were Ugandan and half of which were from other places in Africa, mostly Nigeria.

And then, the other 30% was stuff that I had heard. It was the Caribbean, reggae, and American hip hop, probably a combination of those. So, that's sort of the milieu of these night spots in Kampala that we went to. And people just go, and they – the atmosphere was incredible. So, I'm like Shazaming all of these songs from the dance floor trying to make my playlist of these Afro beats I've never heard before. So incredible. And so, I had a blast with that. And then, just going around Kampala, it has the Baha'i Mother Temple for the entire continent of Africa is in Kampala, which is just gorgeous, not just the temple, but the entire grounds. You can go and walk around.

And it's so just serene and peaceful and amazing. It has one of the largest mosques in all of Africa. I think it's now called the Uganda National Mosque, formerly the Gaddafi Mosque. But it is certainly the largest one in East Africa. And then, it has a Catholic basilica, which is a shrine to 22 martyrs who were immediately canonized and became Catholic saints. And that basilica has drawn three papal visits, including from Pope Francis in 2015, making Uganda the country in Africa with the most papal visits of any country. So, I was just going around and seeing all of these different things. And it was just really spectacular.

And then, we went to the Ndere Cultural Center and saw the cultural performance, which was incredible to see how the different Ugandan cultural traditions from the different people around Uganda, the different kingdoms around Uganda, passed

down their traditions through performing arts. And so, these performances were just mind-blowingly spectacular. And so, I was just totally blown away by Kampala. It was fantastic.

Stella: Yeah. I love Kampala myself. And, unfortunately, we just missed each other. You were just too late. You missed the Nyege Nyege Festival, which was amazing. I was myself, hosting my social impact location, at that time. And we also had about six or seven nomad cruisers at the location. And we had an amazing time. And especially we had, what you say, this mix between electronic music and the local traditional music. It's insane.

Matt: I had heard about that festival. And Brenda actually put it on my radar. And she was like, "Listen, if you can come to this festival, you should really come for it." And the reason I couldn't is that I had already scheduled a safari in Masai Mara in Kenya for that weekend. So, it was the same time, and it was not a changeable thing. So, it was part of the program that I was on, and we were doing that. So, I wasn't able to get there for that. So, we did just miss each other. But totally amazing.

And then, in addition to Kampala, I went out to Jinja and saw the source of the Nile River, which was really powerful because I have lived, literally, on the Nile River for like over a year of my life. I spent a year in Egypt and, literally, lived on the Nile River. Most of the time, I lived, literally, right on the Nile. And so, I have all of this experience and association with the Nile River but 100% from the Egyptian perspective. And so, to see the source of the Nile, which irrigates 11 African countries, was a very cool thing.

And then, when you get there, you realize, which I didn't know before I went, that Mahatma Gandhi had his ashes scattered in multiple major rivers, including the Nile, at the source, in Uganda. So, there's this huge Gandhi shrine there and Indian politicians come there to plant trees and pay homage. And it's this massive thing. It was just totally amazing.

Stella: Yeah. The River Nile, we, obviously, have the Nile Special, the Nile Gold, which is our national beer in Uganda. It definitely is connected to the Nile.

Matt: Yeah, for sure. So, totally impressed with Uganda. So, let's maybe start with your story back at the very beginning. And I want to maybe start with your academic background and your choice to go

in this particular direction because one of the things that you and I found out that we have in common is we both studied international conflict, regions, and that sort of stuff. You went in an international human rights law direction, and I have a master's degree in international peace and conflict resolution and have done activist work in a number of political conflicts regions as well. So, we had that in common.

So, maybe talk a little bit about your journey and sort of your consciousness raising that drove you to those academic interests, from the beginning, and how you became passionate about those issues.

Stella:

Yeah. I was born in Germany. And then, in six years, I moved to the Netherlands because my parents separated. And my brother, he stayed in Germany. I stayed with my mom, in the Netherlands. So, we also got separated. That kind of left a huge impact, as a child. So, I was always very much interested in children's rights, when I was a kid. My parents raised me like either you become a doctor or you become a banker or you become a lawyer. So, I don't like to see blood. I didn't want to become a doctor. I'm not that good in math and calculations, so banker neither. So, I chose to become a lawyer then. And I started studying law and, in particular, children's rights because that was where my passion was.

Yeah, I found out, with Dutch law, I would, actually, be restrained to work and live in the Netherlands. But, since my family came from Germany, and I'd also often been to Germany, and my real father moved to Switzerland, I was also spending a lot of time there. My mom is also half Italian. I grew up in this international field, as a kid, traveling around a lot. And I kind of got scared like, oh, my gosh, if I really only study the Dutch law system, I will be completely bound in the Netherlands. So, at an early stage, I was already thinking of doing international law.

But my English was so terribly bad. It's embarrassing. You wouldn't even believe it right now if you heard me speaking. Even my law professors, they were looking at me, and they were like, "Stella, maybe you can study criminal law". But international law, don't talk anymore about it. And they were really trying to talk me into different directions. And I also did criminology as like a side study next to law because I was also interested in the murder psychology part of the whole legal field. The professors tried to

talk me out of this whole idea of international law.

But I was quite stubborn, and I was like no, I want to give it a try. And then, I came up with this idea to study abroad. But we already discussed it. I wanted to do a master's degree at the scholarship, which was a big cruise boat, similar to the nomad cruise but then, 10 years ago. And this cruise ship was, actually, hosting about 500 students doing a bachelor's degree and a master's degree traveling around the world. And that just seemed amazing to me to be with a bunch of people on a cruise ship. We would dock in every port for like a week, have field trips. It just seemed like a dream come true. But it was 2008, and the crisis hit.

And they didn't get enough sponsors anymore after they already did two trips. So, the whole scholarship program got canceled. And I had to come up with something else. So, I decided to do legal English courses and volunteer work all around the world because I still got inspired from this cruise ship going to not just one destination but several destinations. So, I went to Southeast Asia. I went to Ecuador, Costa Rica, Los Angeles, Honolulu, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. And this was all 2008/2009. And while I was traveling, I got confronted a lot with poverty.

A lot of situations, of course, in South Africa with apartheid, but also in Australia with the Aborigines, also, in Honolulu, Ecuador. Maybe I just looked for it. I don't know. But I always was involved with those type of issues. They also interested me a lot. So, I decided to study international law and then, focus, particularly, on human rights and children's law. So, in 2009, I was studying this. And if you put together children's rights, international law, conflict countries, you quickly end up with child soldiers. And then, I decided to write my thesis about girl child soldiers, in particular. And that brought me, in 2009, to Uganda.

Matt: So, can you talk a little bit about that and just maybe contextualize it for people that maybe aren't familiar with that political situation in Uganda, in terms of the child soldier situation and the Lord's Resistance Army and what was going on there? Can you just sort of paint that context and then, what your academic role was then when you engaged it?

Stella: Yes. I will try to keep it short because, otherwise, it gets too long. And you can private message me for the details or if you would

like to read my thesis. The problem over there was that Joseph Kony with the Lord's Resistance Army, they did not have any support. No one wanted to join the army voluntarily. So, they had to start recruiting people. And many of those people were actually young, vulnerable children. And it didn't matter their gender. They had like boys, girls, they both got recruited. But the problem was that whenever peace resolutions were debated with them, only the boys were set free but not the girls.

So, that's what my whole thesis topic was about. And later on, with my second master, I also focused more on the child victims and witnesses participating, at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. So, to see how the court actually did their interviews in Uganda and all of those things.

Matt: That was around the time, right, that the ICC, the International Criminal Court, issued, I think it was, their first ever arrest warrants. Talk a little bit about then, from there, what your specific interest was and then, your role was with the girl child soldiers and sort of the survivors of that trauma and then, the reintegration and all of that kind of stuff, and how you sort of connected with that.

Stella: To kind of give a bit more context, I wrote two theses. So, one was about material law parts or what is not allowed to do. So, obviously, it's not allowed to enlist and recruit children into your army. That was my first thesis. And then, my second one, for my human rights master, which was an advanced master from the European Union University Center, that one was more about procedures and laws. So, how the child victims and witnesses are participating in the court rulings. So, right now, there are procedures in place to protect the kids. So, the International Criminal Court is like a mixture between criminal law and civil law.

