

Agency for Change Podcast : Ava Thomas, President and Publisher of the Lincoln Journal Star

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing, and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change and these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Hello changemakers, this is Lyn Wineman, Founder and President of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of Agency for Change podcast. Speaking of change, there are few industries that have undergone as much change in recent history as the newspaper industry and our guest today has seen it all. Ava Thomas is President and Publisher of the Lincoln Journal Star. She's also Regional Group Publisher for Lee Enterprises, the Journal Star's parent company, and she oversees 11 other newspapers and websites in Nebraska, as well as agricultural publications and sites in 12 other states. Ava, thank you for taking time out of that busy schedule. I don't know how you do it all, but how are you today?

Ava Thomas:

I am doing well, thank you so much for having me Lyn. I've got to tell you I'm a total podcast junkie. I don't have TV, so it's my go-to vice and I've really, truly enjoyed what you and your team have created here.

Lyn Wineman:

Well, thank you for that. I do think podcasts have really come of age. I find myself collecting podcasts, right? I'll hear about a new one and I'll add it to the list, kind of the way we used to add to a book list I think.

Ava Thomas:

Yes! Ditto. I've got a ton in my library.

Lyn Wineman:

Right, that's our new stressor, I've got to listen to my podcasts.

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

So now Ava, by looking at you and obviously people are listening, but I can see you, I can't believe that you are old enough to have been at the Journal Star for 25 years. But you began your career a while ago while you were attending the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, and you have worked your way up from classified advertising to the President and Publisher of the company. And what was it that just interested you in this business and got you started there?

Ava Thomas:

Well, that's actually kind of an interesting question Lyn, and I'll tell you why. I actually wasn't interested in getting involved in the newspaper industry, like not at all. In fact, I was moving to Lincoln in, oh gosh, December '94. I was transferring, as you mentioned, to the university. I was going to UNK, I lived in Grand Island, and I was transferring to UNL. I'm moving to Lincoln, the big city. I'm a young, single mom at the time so, my daughter Sierra was five years old and I was actually pregnant and due any day with my son Malcolm, who actually just turned 26 yesterday.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh my goodness.

Ava Thomas:

I know. So I know some of you are probably doing the math here, I was getting ready to start winter semester and so the motivating factor for me was not, I want to work for the newspaper, it was the Journal and Star because we were two papers at the time.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

Yep. It was the proximity to the university and free parking if I worked at the Journal Star so...

Lyn Wineman:

Free parking is a big thing.

Ava Thomas:

Right? That's a driving factor in downtown.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Ava Thomas:

That lot where the Embassy Suites is, the hotel, was the parking lot for newspaper employees, so if you can picture it, I was smack dab in the middle of classes at UNL and my job at the paper. So just taking a step back I think, the first thing I do when I get to Lincoln is I apply at the newspaper and I apply at this downtown thrift store. I don't know if you remember this Lyn, it was called the Martin Luther Thrift Shop.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, absolutely.

Ava Thomas:

It was a goody. The thrift store gave me... So both had benefits, right?

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

The thrift store gave me first dibs at the best hand-me-downs and the job at the paper gave me parking.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Ava Thomas:

But I ended up giving birth to my son before either company called me.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh my.

Ava Thomas:

And then the day... The day I got home from the hospital the newspaper called, I had my interview the next day, and I started at the paper the next week. My son was nine days old on my first day.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, Ava. I've always known you to be industrious, hard-working, resourceful, but wow, that story really paints a picture there on how you put things together. When I hear your story, and I think of the newspaper industry, and even though you weren't going into the journalistic side, the newspaper industry is not really well known for embracing strong women leaders. Business in general was a lot different in the 90s than it is today. I feel like I hear glass ceilings breaking all around as I hear your story. I mean, what has it been like being a strong woman leader in an industry that has historically been dominated by men?

Ava Thomas:

Well, so I never intended to lead this company. I mentioned I was going to the university, I was studying criminal justice as part of a pre-law program. I wanted to be a lawyer. I just thought that the job at the newspaper was temporary. I talked about my son being nine days old when I started, interviewing the day after I got out of the hospital. I didn't tell anybody at the newspaper that that was the case because I didn't want it to potentially impact my employment. But circumstances change, my job in classified led me to a sales job, and for the first decade of my career I can honestly say I just kept my head down, and I worked hard, and I wanted to support my kids.

