

TRANSCRIPT:

Ep 072 Arlan Hamilton on Starting a Venture Capital Fund for the Underestimated, Minimizing Funding Disparities, and Having the Resilience to Not Give Up

Intro Clip, Arlan Hamilton: My whole thesis around it was very simple when I was talking to people about it before and after investment, which was there are so many underrepresented founders at the time we come underestimated. No, that's part of our vernacular now. But there's so many underrepresented underestimated founders who are women, people of color and LGBTQ, that's where we're starting because that's what I identify as. And that's the first term you know, for those that have done so much with so little. Imagine what happens when you give them more. It was as simple as that.

Suneera Madhani: Welcome to CEO school. We're your hosts Suneera Madhani and Shannan Monson, and we believe that you deserve to have it all. Less than 2% of female founders ever break 1 million in revenue, and we're on a mission to change that. Each week, you'll learn from incredible mentors who have made it to the 2% Club, as well as women well on their way sharing how they defied the odds so that you can do it to your real business now, class is officially in session.

This episode is sponsored by The Club, a Quarterly box and digital monthly community to help you level up and leadership and life. Learn more today at join.theceoschool.co/theclub

Suneera Madhani: Hi, everyone. Happy Monday. And welcome to CEO School, the podcast. I'm so excited for today's episode to interview Arlan Hamilton. Arlan is if you haven't heard of Arlan, you're living under a rock because Arlan has a woman who needs absolutely no introduction. Arlan is a venture capitalist. And she is a proud gay black woman who is taking the VC world by its head and turning everything around really for minority and underrepresented founders. Arlan has been featured on the cover of massive publications such as Fast Company, and she's actually written her book. It's about damn time. So without further ado, I want to welcome to our show, welcome.

Arlan Hamilton: Thank you so much for having me.

Suneera Madhani: I'm so excited. I'm so pumped for today's today's episode because this is something that is very near and dear to my heart. Personally, as a founder, I am a brown Pakistani woman who has raised over 100 million in venture capital, and it was not easy and truly I felt so alone and Like a unicorn doing it in my own way, and also being a mom and doing it. And so I've personally lived through how difficult it is to have an incredible business idea have a scalable business that's growing, and be told by almost every venture capitalists, that they don't want to invest in me. And so I'm so excited to deep dive a little bit about your mission, because it really just resonates so dearly, with what I'm all about, and what CEO school is all about. So tell us a little bit about your journey, because I know we're all dying to hear it.

Arlan Hamilton: Yeah, so I'm 40. Now I like to start there to give you context, I live in Los Angeles. But I was raised in Dallas, Texas, after being born in Mississippi, single mother and a younger brother, who now has children of his own, and he's all adult now, which is still weird. And for the first 35 years of my life, I was broke, I think a lot of people can relate to that, and had a lot of housing insecurity, a lot of food insecurity. For most of that, and I had some wonderful times to I had some really great moments in that. So don't want anybody to think that it was all down and out, right. But I did definitely had a really specific relationship with money and did not like it. And around 3031. So 2010 2011, I started noticing that there were these people in entertainment, or behind the scenes and entertainment, who were making small investments in a place called Silicon Valley. And these are people like Ashton Kutcher and Troy Carter, who used to manage Lady Gaga. And Bieber and his manager, and all these people were making these investments 50,000 here, 100,000 there, and startups, and people would say it was out of their garage or something like that. And so I just got curious, you know, I was I was in Texas, I had been working on the road, as a, as a tour production coordinator for musicians, and also a road manager in some cases. So for some pretty big names at the time. But I still didn't have any like really that much money to live on. So I was living with my mom. And I was noticing these things, though. So I had like, \$12, in my bank account, on a good day, I had been, you know, had all this financial issue. But I was also like paying very close attention to these millionaires and billionaires and wondering, I was following the money. And so I got really excited about the startup world. And I said, I want to start a company, I want to start something based on I had already always been an entrepreneur. But I never really understood the jargon and understood, I never knew what a co founder was, I had already started always started things without like, on my own. And so things like that. So I wanted to research so I would know what to say or what to know, in the rooms with investors. And it was in that research, early 30s, that I came upon this statistic that 90% of all venture capital goes to white men in the United States, and white men, lovely as they are only make up one third of the country. So it doesn't make sense. And I had at that point been surrounded by intelligent, intuitive and ingenuity, you know, who had ingenuity. And people who are women who are people of color, who are women of color, who are LGBTQ, I identify as all of those things. And I just, it just didn't make any sense. So I said, Wait, that's crazy. I know, I don't know anybody in Silicon Valley. I know, I'm in Texas. And you know, I, I just want to know more about this, because it seems more important to me than figuring out how to start a company. So eventually, I said, You know what, I'm going to invest in 100 companies, led by underrepresented founders by 2020. And I said that in like 2014.

