

# Transcript

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You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast and this is episode number 207.

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Welcome to the My Simplified Life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life, and start taking action today. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, and I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey.

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This is my simplified life.

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Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today, I am so excited to share with you someone I met when I was down in the British Virgin Islands on Necker Island. It is Suzy Gigante, who is with Virgin Unite. And when we met, we instantly hit it off. I feel like she's my little sister. I'm so proud of everything she's accomplished and-

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I said this when I had just met her. So she is absolutely just awe-inspiring with what she has done in her career and her life. And she's willing to share her family story with us, which I am so grateful for, as well as what Virgin Unite is and what they do. As someone who feels passionate about giving back in any way that I can, I love that Virgin

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profit that gives back in such a unique way. It's not one topic specific per se. And as you listen in, you'll understand what I mean by that. So be prepared to learn not just more about the philanthropic and nonprofit world, but to also hear Susie's story. She was born in the United States, but her parents immigrated here in the late 80s. And it's absolutely fascinating what she shares.

02:03

and how it's impacted her life. Hi, Suzy. Hi, Michelle. I am so excited to talk to you. It has been like a bazillion years since we've gotten to talk to each other. And we'll explain to everyone in a minute how we know each other. But can you take a moment to introduce yourself, please? Yes, I absolutely can. And let's maybe not share all the details of exactly how we met.

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But thank you so much for having me today. I'm Susie, Susie Giganti, and I am a Senior Community Manager at Virgin Unite, which you'll learn much more about, but that's the nonprofit foundation of Sir Richard Branson and his family, as well as the nonprofit arm of the Virgin Group. And so yeah, really thrilled to be here and to be chatting with you today. And thanks for the opportunity. And I call him Richard.

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He is a sir, but yes, I don't have to refer to him as sir, he said. No, you're part of a family, so you are absolutely entitled to drop it. And now you're living the dream because where we met is your home, Necker Island. Just takes me back.

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Crazy, crazy, crazy. Yeah. For those that don't know, Sonecker Island is in the British Virgin Islands, right next to the US Virgin Islands. And it is the private island and home of Sir Richard Branson. And I have been living here, gosh, for the last two years, over two years, actually, but had the privilege and pleasure of traveling here many times before that for work. Does it ever the feeling because just spending a week there, I was like, ah,

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It's just heaven. It's a different pace. It's just, and you know, but at the same time, I was kind of like vacation, not vacation. Yeah. Do you still have that feeling after living there for two years? You know what? It ebbs and flows. I'll be honest. It's, I definitely have to like make it a point to pinch myself. It is such an incredible once in a lifetime opportunity that like

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Little Susie in Brooklyn, New York way back when could have never in a million years dreamed that I'd be living on Richard's private island. But it is a completely different world. I am hardwired as a city person. I grew up in New York City. This is quite literally the opposite of that, right? And so it has been a lot of change. It has, you know, it has, it's good. It's sometimes not

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gratitude and my mom, who's one of the most important people in my life, reminds me time and time again, like, oh my God, this is where you live. She came in August for the first time and got to visit and actually stay on Necker Island. I think that just sort of made me fall in love with it all over again and just sort of like...

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She just made me realize like, this is incredible. You need to be super grateful and just cherish every single moment that you have. So that's kind of like this chapter for however long I have left here. I'm really just trying to lead into that. I agree with mom. It's just that it's like going to Hawaii. We went last month and there's just a different pace of life and everyone's just calmer. And then you come back to the city and you're like, get out of my way. It's...

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Yeah, treasure these moments before you have to get back into a car and people are cutting you off and doing what they need to do. And I think, I mean, to that point, like I, the timing of the transition couldn't have been better. I ended up moving. I spent a couple of months temporarily here from December 2020 until March. And so that was still very much pandemic times. And I came back and then very quickly decided because of personal circumstances and work as well, that I was going to.

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make the permanent move down to the BVI in July 2021. But at that point, coming out of the worst of the pandemic and being in New York City of all places during that, living by myself during that, I was really ready for a change. And I think New York at that time was not the New York that I knew and loved, right? It was a very strange place as many places in the world were. And also I was ready for a different pace. I was ready to...