Ava Thomas:

And what drove me wasn't, I want to break glass ceilings, or I want to make it to the top, or I'm climbing this ladder, it was really all about making enough money to provide my kids the life I didn't have, just to give them every opportunity possible. And I hope this doesn't sound egotistical because it's not meant to be, but for a long time I didn't apply for promotions. I just worked really hard, I tried to master my job, I did my best, and then I'd get tapped for a bigger role. I'd get a promotion. I don't say that to suggest that it was handed to me because I sacrificed a lot. I gave everything to my job, but yes, at some

point that changed. And I think by the time it did, I think I probably had over a decade with the company, maybe 12 years in, I built some confidence, I developed that desire to continue on a leadership path. Obviously, I didn't go to law school.

Ava Thomas:

Yeah, so then it was, okay, now how far can I take this? And it really started to be a goal, a reality for me that someday I may make it to the top of this organization that I love so much. But I will say this, the number one thing I hear when I introduce myself or I'm introduced is, you don't look like a president, or you don't look like you could be the publisher. It just happened last week. I had a national call I was on and it was Zoom, and I logged into the call and was speaking to an older gentleman in Delaware, and he said that. And I have this great response now that I landed on, a good friend helped me with this, she said, "Just ask him, what does the president of a company look like?"

Lyn Wineman:

I love that.

Ava Thomas:

It stumps them.

Lyn Wineman:

It does. We've all seen too many movies I think, about not just the newspaper industry but industry in general. When you say company president, I think we're changing that, you're changing that, people will have a different image in their mind.

Ava Thomas:

Well, I think for some, being a strong woman, and breaking glass ceilings, and knowing your goals from the get-go, that's their path. And for others, like me, we take a little different path, but we all find our way, we all get to the... I use sports analogies a lot, my co-workers will tell you I do that, I'm not even a football fan. I know that's a sin, I know, in this town, sorry basketball's my sport. But there are a lot of routes to get to the end zone and I think that's okay.

Lyn Wineman:

I think what you said is very good advice though. I think there's a lot of information and articles out there for young people entering their careers about having your personal brand, and positioning yourself, and your relationship with your company and your supervisors, but working hard and doing a good job is a really important element to that. And I think that having that part of your personality and your desire, I think obviously was a big part in leading to your success.

Ava Thomas:

Thank you.

Lyn Wineman:

So Ava, we're talking in January of 2021, we've all been through a lot. COVID-19 has changed all of our lives and the newspaper industry, which already in the previous decade had a lot of changes, and now

has also continued to change during the pandemic. I'm curious, what are some of the big changes you're experiencing in your business?

Ava Thomas:

Oh, wow. Lyn, you probably know this better than most because ad agencies are such a hyper competitive industry. The media landscape, much like the retail landscape, it's so dynamic, ever shifting, competitors emerging all the time. If you look at the lifespan of traditional media and what it was even 20 years ago to what it is today, there's just competitors cropping up literally by the second. So, the benefit of that I think is, it pushes us to improve. We're constantly trying to innovate. We're trying to stay ahead of those changes, but we've been around for 150 years. So it makes us really grateful for the relationships that we've forged in our community. We're a pillar. We're an institution, but that's also our challenge. So, people see us as the Lincoln Journal Star, we're seen as the newspaper, and that's just one platform that we have. And like I said, we've been evolving, we've been changing, like any other business we're investing our time, our money, our resources into diversifying that business.

Ava Thomas:

So what does that mean? Well, we put a ton of resources into our website, right?

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Ava Thomas:

As a result, we are an industry leader in digital subscriptions. We've built our social media presence. We have email newsletters, we have text alerts, the digital replica of the paper. I mean, all of these give us new ways to connect with the community. Podcasts, I mean, we're on a podcast and we're doing podcasts. Would we have imagined that 25 years ago? No chance. But when you think of 2020, and we just wrapped up 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, literally the week the entire country basically shut down, we announced that Lee Enterprises, parent company of the Journal Star, that we were purchasing BH Media's 30 newspapers from none other than Warren Buffett.

