

**Mill Valley Oral History Program**  
*A collaboration between the Mill Valley  
Historical Society and the Mill Valley  
Public Library*

**Helen Russell**

**An Oral History Interview  
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2019**

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In this oral history, CEO of Equator Coffees & Teas Helen Russell shares both the story of her life and the story of the successful company she co-founded with her wife Brooke McDonnell. Born and raised in Massachusetts, Helen recounts how she grew up dreaming of being an entrepreneur. She then went on to study marketing and business at Northeastern University. In 1989 she visited Mill Valley for the first time and immediately fell in love with the town. Helen describes in detail how she and Brooke built their coffee business over the course of 25 years, moving from Mill Valley to Larkspur, then to Yountville and Novato, before finally coming back to settle permanently in Mill Valley. Throughout this oral history, Helen expresses her strong sense of belonging to Mill Valley and her commitment to creating community in town.

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## Oral History of Helen Russell

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**Oral History of Helen Russell**  
**April 7, 2019**

**Editor's note:** The following transcript is based on a recorded interview. It has been edited for clarity and accuracy.

**0:00:00 Debra Schwartz:** Today is April 7th, 2019, and my name is Debra Schwartz. I'm sitting here in the Hivery on behalf of the Mill Valley Public Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society with Helen Russell. Helen, thank you so much for joining me on this beautiful sunny day.

**0:00:21 Helen Russell:** Thank you, Debra. It's great to be here.

**0:00:23 Debra Schwartz:** It's hard to be here, I think, because it's been so rainy for the last several months, and now it's beautiful outside, but here we are inside.

**0:00:31 Helen Russell:** We will go for a hike right after.

**0:00:33 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, deal. In introducing you, first of all, let me just say that you are co-founder and CEO of Equator Coffees & Teas.

**0:00:43 Helen Russell:** Correct.

**0:00:43 Debra Schwartz:** Or Equator Coffees.

**0:00:45 Helen Russell:** Correct. Either one.

**0:00:46 Debra Schwartz:** I remember some months ago when we were talking — we're friends — that you said you are a 24-year, overnight success.

**0:00:57 Helen Russell:** Yes, exactly.[chuckles] Because we started Equator in 1995 in San Rafael, in a garage. So, we are made in Marin for the last 24 years. We'll be 25, January 1st. We've only been having the retail stores for six years, so people are always surprised when I tell them that we've been in business for 24 years.

**0:01:23 Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, but it seems that when you came aboard into the public arena suddenly there you were with all the savvy of somebody who was born to it. So it seemed from the outside, I'm sure the inside story may be different.

**0:01:37 Helen Russell:** Well, that's wonderful to hear. That's so great. It was pretty easy because — not easy, there was a lot of challenges in terms of opening retail, and it was interesting how we launched into retail from being a wholesale coffee roaster and getting that call. Gosh, it was seven years ago now when Starbucks purchased La Boulange, and La Boulange was one of our largest wholesale customers. We started with Pascal Rigo on Pine Street and grew with him to 22 stores. And when Howard Schultz

asked his team in Seattle, “Who is our competition for coffee in San Francisco?”, they came back with, “It’s La Boulange,” which was our largest wholesale customer.

**0:02:22 Debra Schwartz:** At this time, you’re just roasting coffee?

**0:02:24 Helen Russell:** We’re just roasting coffee, wholesale coffee for great chefs and restaurateurs like Chef Thomas Keller of the French Laundry, Chef Traci Des Jardins, William Sonoma, some retail stores, Whole Foods and things like that. But primarily, wholesale for sure. We were doing a lot of wholesale and we still are. We have over 450 wholesale customers in Northern California, Southern California, and now we’re roasting in New York. We’ve been roasting in New York for the last year and a half. So, when we received that call from Pascal Rigo six-and-a-half years ago now to say that Starbucks was purchasing La Boulange, it was quite a shock because there was \$1.1 million of revenue that we were supplying them in coffee.

**0:03:10:** And so I remember Brooke McDonnell, my co-founder and partner, saying to me, “Oh my goodness, we’re going to have to get into retail.” And I said, “Retail? Oh my God. I can’t get up at 4:30 in the morning, I’m 50.” And so, that was the funny part. Right at the same time, one of my sales reps had called on Proof Lab Station, because Nate, who’s one of the founders down there, had called up to Equator and said, “I’d like to put some coffee into the Station.” So he came by and he said, “Have you ever been down to the surf shop?” I said “God, I’ve been living in Mill Valley on Miller Avenue at Mill Creek Meadows, and I’ve been going by there, but I’ve never been in ‘cause I don’t surf.”