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I was ready to slow down. Because I think often cities and especially ones like New York just breed stress. And so a timing of the move couldn't have been better. So take me back to what were you doing that has led you to be a part of Virgin Unite? Because I love your career story. I got to hear it over wine. So now I'll hear it over tea. Thank you. Thank you for asking.

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Who am I in the world that I'm even answering this question? You're Suzy. Yes, I've spent the last almost seven years at Virgin Unite. As I said, I'm a senior community manager. But what that really means is that I lead both our community of philanthropists as well as the many events and experiences around the world that we put on for them. A lot of those events happen to take place right here on Necker Island, which was a big thing.

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reason for me relocating and being down here. Prior to my time at Virginie and I, I spent six years at the Clinton Foundation in New York, working for President Bill Clinton and the Clinton family, and specifically on what's called the Clinton Global Initiative, which was an annual philanthropic membership program, and then a series of related events around the world. So I was there for six years, have been here for almost seven years, so sort of all in all.

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I've been in the social impact and philanthropic sphere for over 13 years. How do you land something like that? Well, I mean, I'll try to answer that, but I still don't know. I guess the story there is that prior to that, I was studying. So I was undergrad at Northeastern University in Boston.

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and was pursuing a liberal arts degree in communication studies. And at that time thought I was gonna be either a celebrity publicist or a celebrity event planner. Now, the latter, I actually had the opportunity during my senior year of high school to intern for a celebrity event planner. So I went to a high school where basically I had finished all my credits, there was no option to graduate early being the ambitious person that I am.

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took on an internship when I was still 16 at the time and worked for David Tutera, who's a well-known American celebrity. Just a little well-known, yes. And so had that experience, which was incredible, went off to Boston and the beauty of Northeastern for those who aren't familiar, I think it's much more known these days, but that was a long time ago. They have a work study program.

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So instead of a traditional four-year curriculum, your undergraduate program is five years and you are doing two to three work placements during that time. It's not an internship, you're actually a real full-time temporary employee for six months at a time and getting paid. And so in that, I had the opportunity to work at both a global PR firm as well as a small boutique one. And after that, I quickly crossed.

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publicist off the list. I just knew that wasn't where my heart was. And I think what a gift to, you know, at 17, 18 years old, know that that was not the path for me. And, you know, how often do people, especially in America, were conditioned, you have to go to university, you do this, you do that, everything's super linear. And then...

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You graduate and embark on this career trajectory that you've been basically building up to your whole life and then you quickly find out, oh wait, this is not what I wanna do. And you've invested so much time and resource into that. So one of the greatest gifts of going to Northeastern was figuring out, actually this is not what I want to do.

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And then did another work placement at Harvard in their internal communications team, organizing events, so doubling down on the experience I had working with David Tutera. But there, it was less about multi-million dollar weddings like it was with David Tutera. It was more about impactful events. And specifically, I was working on Harvard's multi-million dollar scholarship program. And that's where my heart absolutely lit up.

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and I knew I wanted to work somewhere where I could more directly make a difference and positively impact lives. So that was kind of, I guess, where the beginning of my sort of impact journey came. And when it came time to graduate, it was also still the height of the economic recession when I was applying to jobs, gosh, 2010. And

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probably applied to over 100 different roles all over the world because I was so anxious about figuring out where I was gonna land next, didn't have the means to have a large gap in between graduating student loans, work coming fast and furious. And yeah, the Clinton Foundation happens to be of those 100 applications, the first one to call.

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So the rest is really history. I mean, I never intended to work in the nonprofit sector, but once it all started, I've never looked back and I knew and continue to know that this is really where I meant to be and where I can make the most difference in the world in whatever small way I can. These are pretty big nonprofits. I mean, there's the ones who you're like.

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Oh, they don't have any money. They can't afford to do things. It's like, well, no, the Clintons and Richard Branson, you're good on the nonprofit side when it comes to financials that they're running and that you can, you know, make a living while making a difference. That's really nice. And that is a super important important point that you mentioned. You know, I wish I had a sexier story about how I found this work. But the truth is, is that I

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didn't even know that this existed as a career. So a bit of like backstory of my own personal journey prior to all of what I've just shared. I grew up in a single parent household. My parents divorced when I was about two years old. We lived in New York City. My parents had immigrated actually to the US from Poland only about a year before I was born. So my mom always likes to say I was her American surprise, whatever that means.

