

# the dots

a podcast about connecting.

## Lori Cheek Transcript

**Announcer:** [00:00:04] 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 things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life and now you're host Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur Kathleen Buczko.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:00:26] Laurie Cheek is an architect, designer, entrepreneur and CEO. She's taken a simple encounter to launch her business and truly jumped the shark. Laurie welcome to The Dots. Thanks for joining us.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:00:45] Thank you for having me.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:00:47] Tell me a little bit about your journey. Where do you grow up?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:00:50] I'm from a tiny town in Taylorsville Kentucky.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:00:56] How did you get to New York City?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:00:58] I drove a truck up here.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:01:01] Was it a U-Haul? Because we're trying to get them as a sponsor. Seems like U-Haul reunites to all of the guests from The Dots and just.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:01:12] Well it was a Penske Truck but almost.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:01:14] Ah ok, alright close.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:01:16] Yes I graduated architecture school at the University of Kentucky in 1996. I threw up my graduation hat. Went straight home. Packed up that Penske truck and my cat and drove straight to New York City and never looked back and that was 21 years ago.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:01:31] How long were you an architect?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:01:34] Fifteen years. I was practicing all sorts of realms of architecture and design and the furniture industry. I worked in fashion doing store planning and I did some interior designing, project management, sales of furniture. I just did it all.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:01:49] Were you a risk taker then?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:01:51] You know I don't even think what I've done in life right now with building this business is a little bit like that day when I picked up and drove straight to New York City. I mean I thought that was a huge risk. I didn't have a job. I didn't really know anybody in New York. I just came to the biggest city in America and then thought I was going to make it. And well here I still am.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:02:13] That is that that is the mark of taking a big risk. And Cheekd is a big risk.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:02:20] Oh it has been.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:02:22] So how did you go from fashion and furniture and design to high tech?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:02:27] Well one night I was out to dinner with another architect and I went to the restroom and when I came back, he had scribbled on the back of his business card, 'want to have dinner?' and he handed it to a woman as we were leaving the restaurant. And that was his way of asking this woman on a date. And I could not stop thinking about what a neat way that was to sort of break the ice with someone without this awkward introduction. He didn't know if she was married or gay or available or anything but the two of them ended up on a date. And I left with this idea that I couldn't get out of my head. So two years later I built a company called Cheekd that was based around a deck of cards that you would hand out for dating instead of for business.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:03:17] And how has that been? How has that transition gone for you?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:03:21] Well I had no earthly idea what I was doing building a business.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:03:25] Just like you had no earthly idea what New York City had in store for you.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:03:29] Right. Exactly. But I just figured you know you get one shot. And I always come up with ideas that I thought, this is a great idea and I want to build it. But there was nothing that kind of wouldn't get out of my head the way this idea was sticking there. I mean I was thinking about it all day. I mean in the middle of my career during the day at work, I'd be Googling business plans and just ways to, how do you start a business? And one day I was out at a Mardi Gras party and I told these two guys about my idea and they're like that's a really great idea and we want to get involved. So why don't we sit down on Monday. We helped start ups-start up and we can talk about getting this off the ground with you. And they ended up becoming my partners which was great because they both had a business background and I didn't. So that next week we signed off on some documents and they became my partners.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:04:27] Wow. So it went from an encounter, a business card scribble, to consuming your life. How does how does how does that how does that happen? I mean and what did that mean for your career? And you know was it a side hustle for awhile?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:04:46] Oh yeah it was definitely a side hustle. You know for one straight year I walked around in circles just telling everybody about it and sketching ideas about it. And you know just trying to make it come together. And then I met these guys a year later and then it took us a year to build it which was still a really long time to build this business. But I don't know. I kept working my full time job. Never told my employers what I had done. A months into it we ended up on the cover of The New York Times Style section and said move over matched dot com, this is the next generation of online dating. Our Web site crashed. I mean it was the biggest day in Cheek'd history until I ended up on the Shark Tank many years later but I remember getting ready to walk into work the next day and I was sure that everybody in my office was going to be like "oh this is why you're barely working".