**0:03:47:** So I went down with him, and he says, “Yeah, it’s pretty amazing. There’s something special going on down there.” So I get in the car, I drive down and meet Will, Will Hutchinson. Will and Nate are the co-founders. I meet Will, and we’re walking around and I’m like, “Oh my God.” I could smell the ocean, my hair is blowing, I hear music lessons in the background, I see people at the nursery, the station is there, he’s selling clothes, I go in and see the surf boards, I’m like “Oh my God, I’ve been living here all this time and I never even knew this was here.” And so we’re walking around, I’m thinking, “Oh my goodness, maybe this is the opportunity to have a coffee shop here.” So I said to Will, “I know you just want to put an airpot brewer in.” I said, “But have you thought about a coffee shop?” And he says, “Yes. Nate and I have been thinking, ‘Wouldn’t it be a great place at Tam Junction to have a coffee shop right here at the surf shop?’” So I said, “You know what, Will, I don’t surf.” And he says, “You know what, I don’t drink coffee.” [laughs]

**0:04:46:** So I said, “You know what? Together, we’re going to do this.” And that’s exactly how it came about. There was an old shack, an old blue shack, where the wetsuits were drying, and there were shoeboxes everywhere. The building was kind of collapsing on itself, and there was just this paved little parking spot out front. And we hired an architect. We really wanted it to be indigenous to Tam Junction, and we wanted it to be part of the surf shop. And we opened that store, it’ll be six years in June, I think it was June 14th. And literally, I spent the first six months down there washing the tables down

and just talking to the community and to the customers telling them our story. And it really kind of became this sort of incredible “polo lounge,” I call it, because there were so many people that live in Mill Valley that were coming in for coffee and they were hearing the story about Equator. And from there, it just catapulted us into more wholesale. The head of LinkedIn Global Workplace was on his way to Muir Woods with his family and had our coffee and said, “God, this is the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had. We’d like you to come in and put your coffee at all the LinkedIn locations.” So, that little surf shop, after a year —

**0:06:08 Debra Schwartz:** It’s just a hub.

**0:06:10 Helen Russell:** It became a hub. And what was fun about it, what was amazing about it, and what I loved about the retail, is just the community. Down there, whether you’re three or 83, you just feel good in that space. And it has a lot to do with the way we’ve created that space to be part of that community. After the first year, guess what, it did \$1.1 million in revenue, which replaced all of the money that we lost when Starbucks —

**0:06:37 Debra Schwartz:** Just from a retail store?

**0:06:39 Helen Russell:** Just from that retail store. And that put us on the map. When we started in ’95, there were only probably 30 coffee roasting companies on the West Coast. Now, there’s over 400. So unless you really have a retail store, it doesn’t matter if you own a farm in Panama or you’ve been the roaster of the year or you’re doing a private blend for the French Laundry. None of that matters unless you really have a retail store to experience the brand. So that was our first step into retail, Proof Lab.

**0:07:16 Debra Schwartz:** You and I have known each other for a while, and we’ve collaborated on various community events, and if there’s one thing I think about when I think of you, Helen, it’s community. You are very much a community person: you just have a way of bringing people together. So we’re going to talk a little bit about that. But now that you wet our appetite for Equator, first I want to go back a little bit, so people that know Equator can get the genesis, really, of the story. Were you born in Mill Valley?

**0:07:54 Helen Russell:** No, I was born in Somerville, Massachusetts in 1960. And ever since I was a little kid, I always wanted to own my own business, which really made no sense because there was nobody in my family that was an entrepreneur. It made zero sense. I was the youngest of four, and my mom worked for the phone company for 35 years doing the telephone, and my dad was a postal inspector.

**0:08:17 Debra Schwartz:** And their names?

**0:08:18 Helen Russell:** Helen and Fred Russell. So, I was the youngest, and I can always remember telling them, “I’m going to move to California and start a business, and be an entrepreneur.” And my mom would say, “Well, what is an entrepreneur?”

**0:08:29 Debra Schwartz:** [chuckles] How old are you when you're saying this?

**0:08:30 Helen Russell:** I'm like eight or nine.

**0:08:32 Debra Schwartz:** And you're declaring this. [chuckles]

**0:08:32 Helen Russell:** I'm like eight or nine years old, and I —

**0:08:34 Debra Schwartz:** And California, that's really —

**0:08:36 Helen Russell:** California, I've never even been there, right?

**0:08:38 Debra Schwartz:** You just decided that.

**0:08:40 Helen Russell:** I just decided that. I must have intuitively known in order for me to really realize whatever dream that was percolating within me that I needed to go west to realize that dream. And I didn't know what the business would be. People say, "Is coffee your passion?" For me, my passion is human connection, kindness and empathy, those are my passions, and I really fell into coffee. Of course, there's so much human connection and kindness and people because you're selling an agricultural product that people are farming. These folks aren't making a lot of money, and now that we've been in business for 24 years, almost 25, that we have created what we call the "chain of well-being" where we can actually work with the farmers in terms of initiatives, paying them a way fairer price than they can get on the market, doing micro-credit loans and food security projects. All these things that are sort of intuitively things you should do when you find something that's not quite right, you leave it better than how you found it. None of this was strategy. It was just kind of the way it was.

**0:09:56 Debra Schwartz:** When you were a child, did you have an idea like, "I'm a social person and I want to be in a place where I can be social and do it the way I want to do it." Or what was it?