Suneera Madhani: That was so incredible. Okay, so you are, I mean, when you talk about being broke, I kind of want to go back a little bit. And you say a lot of people relate to it. Maybe a lot of people listening may not really I mean, I personally have never, I've not related to that I've always been in a stable household, I've always had food, I've never had to think about knock on wood, ever a problem of sustenance or my house or my food, that is a different level of being broke than maybe some people think about that cheat like that is I mean, I'd like to talk a little bit about that, if you're open to it. What does that what kind of mindset does that really put you in from the beginning? Like, I'd like to kind of like dig deep into Arlan's in your background to like, really, that's, that's hard.

Arlan Hamilton: Yeah. And I had a lot of friends and co workers, you know, over the years, who kind of related to you more so and they will say things to me, like, Oh, girl, I'm so broke this month. And I and I would say Oh, really? And I would be very concerned because I knew it broke man, right? And they would say yeah, I have to start dipping into my savings And to me, that's not broke, because for 35 years broke meant you had no money. And what it meant as a child is I had a very stable home when it came to love, and to laughter and to support. But we moved houses at least 12 times a dozen times from one to 18. And thankfully, my mom, I mean, she, she's just my hero, right. And she just kept it together enough that we stayed in the same school district for almost all of it, not all of it, but almost all of it, so that I didn't have to continually change friend groups, because I was already so many things, I was overweight, I have a gap teeth, you know, I was weird. I was always in another world. And so I got bullied, you know, a ton. And so thankfully, we had that where it was that stability of at least I know where I'm going to school. But we just would come home and the electricity would be out. And my mom would just be crying. And she just say I couldn't make it work. I couldn't get the \$100 together this month. And she had two jobs at one point. So it wasn't like she was not trying, it was just she couldn't get head above water. And so from 15, I worked to help put money, you know, food on the table as well. And it. So going into that mindset, my my point of view of money had always up until now had been I hate I hate money. Money makes my mom cry. Money makes me not, you know, I have these clothes, I have to go to school and people make fun of money makes it possible or my mom is sick. And we can go to the hospital because she's worried about the bill. I hated money with a passion. Today, I don't hate money. And I'll tell you talk about a little bit later. I don't hate money today. And I think that's a big shift in power. But it may, the thing is like, just like you don't know what it's like to be poor. I don't know what it's like to grow up without being poor. So I don't know necessarily what I'm missing out on. That's a good positive to it. I don't know how much I'm missing out on, I just know that we adapted, we figure things out. And that from a very young age, I had said to myself, I'm going to be rich. If it's the last thing I do, and it's going to happen while my mom is still alive, so that she can enjoy it. And that's what I walked towards every single day of my life and got into my 30s. And I was just so sad because and disappointed that I was like not even rich, but I just didn't have anything together financially. And I said, this can't hold because at one point, I was homeless with my mom, we were sleeping out of a hotel room, sharing a hotel room every day, we figured out how to get the money for it. And there would be times where we would say we don't have the money and I have to go downstairs, it was like a two floor Best Western or comfort in that I have to go downstairs and talk to the manager and say, Hey, can you give us like five days. And it was like we were living there. And you know, they would give us a little credit. And then we'd find the money. And then we do the same thing the next week. And that was like 34 years old. So I'm in that mindset of I can't have my mom doing this. I can't have my mom sleeping on couches, in her 60s at this point. She can't she's retired she you know, she's doing the best she can she's doing everything she can to pull money, and I'm doing the best I can to pull money in. But it's just not adding up. So at that point, you know, it makes better sense to splits to split up and I sent her back to Mississippi to be with the family. And I went west. And so I'm in that mindset when I'm into a 2014 saying I'm completely broke. In fact, I don't know, I don't have a place to

live. But I'm also going to invest in 100 companies by 2020, even though I don't have any investors yet.

Suneera Madhani: This is so phenomenal. Because, I mean, I interview women every single week, and we talk about success stories and and people don't grow up like I didn't grow up rich by any means. I grew up in a middle class household. But I grew up with also a chip on my shoulder because I had immigrant parents like that was just how we worked so hard when you talk about stability in school, I didn't have that. I moved to 10 different schools in 12 years because my parents didn't have an education. And that was their setback was not having education. So entrepreneurship for them was the only way to actually have the American dream. And so for me, entrepreneurship was actually not sexy. So as you talk about like money was bad for you. Entrepreneurship was like, I never want that. So I fled so far from that, to say I want to have the most stable job so I can have stability for my family so that my kids can go to the same school. I don't have to worry about the business because if business always came home and as kids we always worked in the business, but you know that does something to you and different way, right? So like I relate to this in a completely different way, in ways that it's so unrelated to me. And that you brush, you said that so quickly or like most people can relate, no girl did not relate, and the ones that are going to and this is a problem all over the world that we are not talking about, of the systematic things that are taking place and not cause people to come out of poverty. And so here you are, with everything, like literally you should you have the world against you as a child, like literally, it is so difficult. You are different. You are gay, you're lack. And you're homeless, and we're talking even right now, when you said, You're 40, that story you're telling me about the Comfort Inn was seven years ago

Arlan Hamilton: Six years, six years ago, at the Comfort Inn.