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:05:41] Right.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:05:41] But apparently nobody reads the New York Times in that office I worked for them because nobody said a word. So I just kept working there you know working both jobs at once. I used to bring my own laptop in to the office and they're like "Why are you working on this tiny Mac book when you've got this massive Big Mac behind you?" Like "oh I just I'm comfortable with that it's got all my contacts in it". So you know I was working both jobs at the same time for quite a while until I realized I couldn't do it all and I wanted to start working on building my dream. So I gave up my career. I was making \$120000 a year. And you know I went from that to nothin and I've really never been happier.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:06:23] Really. Why. Why is that. Never been happier.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:06:27] I mean there's that whole nine to it not nine to five. I mean it's 8:30 to 8 these days and going into an office like that. It's a job. I mean what I'm doing now is a lifestyle and I'm not spending 50-60 hours getting paid to build somebody else's dream. I'm focused on a life of building my own dream now and that's just the most rewarding feeling. It's like living the American dream right now.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:06:58] So in that context you did try to live the American dream and went on Shark Tank.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:07:03] Yes.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:07:05] Well I had a pretty hard core brick wall at one point when I'd run out of money. Really. I invested my entire savings account to build the business and had to keep funding web development and all sorts of fees that I never knew were going to be involved in in this business. And so I ran out of cash and a friend of mine was like the Shark Tank is accepting applications for the upcoming season. And I just clicked on the link, filled out a profile or the application and I almost forgot I had done it and then four months later I think I got a call from L.A. and there was the Shark Tank saying we like your idea. We'd like to take it to the next level. So it just kept unrolling and finally a year after that I found myself going down that scary hallway.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:07:57] Tell us about that experience. The scary hallway.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:08:00] Well I you know I had practiced the pitch. I mean to an insane level of perfection. And once I got down the hallway you have this crazy stare off with the sharks that it's like an old western. So you're just staring at each other and nothing's happening which is you know, sort of makes you freak out even more. At this point I'm like, I'm pretty brave. I've done a lot of public speaking at this point. But there was something about you know, my life was on the line in front of these people. It was like everything I'd given up in my life was getting ready to get cut to shreds or are going to go to the next level. So I was just terrified. And I don't know I went on to autopilot and I sounded horrible on the show. I mean the Twitter stream the next day kept say "that Cheek'd robot needs to blink or breathe." The reality is I was lucky I got those words out of my mouth. You know I just I was almost paralyzed standing there. So the words came out and I looked pretty weird but I don't know. It was an epic episode. I got torn to shreds and there was still no way I was going to quit.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:09:10] I only read the coverage I've never seen it. Partly because I didn't want to see it before I interviewed you but I have read the coverage that it wasn't your finest performance but you are standing there pretty for lack of a better term, naked.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:09:31] Yeah.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:09:32] And and essentially handing over your first born and saying go ahead do you think it's pretty.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:09:41] Right. And it wasn't pretty and I knew it wasn't pretty but I still thought maybe one of them would see the spark inside me and know if I had the right funding behind me that I could take this to the next level. And I don't know, I think once you start going down this horrible spiral on that show, it's really hard to climb out. And they all sort of, they kind of glom on each other's opinions and I don't even know if there's producers that are telling them with like tiny headsets what to say. I mean it's reality television. So I knew it could go one way or the other and I was prepared for either way and I didn't care because I was at the end of the wall and I wanted either someone in an audience to see me, a shark to maybe get it. But you know eight million people that night knew exactly what my mission was and the next morning I woke up with over 3000 e-mails in my inbox and twenty five hundred of them were all like this is amazing. They have no idea what they were talking about. 50 of them were investors. I mean it was, it was amazing. And within two months I had someone else onboard, that ended up finding my business. Six times the amount that I'd asked for on the show. And we ended up rebuilding the whole business. So there was something beautiful about the brutal bloodbath I had on that show.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:11:02] Wow. So it really became a reality that did changed things.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:11:07] It was absolutely life changing for me and you know that was in early 2014.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:11:13] OK.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:11:14] So it's been over three years and there's not a week or almost a day that goes by where somebody is like "where do I know you from?" I just went into my gastroenterologist the other day to talk about a colonoscopy and we're sitting there he's like. "Good to see you again." I'm like, "I'm pretty sure you've seen me on the Shark Tank". And then we had to have the exam and that was really really weird.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:11:42] Yeah yeah. You had not seen your colon. I'm sure on Shark Tank. Which is good family TV, just not to show the colonoscopy. But having lived through kind of that experience of being exposed to 8 million people how, how are you motivated today? What keeps you going today?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:12:07] I mean the thing is when I first started this business, I started doing the math, like every day. And I just knew I was going to be a billionaire within a year. And it was far from that. But you know success to me now is not about that money. It is about this journey I've taken. Surrendering my career. I mean I've been through every struggle and back. I say I could be the poster child for that age old phrase "What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger". And I am as strong as I've ever been. I'm happier than I've ever been. I mean it is 5:30 in New York City right now. I'm in my gym clothes. There's no one looking for me. I'm working from home. It's just an amazing life. I've done a TedX talk. I've been on the Shark Tank. I've had phone calls from Oprah Winfrey. I've been on international news all over the world. I've been flown around the world to talk about my resilience and how I've never given up on this. And if you told me 10 years ago I was going to be a keynote speaker at a tech conference in Belfast. I would have told you you're an insane person but I've had these kind of opportunities that have been life altering. And it's just it's amazing that I'm someone that people look up to and I mean there's not a day that goes by where I don't get an e-mail or a tweet or an Instagram post of someone saying "You inspire me. I've felt like quitting but I keep watching you and I am never I never want to give up." So I just think that it's really special for me on that level as well. So it's not about the money anymore.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:13:47] So that resilience that that was that's grown from within. Right?