

Fox Rothschild Podcast

Legally EmpowHERed Podcast

Episode 14

Featuring Sahara Pynes with Lauren Imperato

Pynes: Welcome back to Season Two of “Legally EmpowHERed.” I’m your host, [Sahara Pynes](#), and I’m so excited to bring this podcast to you. As an attorney and former business owner myself. I’m passionate about drawing on my own experience and insight to set my female clients up for success.

[Lauren Imperato](#) has become revered as one of the globe's top entrepreneurship experts. Lauren quit her job as VP of Morgan Stanley, Fixed Income, in 2009 to self-start I.AM.YOU, a first of its kind health, wellness and fitness company. Lauren operated and scaled profitable digital, brick and mortar and CPG verticals and wrote a multi-country, [bestselling book called "RETOX"](#), was named one of the 100 Women in Wellness and on Elle's THIS IS 30.

Lauren has been profiled in more than 500 media outlets, including CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Vogue*, Bloomberg, Fox Business, and has spoken all over the world. Her first blog was selected by Tumblr as one of the world's 15 best in the space and went viral twice. After 10 years, Lauren exited I.AM.YOU, and since, advises a portfolio of companies on the nexus of business and brand strategies. She thrives on creating something out of nothing and turning back-of-the-napkin ideas into reality.

Lauren additionally writes on “Between the Waves” and is a member of the board of [HearMe](#), a board adviser for [Lynk](#), [Lada](#), [Aphrodite Health](#), [Women in Innovation](#) and the [Sunny Center Foundation](#). She is the Chief of Staff and Chief Branding Officer of [Delphos Capital](#), a women-run impact investment group, and is the co-founder and CEO of [The Association](#), a first of its kind global leadership community of ambitious, extraordinary career women.

Wow, that is incredible. Lauren is just a force of nature. I’m so excited to welcome you to “Legally EmpowHERed.”

Imperato: So happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Pynes: I have been looking forward to this all week. You have so many amazing things going on, but I just want you to take me back a little bit and tell me about your transition from the corporate world to the life of an entrepreneur.

Imperato: That transition is one that I never really actually thought would happen. I know I wanted to be an entrepreneur my whole life, but it was before “entrepreneurialism” was cool and trending on the cover of every magazine and Netflix show. I was working on Wall Street at Morgan Stanley in Fixed Income, both in New York and London, and had a great gig going.

I became really passionate about something else, and that was health, wellness, fitness. I grew up in Northern California. I was always athletic, playing sports every day. My basketball team meditated before every game and after every practice. I ate salad with every meal. And there I was on the trading floor – and in New York City at large – just seeing very unhealthy lifestyles.

Really rewind 20 plus years, 25 years: The offerings weren't there. I started getting into yoga and meditation and nutrition as sort of a balance or a hobby on the other side. I started teaching on the side, got all these certificates and blah, blah, blah. On the weekends I would turn the front of our loft into a yoga studio and teach free classes. Then during the day on the trading floor, I helped the traders trade their White Castle burgers – which just grossed me out; breakfast pizza was another thing that grossed me out – for other basics. Not for starvation, not any sort of diet trend names that we use now. Just other.

Then I realized that there was no health and wellness industry the way it is now, or fitness industry. I quit to start I.AM.YOU. The thing is in that day, quitting was brutally scary. There was almost a decade of vested shares, effort and political capital in the firm at Morgan Stanley, your whole upbringing and education. I had to take high heels out from under my desk for like two days in a row to get them out from under my desk.

Pynes: I know those days, I worked in New York City for a long time. Were you nervous about the financial piece of it?

Imparato: Oh, I was so nervous. But I also knew that if I didn't do it then, either the health and fitness industry was going to evolve without me, or I would never do it. I really saw this tiny gap of time where I could quit, leave a bunch of money behind, and be flying and hanging in the loose, which is scary, but also work really hard, create a brand in a business so that when the industry exploded, it would be well-positioned. And that's what happened. But honestly, quitting was the scariest day of my life.

Pynes: Tell me more. Did you plan ahead of time and get some ducks in a row before you actually quit? Or you were like, “OK, I'm done, and now I'm going to go?”

Imparato: It's such a good question. People like to think that I like hated my job on Wall Street and I quit and that was it and I was over the “toxic culture.” I actually loved my job. The trading floor was a good environment for me as an athlete. I had been, for almost two years, doing the things and teaching the things that turned into the business. I just wasn't charging money for them. So, I had two years at least of a studio running in the background. It was really like a petri dish, a lab to work on brands and wording and language. But I wasn't doing that, it was just my fun thing. All during the workweek, I've become obsessed with what I was going to teach on the weekend. What the music was going to be, what the anatomy was going to be, the sweat factor.

