

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Malissia Clinton Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:01] Welcome to The Dots. A podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now you're hosting Digital Strategist speaker and entrepreneur Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen: [00:00:31] Malissia Clinton, attorney and social issues advocate. Malissia is the embodiment of a supercharged woman as general counsel of a major aerospace research and development organization, to raising a family, a TED Ex contributor, and raising awareness of race in our world and in our times. Malissia, thank you for joining The Dots.

Malissia: [00:00:50] My pleasure, Kathleen thanks for having me.

Kathleen: [00:00:53] Melissa, tell me about your journey. Where'd you grew up?

Malissia: [00:00:57] I grew up in South Central, Los Angeles. We were transplants from Arizona. That's where my parents met and fell in love. My mom was at the tender age of 17. They had a shotgun wedding. And my father joined the Marines to support the family and they relocated him to Camp Pendleton and then ultimately we ended up settling in South Central when I was in about the third grade.

Kathleen: [00:01:30] And how did that shape your journey?

Malissia: [00:01:32] I remember my mom crying actually when we moved here. We first had to stay with friends of theirs until we could find and afford housing of our own and I honestly remember her crying saying James, is my father's name. "I can't believe you have me living here. I thought we were going to do better than this." So that's an early memory I will say however that you know as a child you just know what your surroundings are you when you're young you don't have really a point of comparison. So that just becomes the norm. So I wasn't crying I just did what other kids did and ran around the neighborhood and went to school nearby and just that those were my beginnings and I took it to be what was expected.

Kathleen: [00:02:31] It's you know it's it's a it's a different reference point for a lot of people and I think that's an important point is that as a child you just know your life. You don't necessarily know the comparison of what your life is to someone else's life.

Malissia: [00:02:47] That's exactly right.

Kathleen: [00:02:48] And how did your family inform then your your journey? You talk about your mom. Were there other members of your family that also helped you form your your point of view?

Malissia: [00:03:01] Yes so I would say there were sort of polar universes. There were, there was my mom and my dad, whom I loved and and was happy to have them both in the household but they fought bitterly. There was some drugs in the household and there was not enough money frankly to support the household on a continuous basis. So I remember having our lights get cut off

or you know running an electrical cord from a neighbor next door just so that we could have electricity. So that was on the one hand and that was very disconcerting for me as a girl of you know seven-eight-nine I can palpably feel the uncertainty and I didn't like it. And then at the very other end was my loving grandparents whom we had last in Arizona and they were very steady and I say this in the in the Tedex. They had a swimming pool. They they owned a daycare center. They were civil rights activists and I had adored them. And so I think every day I woke up thinking about them and they probably represented the bright life of the stability, I thought my child hood should have in it versus you know where I was and the day to day.

Kathleen: [00:04:31] That's important. I think. You need to you know begin to understand kind of how you then took those next steps right from a chaotic kind of family life that was not always the stable dependable life to an amazing high performing lawyer. How did you get there? Lots of hard work.

Malissia: [00:04:50] Lots of hard work.

Kathleen: [00:04:52] We assume.

Malissia: [00:04:52] You did you get that right.

Kathleen: [00:04:53] Everybody assumes the lots of hard work. You don't connect the dots as we like to say around here without lots of hard work. It's not I always joke when someone talks about it's gone viral. They don't really think about all of the the hard work that went into that magical viralness of what just happened.

Malissia: [00:05:12] You know that's exactly right. And then I think there's a healthy dose of luck and happenstance that also has to happen. I would say as a girl you know I was it was about 10 and in the fifth grade that I started to form an idea that you know we've been living in South Central at that point a couple of years and it started to awaken that all was not as I wanted it to be. And so I think what started to happen there is seeds started to form inside me that I think I you know that sprouted then and continue to this day that that I was going to challenge the notions that it sort of brought me to that place in time and see how far I could go on my own steam.

Kathleen: [00:06:10] So you know I planted those seeds? Did your parents plant those seeds? Your grandparents planted those seeds? Your pastor?

Malissia: [00:06:16] Both. I think that you know the best thing I can say about my parents whom I love to death today and who both kicked their drug habits and are no longer together and I think that's for the better of all concerned. What I learned from them in those early days is they were very good at saying what we should do. Now, it was more of a do as I say not as I do. And that was one of my early lessons that I sort of carried forward to this day. I'm ok with someone one, maybe the unlikely unlikeliest someone, telling me what I should do. And I realized early that someone whos maybe made mistakes could probably better equipped me for what not to do, than someone who hadn't right?

Kathleen: [00:07:02] Yeah.

Malissia: [00:07:02] So from my earliest age I took it personally that if I got good advice it was my job to discern that that was good advice and to act upon it. And I think that had a lot to do with where I am today.