**0:10:09 Helen Russell:** Well, I've wanted to do things the way I want to do them. I don't know where I get that from. I'm very self-determined, willful, persistent. I was not a great academic at all.

**0:10:22 Debra Schwartz:** Did you go to school?

**0:10:24 Helen Russell:** I did go to college. I was the first one in my family to go to college. I put myself through Northeastern.

**0:10:28 Debra Schwartz:** Let's just get a little background here. So, you're growing up in a town —

**0:10:32 Helen Russell:** In Medford, Massachusetts, which is a great blue collar community, in an Italian neighborhood.

**0:10:37 Debra Schwartz:** So you went to grammar school there?

**0:10:39 Helen Russell:** I went to grammar school in Medford, and high school, and then I went to UMass, Boston, for a couple of years. I just decided that, “You know what, I need to have a college education.” I just felt like it was just really, really important.

**0:10:55 Debra Schwartz:** And your siblings weren’t going to school?

**0:10:56 Helen Russell:** No.

**0:10:57 Debra Schwartz:** Where are you in the lineup?

**0:10:58 Helen Russell:** I’m the youngest.

**0:11:00 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, the names of your siblings?

**0:11:01 Helen Russell:** My sister, Christine, my brother, Fred, and my other brother, Steven. My sister had a mental illness, so she didn’t actually work, but my brothers retired from the phone company and what would be considered Bart out here. So, I was the one that went to college. It’s interesting, growing up, my friend, Trisha, who was my best friend, her dad was a police officer, and her mom was the crossing agent. But when I would go down there and sit with them and have lunch or something, all they ever talked about was going to college. And when I was sitting at my home, all my parents talked about was, “when you get married and you live next door so you could take care of us.” That was the message that I got, and I was like, “Oh, I’m going to go back down to Trisha’s house,” because that’s really not what I wanted to do. [laughs] I’d love to do it, but I want to do it in a different way. So, I got that message really early, but I got it from my best friend’s family.

**0:11:57 Debra Schwartz:** It takes a village.

**0:11:58 Helen Russell:** Yeah, it does. It really, really does.

**0:12:00 Debra Schwartz:** So, you went to school and what did you graduate in?

**0:12:03 Helen Russell:** I got a marketing and business degree from Northeastern University.

**0:12:08 Debra Schwartz:** So very helpful for what would —

**0:12:10 Helen Russell:** Super helpful, right? I got tutored in accounting because I got a C in math. A lot of times people ask me, “What does it take to be an entrepreneur?” And I say, “You’ve got to be extremely focused and you have to be totally driven.”

**0:12:22 Debra Schwartz:** And have good tutors.



**0:12:25 Helen Russell:** Yeah, and be fairly intelligent. You just need to know what you don't know and hire those people to fill it in.

**0:12:30 Debra Schwartz:** Right. That's always a good strategy.

**0:12:32 Helen Russell:** And it's really being self-aware, I think, that always saves the day when you're an entrepreneur.

**0:12:36 Debra Schwartz:** Now tell me this: when you have this preternatural vision as a child, "I'm going to do this." And did it stick with you, or did it come and go? When did you finally come west?

**0:12:49 Helen Russell:** Well, I'll tell you. I remember my mother got me a job at the phone company — and this was the catalyst for me — 1980, she gets me a job at the phone company.

**0:12:57 Debra Schwartz:** And this is [doing] what?

**0:13:00 Helen Russell:** I am in the basement of a building in Winchester, Massachusetts, and I'm on the facilities team, so people are calling in, broken furnaces, busted toilets. And Jo Ann, who is my boss says to me, "You gotta get out of here, you have got to go back to school."

**0:13:13 Debra Schwartz:** Just when you describe it, the look in your eyes is just like a trapped animal. [chuckles]

**0:13:16 Helen Russell:** I was. I'm not the type of person that can be below or inside. I've got to be out with people. I feel like I need to make an impact, whatever that is, whether it's putting someone's luggage up —

**0:13:26 Debra Schwartz:** So your boss says, "Run."

**0:13:27 Helen Russell:** She said, "Run." And I remember this other woman that was sitting on the other side who was just about to retire. Her name was Ellen, and she has since passed, and she said, "You should go to California, but what are you going to do?" I said, "You know, I don't know, maybe it's ice cream, but I'm going." And they were like, "Good."

**0:13:42 Debra Schwartz:** How old are you?

**0:13:42 Helen Russell:** I'm 20-years-old. So, it was Jo Ann who said to me, my boss who said, "I want you to go back to college," and I quit. And my mother, I swear, she wore black the whole summer. [chuckles]

**0:13:56 Debra Schwartz:** What for?

**0:13:57 Helen Russell:** Because she did all this work to get me into the phone company, which was a secure job that you could be in for 30 years, and you could get that little Bell Labs, this little bracelet, and you were going to be okay.” And I was like, “No, I’ve got to get out of here.” So I did that. I went to Northeastern and I ended up working. I graduated and I got a job in sales, selling voice and data networks at the Prudential Center. And one thing about sales is that — what I love about coffee, you can taste it, you can smell it, there’s a story, there’s people, you look into that cup, you can see people’s faces. But with voice and data networks, you just point out the window and you can’t see fiber optics, you can’t taste, you can’t smell it, and it’s not even real. So, I was so happy to get that sales training, but I was happy to get out of there as well. And the catalyst to get out to Mill Valley, California, was that I took a trip to Palm Springs for the Dinah Shore in 1989.