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:13:53] I mean I always felt I was very stubborn as a kid and I know it wasn't pleasant for my parents but I told them even to this day that it's been a quality that come in very handy in building a business because, you do have to be resilient. You have to be determined. And I mean if if you want it to succeed, you just got to figure it out and there's no stopping. You know you can't, you can't be a wimp about it. You just bulldoze forward and figure it all out.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:14:21] So what advice would you give to somebody who's facing that challenge? Who's just stood naked on the stage in front of the Shark tanks and told go home.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:14:31] Well you know it's a little bit like I've been running around the startup world for many years. And if I hear one more person say they're going to start a photo sharing app. I'm like, are you out of your mind? I mean you've sort of got to pay attention to what it what it is that you're building. I mean maybe you love your idea so much and just like me when I was on that show, there was a point where I'm like OK maybe this version of my idea is not going to work. But I left that show, sat down with, who is my business partner to this day, and we wanted to remove the cloud above the business after that show and reinvent the whole thing based on the initial idea. So I think you've got to be able to listen to feedback. Listen to your customers, and turn the tables or change the game when things aren't working out. So I think you've got to be sort of flexible and just pay attention to to the industry and innovation and technology and everything that's available to you. So I think that some of the best advice. You know you just can't go around building what everybody else has built already.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:15:36] Have you always bet on yourself?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:15:40] Absolutely. I mean I think as a kid my parents put me in everything. You know we're from this tiny town, but still they put me in tennis, piano, dancing, 4-H. I used to make my own clothes. I don't know I think they put all these opportunities in front of me. And even at that point I felt like I can do whatever I put my mind to. So I think there was something about growing up like that that has made me feel like I can do whatever I put my mind to to this day. And it's just been, I thank them to this day for everything that they they put me through even if I hated it back then.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:16:24] I think that that's the greatest gift that. And again besides the U-Haul truck I think that that's also something that unites the guests here on The Dots is that their parents said - "Go. Do." They didn't say you are a blank and we're going to support you in being whatever the blank was. They said try this, try that, try this, try that. You are going to be able to do what ever you choose but you've got to choose and stick with it and try and understand when you're when you're winning when you're losing. Right?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:17:07] yes.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:17:07] It's so important to get that feedback important to understand what the pivot becomes. because eight million people could have voted for you that night, as well. And would your business still be as viable today. Have they done that.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:17:22] No way.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:17:25] So tell us a little bit about Cheek'd today.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:17:29] So after that episode I mentioned I sat down with my partner and we decided to go into an agency and talk about how they could help us reinvent the business. So we decided to change the logo a little bit and realize that those dating cards that I'd come up with many many years ago were maybe not going to work for the world quite yet. Maybe down the road. I don't know. I mean it's like a very old school way of meeting people but the world can adapt to it. And I don't know if that was the fact that we didn't have enough money to market it or the world didn't know enough about it. But now everybody loves technology. Everybody wants to be on their phone, downloading app. We have an app that still tries to make you connect in the real world. So let's say you're at a bar, a coffee shop where you used to be able to flip the card to someone. Our app is a bluetooth enabled dating app so anyone in a 30 foot radius that comes near you that's also on the app, you'll get an alert that they are there. So maybe someone at the gym or you're on the running path, you'll get an alert and that means they're also single. So you could send a note to them at the end of the bar. You press the button "get cheeky" if you both decide you want to talk to each other and then you can start chatting on the app. Or you could actually have a chance to introduce yourself in the real world before starting these inane virtual conversations that all the other dating apps offer you which often lead to nowhere.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:18:53] Yeah.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:18:53] I mean I'm on all the other apps, just test around. Do people actually get off these apps and go meet in person. And it's rare that someone just immediately says hey let's go get a coffee or something. So that's we're still on the same mission but got rid of the cards and using technology and we even done a spin off of Cheek'd and it's a networking app called Network'd. It's on iPhone and Android and it's like LinkedIn in the real world. So maybe go to an expo or you're at a coffee shop or wherever. And it'll tell you who's hiring or I'm looking for a job or it might tell you. You can set filters so you're looking for a web developer, a business partner, and you'll get a ping when someone like that is nearby. And you could go up and meet them immediately and we had a really cool thing about this is since it's Bluetooth it doesn't require any wifi or fail signals, so you can meet people on a plane or on the subway without any any connection other than your Bluetooth helping you connect.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:19:54] That's fascinating because I made no bones about the fact that I've been married for a very very long time.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:20:04] Congrats.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:20:04] Thanks. Some days congrats, some days and what that heck was I thinking. It's so expensive to get out of it now. So why go back but all that being said have friends who are out there on so many dating apps. And if they attempt to make it into some type of real life engagement. I call it the four steps of terror because it's ok I'm meeting this person in this open space right here. If you don't hear from me by this amount of time you need to call this person. And this and it's it's you know whereas you know candidly I kind of I met my husband the kind of old fashioned way in that whole bar scene and things you shouldn't do or whatever but it was a face to face encounter and there was the human element of assessment that really gave an indication as to whether it was going to work or not.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:21:05] Well I think the one thing that's missing that's most important on meeting people virtually is chemistry because in the end that's what matters most. So we're trying to turn the game inside out with this app and let people be able to see each other face to face before.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:21:24] So what do the BIG guys think. So what's the eHarmony world and the match dot com world think of it?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:21:29] Well I mean you know their multibillion dollar companies. So I don't really know and don't know anyone inside. But I do keep saying that they're trying to do something similar but whatever, whenever they try to do anything like this it's never taken off for them because they are what they are. And I think it's really hard for them to turn into an online thing and take it off line. But you know the day they nail that we we could be in some trouble but then we'll just figure out a way to to make it even better.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:22:01] So beyond Network'd. What's next?