Kathleen: [00:07:17] So they planted the seeds and you started to realize that those seeds were

something you needed to act on.

Malissia: [00:07:24] Yup.

Kathleen: [00:07:24] Why law?

Malissia: [00:07:26] So as the story goes I declared when I was, according to my dad, when I was three or four that I wanted to be a lawyer. So why don't we pick any profession you know? I think some of it has to do with my grandparents being in civil rights and me thinking that lawyers that their job was to right wrongs and to carry the banner for justice. I, I like the idea that that it was a professional degree that would help provide for my family, and I like the idea of advocating and using my voice. So I think those are some of the things that sort of filter filter through me to point me in the direction of of law school.

Kathleen: [00:08:20] So how did you find your voice? Lots of people go to law school. Lots of people become lawyers. But how did you find that voice? That advocacy?

Malissia: [00:08:30] Oh, that's a good question. You know I would say advocacy is 90 percent courage. I really do think that many of us see what what is wrong or see the mistake or see the evil or you know whatever you want to ascribe to it. I think the difference and where we get our advocates from is that you are willing to speak out about it and not to say that I haven't failed to speak on occasion because I certainly have and in many respects I frankly wondered if I sold out because I chose a comfy corporate job over you know advocating for folks on skid row or a legal aid job that you know barely paid my law school bills so I don't I don't want to put myself on a lofty level but I do believe at the end of the day that I'm willing to say what some others aren't willing to say and that you know that I think that helped contribute to where I am today.

Kathleen: [00:09:42] Well, and I think you've been an advocate for change even in the lofty arena of a corporate law position in that you brought in students if I understand correctly from the Constitutional Rights Foundation is that correct?

Malissia: [00:09:56] That's right. We've been doing that for the eight years that I've been general counsel here. And these are you know at risk youth who have all of the attributes but not necessarily the exposure or the opportunities to get to college. And so we allow them to intern with us during the summer and they work in our corporate communications department. They have to dress up, they've got to get themselves here, they get paid a handsome wage. And at the end of the summer, if they've developed a relationship they often get a college reference and they've gone on to do some amazing things. Really proud of that program and how we've utilized it.

Kathleen: [00:10:41] Was it not everyone who is privy to this podcast is perhaps privy to what you shared on the Tedex stage in Manhattan Beach. Could you share that part of your story?

Malissia: [00:10:55] So you're probably referring to the incident in February of 2015 where I just left our home in Manhattan Beach flown to D.C. for a business meeting and I got a call from my husband in the wee hours of the morning and he said "Honey the house this house is on fire." And I said "what?" And he said "yep I'm OK, the kids are OK, the dog's OK, we're outside. We're surrounded by fire trucks. And I awoke to the sound of breaking glass and when I rushed out the bedroom door there was smoke everywhere, flames, and I grabbed the kids and we escaped." And turns out we learned later that day that someone had chucked a tire laced with some sort of accelerant at our front door. And this is a community we've lived in for over a decade. But we recently moved the year before to a new neighborhood, a last year neighborhood. And as far as we can tell and surmise over the ensuing days it was it was a hate crime.

Kathleen: [00:12:13] And how did that affect you?

Malissia: [00:12:19] You know as a girl coming out of South Central where the police were frequent, you know relatively frequent visitors because my parents would get into fights and sort of the nature of that uncertainty and that violence. Usually when something like that happens my first reaction is to have to be numb. And that's exactly, I don't cry. I don't yell. I don't scream. And I honestly I don't get afraid I just go numb. And so that was my initial reaction and then maybe a week later I sort of had a bit of a mini breakdown but as is the fortitude that has been shown by my ancestors. You got to get up and dust yourself off and that's quickly what I did. I couldn't stop the event from having happen. And I went into sort of work mode. Where we got to stay for the next few months? How are we going to recover from this? What is the Police Department doing about this? You know I kept myself busy and that's really how I got through it.

Kathleen: [00:13:27] The community that you're in. Not everyone who listens to the dots is actually from Southern California. It's a fairly affluent part of Southern California not like South Central Los Angeles. How did the community react?

Malissia: [00:13:43] So, surprising one of the things that my husband and I talked about in the very early stage in the hours after the fires that we, and it's came from my husband, you know he said "My job is to keep you safe. Someone found that I can't do that here. So we you know it feels like the community doesn't want us here so let's move. You know why why I spent all this money to live somewhere where you're not wanted and..."

Kathleen: [00:14:09] Did you end up moving?

Malissia: [00:14:11] We didn't. we didn't mention that to my book club. And in an e-mail where I also expressed frustration because it didn't appear again in the just days after the fire that the police department was treating it seriously. They'd unceremoniously declared that it was an arson and it wasn't a hate crime. And so we were really upset about that.