**0:15:00 Debra Schwartz:** The Dinah Shore, what?

**0:15:00 Helen Russell:** Dinah Shore is a golf tournament in Palm Springs.

**0:15:02 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, right. She’s always such a classy lady. [chuckles]

**0:15:06 Helen Russell:** Which is so funny because we didn’t play golf.

**0:15:10 Debra Schwartz:** But why did you go?

**0:15:11 Helen Russell:** Well apparently, the Dinah Shore in Palm Springs, and I didn’t know it at the time, was sort of a lesbian spring break. I was only 29, so I was like, “What do I know?”

**0:15:20 Debra Schwartz:** So, have you come out to your family at that point?

**0:15:23 Helen Russell:** Yes, I had.

**0:15:23 Debra Schwartz:** So they knew all along?

**0:15:25 Helen Russell:** Well, my mother said, “Of course, we’ve known all along.”

**0:15:28 Debra Schwartz:** Were they cool with it?

**0:15:30 Helen Russell:** Yeah, my mom was okay with it, because your parents just want you to be happy, they really just want you to be happy. I took a long time to tell them, and if I have one regret in life it is that I would have told them a lot sooner, because I think they would have liked it that way instead of wondering. But I had come out to California two years before, and I was on vacation in San Francisco with my partner at the time, and we met Peggy Bennington, who lives here at 409 Throckmorton Avenue. She’s a lawyer and she’s been in Mill Valley for over 30 years at that same address. She

and I met and we connected and we ended up going to the Dinah Shore together. And then I met Brooke McDonnell who's my current partner for the last 30 years.

**0:16:20 Debra Schwartz:** As I recall, there was a wedding not too long ago.

**0:16:24 Helen Russell:** Yeah, we got married two years ago, which is kind of interesting because Brooke's mother was married four times, so she said, "There's no way we're getting married." But I think our accountant and tax attorney talked her into it.

**0:16:34 Debra Schwartz:** 29 years of begging her to get an accountant, she's yours forever.

**0:16:38 Helen Russell:** [laughs] Yeah, she's mine forever.

**0:16:39 Debra Schwartz:** In the eyes of the law. [chuckles]

**0:16:41 Helen Russell:** I met Brooke and that was it.

**0:16:44 Debra Schwartz:** So, you said, you're at the Dinah Shore.

**0:16:45 Helen Russell:** I'm at the Dinah Shore and I see Brooke across the room. I had seen her in Provincetown two years before, and I marched over there and said, "Oh, you're from Boston?" And she said, "No, I'm not." I said, "No, you are." And she's like, "No, I really am not from Boston." So I tried to convince her where she was from and —

**0:17:01 Debra Schwartz:** You are bossy. [chuckles]

**0:17:02 Helen Russell:** I am very bossy, yeah. And then Peggy gave us the car, so we drove up the coast. She was living out at the Great Highway [in San Francisco] and it was my birthday and she said, "I'm going to take you to Marin. We're going to go over the bridge. We're going to go to Tiburon." And we went to Guaymas and celebrated my 29th birthday. And then I went back to Boston and I asked my boss for a meeting, and I said, "Look, I've met someone in California. I need to be transferred."

**0:17:32 Debra Schwartz:** Really, love at first sight, that was it?

**0:17:33 Helen Russell:** It was love at first sight. It was just one of those things where if I get something in my mind then I'm just going to go down that road and that's what I did. I was just like, "Oh my God." So he said, "Oh, so you've met someone." And he said, "So what's his name?" And I said, "His name is Brooke," which [laughs] worked perfectly.

**0:17:52:** He got me transferred out here. So, I ended up on Howard Street, and I moved in with Peggy. She had a beautiful in-law apartment. And I remember walking down Throckmorton past the library, past the park, down to, at that time it was the Roastery, which is where Equator currently is, at 2 Miller, and sitting on those bean bags while

somebody was roasting coffee, having grown up in Boston 30 years ago where the big treat was to go to church and then go to Dunkin Donuts. And sitting there, I was just marveling at it. To think that, 25 years later, it is now an Equator Coffee location, which is at the center of town. When we opened up at the surf shop, Arnold Spinelli had had the space. And the funny part is, when Brooke picked me up at the airport, we went to Spinelli's in San Francisco, moved into 409 Throckmorton, and that afternoon I walked down the hill and I'm at 2 Miller..