Lyn Wineman:

Right, a little known guy named Warren Buffett, right?

Ava Thomas:

Yeah, I don't know, a mogul? And with that, we've doubled the size of our audiences nationwide.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Ava Thomas:

That acquisition gave us papers from the Omaha World-Herald to Scottsbluff, so literally a very, very powerful statewide audience. We acquired Sunny Media, which is a full-service ad agency specializing in the auto industry, which is a really, really niche market that...

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Ava Thomas:

We hadn't been working with for a number of years. And then Health Bright, another agency and marketing company that specializes in healthcare organizations. We are backed by the Amplified Digital Agency, they're a Google Premier Partner, they're an industry leader in digital marketing. I think that's what people don't know about us when you say, "I work for the newspaper." Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Right. The newspaper is so much more than just paper, right?

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

I was reflecting before we got on the podcast today, I received a news alert on my phone and was thinking about how there was a time in my career in marketing when you wanted to help your clients either get on or stay off of the front page of the paper, right?

Ava Thomas:

Right.

Lyn Wineman:

And above the fold was like, man above the fold, that was like top, top notch, but now I mean, you still want that but you also want either to be on or to avoid the news alert cycle on the app because even though I am a little old fashioned in this regard, I love getting the paper, the actual, physical paper.

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

And I love reading the front page and honestly, I love seeing the ads too because that's my business.

Ava Thomas:

Right.

Lyn Wineman:

I also probably read several of the stories before I actually get to the print version because they're coming straight to my phone and that's just a whole new aspect of what you're doing and what you can bring to the audience.

Ava Thomas:

Well, you're not alone Lyn. We love all of our customers, whether they're on the app, or they're reading the digital replica, or they're on the site, but certainly print readers are passionate about their product. Tens of thousands of them are still getting them on their doorstep every single day.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

And they're some of the most loyal and passionate about our product. It's great to hear from them.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm also very adamant about tipping my newspaper delivery team.

Ava Thomas:

Oh, thank you.

Lyn Wineman:

I just want to put that out there too. So now, we talked about newspapers. I mean, newspapers, however you get the news that comes from your newspaper, are really vital to communities. It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be in a community that didn't have a paper. I know you have lots of options for providing the news, but the Journal Star and Lee Enterprises also support communities in many ways. And I've heard you speak and you say, "One way we're serving is by helping businesses connect with audiences. Strong businesses make strong communities and strong communities support strong newspapers." And I'd like to think that where we both live right now, Lincoln, Nebraska, is a very strong community.

Lyn Wineman:

And one of the ways Lee Enterprises and the Journal Star have backed that up is by launching the local business stimulus program during the pandemic. Could you talk a bit about that program and the impact it's had?

Ava Thomas:

Oh, certainly. So, with the pandemic, in particular, businesses got hit hard. I'm not telling you anything you don't know or anybody else. We've written about it extensively, including ours.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

The magnitude of that challenge is just completely unprecedented, and we knew, not just the Journal Star, but our parent company Lee Enterprises, we knew we had to do something to bolster the business community. I mean, it's critically important to our business. So, we launched the stimulus program and basically what it boiled down to was giving marketing and advertising credits to local businesses just to help them navigate, in any way they needed, the changes that were resulting from COVID-19 and how it

was impacting their business. And we wanted to enable them to get their message to customers so we provided nearly a half a million dollars to local businesses to do just that.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Ava Thomas:

Yeah, last year.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. I so much appreciate it and at the beginning of the pandemic in particular it was just a terrifying time because we had nothing to look back on to tell us what to do here, right? I mean, yes there was a pandemic a century ago, but the world is different now than it was then.

Ava Thomas:

Oh, amen. There's no roadmap and I think one of the biggest challenges was not knowing, when is this thing over? I mean, you saw the fatigue.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

I think initially, I think there were people that, "Oh, I can do this for 30 days, this isn't bad, I'm working from home."

Lyn Wineman:

Right. Right.