**Lori Cheek:** [00:22:04] Well the Network'd is actually brand new. So we're really trying to get a lot of users on that and continue on with Cheek'd. But it's just about user acquisition and you know we're just always trying to innovate and stay on top of every one else. I mean we're a tiny company compared to all of our competitors. But you know we're still in the game and it's been seven years and I don't know of another small dating business. It's a team of two out there that's still on the move. So we're doing everything we can to to stay on top of the market.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:22:39] So you've pivoted from one point to the other. You're doing everything you can to stay on top of the market and you're kind of a challenging the big guys because you're telling them there's a different world out there.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:22:48] Doing our best but it will be a scary day when that when they start doing what we're doing. But again I think that they're doing what they do already. So it's really hard for customers to adapt to a new thing. I mean even LinkedIn one day I got an alert that they were doing Bluetooth connections and apparently they had so many LinkedIn users that were like I do not want these people knowing where I am in person because I don't know anyone in my LinkedIn network. I've got five hundred and something connections. I know maybe a hundred of them so I don't I really don't want those strangers knowing. So it's sort of hard for them to do something like that and they've already gotten shut down by their community.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:23:34] But there certainly is a segment of their community it's very funny when you talk about Network'd. The first thing that popped into my mind was indeed being at a conference or at a trade show.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:23:49] Yes and we're we're trying to start sponsoring events so maybe we go to an upcoming like SXSW for example.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:23:57] Right.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:23:57] And we're their official sponsor. So you walk into that convention center you will know everyone there and you know at a typical networking event you don't know who people are. I mean you can sort of look at the invitation and figure out who you might want to meet.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:24:10] Right.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:24:10] But while you're in the event. It will alert you of the exact people that you'd like to meet. And you know the other funny thing is I think I've been hit on on LinkedIn more than any other app out there.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:24:23] Well that's exactly what happened. Again I've been married a million years and it's like "hey guy" and I was like "really?" this is what we're doing on LinkedIn now? I don't think so. I really don't think so. I think if you knew me you wouldn't be there. So. All right.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:24:36] Well we still have that opportunity to have networks for dating too even though that's not our mission.

**Kathleen Buczko:** [00:24:43] Right. No I think. But I think the the mission of using technology to make connectivity in the real world is a very worthy mission. And thanks so much Lori for joining us on The Dots.

**Lori Cheek:** [00:24:58] Well I had a blast chatting with you. Thank you for having me.

**Announcer:** [00:25:10] The Dots is produced by Chapelure Media at the Network's Studios. Follow The Dots podcast on Facebook, Twitter, and on our web site at the dots podcast dot com. Please subscribe and review on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, or wherever you tune in to your favorite shows.