**0:18:54 Debra Schwartz:** Only it was a roastery then?

**0:18:55 Helen Russell:** It was a roastery then, yeah.

**0:18:57 Debra Schwartz:** So, like in an efficient day or two, it was pretty much —

**0:19:02 Helen Russell:** I fell in love with Mill Valley. I just couldn't get over it. It was June 22nd, 1989 that I moved out here and lived at 409 Throckmorton, and then Brooke and I purchased a condo at 803 Miller at Mill Creek Meadows, and we lived there for eight years, right on the bike path.

**0:19:28 Debra Schwartz:** So, you jumped to Mill Valley to be with Brooke, although you were living with someone else, but it was a done deal.

**0:19:33 Helen Russell:** Oh yeah, we were just roommates.

**0:19:34 Debra Schwartz:** It was a done deal. And you quickly assimilated and got a place together and began your —

**0:19:39 Helen Russell:** Began our journey. And then we had started a coffee bar called Europa.

**0:19:45 Debra Schwartz:** And where was Europa?

**0:19:47 Helen Russell:** Europa was at Spear Street in the city, and over at 155 Grand Avenue in Oakland.

**0:19:52 Debra Schwartz:** So how did it come to be coffee?

**0:19:54 Helen Russell:** How did it come to be coffee? What's interesting is that I was in voice and data networks, and then I had some stock left over and we went up to the northwest, and we saw the whole specialty coffee thing happening, and we were flipping small houses, and literally Brooke and I were sitting at Pioneer Square in downtown Portland, she was having an espresso and I was having a mocha with whipped cream piled high, and she starts to describe the viscosity and the taste and the flavor profiles. And I'm like, "Oh my God." I said "I'm going to go get more whipped cream. That's interesting." So I come back and I said, "Brooke, you know what? You love coffee, and I love business." I said, "Let's start a coffee company." And she said "Okay, sure." That's

what's great about being 31 and 32, right? So we get back in the car, I drove back, and we wrote a little business plan on a napkin. We came up with Europa, and then we opened up two locations. So we were able to purchase equipment, understand the P&L [profit and loss statement], understand the lease, but the pivotal point was, nobody would tell Brooke the roasters that we were using, wouldn't tell Brooke anything about the product. Brooke wanted to know the elevation of where the coffee was being grown, how much the farmers were being paid, and were those children in school, and were there scarce times when they didn't have food.

**0:21:17 Debra Schwartz:** She wanted a sense of the consequences of doing business with everybody.

**0:21:18 Helen Russell:** She wanted to know all of that, and this was over 25 years ago, now.

**0:21:24 Debra Schwartz:** Was she a guiding light in that regard for you?

**0:21:27 Helen Russell:** Totally. She is the product. She is the North Star. Brooke traveled all around the world as a child, and she has an amazing palate for wine, for chocolate. And she hung out in the Castro, and who would be sitting next to her would be Harvey Milk. She hung out at Cafe Trieste, so she had sort of that cafe lifestyle and that curiosity. So after we had the two locations and I said, "Brooke, you know what, if you really want to roast coffee, let's do it." And this other half of the diamond ring that's on my hand, which was her mom's, she sold and she got a little table top Petroncini roaster from Italy and then she started buying green coffee from Dallas Brothers, which is a 100-year-old company in New York, and she started roasting coffee in this little 2.5 table top roaster and then started pulling it on an espresso machine. She named the company Equator, because coffee and tea is grown along the equator. And she chose the Bengal tiger, which you see me sticking on every child I can find.

**0:22:30 Debra Schwartz:** And I'm wearing a sweatshirt with it. [chuckles]

**0:22:32 Helen Russell:** You have an equator sweatshirt, and the Bengal tiger has become sort of symbolic of who we are. We chose that for its rarity, grace, and power because we're women-owned. And again, there were only five women roasting coffee in the US.

**0:22:48 Debra Schwartz:** And at that point, you said there was 400 at one point.

**0:22:52 Helen Russell:** There were only 35 roasters on the West Coast, and now there's over 400.

**0:22:56 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, and so at that time there were very few women.

**0:23:00 Helen Russell:** Very few women. It was Brooke, it was Lindsey Bolger, it was, I forget her first name, Katzeff from Thanksgiving Coffee. There weren't very

many. So, little did we know we were trailblazers at the time. She started roasting coffee, we put together the logo, the trademark Equator beautiful packaging, because we had had those two coffee bars, I understood how to sell equipment and how to lay out a coffee bar, and then I just started cold calling anybody that was opening up a new restaurant or anything, a coffee bar, and we would go out and our unique selling proposition was that we would open with them the first week. Then I started writing articles —

**0:23:47 Debra Schwartz:** What do you mean, “open with them in the first week”?

**0:23:48 Helen Russell:** Like I would show up at 4:30 in morning, work with them till the end of the day, for five days when they opened up a new coffee shop.

**0:23:54 Debra Schwartz:** So you were there, you were hand-holding?

**0:23:56 Helen Russell:** Yep. Cafe Saponi on Lombard is a perfect example.

**0:23:58 Debra Schwartz:** I guess you would say you were the training wheels.

**0:24:00 Helen Russell:** I was the training wheels, absolutely, because we had hired a consultant, and paid them X amount of dollars to help us. Because you’re nervous, right, you’re at the register, you’re steaming milk, you got a line. And so, we were the calming force, because we had done it before. I really understood the P&L and all the things that you need.