Ava Thomas:

But you get in three, four months down the road and it certainly took its toll.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, when our team first went home, I said, "Hey, how fun would it be for us all to work at home for two weeks," trying to put the most positive picture on it possible. And then we were counting, okay now, it's the sixth week, the seventh week, the 12th week.

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

It's like I'm just going to stop counting, we're all going to be working at home until we figure this thing out, and we're all still working at home but with light at the end of the tunnel. Knock on wood, fingers crossed, and all of those things. So related to the pandemic, you were also appointed as the co-chair of

the Lincoln Mayor's Economic Recovery Task Force. I feel like we could do a whole podcast on that, but can you just share some of the important work of that committee.

Ava Thomas:

Oh, that's been great. I'm on the treadmill one Saturday afternoon and Mayor Leirion calls, and I typically would have ignored the call because I'm on the treadmill.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

But something... I didn't even know it was her, but I looked at the number and something just told me to take the call. And she asked me to co-chair with Angie Muhleisen. Angie Muhleisen, come on?

Lyn Wineman:

Angie's one of my idols, right? Idol, role model, she's amazing.

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Ava Thomas:

Amazing. She's a pillar in the community.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Ava Thomas:

So I'm sitting at my kitchen table and if I'm being honest, I felt so intimidated about the prospect of being co-chairs with her. I think a lot of women feel that imposter syndrome where you're thinking, "Angie Muhleisen? I'm not even close to being on Angie's level and everyone in this town knows that, and what am I doing?" Right? But one conversation with Angie let me know I had to do it, not just because it was an opportunity to work with her and knowing she's one of the strongest leaders in this community, and one of the best business minds.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Ava Thomas:

But she wanted to get stuff done. I don't want to do the censored bleep, she wanted to get bleep done and I loved that.

Lyn Wineman:

I don't have a bleep button, so please don't use those words.

Ava Thomas:

Stuff. Stuff. The other s-word.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay.

Ava Thomas:

And I loved that and I was fully on board. So we put together a committee of 18 task force members across a variety of sectors, industries, a well diverse group. We split into subcommittees, we worked all throughout the summer and delivered our recommendations in September, and since then we've been really focused on executing those strategies. And I don't want to get too in the weeds, I think the full report is 34 pages or something like that.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, it's long.

Ava Thomas:

So, I highly recommend the three-page abbreviated version that will tell you all the recommendations. Angie and I, along with Wendy Birdsall from the Chamber of Commerce, we've been really focused on what we've done to the 1% Pledge. We've had dozens, and dozens, and dozens of calls to business leaders, and community leaders, and business groups, Rotary, Chamber, LPED.

The 1% Pledge, is a super simple way to just re-circulate revenue back into our local economy and what it entails is asking Lincoln businesses to spend 1% of their local controllable expenses with local vendors and businesses because the research that we used and the data we analyzed in creating these recommendations suggested that like-sized markets that have done this have generated about 50 million dollars back into their local economy. That's what we've been doing the past couple of months. We've got about 50 businesses on board now, I want to say, and those conversations Lyn, they led to us uncovering a variety of other opportunities as well.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Ava Thomas:

It's where Pledge to Shop Local originated, which was a movement for community residents. So in pivoting from the business aspect to asking community residents to get out, to support our local, and small, and minority, and women-owned businesses when they need us most. So stop clicking, get off Amazon, and support our local businesses.

Lyn Wineman:

I think people really-

Ava Thomas:

Just a lot of tentacles.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, people really jumped in on that Ava. I mean, that was such a great idea and I really saw a lot of people embrace it to the point where you almost would have felt embarrassed-

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

To give a non-local gift, which is very powerful.

Ava Thomas:

Yes, fully embracing it and this isn't just in our community although I feel like it's part of the fabric of Lincoln to support each other, but nationwide you're seeing a turn away from nationals and the behemoth of Amazon to our local folks.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, that's a great initiative. Great work, thank you for doing that. Lincoln is lucky to have you doing that. And we mentioned Angie Muhleisen, I've had the chance to work with her too. I hope she listens to this because she's one of the, in addition to being smart, and powerful, and visionary, also one of the warmest, and most humble, and most inclusive people I think I've ever worked with as well. So just really a great role model for men and women alike.