But they didn't really have procedures in place that children should be in child-friendly rooms or that a child should not see the accused, all of those things. And then, also, for example, one organization would interview the children. But then, the other organization would also interview the children. So, they got double traumatized and harmed because, by accident, they would say, in one interview, that they were abducted for two months. In another interview, they might have said four months. And then, their testimony was not useful anymore. So, I was in Uganda to research

about this.

And before I went to Uganda, I, actually, was super, super scared because the only idea I had about Uganda was everyone is killing each other. People walk around with chopped off noses and lips because that's what happens, in the Lord's Resistance Army. And I had no idea that Uganda has nightlife, and it's beautiful, and it's amazing. I just had those ideas from the research that I did. So, I was super, super scared going the first time to Uganda. And, in particular, also some background, when I went to Uganda, I did not have a smartphone. I did not have an iPhone, a Wi-Fi or whatever. I also didn't have a Mac Book, anything like that.

So, when I went, 10 years ago, to Uganda, I would say it's quite different to the situation of volunteers who go right now to Uganda and who take selfies, Instagram stories, and all of that the whole time. When I went, there was nothing like that. So, I also did not post selfies, no pictures. Just after my trip, when I finally had good internet connection again back home, I made a whole album of Uganda showing the whole picture. The safaris, the nightlife, the communities I visited, everything, which is super different from nowadays. So, while I was in Uganda, I was volunteering at an AIDS information center. And there I met a family, the Bafulas, and they were from Kampala.

They were Ugandans. And when I told them about the research that I was doing about the post-war victims from Northern Uganda, they said to me, "Well, you know, Stella, you don't per se have to travel up north to Gulu," which I still did. "You can also go to this quarter in Kampala, which is called Acholi Quarter. There are a lot of internally displaced people living there. And yeah, they would be the right people for you to talk to." And one of those people that I talked to was a woman called Susan Laker. She also joined the last cruise, the fifth one, in the Mediterranean. So, I spoke to her, and she was only two years older than me.

I was 23, at that time, 23 or 24. So, she was 25 or 26. And she already has three teenaged kids. So, she had her first child when she was only 13. And I was quite shocked about it. But not just me, also the Bafula family was also shocked about it because it's not that the whole of Uganda used to be a war zone. There is peace, since 2006, in Northern Uganda. But there was already peace in Kampala for a very long time. Kampala struggled with the Idi

Amin regime in the '70s, but they did not have Joseph Kony. So, also, for Ugandans living in Kampala, the situation of a woman like Susan who had kids at such a young age and had so many challenges in life was also quite extraordinary.

So, it was just not like me trying to help someone or looking for what to do. It was the Ugandan people themselves who also found people who they thought needed an extra hand. So, in this case, it was David and Ida Bafula who introduced me to Susan because they also were so touched by Susan's story. And not just by her story but also about her will power to really help her kids to survive and also herself. So, Susan's case was that Susan had her first child at 13. Then, she had a miscarriage. She had another kid, another kid.

For a long time, she hated her parents for putting her in this situation that she was in a military barracks to escape from the LRA until she realized that her parents actually did this out of love because they knew that that would be the only safe place for her where she would not be killed. So, then, at one point, she had two husbands. They both died because of the war. They were soldiers in LRA. And then, she found out that she was actually HIV positive. She talks about it openly. She's not afraid at all to share her status with anyone, which is also quite inspiring. So, when she found out that she was HIV positive, she really thought it would be the end of her life.

But then, she had three kids to take care of. And she thought to herself if I don't take care of them, what's going to happen with them. Who will take care of them? No one. So, she knew she had to survive. So, she went to Kampala. Her sisters actually took her. Susan has quite a big family. And in Uganda, it's super common that, as a family, you really stick together and help each other. So, her sisters helped her to move to Kampala. And there, she was working in the stone quarry to earn, literally, \$1.00 a day only to provide her kids with food. But because her own health situation was so bad, at one point, she was not even strong enough anymore to crush the stones herself.

So, she, basically, was sitting there looking at her kids doing the hard labor of carrying up the stones out of the quarry, crushing them. And she was just sitting there feeling miserable and crying because she had to look at her kids not going to school, just

surviving. And that was the moment that she realized that she had to become way more creative to earn a living. So, she heard about some projects making jewelry out of recycled paper. So, she started to teach herself how to roll beads out of paper and varnish them and make really nice jewelry designs. So, that was not too hard labor like crushing stones.

So, she could, with her bad health situation, still roll the paper beads, make the jewelry, and then, she had to send her kids on the streets as well to sell the jewelry for her. And also, she used to go, a lot of times, to the Gaddafi Mosque, this nice, national, Uganda mosque you mentioned in the city center. And she would sit around that mosque, together with her kids, selling her jewelry. And this mosque is about two hours' walk from Acholi Quarter. So, every day, they had to walk over there. And she was sitting there. But Susan did not just make like the simple designs. She really made like outstanding designs because she really wanted to be better than the other people selling jewelry.

So, that was actually the moment that she got the attention of the Bafula family because David and Ida Bafula were working at an AIDS information center where I was volunteering. And in our project, we also had entrepreneur classes with the ladies. And one of the skills was to teach them how to make jewelry. A lot of the customers started to become more demanding, and they said to David, "Don't you have more interesting designs? We get tired of those simple jewelry beads. We want to have cool things."

So, that was the moment that David thought to himself like yeah, I know that there are ladies sitting around the Gaddafi Mosque selling jewelry. So, David went over there to actually look at the market and see what the local women were making. And then, he bumped into Susan with her three kids. And he, initially, was amazed by the designs that she made. But then, of course, he also heard her story, and he was completely overwhelmed and touched, the same as I was. So, he immediately said, "I'm going to regularly buy jewelry from you. And I also want you to come over to teach more women the skills you have."

So, to not just keep it for yourself but really share your skills, make sure that other people learn and also improve and get empowered. So, that's what Susan did. And that's how I met her. I started to buy jewelry from her, but just on a private level because I was

sitting in the library writing my thesis for a few years. Not a few years. The first one was one year, then the second one, another one year. So, like two years. But I felt super useless. I was just sitting in a library writing not helping anyone. And, for me, at the time, it really helped me to help someone because I had a feeling that I was not just writing empty words that no one would care about anyway but that I really was doing something good.

So, I started to buy Susan's jewelry. So, that's one part of the story.

Matt: Then, from there, how did your relationship with Susan develop? Because, as you mentioned briefly in passing, and I just wanted to reiterate, you actually brought her on her first ever trip out of Uganda, which was not only a trip out of Uganda, it was a trip onto the nomad cruise, which was going from Spain to Greece and stopping at the Balearic Islands and the Greek Islands and everything else and allowing her to sort of integrate and experience that entire thing. And so, your relationship with her, obviously, is incredibly close and meaningful to both of you.

So, can you talk a little bit about, from there, once you made that initial connection with her, how did you develop, I guess, both your personal relationship but then, also the business relationship, and how did 22 Stars get started?

Stella: Initially, when I met Susan, Susan did not speak English because, like I already explained, she grew up in the war in Northern Uganda. So, there was no way that she could go to school. So, she didn't know how to speak English or anything like that. But she knew Luganda and Luau. Luau is the language from Northern Uganda, and Luganda is the language from Kampala. So, David and Ida, they knew how to speak Luganda. So, obviously, because they are from there, they were, basically, my translators. So, I could only speak to Susan using them as translators.

So, also, when I left Uganda in 2009, the three years after, I just sent a message to David and Ida asking them to help me out to send me more jewelry from Susan and send her the money. And this was just purely based on trust. You just trust people. And I, obviously, thought, okay, this could go wrong. Maybe the money will never arrive at Susan's place. You don't know. Or you do know. I guess, in your heart, I guess you do know. At least I would

say I have good intuition when it comes to people.

So, three years later in 2012, this was after I worked for the European Union Delegation in China on human rights issues, I had a feeling that I really missed the field work to really work directly with people on the ground. And also, as I mentioned in the beginning, I wanted to see my family more often. But if you live this ex-pat lifestyle or – I mean, what is an ex-pat nowadays? I could also be, basically, called an immigrant living in a foreign country working. So, I was working and living somewhere else than my home country. I didn't see my family.