Kathleen: [00:14:35] Yeah. How did they come to that conclusion so quickly?

Malissia: [00:14:37] Yeah that's what we want to know. Well I, I don't know how they can. I don't see how you could live in the circumstances. I think it was a defensive mechanism, right?

Kathleen: [00:14:45] Right.

Malissia: [00:14:46] I reached out to my book club and said This is ridiculous. And by the way we plan on moving. But please help us figure out how to respond to this and maybe attract some attention to this. And so that's just what they did. And by that Friday, the fire was on a Tuesday, I think and by that Friday friends of ours organized the visual and the town square and at 5:30 that Friday we arrived and so did 700 people from the community. We were surrounded by all these folks who many of whom were crying and expressing frustration. And the central theme was, "Please don't leave, don't leave. You know that fire didn't represent us. We had nothing to do with that fire. We're not sure what idiot did have something to do with that fire. But please don't leave the community." And it was that it was that moment that compelled us to stay.

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Kathleen: [00:16:04] So what advice would you give someone that's you know facing challenges because clearly you've faced your set.

Malissia: [00:16:12] You know life... like my mom has a saying that life don't skip nobody. And I think I ...

Kathleen: [00:16:17] I love that. Actually I think we're going to do a collection of mom quotes that have come about because of the dots. And I think that just so be the book that comes out of this collection of mom quotes. But it's true. Life don't skip nobody.

Malissia: [00:16:31] Life don't skip nobody. So and the older I get you know I've had cancer. I've lost a brother to a bullet of a police officer which has literally ripped from the headlines. I've had the worst things possible happen to me that I could not have predicted. But life don't skip nobody. And I honestly think we're ultimately measured in terms of our sanity any way, is measured by how you deal with it. You cannot avoid these sorts of things. We cannot avoid it.

Kathleen: [00:17:10] And what has been some little in you dealing with it and adressing things and moving past them.

Malissia: [00:17:20] You know for me it goes back to my face and I've enveloped the low moments in that face and in the sense that it causes you to go introspective and to realize that so many things are be out of your control, really. And that the only thing I control is how I react to them. The reality is that we're all going to die, every single one of us. And it's a sobering and frankly frightening, fact of life. And the fact, for example, that someone dies much sooner than you anticipate, didn't stop the result that that was going to happen anyway. So I tell myself that these things are meant to toughen me and to make me wiser and to make me stronger and to to to really dial into that piece that I do control, which is my reaction. I can't control the event but I can control how I react to it. And I see myself growing in that respect because I compare how I react to a situation today, post my brother's death for example, post cancer, versus how I reacted before and I can tell that I've just learned not to sweat the small shit. Sorry if I'm not allowed to curse.

Kathleen: [00:18:47] No, you are you are. We actually encourage sometimes...

Malissia: [00:18:50] Ok.

Kathleen: [00:18:50] For people to do that because it sometimes is just the best word.

Malissia: [00:18:53] You just can't he just can't sweat the small stuff that you really can't sweat it. And you start to have a broader definition, much broader definition of what's small. You know?

Kathleen: [00:19:06] Yeah. By understanding a broader, a broader horizon you understand just what small things are.

Malissia: [00:19:12] Exactly.

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Kathleen: [00:19:33] So what motivates you at this point? What keeps you going?

Malissia: [00:19:39] So my kids, and my hubby. For sure you know that's I think that's also the purpose of children, to keep us from you know running to a deserted island and not coming back. To escape the insanity that is our society right. So you know you gotta you gotta show up for the day to day. Just to prepare a better place for them. So I've got three kids. One just graduated from high school and is headed to Stanford in the fall. And then I've got one who's a sophomore and the other is a seventh grader. And I've got a loving husband, so I participate partly for them. I think their biggest piece. I think the other piece is that I cite to enjoy living you know doing some of the things that we hear about taking care of myself, exercising, trying to love the person I see in the mirror. I do that maybe 75 percent of the time. You know depends on if I put on pounds or not.

Kathleen: [00:20:45] Right. It's always a weight issue with me too.

Malissia: [00:20:47] Right. Right. So you know trying to love the person I see so that when I wake up and I see her she wants to face the day. I think that I'm going back to exercise that it's important for me because I've never tested this out. But I you know you kind of know these things right. I think I have some a chemical imbalance and I think I need those endorphins. So for example it helps if I wake up and go work out. It helps to blow out all of that negativity and worry and anxiety that I may have awakened with. Right. So learning those tools that help Melissa may not help everyone else but I have to figure out what helps me get through the day.