**0:24:21 Debra Schwartz:** P&L, what is that acronym?

**0:24:22 Helen Russell:** Profit and loss, of how to be a consultant. And then I started writing articles for the trade magazines. How to buy espresso equipment, brewing equipment. In those days we sold everything.

**0:24:31 Debra Schwartz:** Making a name for yourself.

**0:24:31 Helen Russell:** Absolutely, in the industry. I would sell anything: espresso equipment, brewing equipment, refrigeration, roasters, water filtration systems, anything to keep that business running. And that’s what we did.

**0:24:44 Debra Schwartz:** And you sold under what business name?

**0:24:47 Helen Russell:** Under Equator.

**0:24:49 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, so you were not only roasting your coffee, but you were also providing all these additional services?

**0:24:54 Helen Russell:** Yes. So, if you were opening up a coffee bar right now, I’d sell you espresso equipment, brewing equipment, I’d look at your architectural plans.

**0:25:00 Debra Schwartz:** You're an all-in-one stop?

**0:25:01 Helen Russell:** One-stop shopping, whether it be coffee, tea, filters, chocolate anything that you would possibly need to open up that coffee bar and be successful. We were committed to your success, because the more successful you are, the more coffee we're going to roast for you. So, it just started that way, having those two years with Europa as our first start. Who would have known? In any successful business, you need three things. You have to have the people, and that's me, the sales person. You've got to have the product, Brooke is chief product officer. She traveled to the farmer's gate, she got dirt on her boots, she met with those farmers in Guatemala, she understood that product, she brought it back.

**0:25:44 Debra Schwartz:** Did she make a determination to work with certain groups of people based on their social ethics or on their demographic?

**0:25:51 Helen Russell:** Yes. It had to be quality number one. Quality always leads to sustainability, right? We only buy the top 2 percent of specialty coffee, and we buy coffee from Central and South America, East Africa, Indonesia. I'm going to be traveling to Rwanda in June, a place that I was 12 years ago, when I took a trip and brought back coffee from Rwanda. Now it's part of our menu that we have, because there's 47,000 women that have rebuilt the country, post-conflict, through coffee. It was Howard Schultz from Starbucks who first went over there and had the Black Apron Project because it helped keep the tensions down by selling coffee, exporting coffee from Rwanda. So, Brooke has always been extremely socially-minded.

**0:26:46 Debra Schwartz:** But she's not that social, really, is she?

**0:26:50 Helen Russell:** She's very much an artist. She's very much an introvert, very much an artist. I remember when we were the first coffee roasting company in Northern California to sign on with Fair Trade USA. We were the first. Why were we the first? Because it absolutely appealed to Brooke's heart and mind, and of course to mine. I remember Brooke was out roasting and I get a call from Jerry Baldwin, who was the chairman at the time of Peet's, and he said, "Helen, can you have Brooke give me a call back? I've got people picketing outside here at 4th Street in Berkeley. They want fair-trade coffee." Now Peet's had always purchased great coffee and had always paid a fair price, well-above fair-trade. But because it didn't have that seal —

**0:27:39:** So here you have Jerry Baldwin who's a legend. That would be like Jerry Garcia calling you and saying, "What kind of pick do you use when you guitar?" It would be that crazy, right? And so, she called him back and she said, "This is a women's cooperative that we're buying fair-trade from Peru." So, we became friends with Jerry. Of course, Peet's was giant, and that was my first real cup of coffee, when we would go over to Peet's Coffee here in Mill Valley and then sit in the depot and drink that amazing brew, it was so dark and they would stir it and they get that amazing extraction. It was like the best cup of coffee I've ever had. I just loved it. That's what Brooke and I would do in the afternoons. We'd come down to downtown Mill Valley, and we'd go to Peet's

and we'd sit on the plaza and just imagine, not even knowing that behind us would be an Equator someday.

**0:28:27:** It's just hard to believe. When I came to Mill Valley, I was like, "Oh my God," I didn't want to leave it, I loved it. We lived at Mill Creek for eight years and then as we were growing the company, we needed to sell the condo. Then we rented in Larkspur, for a year, right behind where our store is now in Larkspur. And then we moved to Yountville and we bought a cottage. And then we put our coffee in one of the local cafes there. Then chef Thomas Keller comes in from the French Laundry, tries our coffee, and then he calls.

**0:29:08:** So, this journey of Mill Valley for eight years, Larkspur for a year, and then Yountville for three years, and then we moved back and we were in Novato for 15 years on Hamilton. We were growing, growing, growing the business. And then, all of a sudden I was coming down here every weekend, for Proof Lab, and the goal was always to get back into Mill Valley, always to live in Mill Valley.