Suneera Madhani: I am, I am floored right now Mic drop and in that timeframe, you're going through this and then you decide you're hearing the talk happening, you're working in the production in the in the, in the music industry, and then you see rich, successful people talking about venture talking about startups. And then you're like, you know what this is I'm going to pay attention. Because I want to change this that's taking place, this is not going to happen for me, and my family is not happening to me, my mother, and you're like, I'm actually gonna be an investor. That is where your head goes, that is. So I don't even understand that.

Arlan Hamilton: Well, I originally, originally, you took it all the way to that point, because originally it was like, I'm good paying attention, because I'm going to start a company. And that's I'm going to get us all out of this. Okay. And then in that research, right, be prepared for these conversations with vendors, customers, investors, that's when I learned about Oh, 90% of all funding goes to white men. So am I going to have a chance? And even if I could hack my way into a chance, what does that leave everybody else? So it was in that moment where I was like, I don't know, it was like, I mean, I actually do know, it felt like it was a more of a calling than a chasing something. It was like, so in 2014, I was at that hotel, I was walking, pasting the parking lot, I still remember it because there's a guy in a truck, the bed of a truck with a with a thing of beer. He's like you want to party? In Texas, it's so stereotypical, but it happened. And

I'm like, No, I'm good. And so I'm pacing this parking lot with my headphones on. And I'm trying to figure out like you're broke, you've been working on this fund idea for a while. Are you crazy? You know, and no, you know, that's a trigger word for some people. And I don't want to offend anybody. But I said to myself, are you crazy? And what I did was I said, Okay, I told myself, close your eyes. And imagine the world in five years. Is it okay with you? If backstage capital doesn't exist? If the fund that does the thing that you say it's going to do doesn't exist in the world? And I just opened my eyes real fast. I was like, No, I'm not okay with that. I'm not okay with that. And not only am I not okay with it, but I don't mind if it happens, even without me. It just needs to happen. It needs to exist. So when I said that to myself in that parking lot of the hotel in that moment, that's what I knew there was no stopping, I am going to figure out a way to invest in underrepresented founders. And on top of that, I'm setting a goal for myself to invest in 100 by 2020, because so many people are telling me we don't exist, and that they're not enough viable companies. So I'm going to turn that on its head. And that was that happened, and I'm broke as you can be. And hadn't. And, of course, people laughed at me. And people sent me out of rooms and things like patted me on the head, all of that. But I just knew I could see it as clear as day. And I have to tell you, we reached 100 companies invested in by 2018.

Suneera Madhani: That's amazing, Arlan that's so incredible. I mean, it's just so incredible that you have the tenacity to not just say, I'm going to start a company, I'm going to actually go there's a problem here, there's a problem that 90% of venture capital goes to white men, and the contrary doesn't look that way. And I'm going to be a catalyst for this change. I don't have any money. I don't have the experience. I'm you know, in some could say like, in the middle of my you know, like, I don't have I don't have the you know, you're not in like you're at a highlight of your career of your professional experience. And you decide you're just picking up nuggets, and you're like, this is what I'm going to do. How do you actually how did you make it happen? So it's so incredible that you did it, but I want to know how.

Arlan Hamilton: Yeah, that question is exactly why I wrote my book because it is a lot to me.

Suneera Madhani: Let's all grab our copy, and it's about damn time. I'm actually gonna link it into the show notes. I'm so excited to deep dive into it. But I mean, give us an abridged version

Arlan Hamilton: Absolutely, I would absolutely love to. And also, I will say there's an audio version of it that I read that I really love people to grab, because you can kind of get inspired by it as you're exercising or doing stuff around the house. And you know, that's my favorite way of taking a book in. But that's just my opinion. So I went from the parking lot to \$15 million raised 170 companies invested in you know, there's, that's a six year period pretty much a little less than six years. Or a little more than six years. First thing I did was, like I said, I sent my mom back to Mississippi, because I just couldn't bear to see her going through the same thing I was going through, we were both going through it together, we didn't have money. But I sent her back to Mississippi. And I just said, you know, give me a few months to figure this out. And she's just been amazing. I then went to California. And I went to I went to Silicon Valley, I went to where were the things was happening. And this is this part I don't want anybody to ever emulate. I don't want anybody to ever think of as a good thing, or you know, give me credit for,