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I think we know. I don't ask follow-up questions. I'm like, OK, cool, whatever makes you happy. But yeah, my parents had immigrated to the US in the late 80s, and it was still communist times in Poland. So they really left everything behind with two teenagers, my brother and my sister, in pursuit.

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of a better life and the land of opportunity, as they say, or the American dream, because those opportunities didn't exist in Poland at that time. And then unfortunately did divorce when I was just two years old. So not only was I raised by a single mother who's an absolute powerhouse of a woman and human, I was raised by an immigrant. And without getting too political or political at all, we know how that goes, especially in the late...

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80s Eastern Europeans were not welcome and accepted in America. And my mother went from being a qualified teacher in Poland with, you know, substantial education of her own under her belt to having to work in a nursing home in Brooklyn, because she didn't speak English and no one wanted to take a chance on her. Um, so I guess all that to say, I was very lucky to be raised with sort of service as a core value.

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And while our family absolutely did not have the means to give back in the traditional sense, we did so by volunteering, volunteering our time and talent. My mom always instilled in me to just be mindful of what other people might be going through and never make assumptions and just know that even though times aren't always easy at home, someone else has it worse and just make sure you have lots of empathy.

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to give to people. And so I guess that's why I didn't know a career like this existed. We never had the means to donate money. Philanthropy is not a word that we used or that I even, I didn't even know what that meant until I was like literally graduating college and was applying to jobs.

So yeah, so it's just, I think it's amazing that I'm where I am right now. I feel very lucky. I feel very privileged.

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It does kind of make sense when you piece all that together, you know, my own experience growing up, like it makes sense that I am where I am. And it also makes sense the way you opened up with your mom saying, you know, you need to pause and be grateful for where you are, look at your surroundings. She has to be so absolutely proud of you, you know, to have immigrated to the US. I'm embarrassing sometimes. No, no. She is my cheerleader and it is, it's moments like that, like that just...

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bring me back to reality a little bit. And you know, it's not always a walk in the park. We all live very busy lives. There's lots of stressors in that, but it's really nice to like have my mom as that sort of like guiding voice and guiding light to be like, gosh, when I was moving from Poland to this country I'd never been to, didn't speak the language, not in a million years did I think.

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my daughter was going to work for the people that she's worked for. So I think, you know, it's, it gives her great pride and joy and it sort of reaffirms the very difficult decisions that she made and was very brave to make, right? Like when she decided to leave everything behind and come to America, she always says that when my father and her were going through the divorce, you know, everyone back home was saying, pack your bags.

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take the three kids, come home. Like communism had fallen, life was much better in Poland. And yeah, and she didn't, she made a choice to stay. She felt like she had a responsibility to me because I was born in America to stay. And that, you know, I would be afforded so many more opportunities if I stayed in America. And she didn't think it was fair to change my trajectory and take me back to a country I wasn't born in.

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When did you learn that she made those decisions? At what point were you in your life? I'm just curious if that affected how ambitious you have always been. You know, you're ready to graduate at 16. Was that in the back of your head or was this just who you are? Is this just Suzy? Well, part of it's just me, I'm a Capricorn. So for those that know anything about astrology, yeah, we're just.

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we are very ambitious to a fault sometimes, a self-inflicted stress and pressure that no one else is responsible for except myself. But no, I think I felt a level of responsibility to her because even though we didn't talk about some of that until I was much older and probably not until I was 18, 19 and so on, with my own two eyes, I can see my parents were not together.

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And what did that mean? I was mostly with my mom, but spending time with my father. I was very lucky to spend my summers in Poland. So every summer, I would go spend that time with my grandmother and my mother's mom, who's passed away since. But I did spend three months there every year, got to see where my mom was from, where my parents were from. And then went back to New York City, a whole different world. So yeah, I think it was mostly just me

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I just included on the fact that she made a lot of sacrifices and she did not have it easy by any means. And I just wanted to make her proud. I know that sounds, but it's just the truth. You have. I know you have. So let's dive in now to what Virgin Unite is and what they do, because I feel like a lot of people know Virgin Records, they know Virgin Airlines, but there's a whole big sector of Virgin things.