**0:29:34 Debra Schwartz:** The sirens of Mill Valley were calling to you.

**0:29:37 Helen Russell:** I was at Proof Lab and, you know, that money was building the business, and we were putting money away, putting money away, putting money away and, of course, we found a little house up here at 60 Hillside. Half the size, double the price from where we were living, but it was so important. I said that to Brooke, and she says that, "You love Mill Valley." I was going to stay at an Airbnb here. Everybody who came up to me said, "Do you live here in Mill Valley?" Like all the residents, right? And then I would tell my story of how I lived here, and this and that, and I went home and I said, "Brooke, we're moving. I have to be in my town. We can't own a business here unless we're part of this community. So let's just do it sooner rather than later. I know we'd like something a little bit bigger, but I've got to get back in." And then we moved here and of course, walked down to town.

**0:30:21 Debra Schwartz:** Because Hillside, the house that you've lived in, is just right above the Catholic church there.

**0:30:29 Helen Russell:** Right there. And we would come down, I'd come down every day, and go to the bookstore.

**0:30:32 Debra Schwartz:** I mean, really, you could go to the back of the church. We have walked up.

**0:30:34 Helen Russell:** Yeah, we've walked up together. And that was a beautiful little spot, because you could lay there and you could hear the weddings happening at the art center

**0:30:43 Debra Schwartz:** And practically smell the coffee brewing.



**0:30:47 Helen Russell:** You could smell the coffee, you could hear the laughter on the weekends, and I just thought, “Oh my God, I can’t believe it. I *can* believe it because this is what I imagined being a part of this town.”

**0:30:58 Debra Schwartz:** There’s a lot in Mill Valley. There’s the natural world, and then there’s the people, and sometimes there are pivotal people that just make a place feel like home. Are there people in your mind that just seem like those people to you? Or characters that have caught your attention and whom you wanted know more?

**0:31:27 Helen Russell:** Oh, Ken Brooks. I grabbed on to him early on, because I remembered him from 1989 when I moved here when he owned that store here.

**0:31:35 Debra Schwartz:** The Roastery?

**0:31:37 Helen Russell:** No, Ken Brooks. Remember Ken? He’s on the Chamber. He’s now over at the Mill Valley Depot, the book store, Ken.

**0:31:43 Debra Schwartz:** Oh yes. Really? Oh!

**0:31:44 Helen Russell:** Yeah. So, he had a retail store, and I remembered him from when he was in that store.

**0:31:48 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, right. Uh-huh.

**0:31:49 Helen Russell:** When we opened Miller, he was one of the people who stopped by, and he was nodding, looking at me suspiciously, and sometimes it was like, “Who is this interloper?” And so, we became very good friends and he was super helpful in helping us sort of navigate things. When Arnold Spinelli left, I think it was called the Coppa at the time, or maybe he changed the name since then. But it was a very, very big deal, because it had been gone through several iterations. It was the Roastery, then it was Bona Vita, then it was the Coppa, and now Equator is coming in. A lot of the residents were very concerned about what was going to happen to the employees there, how would it change and all those things. And I totally got it, because, look, I love this town. I would want to know who’s coming in as well. I answered everybody’s questions, and we wanted to keep everybody who was there. And I said to Brooke, “Look, you know what? This is going to take a while. Let’s put a cart out front and really build community before we even open.” So we put the espresso cart out.

**0:32:56 Debra Schwartz:** Because it took a while to open. There were renovations.

**0:32:58 Helen Russell:** There was a lot of unfortunate — no, it’s not unfortunate, it’s kind of the way it is now. It’s just the way it is.

**0:33:11 Debra Schwartz:** Working with the Planning Commission.

**0:33:12 Helen Russell:** Working with the Planning Department. And I get it. You're over there, people are bringing in their plans for their nanny's house, another garage for the Tesla, "We're going to put the dog over here." And these folks who are working there can't even live here, they can't even afford to live here, and they're getting inundated with plans and now they've got one more, so it's a lot. I think they have a lot on their plate at the Planning Department. They want to do the right thing, they want to be helpful, but it's that the wheels move slowly, and we got caught up, we got a lot of sand in our wheels, even though we did everything right.

**0:33:50:** There was a lot of transition at the Building Department, so if we hadn't put that cart out there, I think we would have lost everything. That really helped us get through, and the residents were so grateful for us being out there. It became the hub, it became the front step, the stoop of Mill Valley, and everybody was so kind and gracious and they were cheering us on and, "Should we go over the Planning Department with you?" I said, "No, we'll move through it, we'll get there." And fortunately for us, we had that wholesale business, that allowed us to get through it all. Since then, things have changed over there and it seems like it's way more organized and functional, things are better, which is great. But at that time, they were shorthanded and it was tough on them. But I never lost the empathy of knowing that, even though it was costing us hundreds of thousands of dollars.

**0:34:45 Debra Schwartz:** Really?

**0:34:47 Helen Russell:** That thing should never have been that expensive.

**0:34:49 Debra Schwartz:** But you did a lot with the store here in the plaza.

**0:34:54 Helen Russell:** We totally changed it.

**0:34:54 Debra Schwartz:** The history as well that you built in, in subtle ways.

**0:34:58 Helen Russell:** Yes, that history there. I mean I get goosebumps when I think about it, when I think about the train coming down Miller Avenue and exiting to the depot, when I think about all the redwood that we really went out and sort of scavenged for. Dan Defoe was my contractor and he found me all this redwood and he set up a place downstairs and all that redwood that you see was repurposed in there.