it's just what happened. Try to avoid this at all costs, I ended up sleeping on the floor of the San Francisco Airport. And I would sleep on the floor of the airport. And then I would get up and I would go to meetings. And the reason I chose the airport was because it was safe. In my opinion, it was sheltered. I figured if I ever had to sleep on the ground, I would probably give up. So I knew that about myself. So I said, I'll sleep on the floor of the airport. And I could trick myself into thinking and others, by the way into thinking I just missed my flight. And I could keep myself motivated. It was something I'll never ever want to do ever again, it's not something that I want anybody else to ever do. And I say that because some people have done it on purpose to get my attention. And I just it just I hate it. And it's something traumatic that happened. But I would do these meetings. And I met a woman named Susan Kimberlin in May of 2015, in San Francisco area at a course. And for three months or so three or four months, we talked. And in September of 2015, after she learned everything there was about my vision, because again, I'm just a person sitting here and at the time, I didn't even have my own bank, I didn't have a business bank account, you know, I was just had this idea. So she puts, after all these years of trying, she puts \$50,000 into backstage, and she says take 25 and invest in the first founder and take 25 and invest in you. And so I set up shop, I moved to LA when she did that, because that's where I had friends. And I hit the ground running. And I never looked back because I was so prepared because I had been talking to founders all those years. It wasn't like I was just trying to raise money, and then I'll figure out how I'm gonna invest in. I was working with founders the whole time. So it was a matter of who goes first, basically. So I took that I said, I always said if I get one investor, I'm going to give 100 Just give me one. And I'll take it from there. So Susan gave me that confidence. And literally the ability to not have to sleep on the floor of the airport, or some hotel room that I scraped together and to just be in business. And then I went to the next person, the next person now I had, you know, now I have an investor, would you like to be part of it? Now I have this investment. And this is why I invested in this company. And then that build. And then over time people like the CEO of slack, Stewart Butterfield, people like Marc Andreessen at Andreessen Horowitz, people like Ellen Pao, etc. They started investing, because they saw they saw what I was doing. And now you have to remember this is five years ago. So this is before everybody's talking about race in Silicon Valley. It's certainly after many people came before me to try to talk about it, but it's didn't have that highlight that it has today.

Suneera Madhani: I mean, this is I have so many questions. So this woman really gave like that was the that was your golden ticket. Like everything that you had been working for to get that first shot and you obviously couldn't like it was this or it was like this, you have to make that successful? Like that was it that was it for you? How long were you at the airport for like, How long were you living there?

Arlan Hamilton: I don't like to talk about the length of time. Um, but it was too long.

Suneera Madhani: I cannot even imagine what that must have felt like and just your resilience, like I mean, I commend your resilience for showing up every day going to meetings. And pretty much like putting on a suit of armor that nobody knows about, like literally you're living in your own, you know, in a different reality, like in your day job to actually what's taking place at home at night.

Arlan Hamilton: Yeah. And I have to say it wasn't because I was ashamed that I didn't tell people it was simply because I knew that I would eventually make the fund work. And I didn't want anybody to invest in me, because they were sad for me. So, Susan, today, you know, she, we've done a documentary, we've done all kinds of interviews together. And she To this day, she said, You know, I wish you would have told me you're at the frickin airport. And I said, I could have, and you probably could have saved my save the day. But I don't think it would have the professional relationship that we have. Because you would think of me as a charity case, rather than let me take a bet on this woman who is doing this thing. And that is exactly how it played out. And I'm so grateful for that. So maybe two or three people in Silicon Valley knew and they you know, but no one else knew my mom knew she would send me like \$10 on a card, if she could scrape it together to go to the, to the international portion of the airport, which is open before TSA, and I would go and get a meal. You know what I mean? Like that, it that was on a good day. So that, you know, and then when we were flying before COVID, I was flying so much in the last three or four years. And a lot of times I landed San Francisco Airport, and I would absolutely walk past the spot that I would sleep in. And every single time without fail, I would look at it, I would take stock of it. And I would get emotional. And I would just kind of smile to myself, like nobody knows that I used to sleep there. In this group, you know, this group that's walking with me,

Suneera Madhani: I am literally at a loss of words. That type of resilience. I mean, I'm not I mean, I you've literally defied the odds Arlan like you have defied the odds. This is just thank you so much for sharing that. I mean, this is this is so such a personal thing that you went through. And he used all of that. And you didn't use you use all that fuel. Use all that fuel. You did not let it stop you never once did you say that? This is what's going to stop me. You carried on? How did you start building connections with you know, what was the what was the fund? Tell me a little bit about your your vision for backstage and you know, you are passionate about about helping and funding underrepresented founders. But how did that kind of take place for you? So yeah, that that mission and how that mission really transpired.

Arlan Hamilton : But my whole thesis around it was very simple when I was talking to people about it before and after investment, which which was, there are so many underrepresented founders at the time, we call it must underestimated now, that's part of our vernacular now. But there's so many underrepresented underestimated founders who are women, people of color and LGBT Q, that's where we're starting, because that's what I identify as, and that's the first star, you know, for that have done so much with so little. Imagine what happens when you give them more. It was as simple as that. And the pushback would you know, from anybody would have been but are there enough people starting companies that are good enough? You know, so well, while someone like you might have been out there looking for capital, with the things that you had against you, you know that there are some investors who because of their background, because of what they're used to seeing as the default. What's the CEO look like Mark Zuckerberg for some reason, that they may have said, Oh, you're not CEO material. And so I was hearing that over and over and over from founders I was researching, you know, I think of founders as my customer. And capital is the product. And it's a little you know, maybe the LP