So, in many ways, yes, I was prepared. But from deciding that I was going to quit, which was March – actually, I was on the only other retreat I've ever been on as a client. I've led dozens – and I was like, “Oh my God, I have to do this” to April 15th, which is the day I quit. I think it was only one month and I opened my doors with a launch party on May 1. That was a six-week turnaround, in which I definitely

didn't sleep, to get it out of the bag. But momentum is important to me, as it is to every entrepreneur. I don't like to just twiddle around. I just sort of went for it once I quit.

Pynes: I love that not only were you an entrepreneur before it was cool, but you had this side hustle before it was cool. Also, I just never heard about sort of those dual tracks. Dare I ask about your fitness routine now? Do you still have time for mental health and working out?

Imparato: Definitely. You know, I always say that you wake up, you shower, you brush your teeth, you also drink water, exercise.

Pynes: Some days it's just too busy to brush your teeth.

Imparato: I mainly run, box, play tennis, ski, but I definitely exercise every day. It's been it's been part of me since I was little

Pynes: Right. And what is your day job these days?

Imparato: I exited I.AM.YOU. after 10 years and now have a very busy day job, in which my co-founder, Janelle Hallier and I founded The Association. The Association is a women's leadership organization across the United States and Europe at the moment. Soon I'm turning to Asia and Latin America. We curate your personal board of directors. We curate groups of eight to 10 women, geographically centered, and we create a system for you to meet with your board every month and follow our recipes/secret sauce for that monthly meeting, and help you get ahead and tackle those amazing opportunities and challenges that every career woman faces.

Pynes: How big is The Association team right now?

Imparato: The team is five. I feel like we need 500.

Pynes: Right.

Imparato: Janelle and I each wear a lot of different hats. That's kind of the joy for me of being an entrepreneur, wearing all those different hats. It allows you to never get bored. We are live in New York, L.A., London, Madrid, Miami, Boston, the Bay Area and are launching this quarter in Seattle, D.C., Texas and Chicago. I know I left out another city that we're live in. We're growing both horizontally across the nation and deep with various groups in each of those cities as well.

Pynes: So, who has time to work out?

Imparato: Well, I think if I didn't work out, my partner would be way more stressed about me and me about her.

Pynes: You guys are working across multiple time zones, right? I know Janelle is out in Spain. Madrid, right?

Imparato: We have some of our team at Pacific time, some of our team at East Coast time. Somebody in Madrid, in Europe. So yes, we work across time zones. It seems to be that the East Coast, you're kind of always slammed in the middle, but it works really well. And we believe in that flexibility

Pynes: What are your current biggest challenges? I mean, what keeps you up at night, other than calls with your partner?

Imparato: The biggest challenge is, quite frankly, demand. A lot of women want their personal board of directors, which is incredible. But before we create a board for every woman out there, we have to interview them, vet them. We use a combination of data science and a personal touch to create these boards. There's a leadership questionnaire women take. There's a lot of work that goes into that. It's a lot of logistics, quite frankly, and hands-on logistics. We don't just chuck a bunch of women together. We really think about how they would fit together. Is there diversity of thought in that group? So, logistics, believe it or not, which is not something that I thought a lot about before entering this business, definitely keeps me up at night.

Pynes: It's so hands on. Right now, are you and Janelle pretty much hand matching? It's almost like a matchmaking business.

Imparato: It is. We have a committee. Once candidates been interviewed and provided their data science leadership test, then once our team meets, we take them to the committee. As a committee, we decide "accepted" or "not accepted." Then once we hand-on curate a group, we go back to that same committee, say, "Listen, this is the group we were thinking about."

As a company, we have not taken outside investment because we don't want to have to report to investors about how many groups we launch in a quarter. We care so much more about quality than quantity. That's another thing that keeps me up at night is that. The demand is there from women, but we can only launch groups so fast. Because we don't have to report that we launched 10 groups this quarter and five groups that quarter and 100 groups the next quarter, we have that luxury to really deliver a quality product.

Pynes: What about your marketing plan and branding aspect of things? Which is certainly not an area of my expertise, but it would seem that this is going to be a huge personal referral-type business.