Ava Thomas:

Couldn't agree more.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, and gosh this is leading us right into the next question I have for you. One thing I really love about Lincoln is the Inspire Celebrating Women's Leadership Awards that the Lincoln Journal Star sponsors, founded. I mean, you do all of that work but I know you concluded the sixth year, this year.

Ava Thomas:

We did.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Will you talk more about that and how you... I know you were instrumental in that.

Ava Thomas:

Oh, how much time you got Lyn?

Lyn Wineman:

I know, right.

Ava Thomas:

My favorite topic.

Lyn Wineman:

We could do another podcast just on this. As a matter of fact, one of my goals is to be able to talk to each of the Women of the Year from that, which I know will be difficult but I would love to interview each of them on this podcast.

Ava Thomas:

Oh, they're incredible.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

This is one of my favorite things to talk about. So it's January 2015, and I had recently been named the President and Publisher here, so now I'm on various boards, and getting comfortable with attending events, and rubbing elbows with folks who are kind of the Angie Muhleisen's in the community. And I'm at the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors meeting one morning, and keep in mind I'm the new kid, right? So I'd been the General Manager at the paper before I became Publisher, but I can't tell you how many people, even at that meeting asked me, "Oh, where'd you move here from?," when the announcement was made. So "I've been here 20 years." But I kept my head down, and I was working. So anyway I'm sitting directly...in that meeting, I'm sitting directly across from Kim Moore, and I don't know if you remember Kim Moore but she was the CEO of CHI St. Elizabeth at the time.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Ava Thomas:

And then Kim Russell, she's across the aisle, and she's the Bryan Health CEO at the time.

Lyn Wineman:

Yep.

Ava Thomas:

Wendy Birdsall's leading the meeting, she's Executive Director of the Chamber, Joanne Martin's there, Angie Muhleisen's there, I mean, just... I'm looking around the room.

Lyn Wineman:

What a group.

Ava Thomas:

Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

It's the hospitals, the newspaper, the Chamber, the Community Foundation, the largest insurance company, you mentioned the Women of the Year, Joanne Martin was there.

Lyn Wineman:

Yep.

Ava Thomas:

I mean, it's incredible. So I wrote down on the agenda from the meeting, and it's like, we need to celebrate these women.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Ava Thomas:

What can we create to celebrate women's leadership? And I brought it back to my team and that fall we had the inaugural Inspire Women's Awards. The thing is that, if I could just put it into perspective for people that maybe don't know about it, is we get hundreds of nominations, I mean, hundreds and hundreds of nominations. And I, along with the Inspire Advisory Board, we read every single one of those nominations.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Ava Thomas:

And it is daunting. It probably sounds like it is, and it is, but it is truly heartwarming and at the risk of sounding cliché, it's inspiring.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

It makes you want to inspire someone in the way these women have. That one event has turned into a scholarship for future leaders, we have micro events, we have a newsletter, we have monthly profiles. We just launched the Inspire Girl's Program for the younger crew. And it's continuing to grow and evolve like anything, and we've just created a ton of things over the course of 26 years. That's one of the things I love to do, to think of things like that. But Inspire is definitely among the things I'm most proud of in my career here.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, I was... As a matter of fact, this year because of the pandemic I attended remotely, and so it's the first time I think I've missed it but one of my favorite things, always a must-do on my calendar. So kudos to you.

Ava Thomas:

You have had a ton, a ton of nominations from your team. I think Jen Landis was with you when she won, wasn't she?

Lyn Wineman:

Yes, Jen Landis won in entrepreneurship and I was lucky enough to win in entrepreneurship.

Ava Thomas:

Yes, you were.

Lyn Wineman:

So I didn't expect to but I really appreciated that, but we've had a number of... We like to support strong women leaders at KidGlov and so we've had a number, and will continue to nominate people from our team as well. So thank you for that.

Ava Thomas:

Thank you.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, so now Ava, one more thing that we could also probably spend a whole nother podcast on, but I only have time for one question. You personally are so committed to supporting community causes, in particular I know you are instrumental at one of my other favorite things, 100s of Women Who Care. I've heard you volunteer as a big sister and you support the Lincoln Community Foundation. Why is this work so important for you?