And I was frustrated because I wanted to see my family more often, but I also wanted to work directly with people and not go through the whole bureaucracy and raise money on so many things that, in my opinion, were a waste. So, I was in between jobs. I went back home to see my dad, to see my mom. And then, I was thinking like, yeah, I can apply for all types of jobs from my mom's sofa. But I can also move my ass over to Uganda and just help Susan to set up a jewelry online store and go from there. So, I went back to Uganda not thinking that it would be actually me setting this up. I just wanted to go there.

And I knew that Susan was illiterate. So, it's not that I thought that she was going to set it up, but more like to help David and Ida to set it up, basically. So, I went back to Uganda not knowing what to expect. So, again, I was super, super scared to go back because I thought maybe everything would be wrong. But, of course, I also somewhat knew like no, I don't think so. So, I went back to Uganda in 2012, met again with David and with Ida and met with Susan. And to my big surprise, Susan actually talked English because she went back to school with the money that I sent.

And she was also able to move to a slightly better house. She's living in an area where people don't have electricity nor running water. But where she used to live, it was, literally, like a house 2 meters by 2 meters or 3 meters by 3 meters, super small, no real door, no windows, nothing. And thanks to the money, she was able to move to a bigger house. And then, I saw this impact, and I could talk directly to Susan. I didn't need a translator anymore. So, then, she also said to me, "Please, please help us to sell our jewelry on a larger scale." So, the idea was, I thought, that I would just help them to set it up.

But then, I soon realized that it's impossible because, from Uganda, to send one bracelet or one necklace, it's too expensive. People need to ship a big quantity to let's say the Netherlands. And then, in the Netherlands, my shipping costs are lower. So, if I have the whole stock, in the Netherlands, then, I'm able to ship one bracelet to you for \$2.00 or \$3.00. But you cannot ship only one bracelet out of Uganda. The shipping time would be too long. You need a distribution center, basically. I would say I'm like the bridge between Uganda and the rest of the world because, also, some of the designs, I really love them, but I also thought they are more for summer, and we are now in October or November.

So, you're looking more for like a Christmas collection and not for spring colors. So, Susan made her incredible designs, but I saw that I could tweak them a little bit to make them even more suitable for the western market and really bridge the designs with my own ideas of what I would love to wear in autumn, spring, summer, winter. And that was also an eye-opener that I started realizing that Susan was like, "Stella, what is winter? What do you mean?" So, I was sitting there with my computer showing her pictures of look, this is a tree in spring. This is what a tree looks like in winter. This is a tree in autumn.

And it was an education from both sides. She taught me a lot about what they need and how her community works. And I also showed her how our market works and what we like. So, this was like 2012. So, we started with this social jewelry project. I realized that, in order to set up a business, I have to be back in the Netherlands because I also saw that I could not let them set up the business. We still needed this bridging. So, I went back to the Netherlands and set up this social jewelry business in 2013.

Matt:

And I like the way that this particular story is unfolding because one of the things that I always talk to entrepreneurs about who is trying to start a business is to really start with the question of why and what the meaning is. And are you really passionate about what you're doing? And is it really having an impact, in a meaningful way, that's going to inspire you to work a lot and get up every morning and just love what you're doing every day? And if it's having a major impact, that's a really important thing. And so, I really love the trajectory of your story, in terms of you finding something that was so inspiring to you and a person that was so

inspiring to you.

And then, being able to plug into something and then, design and build a business model that would really make a meaningful impact. But from there, and this actually is another thing that we have in common, and I want to ask you to speak to this, which is that our academic backgrounds are not in business. So, with me, as I said, bachelor's degree in sociology, master's degree in international peace and conflict resolution. I was working in the nonprofit advocacy space for my entire professional career, up until the age of 30. All of a sudden, one day, I unexpectedly get fired from my job. Now what?

And I'm like, you know what, I'm going to start my own business. And I'm going to go the entrepreneurial route. And I'm not going to apply for another job. I'm going to chart my own path, and I'm going to do this. The only problem was I had no idea how to start a business because I had no business background. And so, I had to literally make some strategic decisions to start going to the book store, reading books on how to start a business, figuring out what types of seminars I could attend to go learn the things I needed to learn about building a business and doing these things. So, I had to do a very accelerated, self-teaching initiative to figure out how I was going to build my business and then, go from there.

But also, the same thing, we integrated a social impact component. We donate 10% of our net revenue to causes that are really important to us. So, as the business does better, so do the causes we care about. And we created that whole why aspect, at the very beginning, as well. But we still needed to learn how to build the business and how to create it and grow it and make it actually successful and sustainable, in the long term. So, I would love to hear about how you approached that and figured out how do I do this. How do I run a business? What types of initiatives did you take to sort that out? And what were your next moves?

Stella:

I didn't read the books as you did. What I did was, actually, during my studies, international law in Leiden, I became the board member of SIFE, Students in Free Enterprise. Nowadays, it's called Enactus. So, in SIFE, we found out that the best way to help people out of poverty is by making sure that they become self-sustainable. So, we had like various projects in Bolivia and Madagascar, but, most importantly, also back home in the

Netherlands because, of course, you don't have to cross borders, in order to find poverty. So, in my case, it's not that I wanted to help people in Uganda and not people in the Netherlands.

No. I could also have found my passion project in the Netherlands. It was just because of my academic background, my thesis, that I ended up in Uganda. But it could have been in my back yard. So, but there I really learned about making people self-sustainable. So, you don't just throw free things at them, don't just donate stuff to them. Let them have their own dignity and self-respect, and let them do something that they can feel proud of themselves and that their children are proud and that they learn how also to move forward without you.

It's not like business learning, but it was more like a philosophy, I would say, that I already had, in my mind, when I said, "Yes, Susan, we are going to set up the social jewelry business." So, I already had this background from SIFE. And when I posted on my Facebook, like I just got my business registered, I, obviously, got a lot of comments on my post. And one comment was from a friend who said to me, "Hey, there is an amazing program at the Rotterdam University, Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the startup campus. And, actually, for courses like yours, we set up a business for a good cause."

"We give a discount, so you can participate. And you should give something back." And back in the day, I was one of the first people using Instagram. And I had a huge Instagram account. And then, I said, "Sure, I can share my Instagram skills with a few people and my experience of Uganda." And they're like, "Okay, perfect. You can participate in our program for a really reduced price." So, I did this Erasmus course, which was three months. They had to teach me everything about testing your market. So, I went every Sunday to the market in Amsterdam to sell my products. But not just to sell them, but to find information.

A lot of my friends were making jokes because they all became lawyers, bankers, doctors, all of those things that my parents hoped that I also would be. And they were sometimes really mean, some of them, really mean. They didn't understand it. So, they were like, "Oh, so now, the child soldiers are producing bracelets, and you sell them? Good for you." And I was like, "No, it's not the kids who make it. It's not child labor." But like a lot of people, they

don't even realize it. And I think that, even if I would have said to people, "Yes, it's made by kids, please buy it," I think they even would because a lot of people are on a different level when it comes to helping when it's their mates.

So, they made fun. They were like, "Oh, so now, you're sitting on a market. Are you also screaming around like, 'Buy two bracelets, only pay for one?'" They were really mean. And I was like whatever. They just don't get it. But I'm doing things for myself. And I would say I have this attitude already since I was a kid, that I really do things for me and not for others. Since I was young, people never understood me, never got me, probably because I had a childhood of having separate families, separated from my brother. Also, my parents, they always did like really adventurous, crazy things that no one would understand.

Both of my parents, my real dad, and my stepmom, they are hobby pilots. So, my real dad flew in a little airplane through Africa. My stepmom flew in a little plane from Europe to the states. And then, my mom, she moved to the Netherlands. My parents, they always have been quite adventurous, which was not the standard. So, I always had a feeling I was misunderstood. And because of that, I just kind of let go of it. I never thought like I need to explain myself to anyone. I just do whatever I want, and I don't care if people don't understand me until I needed to sell products. Then, I understood that people need to understand me because, otherwise, I can't sell.