is the customer better analogy, but I think of research is so important, talking to the founders themselves. And hearing the stories, one after the other. There's a black woman that I know who was in her 40s at the time, who was teaching, as was an adjunct professor at a major college, and she couldn't get she already had things in market researched, major moonshot could not get any funding. But the 25 year old white men who she taught, who had a back of napkin idea could get funding. And I could see this happening real time because I was sending the decks at the same time to people. They take the meeting with the guy, and they wouldn't take it with her because they couldn't simply wrap their minds around. She is a powerhouse. He's a force to be reckoned with. And it's it's different than what I imagined us. It's the same reason that when I was on the cover of Fast Company in 2018, as the first non celebrity black woman to be after Oprah, Serena and Beyonce, that as I was going to keynote, an event in Boston, walking out of my hotel room, someone asked me if they could take the towel off of my cart thinking that I was the maid. It is that default. Have I know what you are in this place because that's what I'm used to seeing, or what my what my whatever biases tell you. So if you apply that it's an inconvenience. And it's it upsets me pisses me off in real life. But when you talk about my money, and my livelihood, and whether I get to compete with my biggest competitor or not, because you may not think we can have a beer together, this is serious business. And it happens to so many of us. And so anyway, my vision for backstage was, let's see what we could do. If we see the ecosystem, let's see it, like in an accelerated way. That's why we invest in so many companies, we only invest in 2% of what we see, by the way, can you imagine we've invested 170 companies in five years?

Suneera Madhani: isn't there out air quotes here, pipeline? right, because this is something so I've gone through my fair share of pitches to VCs, I just recently went through a big transaction for fattmerchant, where we were going, we got private equity. And, you know, some of the questions I always like to ask is, tell me about even just other females in their portfolios, I've always been the first female maybe that they've invested in, like, from a portfolio standpoint. But when you look at even just that statistic, less than, like, less than 3% are female, female founder, like female funded, and then it's less than 1%. If you're a minority in these portfolios, and you ask these questions, and then they're like, of course, we want to want to, but there just isn't enough founders out there that are in this tier that are that are, you know, that have skill, but they're just not enough. There's not there's a, this is literally called a pipeline problem is what I hear from the investor space. I'd love for you to comment on that. And tell me about this air quotes pipeline problem.

Arlan Hamilton: It's all bull. It's all excuses. It's one more excuse. And the reason I know it's an excuse other than just logic is that I've been in the situation, you've probably been in the situation to where they tell you. This is what it would take to get XYZ, this is what it would take to get an investment from us. This is what it would take for you to be taken seriously by law, you then go off, and not only do that thing, but exceed it. You come back to them. And they say no, this other thing has to happen to they're moving the goalposts because they never wanted to invest in you to begin with. And the pipeline problem myth is just that maybe at one point at, you know, in the 70s 80s and 90s, maybe there was a point where there weren't enough people starting companies because they just kind of all the systemic stuff going on that that you couldn't

really find 20 different companies in your wheelhouse, etc, etc. You cannot say that today, you can say it five years ago, but you certainly cannot say it today, your absolute evidence of that. And the fact that not only do they use these excuses of pipeline problem, but they also contradict themselves. When they talk about the fact that I can't see it, I don't see it. Their whole job of the venture capitalist whole job is to have an imagination, and to see what others cannot see and to see around corners and to believe in founders to find the outliers. I can't see it. Could you see Airbnb at day one? Don't tell me you don't have an imagination if you could make Airbnb, a multi billion dollar company and day one. So don't tell me, I don't know how to look at your company. Because of your mark. Maybe your market happens to match who you are. Maybe it's for women, you know, don't tell me you can't imagine what it's like to be a woman. Look at the numbers. I can go as Arlan as the black girl woman, you know, I can have a conversation with a white man who's bald and talk to him about a haircare company. For bald men. I do not have to be a bald man to understand the problem of being bald and the dissolution and some cases not a problem. But the solution of having more hair. They tell on themselves when they give us these excuses. And they say in some situations, I am willing to be the Oracle I am willing to be creative. I am willing to be resourceful and research. And in other cases where I don't want to lift a finger, I am willing to give you excuses and make up terms like pipeline Pro.

Suneera Madhani: No, it's definitely it's it's there. And you're obviously proving that wrong every day because your pipeline isn't the problem like there is there is no pipeline problem. And this is just I mean you are I'd love to kind of talk about you know, so you're you've gotten the success that you know you're proving this wrong. You're building connections with these founders, you get your first few investments. You're on the cover of Fast Company. How did everything progressed? so quickly? Can you take us through kind of like that journey? Take us to where we are today?