Ava Thomas:

Oh, I think it stems from where I came from. I didn't have a stable childhood when I was young. There was a lot of dysfunction in our family. My mom was 17 when she had both my brother and me, so do the math on that one Lyn.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, wow. Wow.

Ava Thomas:

Yeah, we're 10 months apart.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Ava Thomas:

So can you imagine being 17 and having two kids under the age of one? There was abuse, there was alcoholism, and addiction, and a lot of moving from state to state. We were on government assistance. We were pretty transient, living in low income housing when we did have bouts of stability in our life, but I feel really fortunate because we managed to avoid foster care. We had a very large, loving network of family. My grandma was sort of our rock, always taking us in. So, when I had the opportunity to be part of... I think the first thing I did was being a big with Big Brothers Big Sisters and the reason I chose to do that was to try to give back because I felt like I had that mentor in my family and recognized that there were young women that didn't. Laura was my little and I was hooked into this desire to give back to others who faced challenges and adversity in their lives. You didn't mention it, but RISE is a prison mentoring program that I'm-

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, RISE is a fabulous program. Yes, thank you for-

Ava Thomas:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

It's amazing. I'm extremely passionate about supporting them with my time and my money because I know first-hand what leads to incarceration. In so many cases, it's substance abuse, it's mental health issues, it's poverty, and we're all better than our worst mistake in life so I believe in second chances. I know gosh, like 100s of Women Who Care, I could do a whole podcast on that. They're just the most remarkable women.

Lyn Wineman:

Remarkable, yes.

Ava Thomas:

You've been, so you know.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, I love going. Yes. I go whenever I can.

Ava Thomas:

How simple.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

If people don't know of 100s of Women Who Care, it's essentially 100 women getting together for 100 minutes to pick a deserving charity and we write a check for 100 bucks. So who wouldn't want to give \$10,000.00 to charity a few times a year? Yeah, Community Foundation, phenomenal, phenomenal organization. What they have done, I think you had Barb Bartle on.

Lyn Wineman:

I did, she's another one of those Women of the Year, I believe from the Inspire Awards.

Ava Thomas:

She is.

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Ava Thomas:

She is. Under her leadership, what she's built and just the incredibly talented team, they're so passionate about Lincoln and doing amazing and impactful work in this city. So I feel really lucky to be a part of it. I'm actually going off the board in February and I'm bummed about it, but... So, I should circle back to something because I talked about my mom, and abuse, and addiction, and things of that nature, but my mom is incredible and she just celebrated, this Christmas, on Christmas Day, 35 years of sobriety.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, good for her. That is an amazing accomplishment.

Ava Thomas:

Yeah, she just moved to Lincoln. She's like eight minutes from my door. She is the prime example of someone who never, ever gave up and she says often that she got a little later start in life than others, but she's made up for it. She's just incredible, the best grandma, the best great grandma, I'm just really, really lucky.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great. Ava, I did not know the details of your story in that way and so thank you for sharing. And you are just the picture of perseverance and success, and I'd love to hear what advice you would give to listeners who want to make a difference in their lives, and in their communities, and essentially in the world.

Ava Thomas:

Gosh, kind of a loaded question.

Lyn Wineman:
It's very loaded.

Ava Thomas:
You talked about interviewing the Women of the Year and I'm sure you remember Donde Plowman.

Lyn Wineman:
Yes.

Ava Thomas:
She was former Vice Chancellor of the University for those who don't know. She had a motto when she came and it was, start something. And she left her mark on Lincoln.

Lyn Wineman:
She did.

Ava Thomas:
She left her mark on the state I mean, if we're being...

Lyn Wineman:
And she was not here very long either.

Ava Thomas:
Right.

Lyn Wineman:
But I think she was one of those people who leaves her mark wherever she goes.

Ava Thomas:
Yes.

Lyn Wineman:
In a very positive and powerful way.

Ava Thomas:
Well, like we were talking about in the beginning, she had a vision, she knew it from day one, she was breaking glass ceilings right and left.

Lyn Wineman:
Yes.