So, I did this market research. And I explained to my friends who were making fun of me that I was not on the market to sell jewelry to make money, but I was selling jewelry to understand what the customers like. Is it too expensive? Is it too cheap? Do you understand the story? What designs do you like? So, all of this market research. And then, I had to report back to the start up campus about my findings. It really forced me to interview and film people and really do this research, which was super important because that also made me realize that I needed to really twist a lot of my designs a bit to really put more focus on the products.

Of course, the story is nice. But people buy your necklace one time out of pity. But then, they will never come back, unless your product is amazing.

Matt: I agree with that 100%. And I think that is so important that, when people are designing business, and if it has a social impact component, which I advise all entrepreneurs that they should all have some kind of social impact aspect of their company so that they're affecting positive change in the world, with their business. And whether it's directly their product is manufactured by artisans in Uganda like yours, or whether it's that they're just like my company, donating 10% of their revenue towards really important causes that are affecting positive change, have some social impact component.

But I agree with you 100% that you can't lead with your business offer being helped such and such cause by buying my product because that's, basically, a charitable thing. And anybody can donate to charity. We can all contribute to whatever charities we want. If you want to have a viable business, your product itself needs to lead and needs to be desirable in and of itself. And your product, as you know, I just bought and am, currently, as we're doing this interview, rocking one of your bracelets, your men's bracelets, which is really fantastic and fashionable. And I, obviously, want to support your business and your initiatives.

But I was very impressed with how stylish and dynamic your product is. And that, I think, is what is really going to keep people buying these things again and again and again. So, you can make a donation one time, but that's your foundation. That's different from your business. Your business has got to have a product that people actually want to buy. And so, I think the market research and figuring out what would you pay for it, even if it had nothing to do with this charitable stuff at all, what's desirable to you that you're going to keep buying that is a really important aspect.

Stella: Yeah. So, I learned this, at the market. What I also learned was – I did not learn that, at that moment. Unfortunately, I learned that two years later. So, I wish what I would have learned or would have known back then was to outsource things and do invest. But my environment was quite negative, except the people from the startup campus. They were like inspiring and positive. But you can imagine my friends, family, they all knew me as being career addicted. I had really high grades. I graduated cum laude. I have two master's degrees. So, everyone was seeing me as either a diplomat or human rights lawyer or working for the United Nations, these high goals.

And that's also what I used to have until I went to China in 2012, and I changed my whole idea about life, family, career, everything. But yeah, my environment was still used to the old Stella. And they were quite shocked. And they thought that I was crazy or that I was doing the wrong thing. And because of that, I, literally, had to do everything myself because I was too scared to outsource things and invest more money because, according to everyone, I was crazy to set up a business with women who are illiterate and who are HIV positive and who could die. They were like set up a solid business with people who are educated and make it in China for half of the price.

Obviously, our products are made in Uganda. They're handmade, so they're not fabricated in China. So, obviously, I know that my products are more expensive than if I would have made it somewhere else. Of course, we don't just buy the products from the women. We also give back to them by taking care of their other needs. Yeah. So, what I really would have wished back then would be to have more self-confidence and start outsourcing things because I would say, the first year, I lost a lot of time by making my own fliers, building my own website, just doing everything myself.

And then, of course, at one point, I also kind of started running out of money. Not completely out of money, but I was living on a tight budget for myself. I needed to find a job that would pay me at least every month. And I also wanted to learn more about this whole crazy fashion world. So, I was living in Amsterdam. And then, I started to work for Calvin Klein for their European web shop. And I was translating for them the German, Dutch, English language because, as Matt already said, I'm bilingual, trilingual. And I was taking care of the German part. And the most important thing that I actually learned over there was customer service.

I never, ever realized that that's, basically, the core of your business. Your whole reputation, just everything can be ruined in just, basically, one day by sending out a wrong email to someone. But you can also just build your whole business on customer service and on giving people a great experience. And I would really say that that experience helped me a lot because I realized that I always need to send very positive emails to my customers. If something was out of stock, I would always give them an

alternative or send them a free bracelet or whatever I did because that's the other thing.

The products are made in Uganda by women who live in a very challenging environment. So, our products, now it's getting better, but especially in the beginning, they were not perfect. The colors could be slightly different. The sizes could be slightly longer, slightly shorter. So, I knew that I had to be very generous and very kind and very nice to my customers to keep them because they were used to the standards of everything is exactly like the product picture. And that's not the case, with my products. Now, it is, because we really improved on our quality control a lot, over the years.

But, in the beginning, it was a huge challenge. And thanks to my experiences with Calvin Klein, I learned how to deal with this.

Matt:

And did you, in addition to the customer service element of the business, which I agree with, by the way, 100%, people want to patronize businesses that are going to give them amazing customer service. And sometimes, as you said, your supply-side channels or your other variables that affect your business deliverables and that affect the customer experience, some of those are third party variables that can be outside of your total control. And so, the one thing that you do have control over is the customer service of your company and how you treat your clients and how quickly you respond to them and how supportive you are to them, when something doesn't go right.

And so, I would agree with you 100%. I think that is a crucially important focus that we at Maverick Investor Group prioritize as our top priority as well, in terms of the way that we deal with our customers. Even if they have an issue with something, or it's a supplier issue, or something goes on, we always are trying to be there for them, responsive, supportive, and to do everything we can to help them to resolve whatever it is.

But when you were with Calvin Klein, and you were studying them from a fashion perspective, for your business purpose, did you have any additional, besides the customer service element of the way they run their business, did you have any fashion specific takeaways that you learned there?

Stella: What I learned is that you really have to plan ahead like at least nine months. You first need to create your samples. Then, you create your photo shoot and your launching of your lines. So, it all takes a lot of time. And what I learned with them was that you have different target groups. So, you, for example, have the people who are like youngsters, so more teenagers, young people. And they want to have more affordable products. So, if you target them, you have a different type of music playing, in your advertisements. You also use a different type of language, in your advertisements.

You just really target your group. And it was really beautiful to see Calvin Klein who targets all those different types of groups because they all have this high-end label where people pay more money. And they use different pictures, different language, different images. However, they're still one brand. So, I realize that the brand 22 Stars, I actually don't need to only have one specific target group. I can have several groups within 22 Stars. So, I do target women. However, I also have a whole men's collection. And I even produce jewelry for children. Of course, I target the moms, in this case. But that was really interesting to see with them.

I don't need to only focus on one group. As long as I make different lines and know how to market it, it's all possible.

Matt: I love that. And, as I've said, I've already bought at least one of your men's bracelets. I'll probably buy at least one more from you, on the nomad cruise. And then, I already asked you about the women's line for gifts for women in my family. So, I'm super excited to see all of those different lines. And I think that's a really, really good takeaway, in terms of thinking about how you can expand and target different markets. So, let's talk a little bit about the foundation and how that came about. So, you established this business. You got it to this point. And then, what started the foundation? And tell us a little bit about what that does.

Stella: I would say that, with the social business, what I also realized is your profits go up and down, up and down. So, if your social programs are depending on how much you're selling, it's quite vulnerable because you never know how much you're going to sell. So, this, actually, brings me to something that I did not learn at Calvin Klein, but I learned from other social businesses. So, the first years, I always had my winter collection, my summer collection, sometimes like a little spring/autumn collection.

And then, at one point, I stopped with that because that's actually the model that Calvin Klein has. They make sales. They are promoting Christmas, Black Friday. And yeah, I learned from them what I do want to do. But I also learned from them what I don't want to do. So, I stopped doing the winter collection, summer collection. I created like an endless summer collection because I love summer. People who know me know I follow the sun. But, of course, I didn't stop, after the endless summer collection. I just have collections, and they pop up any time in the year. So, it's always a big surprise when I launch new products. You never know.

And they're durable. I thought, at one point, to myself, why should I put my things into sale and discount because, actually, it really affects our profit and our margin, and it affects my way to impact my community. Because, if I start putting everything on 50% discount, it also means we have way less money to put into our social programs. So, I completely stopped with those discounts. Sometimes, I give a little discount because I love you, and I want you to come back. So, little discounts, sometimes. But I don't do those big sales anymore as Calvin Klein does. And neither do I do those collections related to spring, summer, autumn.