Arlan Hamilton: Sure. So, for from from the end of 2015, till the middle of two that well, to the to middle of 2016, it was very quiet. You know, I got a few more investors and I made a few investments, but I just kind of hedged down just kind of did my thing. There was then came knocking inc magazine came knocking and wanting to do a story. And this is another kind of lesson that might help somebody like, because it helped me, they wanted to do a story. And people didn't know much about the before, right? So they want to do this kind of profile, big story front page. And I was like, okay, so we do like four or five interviews is a big story. And for for a second of it for maybe two to five minutes of it, I mentioned that I had slept on the floor, the airport, and I had housing and security. And I said to the writer, I said, Please don't make this a story of rags to riches or from homeless to Harvard, or Please don't do that. Because I don't want to focus on that. I want it to be about the founders. He said to me, my editor makes that decision. So if he pulls us out, and he decides that's the headline, it's gonna be the headline. So on the day that it comes out, I opened up the thing, the URL, and it's from homeless to Harvard, you know, it's like the big headline, and I get under my covers, and I just hide my face. I'm like, I don't want to deal with everybody looking at me and sit and feeling sorry for me, I just don't want to deal with that it's not productive. So I'm gonna have a little pity party, I can't believe Inc did that, whatever. And then within a few minutes, my phone starts blowing up, my email starts

blowing up, my dm start blowing up. And it's what some people are, like, Great story, and congratulations, but most of it is, I, I am homeless right now. And you've given me the strength to keep moving on, or I used to be homeless, and I didn't want to give up or right now I feel so I'm not homeless, but I feel so I don't know what to do next. And you've given me and it was just overwhelming of people seeing themselves in some way, fashion or form, and feeling inspired. And I and I was like, wait a minute, I need to just Buck up. I need to stop being so like, you know, self centered. This is actually helping people. This is something I never even imagined I thought the helping was going to be the investing. But they're getting it from the story. That's crazy. I've just known this as my story. I've always been broke. And I wasn't rolling in dough. At that time, you know, I was just sort of making ends meet. So then that happened. And so for the next couple of years, things progressed in the press. And so every piece of press I've ever gotten has been inbound. And people think we have like a whole PR section, but it's all been inbound. So then I was the subject of gimlet startup podcast series, as a six part podcast at the top of 2018. That brought in you know, 10s of 1000s of new people listening to the story. And they did such a really great job of the narrative of it that it just brought a lot of people in again, inspiring. And then fast company called probably spring of 2018. And they said, We want to do a story. And here, this is kind of funny. I don't know if you want to talk about it or not, but call me and just like with gimlet I didn't realize what i what i was being told like with gimlet, they said, We want to interview I'm like, Okay, cool. I thought it was for one interview. But it turned out, I was the subject of their whole series, you know, for startup. So then Fast Company calls me kind of think it's spring of 2018. And we're like, in the middle of doing all this stuff for our portfolio. We're probably at like, close to 100 at this time, and we're just doing all this all this work. And they said, We want to interview you. And I'm like, Oh, cool. They said, we're gonna fly somebody out from New York to interview. So it's like, okay, so she comes to our, our, our investor day that we have, because it's a day that works for us. And she's interviewing she's like, eight months pregnant, or seven months pregnant. And I don't think anything of it, I'm just having the interview. She's showing her around, and my business partner Christie, who wasn't a mother at the time, but is now she comes up to me, she's like, Arlan there's something going on, they would not fly a seven month pregnant woman here. If this was just like a feature like a something, I think they're gonna try to put you on the cover. And I'm like, that doesn't make any sense. Who are you talking to? I think Gary, go ahead and sit down on thinking you're thinking straight, so I just was just completely oblivious to it. And then a few weeks later, they they they tell me they're like you are one of three options for our cover this for October. And you need to do a photoshoot in case you become the cover. And we'll use the pictures if not, you know, some of the pictures. So I don't know who the other two was. I can imagine it was probably Melinda Gates because she ended up being a part of the cover picture thing. And so I go, I do that. I talk a lot about in the book, kind of a little funny story there. So you can read about that. And then an August of 2018, I'm visiting my wife, my fiance at the time, and who's not my wife, but I'm in Germany visiting her, where she, where she was from. And I get an email from Fast Company, and they said, You're the cover for October, it comes out September, close to September 15, which is another anniversary for me. And, and it just, you know, it was something else, it was something else. So that once that cover came out, and a lot of things happened from that point.

Suneera Madhani: That's just so incredible. What a full circle story right there. Yeah. And it's true, your story is so inspiring. And it's hard, it's hard to share it. But, you know, it's, it's what makes it's that human connection, right? It's that one person that's listening, that you could change their life, because they listened to it, or they heard your story. And they took that leap, or they didn't think so less of themselves, because they're like, Hey, you know, if Arlan can do it, I can do it. And that's, that is definitely part of the why of showing up. And especially as successful minority women, I do believe it is our duty to share the story. And to leave it unedited and to and to share. And it's hard. And it's not easy. It's I can't even imagine. I mean, I go through it every day, and I'm at a different a different plate like place in my life that even it's so hard to share all the personal stuff I show up on social everyday. I've been in a lot of these magazines, I know exactly what you're talking about when the editor wants to pick one line. And it's about that. And I'm usually sometimes I used to feel I'm gonna say this out loud here, because I think we should talk about it. I used to feel like the check off token brown woman because I was successful, I was able to raise venture capital I got through the odds of my company was booming, or on inks, like 500, for two years straight, Fast Company actually was my breaking that was like when the company, when I really even learned about venture capital was because a rider from Fast Company just called me and was like you're doing a subscription. And you're like the Netflix of credit card processing. I've never heard of this told me and I take this interview, I've no idea what it's gonna do. And it's front page online, on that company. And what that did to our company was, I'm forever grateful. But there was, I had no idea I didn't, I didn't like, I wasn't prepared. And then from there, I did hire a PR team, because there was a lot of inbound requests. But at the same time, I used to feel like are they really sharing the story? Because they want to share my success? Or is it because I'm the token successful Brown Girl. And that used to give me anxiety. And I didn't want to be the token person. But at the same time, I learned to shift my narrative to say it's actually my duty to show up and to say, yes, interesting hat, take that seat on that panel, to, to go to that conference, to be that keynote, to share that story. Because there is somebody out there, that's gonna look as I never got to see another me in anywhere else. Like, I wish there were more young moms, women, minority, brown, whatever, that wasn't white male 54. That was hurting tech companies. And so you know, it's tough to shift that narrative. But I'm just sharing that I used to feel that way. And I don't I've not been on the cover of Fast Company, yet.