Ava Thomas:

But I remember she invited me to lunch one day and we went to Misty's downtown and she told me how when she first got to UNL she met with the university leadership and she had this grand vision. She started up the CBA and so she had this vision of building a new College of Business Administration building.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

And I don't want to... This is my interpretation, I didn't get the sense that she got a ton of support on that.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

But it didn't deter her. Some people would have just... Would have maybe... But it didn't deter her, she raised 150 million for the college. She had what? 85 million dollars for the new building?

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing.

Ava Thomas:

She built that.

Lyn Wineman:

And she did it. I mean, she led that effort and she did it. And it's not just a building, I mean it has brought businesses across the state together in a different way I believe.

Ava Thomas:

Oh, absolutely. The Clifton Strengths Institute that she made possible it was... So I remember leaving that lunch, so you're asking what do you do to make a difference in your community and the world? I remember leaving that lunch and thinking, I'm over here patting on myself for raising 20 grand for a local non-profit, but here's the deal. When you think about, okay, start something, I started somewhere. I started with \$20.00. I worked my way up to \$200.00. A few years later it's a couple thousand dollars. And then by the time I'm sitting at lunch with Donde it's \$20,000.00, and I think it's, like I talked about my mom and her getting a little later start because she took a different path, and we all have to start somewhere so just start. It doesn't have to be perfect. I think I, along with a lot of women I speak to, we fall into this trap of perfection, and over polishing, and it's got to be just right. Don't do that, just decide and start.

Lyn Wineman:

Just go. Someone told me once, anything that's worth doing is worth doing ugly, and it's a... Right?

Ava Thomas:

I love that.

Lyn Wineman:

It's a weird quote, but what it means to me is yes, don't wait to perfect it. Get out there and try, try it, try it on. Figure it out but don't wait and I hear you saying that too. So Ava, we've talked about so much today. We've talked about your career, your passions, your community service, the different programs that you have. I mean, the question I have for you is, how do you do it all? Like work, community, kids, family, personal life, I hope you have some time for yourself occasionally, but how do you do it?

Ava Thomas:

Oh my gosh, I'm laughing because I just said to my executive assistant yesterday, "I really need more hours in the day."

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

And she just looked at me, "No, no you don't." I will say, and I don't recommend this, but I don't sleep much. I never really have. I talked a little about my childhood and it's just... Having a child at a young age, I was in high school when I had my daughter, I was working. I was going to school, I was working, that doesn't really lend itself to getting a lot of sleep.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Right.

Ava Thomas:

With homework, and a job, and a baby, and again, don't recommend it. I think rest is really important but there's so much that I want to do and that's personally and professionally. I love my job, love it. It's such an exciting time to be in this industry. My company is transforming in a way that I just feel so fortunate to be a part of and when people say, "Oh do what you love and you'll never really feel like you're working," I genuinely love it. I love getting up, I love coming to work, I love the people that I work with, so it is hard to shut it off and I'm sure you find that too, but I have found that same passion with philanthropy. I want to spend more time on that and I'm taking this national social change leadership program, and it's the first all women cohort and they are extraordinary. And I don't... I don't want to play the self-deprecating card, but I kid you not Lyn, I am the dunce in this group.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, I can't imagine that, but it sounds like a great group.

Ava Thomas:

It's amazing.

Lyn Wineman:

I could never... Oh, that's neat. How inspiring that must be Ava. I mean, really. I get that, what you're saying. I mean, kind of sleep fast all right? I can hear-

Ava Thomas:

They call it sleep short. Sleep short is what it is. Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Sleep short, right? When I speak with leaders who just love what they do, it's just like next level. I'm a crazy person that I wake up at 4:00 o'clock in the morning without an alarm and I jump out of bed because I can't wait, what am I going to do next? I have all these things I want to do, so I get that. So I'm going to ask-

Ava Thomas:

What next?

Lyn Wineman:

What next?

Ava Thomas:

What next, yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Right. Right. I'm going to ask you my favorite question next though because I am inspired by motivational quotes and you've shared some things you've heard from others, but I would like an Ava Thomas motivational quote. Just a few of your own words of wisdom.