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that people just don't know about. Absolutely, yeah, happy to share. So as I sort of said at the start, Virgin Unite is both the nonprofit foundation of Richard, not Sir Richard, Richard and the Branson family, as well as the nonprofit foundation of the Virgin commercial group of companies. So I always like to say we're a bit of a unicorn in the nonprofit space, because we sort of, we sit in both.

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both spheres. Richard started Virginie almost 20 years ago. Next year is actually our 20th anniversary, which is super exciting. When he personally was taking a step back from the day to day of the Virgin Company and the businesses and wanted to spend really almost all of his time on his philanthropy and how he could make the most difference in the world.

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So we were founded as a traditional sort of family office, family foundation, but we work in very nontraditional ways. So we don't focus on a single issue. Instead, we have a model that looks at identifying issues or solutions that aren't getting enough attention or need more support. And then we'll go off and mobilize our amazing community, which includes you and others and our partners and their resources towards supporting an existing cause or...

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We'll bring Virgin's entrepreneurial energy and actually incubate and launch brand new nonprofit initiatives to address a gap. And we'll eventually spin those organizations out. Those entities will live on their own and we'll continue to support them in the background in any way that we can. So we've actually incubated and launched 19 independent nonprofit organizations in 20 years.

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such as, just to give you one example, the elders, which we started with Nelson, the late Nelson Mandela in 2007. And that's an incredible independent group of global leaders that advocate together on, you know, lots of different things in the world. So that's one example of the 19 organizations we've helped to start. That's amazing. Keep going. Yeah, keep going. I'm like, yes, yes. I would like to point the incubation piece out because that's really unique.

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in the nonprofit world. So we, you know, in the same way that Virgin from a commercial standpoint, you know, seeks to sort of disrupt, positively disrupt industries and shake things up, we kind of do the same thing in the nonprofit world. So, you know, in the same way that Richard started Virgin Atlantic to change up the, at that point, sort of stale airline industry or the way that he's started Virgin Galactic, which is creating a whole new segment of

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commercial tourism, you know, Virgin Unite really does sort of work in the same way. And it is amazing because when you think about a nonprofit, you don't think you think there, you know, it's one specific subject, one topic, one thing that they are focused on. And that is completely different for Virgin Unite, which is so unique. And of course, that's Richard, like, why wouldn't he do something unique? If you read his books or meet him, you will understand that.

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Absolutely. I think, you know, another important piece to this is that we don't do any of the work on our own, right? We do everything in partnership, in with collaboration, like, we just very much value the fact that we can make a much more impactful difference when we are all able to come together and multiply resources. So that's very much embedded, you know, into the heart of our organization.

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part of our DNA. We just were sort of the matchmaker in all of this. Oh, you know, I love that word. I thrive on that word. In the way that we were matched together on that fateful day. Yes, I love it. So how do people get involved with Virgin Unite? Is it something that an everyday person can be a part of? Because, you know, just as you were talking about volunteerism,

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I'm sure there's a lot of people who are like, oh, I'd like to do something that's not so focused on one topic, but this allows you to do so much more. Absolutely, it's a great question. So at the center of everything that we do is this incredible community that we call the Virgin Unite Constellation. And this is a network of now over 3000 or so individuals, like I said, like yourself, people that we've met along the way.

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It's not a formal membership structure. It's really just anyone who has come to one of the events that we've hosted or wants to just sort of partner with us on their own impact journey and their philanthropy. So it's really inclusive and we work with our community in a few different ways. We work closely with individual community members to provide them with ways that they can apply their unique resources, whether that's, of course,

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philanthropic dollars, but also skills, connections, ideas, pro-bono support through their businesses, all of those things, towards vetted nonprofit projects across all of those issue areas. So really, in the same way that we advise Richard and his family on their philanthropy, we're doing the same with this community. So we sort of serve as this unofficial philanthropic advisory. Core to all of that.