Arlan Hamilton: I'll make a phone call because I don't. You have to be on the cover.

Suneera Madhani: You're the best. I'm just so thankful of women like you who are sharing their story, and are proud of it. I think one of the First Men what really got connected me with you was I don't know how I got connected to you online. I started following you online. And I think you had just gotten married to your wife.

Arlan Hamilton: Yeah, that would have been 2019. Don't let me get it wrong. Don't let me get it wrong. August 2019, is when we got married.

Suneera Madhani: And I don't know, like, I think like I was following you around that time. And you showed your you know, your personal life and your wedding. And it was just so special. And

I remember connecting with you as like, you know, I was a founder like it, you know, I was following you because you were in venture capital. And I thought you what you were doing was really cool and mission centric. And I absolutely was like, Yes, this is this is my woman. This is what I'm about. I want to fill my feet with women like you. But when you share your personal, you know, your personal stories and you really talking about how hard it was, even as an LGBTQ woman, I'm not an LGBTQ woman. But I resonated so much. I was like, that's so brave. And there's so many and you sharing that story. Probably inspired like probably. There's so many people that are connecting to that. And I do believe that it is our duty to put the mic on and share that story and to talk about it and it's hard and we should give credit to those because it's not easy to get up there and share the things that you share. But we appreciate it because it's needed. And we need more Arlan's every single day in our feeds and every single day on the cover of Fast Company. Because this is what's actually going to be the catalyst for change in what we need in the world.

Arlan Hamilton: Well, thank you. I mean, I don't know if you have any, what are your aspirations after this? Because you, you probably you definitely need either. In my opinion, if you don't already have one, some sort of television show where you inspire other people. I know you're doing that through all your work right now. I was gonna say something in politics, but I think that might be I think you might be a brighter star than that. So you know, whatever you do, it's an example, I was actually kind of curious about, you know, the statistics of how how many Pakistani women and girls are in the United States?

Suneera Madhani: No, I don't, I don't know,

Arlan Hamilton: It might be interesting to find out that number. Because let's say it's 30,000 70,000 150,000, whatever the number is, and imagine you can be an example. And that token, but an example, for all of them, who have any sort of aspirations to be an entrepreneur, or those who didn't know what their next step was. And then you inspire them to think of a way to do that. That is a legacy. And that goes that transcends lifetime, you know, and that could be really, really profound.

Suneera Madhani: No, I appreciate it. And you think so highly of me as it's just, it's an honor for us to even have you on the show. And for us to connect, I'm so excited about even supporting your mission. That is what I'm, that's, that's why I do this, you know, fattmerchant super successful, we still have, you know, my goal is to exit this company at a billion dollars. Public goal, I want to be the first I want to be the brown woman that exits her company, out of ability, I want to be a unicorn brown woman. So that is a personal goal that I have for for this for the technology company. But really around the premise of CEO school is exactly that. It's, I didn't go to CEO school. And this is why we started this podcast, my partner, Shannon and I, and she comes from a very different background as well. But it's it's literally us coming together to say how do we amplify the stories and it's not about us, it's really about the successful stories, because it's, it's such a this fictitious 2% Club should be bigger, it should be 98% of women that are successful, not 2%. And I think that the way that we get there is exactly this. It's you know, it's not about the TV series. And it's not about the book, and it's not about me, it's what can I do

to actually amplify these stories so that we can continue to inspire the next generation, because I'm a girl, Mom, I have two daughters. And for me, that is what that is my why when Mila grows up when Ana grows up, they shouldn't even have to think about the word feminist like that should not even be in their vocabulary, because they're showing up as equals. And that's really what feminism really is, I was something that I just talked about on the last show was feminism is not women are greater than men. It's just equal to Yes, and that is what the mission even for as if it were just for women as a minority as a minority race, right, just want equal, I want to just be have the same opportunity that a counterpart person does like anybody else, I just want that same option. It's up to us and whoever is going to be successful, but I want to have a fair shot at it. I don't want my kids to not have the shot because of the color of their skin, or because of where they come from. Or because, you know, if they choose to love, you know, some choose to love, however they choose to love that should not be a reason that we bias ourselves to their success. And that is a mission that we should all be behind.