Besides that, it helped me, at least, to have a more stable set of profits from the social jewelry business because I don't have any more of those crazy sales. So, it's a little bit more clear for me now the amount you get in every month, although it still, obviously, varies per season. But this thing was so important that when I was on the very first nomad cruise in 2015 in December, and I was giving my talk, and I was sharing my experiences with the people over there, a lot of people actually said to me how much does it actually cost to just support one of your social programs. Forget about the jewelry, I want to just support that kid to go to school. How much is it?

Because that was the other problem I faced with my social business, besides people do crazy sales and all of that, which I stopped doing. People constantly were asking me how much money from this necklace goes to that woman? How much money goes to you? How much money goes there? And I can tell you about one necklace, but every necklace is different because I sell one necklace to this store for that price. But then, I sell a necklace

to someone else maybe for a different price. And then, sometimes, necklaces break. Sometimes, I have stock, which I don't sell. So, it's super difficult to say.

And also, the banking fees are high. Pay Pal costs are high. Selling fees are high. Import taxes are high. So, a lot of people actually benefit from selling this necklace, not just me or my Ugandan additions. A lot of people benefit. And I would say that, myself, because of my passive income stream, I really reinvested everything back into my social business because I want to grow. And I want my women to become better. But that was also something that I found was an obstacle.

And yeah, then, it was quite interesting that people said to me how much does it actually cost to just promote your social programs because, initially, I was against donating and handing out things for free to people because I felt like it's not helping them to take care of their belongings and to become self-responsible and, in the end, self-sustainable. So, initially, I didn't like the idea. But then, I brainstormed with some people on the cruise. So, that's also why, again, the nomad cruise is so important because it really broadens your perspective. You're not just speaking to lawyers or bankers or marketers or shipping specialists.

You speak to so many different people. And yeah, then, I started my first Go Fund Me campaign to finance the social programs directly, without selling the jewelry. And in January of 2016, I got enough money to send the first 20 kids to school. And then, I went back on the second cruise because, actually, the founder of the nomad who was Johannes, he also said to me, "Oh, Stella, this is so awesome that we can literally see what you have been doing with our money. You're so transparent about everything." And I'm like, "Yeah, why shouldn't I be? I'm a one-person business."

Well, not one person. I mean, in the Netherlands, I'm registered as one person. But, of course, in Uganda, I have the local people working for us. But for me, myself, from the European side, I'm one person. And yeah, so he said, "You really have to come back on the second nomad cruise and share with people what you did in between those two cruises." So, yeah, I got this knowledge from the first cruise. I immediately did something with it. And I had a nice outcome. So, I went on a second cruise, showed the people the impact. And then, I immediately had people who said, "I want to

come to Uganda and see firsthand the kid that I sponsored, see how to help you further.” So, that’s what we did. And then, the whole certifications idea came up.

Matt:

So, in terms of the foundation, I understand that the foundation runs an educational program, which, based on the money that you’ve raised, your foundational contributors and sponsors make a recurring commitment. And so, you’re able to consistently rely upon a recurring amount of income in the foundation. And you’re currently running five-tiered programs. So, one is an educational program where you’re sending over 300 kids to school. The second one is a nutritional program where you’re giving all of those kids, every single week, a hot meal.

The third one is that you’re doing small business training and microloan programs that are supporting at least 56 or more families, some of whom are the parents of those kids. And you’re running a development program to pay for things like medical fees, mattresses, water filters. And then, the fifth piece is that you’re running an after-school program, which gives kids extra classes and allows them to do extracurricular activities, in addition to their schooling. And as your donations increase, and you get more sponsors and more contributors to the foundation, you’ll just simply be able to scale up those numbers.

And one of the really cool things that you also shared with me is that these people might be artisans now that are making jewelry. And as you said, they’re illiterate and all of that stuff that, as they go through these training, they’re increasingly learning English. They’re able to go back to school themselves, in addition to their kids, with the money that they’re making from their business ventures, from using the microloans to make more money with their businesses, send themselves back to school, learn English, learn business skills, and then, actually, move up to be local project managers for the company, in addition to just being the artisans.

Stella:

Yeah. So, in a secure model, after the first cruise, I started a Go Fund Me campaign and started sending kids to school. I was on the second cruise, and I was like oh, shit, yeah, I just raised \$1,000.00 euros, I was able to send the kids to school. But what am I going to do now? Of course, I had to do another Go Fund Me campaign, in order to, again, raise \$1,000.00 euros because, otherwise, what’s going to happen with the kids? So, I was, again, on the second

cruise, again, brainstorming with people like what do I do now because, soon, the school term was going to end. The kids would go to the second term.

What was the best way to move forward? And, actually, before the cruise, I had a few people who actually already said to me, hey, we saw that you put the profiles of the kids online who you started sending to school. Can we like sponsor one specific one of them? And that's what I did because, of course, it's nice, if you send kids to school for a year. But then, what? Then, nothing. So, I really, really encourage the sponsors and really make them realize that, if they start sponsoring a child of 22 Stars, it's a long term commitment. If this sounds too scary to anyone, don't worry. Of course, you can always stop your sponsorship.

Please let me know at least three months in advance, so I have enough time to find a new sponsor. But we also run those additional programs, for which we also need donations. So, if someone thinks it's too scary to commit long term to our kids, please sponsor one of our other additional programs because, for us, it's way more difficult to find finances to run all of those additional programs effectively because most people, they also love to be attached to a specific kid because it's more tangible. But that also made me realize, yeah, I really need to make things tangible for people.

So, I started a lot of campaigns like you can finance for water filters or for mattresses or for this or for that. And that really helps. And then, also, with the long term sponsors, we charge them just a tiny bit more money than the actual school fees and uniforms cost. So, actually, with the money that they send for their kids, we are also already able to give the kids a bit more than that, to also give them the after-school homework help.

Matt: What are the sponsorship levels? What does it cost for someone to sponsor? And what does that give to the child?

Stella: We have a kindergarten, primary school, and secondary school. Kindergarten is \$180.00 euros a year. Primary school is \$240.00 euros a year. And secondary school is \$480.00 euros a year. So, that comes down to \$15.00; \$20.00; \$40.00 a month. However, the schools we are working with, they're all really good schools. But you also have better schools as is always the case. So, in this case,

either the sponsor could say, especially if the sponsor has been to Uganda, “Hey, I want my kid to be in a really good international school.”

Or the community that we are helping, the parents could also say we want to top up and make sure that our kid goes to an international school, which we allow because a lot of people always ask me, “Stella, we want to help the kids who need it most. We want to help the kid who is the poorest of everyone.” So, we don’t work like that. For us, the community is everything. So, we support girls and boys, also all ages. So, we don’t stop at 18 because many kids only had a chance to go to primary school, when they were already 9, 10, 11 years old. That’s the case with Susan, our project manager.

So, they might only finish secondary school, when they are already in their 20s. And we still support them. And we want the whole community to work together. So, if thanks to our business program, a family is able to scale up a bit, it’s not that they are suddenly rich. They still live in the same quarter. But yeah, they maybe make a little bit more money than the neighbors do. But we don’t want to punish them. We don’t want to tell them oh, look, now, you started making a bit more money, so your kid is going to be expelled from our program. No. We don’t want to punish people for earning more money.

We want to encourage it. If they say that, “Hey, we earn more money now, so our kids go to a bit better school,” then, that’s great. In general, from sponsorship, it includes the school fees, the uniforms, registration fee, development fee, tours, things like that. And then, we also finance to also pay our local project managers on the ground because all of those people, initially, did everything voluntarily for us because they themselves, like Susan, have such a big heart. They just wanted to see those kids in school. So, she never ever asked any money from us for going to the schools, paying the fees, sending us the reports, going to the houses, visiting the kids, giving us reports, updates.

She never ever asked me for any money for that. But, of course, now, we grew to such a big number of kids that we, obviously, did start giving her and also our project manager a compensation.