Imparato: The branding marketing I actually love. I have no technical background in it, but I really have been doing it my whole life. I believe, as I did with I.AM.YOU., that for a company to last and for a brand to last, I think it really should come from the founders, that brand and that voice. Otherwise, you outsource it to another company and, for us, this comes from what we thought was missing in our life. That's what's resonating with women.

We are going word of mouth though. That's the way I built my last business, which was sold out and it was subscribed for a decade. So, we're going over word of mouth for this as well.

Pynes: Great. What advice would you give to your younger self, let's say, going back to when you started I.AM.YOU.?

Imparato: Try and be more patient. I am inherently a very impatient person. There's this thing, there's an entrepreneurial thing. If you have momentum – and it's a dopamine/adrenaline tradeoff at all times – that momentum is critical, but also sometimes things take longer to gestate. I don't know if that's the right word, but to really come to fruition. Not panicking if something doesn't turn around in a second. I think would have probably saved me a lot of agony in the first years of I.AM.YOU. and something I'm really trying to bring into The Association.

Pynes: That makes sense. I mean, you seem just so grounded with so much going on.

I know you're involved in impact investing. Can you tell me a little bit about what you're doing in that space?

Imparato: Absolutely. I am the Chief of Staff and Chief Branding Officer for Delphos. Delphos is an impact investing group focused on emerging markets. What we do is we finance and orchestrate impact deals focused on climate transition and infrastructure in Africa, Latin America and EMEA – which is Eastern Europe and Asia. We look at those countries and those populations, those societies. Here in the States, we're constantly yammering on about ESG, impact, DEI. Those are all really important things, but the majority of the planet doesn't need those. These Third World countries, these emerging countries, need broadband. They need hospitals. They need other sources of energy besides burning the plastic. In Kazakhstan, they burn so much plastic just from wrappers to try and keep themselves warm. At Delphos, we are really trying to attack this problem in a way that nobody else is.

Pynes: Have you successfully funded any projects?

Imparato: Oh, yes. Delphos has been around for over 33 years. It's a boutique investment bank focused on these projects. Now we are going for a fundraiser for the larger part so that we can get involved hands-on in financing them as well.

Pynes: What kind of data are you seeing from the most successful projects?

Imparato: Data is such a phrase that I feel like we use so much in society today. I like to talk about quantitative data, but also qualitative data. We tend to forget about qualitative data, which is actually the crux of living and success in my mind. We're just seeing, when you put a solar plant in Ecuador, many more people have energy in their homes. Or if we put a road in Cambodia, many more people can get to and from work, or the crops are transported with less damage to and from the farm to the next step. These things really have a huge impact on socioeconomic growth and prosperity for the people on the ground, and then everybody tangentially involved as well, both in the countries and outside of the countries.

Pynes: Is Delphos primarily women-funded? So, it's women helping women?

Imparato: It's a women-led company. There are men, but it's one of the first, if not only, women-led organizations focusing on impact in emerging markets.

Pynes: I love that.

We were at an Association breakfast, as I mentioned, for our L.A. group yesterday, and one of the women said the great thing about this group is that it was started for women to help each other and, in sort of the general population, there's this mentality that women don't help other women. What's your response to that, and what do you have to say?

Imparato: Oh, do you want me to be blunt?

Pynes: Blunt as you want to be. Of course, I'm not like that. You're obviously not like that. The second somebody asked me for help, I'm running around the block trying to help. So, it took me a minute.

Imparato: I actually do not think that women tend to help women. I think it's a lot of B.S. and fanfare and pink hats and memes and whatnot. I think the majority of women don't help other women. I have been on the side of that the majority of my life, which is why I needed to start The Association and why I wanted to get involved with Delphos.

I don't quite understand why it has to be that way. When I am talking to a guy and the guy says, "Hey, wait, let me connect you with Jane, she could probably help you out." Within a day – sometimes they forget, but within a week – I'll have that connection email done.

90% of our members of The Association have had similar negative experiences with other women, so I know it's not just me talking. It seems to be a trend. I don't know if it's that... there were a lot of studies about this and I actually wrote a paper on this. I call it a "woman versus women," plural versus the singular. My theory is that the rest of the world thinks it's the queen bee. "I need to be at the top." Or, women have struggled so hard and there are less spots so they're edging people out.

I actually think women just need to hold more true to their word. Just be able to be direct. If they don't want to help somebody else, say, "You know what, it's not the right time for me." That's what a guy does. But here as women we're asked, or we think, that we always have to be nice. We think, or we're asked, to always be friendly with other women. We're implicitly being told through these asks that competition is not for women. In fact, we would not be alive as a species if we weren't competitive. Men are encouraged to go out there and be competitive. Even just look at baby clothes and kids clothes with sports trophies, all these prints on them.