Arlan Hamilton: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And I would be remiss if I didn't say choose to love and just love. Yes, no end up loving.

Suneera Madhani: Absolutely. Arlan. So what's next for you? And what's next in your I know you have a big race coming up. Like tell us a little bit about how we can support you in this journey. Where can we find you? What do you need from us? How do we get behind this mission?

Arlan Hamilton: I tell you what, there are a few few quick things. One is like I said, Get it's about damn time the book. Every time somebody picks up the book and reads it, or has the audio version, they get in touch with me and they tell me I mean 1000s and 1000s have told me that it just means so much to them. They see themselves and inspire themselves. It's not just a story about me. It's story about them. And you know, I this is why I wrote the book is for to talk all about Backstage all about how you can go from this to that in five years, and what your next step might be, no matter how successful you already are. Another thing is I like you said backstage is raising right now and you can go to Republic.co/backstage to check out how it's going so far. And you'll learn more about what that raises there. And then I have my own Academy. I don't know if you know this or not, but I have arlansacademy.com.

Suneera Madhani

I'll link it in the show notes. So yeah, we'll make sure that the audience has all that.

Arlan Hamilton: So it's just where I have a really diverse group of experts talking about mostly entrepreneurial things. But we will expand on the topics when we're creatives etc. And it's just every single week, we add a new course. And you can also you can buy the courses individually, or you can buy tuition, which is very, very accessible, the amount of it and when to make it very accessible for people. And that's a great way to support because I pour back all most of my personal capital back into Backstage.

Suneera Madhani: That's amazing. Oh, we can't wait to get behind that. And as a fun closing Arlan I want to do a rapid fire with you and let the audience get to know you a little bit better. So let's see. I don't usually prep the questions either. So let's see. Let's see what comes out. All right. Coffee or tea?

Arlan Hamilton: Tea

Suneera Madhani: What kind?

Arlan Hamilton: Um, something like mint peppermint or anything that's like that. I don't have a certain brand that I love. I just like it to be to be very soothing.

Suneera Madhani: Okay, soothing tea. It actually shows from your personality if you can't tell them like a three cups of espresso coffee girls. I'm always wired I'll have tea at night. Okay, so tea morning routine? What is like, Is there something special that you do? Are you a morning routine person? What are some things that do?

Arlan Hamilton: Not really routine, but I do have to do vocal exercises now because I talk so much. So I'll do that in the morning. I'll check my mail for about 30 minutes. I'll kind of check in with my team. And then I'll usually get going with what's what the day is and checked. Just It used to be that would check the news very first thing to see what had blown up. But now these days I checked the news kind of mid day to make sure that I'm up you know up on things of course

Suneera Madhani: And pizza topping.

Arlan Hamilton: Oh, pepperoni and pineapple and or, or like a margarita pizza and @ me, pineapple belongs on pizza, let's just say

Suneera Madhani: I like all kinds of pizza as all you know, all you anything on pizza. Awesome. And then as you win you, one of your biggest goals was to invest in 100 companies, when you hit your 100 investment Did you celebrate? Did you do anything? What did you do to commemorate that?

Arlan Hamilton: I had sprinkles cupcakes delivered to me and pay the delivery fee. And I know in a world where people celebrate venture capital by going to strip clubs and going to Jacuzzis and all kinds of cocaine and all that my splurge was a guy sprinkles cupcakes delivered to me and didn't worry about the delivery fee. I was working I was moving and shaking.

Suneera Madhani: That's amazing. And last question, what is one piece of advice that if you could go back to yourself, like at whatever point in your life, and that you would tell your younger self? Like what would be that one thing that you want to just shake her and tell her

Arlan Hamilton: I would tell her that she was right about being staying true to herself. That shouldn't change. In fact, I say Be yourself so that the people looking for you can find you. And that's really dear to me. I would also tell her to keep holding on that it was going to get better. And it was going to take longer than she thought but it was going to be better than she ever imagined.

Suneera Madhani: That's incredible. On that note, thank you so much for being on the show. We're so honored to have you. I'll be linking everything in the show notes for our audience below. Go follow Arlan on Twitter on Instagram. She's just a force to follow. I don't miss any one of your stories and I enjoy them every day I'm going to be ensuring that I get my audible in for it's about damn time and also becoming an investor in your new fund that's coming. that's taking place in February. So super, super pumped about it. Congratulations Arlan on your success. And thank you for being a just a beacon of hope for those that need it. And for really representing all the underrepresented. So thank you for being here today.

Arlan Hamilton: Thank you so much.

Suneera Madhani: Thank you so much for listening. We hope you enjoy the show. Follow us at CEO school on Instagram for show notes, inspiration and exclusive behind the scenes that you won't find anywhere else. We also have an absolutely incredible resource for you. It's the seven lessons we learned building million dollar businesses. These are complete game changers and we want to give it to you absolutely free. All you have to do is leave a review of the podcast, why you love the show, screenshot the review and email it to Hello@ceoschoolpodcast.com and we'll send it your way.