Matt: And can you talk a little bit about also the co-workcations, the

social impact co-workcations? And just for people to understand that workcation is a merging of the two words work and vacation into one word. So, that's the word that we're using, in case you didn't recognize the vocabulary. But a social impact co-workcation to Uganda where you are acting now, I think, it's three times a year, you've got it up to twice a year where you're bringing location independent entrepreneurs and change makers and people who have contributed to the foundation. They can go whether or not they have.

But some people have contributed and want to meet the child that they're sponsoring or the family that they're impacting. And some people aren't necessarily sponsors of the foundation, but they want to go and participate and see Uganda. So, talk a little bit about what the experience is like, what type of person it's for, and what happens on the co-workcations that you're organizing.

Stella: Yeah. So, as you know, I'm a digital nomad myself. And yeah, I decided to not live in Uganda because the Ugandans can do so many things so much better than I can. And I would never, ever be able to get to their level because I don't speak the local language as they do. I'm not living in the community as they do. So, I leave a lot of tasks to the local people because they do it 10 times better than I do. Yeah, so my job, basically, is finding sponsors, finding people who like to buy the jewelry, bridging cultures, seeing what is in Europe.

But, of course, I also still need to go to Uganda a lot of times to also communicate with them on the ground like what do you guys actually need because, a lot of times, people will be shy. And they don't want to tell me what they need because they don't want to seem ungrateful, for example. So, I think it's still really important for me to be in Uganda but also not be in Uganda. And then, I started realizing, from the nomad cruises, that digital nomads, surprisingly, can work from anywhere. So, I was like hey, why don't I come to Uganda, and why don't I work from Uganda. And then, I found out a lot of people have the wrong images and views of Uganda.

And I would say, one of the causes is, unfortunately, volunteers and this whole white savior complex, which I still find difficult to talk about sometimes because I am white myself. I have been seen by certain people also as a savior because they, literally, told me,

“Stella, you saved my life.” And I don’t want them to put me in this category. But of course, I know, at the same time, just the fact that I’m white, and I work in those communities, I’m also kind of part of this white savior complex. But because of those people that came to Uganda only taking selfies, Instagram stories, and I don’t know what else about poverty, people really got scared to go to Uganda.

Or they would be like, “Stella, do you guys have drinking water? Do you have internet?” I was like what are you talking about, of course, I do. Uganda, like you already mentioned in the beginning, has amazing nightclubs, restaurants, everything. And a lot of people didn’t know. So, I was a bit sad about it. I was like this has to change. People should realize that not only can you go to Cape Town or Barcelona or Bangkok or Medellin to work, you can also come to Kampala or Jinja, and you can also work from there, on your laptop. It’s an amazing, beautiful country.

We do have internet. We do have electricity, all of this. So, this idea came up then, after a friend visited me in Uganda. So, he’s like a digital nomad guy. He came to Uganda. And then, many people responded, “We also want to come.” So, this was about two years ago. And since then, I’ve organized six social impact workcations. So, these workcations are for digital nomads, location independent entrepreneurs who can take a laptop with them, work on their own things, but, at the same time, want to co-work, co-live with other people, so that they don’t get this experience that I had been all alone in Kampala.

And, unfortunately, up until today, it’s not that there is a big community of digital nomads in Kampala. So, if you come to Kampala, you don’t immediately find them. So, I kind of wanted to start organizing this myself that, when I’m in Kampala, I can share my experiences. I don’t feel lonely anymore. And, at the same time, I also really started showing people that Kampala and Uganda is a super beautiful, fun country. So, the people come on co-working vacation with me, co-working, co-living, and safari trip. And, of course, they also want to give back to the projects they visit because, after all, it’s not that I’m just organizing workcations. I run social programs in Uganda.

And I saw myself that it was super helpful for me to connect with digital nomads because they really uplifted my business, my

private life, they're inspirational, everything. So, they come to Uganda to do skill sharing and to actually train our managers. So, they don't just come over there, do something, and then, they leave, and people cannot continue. No, they leave valuable things behind. And a lot of things that they actually can do is remote work. So, currently, I have a few volunteers from previous workcations. They're also nomad cruisers.

One of them is doing an automatization project for me to automatize all of our things. But you don't have to do this in Uganda. You can do it from anywhere. So, regarding volunteering, yeah, do you have to come to Uganda to volunteer, or can you do it from home? Because, unfortunately, I saw a lot of people coming to Uganda to volunteer because everyone back home would give them 200 likes and say amazing job. But that's not necessary. We have amazing local people. And I learned a lot from them. And not just me, also my workcation participants exchanging skills was so beautiful. For example, we do those mastermind sessions.

And they're not just about your business life but also about your personal life. But this whole environment of speaking with different cultures who have different standards makes yourself also be way more open about what you do yourself. And I think, if we would have had these mastermind sessions, among us Europeans, no one would ever answer those questions in such an honest way because we are always afraid how do other people see us. What would other people see? How would they judge us?

And I think, in Uganda, it's really interesting to have this really honest, open dialogue about how we look at things, so we can really learn from each other what to do, what not to do, but also to speak out about things and not be scared that people judge us.

Matt:

Can you talk a little bit about like, if you were to distill down some of the principles, you mentioned the sort of white savior complex and some of the ways that certain western people may approach or think about volunteering or think about engaging with communities in places like Uganda, can you talk a little bit about the ethics of what you think is important about engaging with communities there, in a way that is in an empowering sort of solidarity framework, as opposed to a patronizing, charitable type of power imbalanced framework?

And what should people be conscientious and aware of when engaging with communities, in Uganda or as we travel the world, in general? What are your thoughts on that?

Stella: I would say, first of all, people probably don't need you. I see, a lot of times, that people make themselves the center. Like it's more about themselves than about the community they visit. And I would say, first, stop going to countries thinking that they do need your help or whatever they need. They don't. People in Uganda, like I already mentioned, they also help each other. Like David and Ida, they are Ugandans, and they already started helping out Susan. Of course, they could only help to a certain point because they needed to find international markets. So, that's where I could step in and where I could help them.

But it's not that people have to go somewhere to help people. I think that's just the biggest mistake that a lot of people make.

Matt: I agree entirely. I think it's really important. And I want to actually step back and ask you a little bit more of some macro questions. You've been traveling now for eight years. And you have been to over 60 countries, over 20 of them in Africa, which, obviously, has a very special place, in your heart. And I want to just ask you a little bit to speak about that. And I guess, I want to pose the question, to start off with, the first question, at the most macro level, is why do you travel. Why, potentially, should other people travel? What is the value of travel? As you said, there are beautiful places to see in the Netherlands. It's a gorgeous country.

There's plenty of social injustice and poverty and issues that need to be dealt with in the Netherlands. All of that stuff is also in the Netherlands, as it is in the United States where I'm from, as it is in every country. But talk a little bit about why travel. What do you get from it? Why do you travel? And why should other people probably do some traveling as well?

Stella: This is like a super subjective, individual question. So, I definitely cannot say this is for others. It's just my own, unique experience. So, in my case, I would say that, while traveling, I got confronted a lot with myself because strangers are sometimes more honest with you than friends because friends are sometimes not that critical, or they don't dare to tell you, in your face, what they don't like about you because they're afraid of losing you. But if you meet

strangers, while you travel, they don't give a damn if you don't want to talk to them anymore. But they are way more honest in confronting you.

So, that's something that I realized, while traveling, which I found extremely interesting and also powerful because it helped me a lot, in my own self-development. For example, with Uganda, in particular, what I found very interesting was how the community works and how people help and love each other and their family. That also made me realize that I should invest way more time into my own family as well.

Matt: That's really powerful. So, maybe could you share some of your travel stories? I know you've traveled extensively. And you've done a lot of solo traveling. And you and I have been sharing travel stories. We've been to Barcelona together for a couple of weeks now and have been hanging out and sharing travel stories and stuff. And one of the ones that stood out to me that I wanted to ask you if you could share is the story about how you used Tinder when you were traveling alone through Africa a few years ago, and what came of that because I thought that really stood out to me. Can you share that story?

Stella: Yes, of course. So, yeah. I love Tinder. Right now, not anymore because I have a boyfriend. I used Tinder as no mating, no dating. You're laughing.

Matt: That's amazing. That's amazing. And your profile, literally – but when you were single, this is an important context for the story.

Stella: Yes, I used to be single, yeah.