Woman is all theoretical. It's unicorns and rainbows and all this other stuff. We're supposed to be docile. We're not supposed to compete. So then when you put two women in a room together, women are pretending that they're not competitive, when in reality, they're just going against their nature and holding the entire gender back.

Pynes: That's an important perspective.

Imparato: One not everybody likes to hear, I'd like to say. I've definitely gotten whooshed at times for saying it, but it's been my experience and 90% of our members, who are based across the world, across industries, so I know I'm not alone here.

Pynes: How is The Association changing things for the better in that regard?

Imparato: What we do in creating our board of directors, is we look across industry and cross level, unlike other women's groups out there, which tend to be echo chambers. Meaning, they're either C-suite or they're women in finance, women in law, women in the arts, whatever it is. We have philanthropists, lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs, techies. I mean, you name it, we have that gamut.

What each woman brings to the table on their board is their experience. The experience of a doctor is in no way directly similar to the experience of a lawyer. But what we're finding across the globe is that women face the same problems and the same challenges, they just attack them differently because of their experiences and their expertise in a particular field. By bringing a group with what we call "diversity of thought" together, we can help other women create their own path to success without advice being given. Without saying, "You should do this," or, "I would have done that." Without any snarkiness or passive aggression. It's just, "Here, I'm a doctor. This is what I do."

"I'm a lawyer. This is what I do."

"I'm a philanthropist. This is what I do."

Then suddenly the techie is like, "Oh, my God, I should do this." They take that input and create something new for themselves.

Pynes: Right, where you can take away what you hear. Everybody hears things differently, or everybody resonates with something differently. Just hearing the, as you called it, "diversity of thought," and taking away shared experiences or, "here's what I did," or, "here's what this reminds me of," I know has been very informative for my own professional growth for sure. So, I appreciate you guys.

Imparato: That's great to hear

Pynes: Yes. So, you are writing some books. What's next?

Imparato: When I exited I.AM.YOU. in 2019, and before I met my co-founder and started The Association, it felt like years and years of an endless, hopeless transition of, "What do I want to do next?" In that period, I really realized that there's not a lot of literature out there on transitions. There's a lot of self-help type stuff, and there's a lot of, "If you're in your business, how do you do a pivot?"

But career transition or life transition is brutal. It sucks. I woke up dreaming of wine and went to bed dreaming of coffee and I was just a mess. I was like, "God, what have I done with my life?" Even though the exit's the best thing I ever did, I was a mess. I think it's because as a driven person, suddenly you're in this gray space. I've always had a non-linear career, and I was actually quite jealous of my friends that had completely linear careers. The first time I was like, "I'm jealous of my friend who's a lawyer, my other friends at the bank. They never have to think, they just jump to the other bank."

Here I was with a lot of optionality, but I didn't see it that way. I saw it as the worst of the worst of the worst. That I chose, by the way, in exiting the company, but the worst. So, this book, *Between the Waves*, is an exploration of how you really can manage transition in a realistic way without being self-help-y and without being an executive coach doctor.

Pynes: OK, well, I'm going to have to check that out. If you need a free reader, I am here for you, Lauren.

Imparato: Thank you so much.

Pynes: I just want to close with this: What are you most looking forward to over the next year, whether it be personal or in your professional life?

Imparato: That's a big question. I mean, I love life, so I feel like I'm always just looking forward to life itself. I think that the little things are the things that I'm really looking forward to. Whether that is a surprise visit by a family member, or that perfect summer day with an Aperol spritz or something on the beach. Whatever that is. I think that we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to have the must do or the dos to feel happy. And I, particularly having gone through that transition, and now starting my second company and working with Delphos, things come when they're supposed to come. As agonizing as it is when you're in a transition or not in a great place and everybody tells you, "Don't worry, be patient. It's going to be great." And you're like, "Oh, my God. What don't you understand about life?" Actually, it's true. So, I'm just really looking forward to growing The Association, getting a board of directors for every woman out there and continuing this journey, no matter where it takes me, because it seems to be that I never know, and it seems to arrive on my lap.

Pynes: Congrats, Lauren. Thank you so much for sharing your story. It was so great, and I look forward to seeing all the amazing things that you accomplish.

Imparato: Likewise. Thank you so much for having me.