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are these events that we put on around the world. So that's always on offer as well. This includes gatherings that take place on Necker Island, speaking of which, as well as trips to the front lines of places like South Africa, where we're heading in a couple of weeks time, Kenya, Morocco. Basically the sort of like the other side of the coin is taking our community to the work versus with the gatherings that we host in the British Virgin Islands. We're bringing...

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the experts and the people to the island. So we offer both. And regardless of the trips and gatherings where they take place, they're all designed to really catalyze as much positive change in the world as possible. So yeah, in a nutshell, we're a community and a connection engine between people with resources and passions, and then amazing projects and partners that neither support the most. And I think what's most important of this all is it's not one size fits all, right? So we really...

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do sort of work with our community to figure out what it is that they are hoping to sort of do in this world and how we can help influence that in any way. And I want to point out that when you go on these amazing trips and you're paying money for it, there is a portion that goes to Virgin Unite. So although you are basking in the sun on an island, you're doing good.

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Absolutely, and that is a super important distinction. Any of the, so we sort of have two styles of events. We have ones that we put on entirely ourselves, and then ones that we do in partnership. So the one that you joined us for, Michelle, was an example of a partner gathering,

but then we also host our own events. Either way, there's always a portion of that that's baked in that is a donation to Virgin Unite.

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And another important distinction is that because Richard and the family cover all of our overhead costs, 100% of any donation that comes to Virgin Unite is immediately granted out and goes to support the many different issue areas and organizations that we're working with. So I always like to call that out. So I think there's so much wasted efficiency and resources in the nonprofit world. And so it's super important that that, you know.

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that money is being used as effectively as possible. Yeah, because there's those grading systems where you'll see that 80% of every dollar actually goes to the foundation, whereas this is 100%. And that's a big distinction that I think a lot of people who donate to nonprofits don't realize that your dollar is not going dollar for dollar. Yeah, and again, we are in a very unique position because of who we're founded by and who.

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the foundation sits with. So completely recognize that's not possible for everybody, right? So we are in a really lucky position where we can sort of just be that matchmaker and sort of focus on philanthropic investment and really treat our investment schedule in the way that a commercial entity would. We're very sort of just...

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critical of how that money is spent in a good way, right? Like we just wanna make sure it is going to the best possible place and that it's going to be used to the best ability. So how can people learn more about Virgin Unite and get involved? Yeah, so, well, firstly, you can go to [virginunite.com](http://virginunite.com). I know that's a basic answer, but we do have more information on the many different organizations we've started, some of the issue areas that we work on.

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And from there, you know, always welcome a conversation about with me, just about the community a little bit more and how you can get involved. So I'll share some resources with you, Michelle, and we can post that. We'll put them in the show notes. Yeah. Thank you so much, Suzy. It is such a joy to be able to do this work. And again, I still don't know. Even after all of it and after sharing this story, I still don't know how I got here, but it's been.

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It's been incredible and being able to meet people like you along the way. I mean, that is this is why, you know, we do what we do. You are too sweet. You are my little sister. Thank you for sharing your personal story and how Virgin Unite has come along and what people can do. I love hearing. I'm just so proud of you. This is like big sister gushing and like, oh, look at all she's done. She's amazing. So thank you for sharing of yourself so freely.

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Oh my gosh, of course. Hopefully I didn't share too much, but I think there's probably more that was left behind for good reason. Yeah, no, this was my favorite thing that I've done probably, definitely today, looking at my schedule and for the week and for probably many months. So this was fun. This was really cool.

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I am so happy you all got to learn today about Virgin Unite and to hear Suzy's story. She is my little sister and I will claim her forever. She's just absolutely adorable. She made my trip to Necker just so much more beautiful by knowing her, meeting her, learning so much more about her. And I truly wish that I could just go back and live there for a little while. I don't think that would be a bad thing. So I'm so appreciative to Suzy for taking the time.

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to talk to us, to share her story, and to share what Virgin Unite is about. As a reminder, you can get *How to Get on Podcasts*, pre-order it now, anywhere you buy books, [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org), Books-a-Million, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Walmart, and with your pre-order, you can send me your receipt, and you will receive the companion course that goes with it up until pub date. As always, friends, thanks for listening.

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and don't forget to do something good for someone else.