Matt: When you were single, and you were using Tinder, your profile said no mating, no dating.

Stella: Mm-hmm.

Matt: That's amazing. So, go ahead and talk about what you did use it for then?

Stella: Because I love honesty. And I was like I don't want a guy to fall in love with me or, of course, probably just spending one fun night with me. But I don't want that people would be like oh, my God,

amazing. She's over here. I want to meet here and have crazy ideas because I was like I'm here maybe for only a day or two. So, what's the point. So, I wanted to be as upfront, clear, and honest to people. And, of course, I was single. So, of course, if I would meet people that I really clicked with, who knows what happens? But, in general, I swiped right on a lot of people that I was initially not attracted to but that actually turned out to be amazing people.

Also, I read the profiles because of the things they were doing. Yeah, so, I met, for example, when I was in Mali in Bamako, I was together with a girl. And we were constantly stuck in our backpacker hostile, which was not like a backpacker hostile. It was Bamako, of all places, so it was full of policemen and soldiers and United Nation people. Mali was not the safest place on earth. So, there were no tourists. And we couldn't really go out at night partying. So, in my case, we were in this hotel for quite some time because we were waiting for our visa approvals of the other countries.

And I started to get a bit bored. And I was saying to my friend, "Let's invite some guys from Tinder. We will be honest about it and tell them that they just can come all together." And my friend was, at first, looking at me like this is a weird idea. I was like why is it weird. What's the worst that can happen but another boring night over here? So, I invited those guys. And it was amazing. We had such nice conversations. And then, after I left the country, those guys started hanging out with each other because they met during that night out. That wasn't my only experience. I have many of those stories all over Africa, but a lot also in Uganda.

I met a lot of guys in Kampala through Tinder who actually got engaged with my project, even made short movies for my project, everything. I would say that, in the African continent, you, obviously, have fewer people on Tinder because I went to remote places. So, in 10 minutes, I would literally swipe through everyone. It's not like Amsterdam where you have tons of people on there. And I sometimes had a feeling that just the fact that that person was in the same place as me, why the heck is you in this remote place. There must be an interesting story behind it, probably, in the first place, since you are here.

So, I want to meet you. Of course, you can say why don't you use Intonations or some of the ex-pat friends. Well, my answer to that,

it's just too slow. If I start posting something in a forum, I have to wait, until people reply. And it's just too slow. And nowadays, our life is fast. So, that was just the fastest way for me to immediately get responses of people and get meetups.

Matt: And you're still connected with some of these people. And some of them are still even involved in the work that you're doing.

Stella: Yes. So, like I already mentioned, one of the guys from Tinder, he made a video for my organization. And the other guys are not directly involved anymore, but some of them do sponsor children of my foundation because they visited our project. So, yeah.

Matt: And you even opened up your Tinder profile to men and women and made female friends on there as well.

Stella: So, this was actually a really, really interesting aspect. I did also meet women in Uganda and also outside of Uganda, also in other countries. Yeah. One of the women I met also became a big supporter of our organization. But also a friend of mine. I would say she really helped me a lot over there,.

Matt: Let me ask you one more question. And then, I want to move into the lightning round here and wrap this up. How do you deal with stress? And how do you organize your time, in your life, as you're moving through time zones and that kind of stuff, to optimize your productivity and get things done, but also manage the stress that comes, typically, with entrepreneurship and all of that?

Stella: So, regarding the stress part, I used to be very stressed with everything because I had very high standards set for myself. I was extremely career oriented. And I just completely changed, in that aspect. So, everything that I'm doing is only for myself. And a lot of people ask me about numbers. How many bracelets did you sell? How many necklaces? How many this, how many that? And for me, that has been so unimportant because, when I started this journey of starting 22 Stars and stopping whatever I was doing, the most important thing was to really find peace and happiness with myself.

Like I already mentioned before, throughout my youth, I struggled with my situation with my family. I really wanted to be more connected to my mom but also to my dad and just have more peace

in this relationship. And that's what I found. And I found it through being a digital nomad and through setting my own times when I'm working. And I said no to a lot of partnerships because of this because people started offering me things like yeah, we can work together. But then, I want monthly reports, or I want this or I want that from you. And I was like no. I'm not just doing whatever I'm doing to sell thousands of bracelets or to sponsor thousands of kids.

Obviously, I do want, at one point, to reach this. However, it should be at one point. I like to take things slow and on the way, learn and adjust, before I would make a big mistake. And if you take little steps, I take a lot of steps forward, but I sometimes take a lot of steps backward. But because I always take little risks and little steps, I'm moving forward slowly. But I also move forward together with my Ugandan people at their pace. So, I really try not to take things too fast. Take it step by step. And that's how I deal with stress because I would say that, in general, I don't really have that much stress because I'm not responsible – I am responsible, obviously, for my project and for my kids.

But I know that all of that I calculated and that's all protected. I know that, even if some sponsors would fall out, even if some money would drop, I made, obviously, some secure places in my organization that I always know we have something to fall back on. So, I would say that everything that I'm doing is somehow protected. I also have my own falling nets with having my property that, even if something would go wrong, I would still have this net I could fall into. So, I, literally, don't have that much stress. And I just try to avoid it by taking things slow, step by step.

Matt: I get a lot of questions from people, women in particular, about solo travel. And for female solo travelers, you have traveled by yourself through a lot of the world, including a lot of parts of the world that would have high-security warnings associated with those countries. Can you talk a little bit about any advice that you would have for women that are considering long term, solo traveling endeavors, and what types of security precautions or other types of planning they should do for a long term, female solo travel experience?

Stella: I would say that, in general, as you already know, I'm not someone who is planning that much ahead and all of that. But if I look back

at it, of course, sometimes, I would have thought maybe I should have had like a smartphone with me because I traveled quite a lot without a phone, which was also quite enlightening for me. But I would say, in the end, it doesn't matter how much pre-research you do or pre-arranging things. It's all about the moment. So, for example, what I usually do is, if I travel solo, it really avoids alcohol. That's actually one of my No. 1 rules when I travel. I would maybe have one wine, but I would definitely not drink a whole bottle or more than that.

So, really stay super aware of your surroundings. I already mentioned to you, I would have four eyes in my head all around. So, just always following my intuition because, unfortunately, you cannot always rely on a smartphone. I traveled without a smartphone, but even if I would have had a smartphone, a smartphone can run out of battery. So, how much help would it be? Nothing. So, you should not prepare that much beforehand, but you should be ready at the moment. So, as I already mentioned to you, I read this very inspiring book, *Power of Love*, from Eckhart Tolle, during my 42-hour bus drive from Zimbabwe to Tanzania. And it made me, again, aware of how much you should really be present because you can just see a lot of potential danger if you just open your eyes. You can see, if something feels uncomfortable, or if you get scared of something. So, just really throw that smartphone away. Or even though I sometimes wished I would have had it with me, it's still good to not look too much into it. Today, for example, we almost missed each other, in this café, because I was, actually, looking on my smartphone typing some stuff. And I was not even aware that you were passing me.

So, if you're really aware of your surroundings, then, you really know what's going on.

Matt: That's good advice. All right. Stella, are you ready for the lightning round? What is one book that has significantly impacted you, over the last decade that you would most recommend to people?

Stella: Yes, it's definitely *The Power of Love*. And the funny thing is that I did not want to read it. I thought it was boring. And I was like do I really have to read this. So, I was in Zimbabwe, and I was going to the bus station. And I asked when the next bus would leave. And they told me, initially, it's leaving in 10 hours. And it was already

7:00 p.m., so I couldn't buy another book to read. I didn't have my smartphone with me because I left it somewhere by accident. So, I had nothing. And then, I went to my hotel. I asked them if I could buy a book from them because I saw a whole library of books.

And they were like no, you need to exchange a book. So, for a second, I was even thinking should I exchange this book for it because I thought it was so boring anyway? But then, it was a gift from a friend. So, I also had a feeling like no, I cannot exchange a book that I just got as a gift. So, I have to keep it. I asked them if I could buy another book. I couldn't. So, I had only one book with me. I was on this bus trip, which is like a whole story by itself. And I had read this book two times even. And yes, definitely read it. I mean, a lot of stuff, obviously, was also new for me.