Ava Thomas:

Wow. I mean, I like motivational quotes. I always pull stuff from things my grandma said as a kid and try to sort of manifest those in my life. I talked about this course that I'm taking and one of the things we've been working on this year a lot is identifying our core values and our guiding principles in our lives. And then aligning those actions and your behavior with those values and principles, so when you say, "This is important to me." Well, let's see what you're doing. Is that reflected in your life? Right? So, I'm really trying to, right now, figure out, are the things that I'm doing, is the way I'm spending my time, am I walking the talk? So I tell myself daily really, walk the talk. And you've probably heard that one before and it's-

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely.

Ava Thomas:

And I don't know if it's considered a motivational phrase, but we took those core values and we had to write guiding principles for our lives. Faith, family, take that and put it in a bookend sentence that is what you'll use moving forward with your life after this. And just taking the time to really step back and think about those, my family comes first. That's a guiding principle for my life. And then I look at, how

am I spending my time? Do I make time for my children? Do I make time for my mother? Do I make time for my niece, my brother, the people that are important to me. Those relationships that... I talked a little bit about sacrifice when you're really, really focused on your work those relationships can suffer, and so yeah... I'm walking the talk, I'm going back to the guiding principles that I drafted for my life to make sure that I'm in alignment with the things that matter most to me.

Lyn Wineman:

I think that's such... I love that quote Ava, and I think it's such good advice because I mean, time is the thing that we have that we can't get back. I mean, it is a very limited resource and I think a key to happiness is making sure that you're spending that time, investing that time essentially, on the things that are really most important to you because honestly there are so many things that are competing for our time. And even if we sleep fast or sleep short we can't do them all, right?

Ava Thomas:

Yep.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great. Ava, I've had so much fun talking with you and I just want to... For people out there who want to learn more about you, Lee Enterprises, Lincoln Journal Star, all of the initiatives and new programs that you're working on, how can they find you?

Ava Thomas:

Oh, I'm really easy to find. Almost too easy to find, if you have a complaint, but we get a ton of compliments too. But if you just go to journalstar.com and the contact us tab, you'll find my information, my email, my phone number... Yep.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow, that is very brave to put it right out there.

Ava Thomas:

Accessible, accessible.

Lyn Wineman:

Good for you though, I think that's fabulous. Good for you. So as we wrap up our time here today, what is the most important thing that you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing Ava?

Ava Thomas:

I guess I would say that it's really not about me. The work I do professionally is all about the focus on the front lines. They're the heart of what we do, speaking from the news perspective they bring you, our community the best, the biggest, the most accurate, the most timely report possible, and I can't... I haven't lived a long life but I think a free press has never, ever been more important than it is in time of crisis and if you think about the pandemic, racial unrest, the political tension and environment we've been living in, those pros work their tails off. And trust me when I tell you, and I think you know this Lyn-

Lyn Wineman:

Yes.

Ava Thomas:

They're not doing it for the money.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Ava Thomas:

It is not about the money. We're all holed up at home, we're paralyzed with fear, we're trying to figure this out, and our news team in particular was out there making sure we were safe, and connected, and we... I have to say this. This pandemic caused our business serious disruption, so it took... We took our most valuable asset, our most valuable product, and we're a business and I think people sometimes forget that, which is our content and we made coronavirus content free.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah.

Ava Thomas:

And I talked earlier about the marketing grants and stimulus money that we gave local businesses, we gave them our other best product which is advertising and marketing services that keep us afloat for free.

Lyn Wineman:

That's so true.

Ava Thomas:

And that's not about me, that's every department in this company has really worked hard to serve our community and I just feel incredibly fortunate to lead the organization. Beyond that in my free time, which is my personal life, I'm focused on the things that matter most to me. Long, long after I'm gone I want my kids, and my grandkids, and others to be proud of my legacy, and follow their passions, and serve others. And I guess that's what I would close with.

Lyn Wineman:

When the pandemic is over and we're out and about, we'll have to grab some coffee sometime. You're a strong leader, you're committed to great causes, and you're a true inspiration. I'm sure our listeners will be moved by your words of wisdom today. Thank you.

Ava Thomas:

Lyn, I'm a huge fan of yours. Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

Announcer:

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