Kathleen: [00:21:32] Right. And that's part of the journey too is really finding out what works for you. Everyone has a you know a lot of different tools at their disposal and what works with you. Some of it's not tied to socioeconomic levels. But getting out, and getting a breath of fresh air, and taking a walk, is oftentimes a great reset for many many people.

Malissia: [00:21:54] Absolutely. Absolutely.

Kathleen: [00:21:56] Good to ask you a serious question. You're sending your oldest off to Stanford. And in today's environment as you shared your story from February of 2015, what are you telling your son, daughter who goes up to Stanford. You know what in today's environment where the conversation is not very friendly?

Malissia: [00:22:21] That's a good question. So I will I will be candid. There is a conversation that I'm definitely going to have as a black mother of a black son and that is that we we've talked about the police what to do and what not to do. You know you don't mouth off. You keep your hands where you can see them and you make sure you live to see another day.

Kathleen: [00:22:44] Yeah.

Malissia: [00:22:45] And I can't have even as I say that now I tear up.

Kathleen: [00:22:49] I can hear it in your voice.

Malissia: [00:22:49] Because should not have to have that conversation with my son.

Kathleen: [00:22:53] You should though.

Malissia: [00:22:54] I should not have to worry that a boy who is as accomplished as he is. A straight A student and 99 percentile on the S.A.T. may not come home to me because he meets the wrong person at the wrong time. Not because I think he's done anything wrong but just because he meets the wrong person at the wrong time. So, so we have to have that conversation because you know I didn't raise him to lose them of course. And that's something that I'm confident other black

mothers and fathers share with their children because it's unfortunate how we lose them. And I I I don't think we've had enough conversation on this issue. I don't think we treated it like the epidemic that it is unfortunately. So you know this is this is my prophylactic effort to deal with it.

Kathleen: [00:23:52] No and I I applaud you for saying that out loud because I think that's an important thing to say out loud that you as a mother have to have that conversation. So that you didn't raise them to lose them. In some ridiculous way. Not predicated on you know health issues or something that is equally terrible but the general environment in which our young men of color have to march out into and be successful. I did not have that conversation with my son when he went to college. And probably should have because he ended up actually in a situation where he was shot at with another man of color as they were being carjacked. And was not lost. And I do oftentimes think about the fact that he had a guardian angel on his shoulder because it was another young man of color who had been lost who was involved in a gang initiation and carjacking a car and shooting someone was the initiation. And the kid was only 15 years old. And my son ended up being very involved in the community because he didn't think that that kid at 15 years old should only have that as a choice. So on the other side of the table I'm very proud of him. But no one should have to have a conversation with their child at any way shape or form about the violence they may have because of the environment we create.

Malissia: [00:25:39] Well I'm proud of him too and proud of his mama as well, but you know and the raise you know as you know when you can or when they live to see another day and that turns into a life lesson and look what it spawned. Like to me that's that's the beauty of living. It's when they're taken tragically and you know by a fellow American no less of the things we do to each other. And I think you know maybe a pod cast for another day but I think we just we are in this country where we are missing such an opportunity to relish the fact that we're multicultural and instead we needlessly fight against one another. You know?

Kathleen: [00:26:22] Absolutely.

Malissia: [00:26:23] I, I that I am not of that spirit. I think it's ridiculous the ridiculous and idiotic and really not representative of what we stand for. But unfortunately there are people who believe there us versus them. You know there are people who have an unnatural fear of the black male. Frankly I think that if we could just have a conversation about that a lot of this is based on stereotypes. You know a lot of this is innate but because we don't talk about it because we pick our corners, people die. And it's it's unfortunate. You know are there in imprisoned which cost us a lot more. It's just it's it's a broken system if you ask me. So.

Kathleen: [00:27:08] I don't disagree. And I would never disagree with a lawyer. Melissa, what's next? What do you think are your next challenges in your, in your journey?

Malissia: [00:27:21] Well that remains to be seen. To tell you the truth you're right you never know in terms of challenges what tomorrow will bring. I'm at a pretty steady state in terms of my profession and I feel like I'm at a pretty steady state in terms of my motherhood. I guess I would like to be a part of a bigger conversation. I just haven't figured out how to do that. And a pointed and an impactful way. So maybe in the future I will figure that out. You know I you know I want to be a part of the solution not just a complainer.

Kathleen: [00:28:05] Yeah.

Malissia: [00:28:05] Right? And so maybe I will maybe I would hope that something will come my way just like this did frankly that allows me to be a part of the solution and not just a complainer.

Kathleen: [00:28:19] Well we don't think that you've complained about anything today on the dots. And Melissa I do want to thank you for your time and we appreciate you giving us some guidance on how you connect the dots.

Malissia: [00:28:31] My pleasure. Thank you so much again for having me Kathleen.

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