But a lot of stuff was also affirming what I was already doing naturally, which is also sometimes nice to just read something that shows you again that what you are doing is a good thing.

Matt: What is one app or productivity tool that you're currently using that you would recommend?

Stella: I guess, it's a common one. It's Slack. So, I love Slack because it has all of those different channels. And it's quite organized.

Matt: If you could have dinner with one celebrity or author or public figure, someone who is currently living now, anyone in the world, who would it be?

Stella: Matt already asked me these questions hours ago. And to be honest, I still don't have an answer to it. I went on Google, and I Googled all of these people. And sorry, I never, ever cared anything about famous people, celebrities, all of that. I really love meeting real people. And I think that a lot of real stories are not highlighted enough because people don't have the marketing budget to promote themselves or whatever the reason is. So, I, personally, would not like to pick any celebrity.

I would really love to pick a real person who is inspiring, empowering, who overcame challenges. Someone, for example, like Susan is my project manager who really fights for the future for herself, for her kids and just never, ever stops and really does things and doesn't sit back home being lazy and waiting for something to happen. I like people taking action.

Matt: Knowing everything that you know now, with all of your life experience, looking back, what advice would you give to your 20-year-old self?

Stella: So, my advice would definitely be to be confident and really find your own way because I had a feeling that, for a very long time, I had the voices of my parents inside of my head and my community, my friends, everyone saying you have to go in this direction. And changing the field, finding my tribe, like the tribe on nomad's cruise, that's one of my tribes, finding my tribe really helped me to be surrounded with people who actually really uplift me and inspire me and encourage me and motivate me. And I was with people for way too long who were thinking in a different direction than I do, which is not wrong.

There's nothing wrong about it. But you really need to look into yourself to see what you want, and then, find people who agree with what you want. And don't hang around with people who go into a different direction.

Matt: What are your top three travel destinations that you've ever been to that you would love to go back and spend more time and that you'd most recommend that other people visit?

Stella: Uganda. Yes, I love Uganda. So, I definitely always would go back there over and over and over again. They're the most friendly people on the planet. And it has beautiful nature and everything. So, Uganda is No. 1. No. 2 and No. 3 are very difficult, I would say because I love a lot of places. I would say, actually, for me, one of the places was Beijing, China. I would love to go back. And it's actually quite funny because, on the first side, I, at least, thought that Beijing was polluted and ugly and dirty and not nice. But I would say Beijing is one of those cities who hides something. So, it's not that obvious, in your face, that you take the plane, you arrive, and you're in paradise. No.

You would need to look for it. But that's also the charm that you do need to make some efforts. But then, if you find the nice places, the nice people, the hidden gems, then, it is paradise. So, Beijing, China is second. And then, third, I would say Cape Town. It's so obvious. It's like everyone always says it, but I love nature and everything that it has.

Matt: What are your top three bucket list destinations, places you've never been that are at the top of your list that you most want to go?

Stella: So, that's also a good one. So, 10 years ago, when I did me around the world travels, I already made a bucket list of places that I really wanted to go to where people told me that those places probably, within 10 years, would not be that nice anymore. There was Galapagos Islands, Great Barrier Reef in Australia, some more places like that. And I went to them already. So, I sometimes feel a little bit spoiled because I've been to so many amazing places already. So, now, if I have to choose the place that I really would love to go that I have not been to, oh, my gosh, there are a ton. But to start, I would say Japan really interests me a lot.

When I was in China, I wanted to go to Japan. But I had a single visa for China. So, I couldn't go from China to Japan, otherwise, I would not have been able to go back to the country. So, that's also a thing that you really have to be aware of like our visas. I, myself, I'm in such a privileged situation because of my visa. And I sometimes also feel guilty about it because I'm surrounded with a lot of people who don't have my visa situation. So, indeed, I can, literally, say any country I want, visa-wise, I know that I probably could make it happen and go there. But I'm also aware of many people who can't. So, it's always difficult to say where I want to go. I like surprises.

I want to be surprised. And how can I surprise myself, if I'm going to now tell the destination already? But to just choose something, I would say Japan, India, Indonesia.

Matt: Those are all three places that I have gone to for the first time, in the last two years. I went to India twice last year. I went to Bali very briefly. I would love to go back and spend more time. And then, this past year, I've spent three months in Japan, which is totally amazing. So, Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto were each a one month base for me in Japan this year. And they were truly amazing. So, I think those are some really, really good destinations. Let me ask you one final question here, in the lightning round, and then, we'll tell people where they can find you and all of the amazing stuff you're involved with.

I want to ask you about the digital nomad ecosystem and its

evolution. You've been a world traveler now for a decade. You've been full-time nomading for many years. And you've seen the ecosystem evolve, as you just mentioned, the term that you found your tribe or tribes plural, in multiple senses of that. How do you, if you can talk a little bit about what it means to you to be a digital nomad, how that lifestyle works for you, and how you see the nomad ecosystem evolving into the future if you can share that?

Stella: So, that's an interesting question because I don't know, actually. Even though I have been a digital nomad for 10 years, I'm not a specialist. I never looked into this topic. I just know, from my environment, that I, obviously, do see it growing. I see some people who also want to travel more. Or not even travel more. A lot of my friends, they want to still have their home base, which I think is quite important to have as well. So, they don't want to become nomadic. So, the digital nomad is, obviously, a term that involves a lot of things. So, I would say people definitely want to have the option and opportunity to work from home more.

It doesn't have to be like being self-employed or have your own business. It can be working for a company. But I definitely think that also companies, of the future, should take into account that people love to work one or two days a week from home and, perhaps, also reconsider this whole model of this 9:00 to 5:00, five days a week job. Yeah, be more flexible.

Matt: All right. Stella, how can people find you? Now, we're going to put all of the links to everything in the show notes. But just verbally here, how can people find out more about you, about what you're doing, follow you on social media, get involved with your programs, or learn more about them, if they want to, where do they go?

Stella: Stella Romana Airoidi, that's my name. I guess, if you Google it, you will find a lot about me. So, you can just Google it, then, follow it. Of course, on Facebook, it's my name. If you follow my name, you find 22 Stars and everything, the same for Instagram, same with my email address, stella_airoidi@hotmail.com. I think I'm very easy to Google because there are not many people with my name.

Matt: Okay. And we're going to put all of this in the show notes, so you don't have to remember that. You can just go to the

www.themaverickshow.com show notes, and we're going to have all of these links there for you, so you can just click on them. But what are the opportunities for people to get involved with what you're doing if they want to go on a co-workcation, or they want to learn more about that, what are the options for people?

Stella: So, people should just, literally, write to me because I'm quite flexible. And I'm open to everything. So, just contact me, and we can discover together what the options are because I have tons of options for people to get involved. For example, you can get involved remotely, do, for example, content writing for us, translations, become a wholesaler, affiliate partner. You can buy our jewelry through that. You can even become a designer. You can become a photographer. You can also just follow us, share our stories, become a long term sponsor for kids. You can definitely come to Uganda, visit us over there.

Just contact me, and I will look at you as a person specifically because I don't like those packages where people say this works because I would say we are all individuals, and everyone has his own skills and unique features. And I look at how someone can get involved case to case.

Matt: Right. And they can also buy the jewelry, which every piece of jewelry that they buy also benefits all of these causes as well. So, we will put links to all of this stuff in the show notes. So, just go to www.themaverickshow.com and you will see links to every single one of these things that we're talking about. You can check out the websites. And you can contact Stella directly there. Stella, thank you so much for being here. It was a pleasure to have you on the show.

Stella: Thanks a lot. It was super exciting to be over here.

Matt: Awesome. Well, we will keep everyone posted on how the nomad cruise goes for us. We're about to embark from Barcelona and go to Brazil and have some more adventures. But thank you, everybody, for joining. Definitely be sure to check out Stella's stuff. I'm rocking one of her bracelets right now. And they are really, really awesome. So, check it out in the show notes. Good night, everybody.

Announcer: Be sure to visit the show notes page at

www.themaverickshow.com, for direct links to all of the books, people and resources mentioned in this episode. You'll find all of that and much more at www.themaverickshow.com.

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