**0:35:27 Debra Schwartz:** And the railroad ties.

**0:35:29 Helen Russell:** The railroad ties are my favorite because I remember when Dan was calling me and he was up on 37, they were harvesting, they were taking up the railway ties and one of them is 1910 Colorado, and he said, "Let's build that out front." So we created the railway ties.

**0:35:50 Debra Schwartz:** That's the counter outside?

**0:35:52 Helen Russell:** The counter outside.

**0:35:52 Debra Schwartz:** So if you look, and it's not always obvious to those who may just be looking from the top, there's a small plaque, but you can see.

**0:35:58 Helen Russell:** Yeah. I put two small plaques there as an ode to Mill Valley because this place is so special that I wanted people to remember that it wasn't long ago when that train pulled in, it wasn't long ago that in this rural community the only access was the train. Now we have a lot of tech families coming up that are moving over the bridge because it's close to San Francisco, and you can raise a family here. I remember one of our customers down at Proof Lab, his name is Dave Morin.

**0:36:38 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, Dave Morin.

**0:36:40 Helen Russell:** Dave's awesome.

**0:36:40 Debra Schwartz:** Right.

**0:36:40 Helen Russell:** Dave and Brit Morin. He was at the surf table and a little bit of his mocha fell on to his boot, and I went down there and I cleaned it off, and he said, "Oh you must be the owner, nobody does that kinda stuff." He said, "Let me tell you a funny story." So he started to tell me that Brit, his wife, had said to him, "Dave, we're going to have a baby, and we're going to move over the bridge to Mill Valley." And he said, "I'm not moving to Mill Valley, there's no good coffee in Mill Valley." "And she said, 'You've got to try Proof Lab Surf Shop. We're going to go.' So she brings me here, I have a cup of coffee, and then I drive up the hill and I buy the house." I said, "That's awesome." [laughs]

**0:37:14 Debra Schwartz:** And then, not only did you do that but after you met them, you called me and said, "We've got some new people in town."

**0:37:22 Helen Russell:** Did I? I was talking about Dave and Brit?

**0:37:22 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, you did. "Come say hi and introduce them around." That's you in the community.

**0:37:28 Helen Russell:** They're so special. And then, little did I know, I found out that Dave's family when they came through Ellis Island, their last name was Katz, K-A-T-Z. And so, when his grandfather or great-grandfather said to the gentleman that was behind the desk, "What in English is a name for cats?" The gentleman said, "feline," and he heard it as "filene," so they were the founders of Filene's Basement in Boston, which was our hangout after church.

[laughter]

**0:37:56:** We would go to Filene's. I said, "You're kidding, that was your family?" He says, "No." So all these wonderful little stories that make this community so special: the local residents, the people that have been here a very, very long time, the people who're fortunate enough to come here. It's expensive, right? It's really expensive because of the proximity. But we're living in paradise here.

**0:38:20 Debra Schwartz:** Whose idea was it to put in the biker stools?

**0:38:26 Helen Russell:** Oh, that was me.

**0:38:29 Debra Schwartz:** Because we got a history of mountain biking here in this town.

**0:38:31 Helen Russell:** Absolutely. If I had the COO that I have now, he never would have let me, but I had this gentleman over in Berkeley make me these seats because I wanted it to feel like a saddle, maybe a little bit more comfortable.

**0:38:48 Debra Schwartz:** Like a bike saddle?

**0:38:48 Helen Russell:** Like a bike saddle.

**0:38:49 Debra Schwartz:** So, there's even the space there to protect your prostate.  
[chuckles]

**0:38:51 Helen Russell:** Yeah, exactly, all these little idiosyncratic things.

**0:38:56 Debra Schwartz:** It's the touches.

**0:38:56 Helen Russell:** From the train to the redwood to the railway ties and then actually getting that little area out front that we could slide the bikes in. I wanted to have waffles because I love waffles and I wanted the community to have a place that they could call their own. Because people always say to me, "Can we do this here?" And I say, "I built it for you. You can do whatever you want here. Yes." I would say yes. "Can we have an event here?" "Yes." "Can we do this?" "Yes. Do whatever you want here. This is your space. This is why we built it."

**0:39:35 Debra Schwartz:** And then you did a real favor for the Mill Valley Historical Society.

**0:39:39 Helen Russell:** Did I?

**0:39:40 Debra Schwartz:** With our orphan map.

**0:39:41 Helen Russell:** Oh God, that map is a treasure.

**0:39:44 Debra Schwartz:** When was it that I called you? It must have been three years ago maybe?

**0:39:49 Helen Russell:** Yeah.

**0:39:50 Debra Schwartz:** We've got the beautiful hiking map that had been on the store over by Old Mill Park, but when they took down the old building, they dismantled the map and put it in someone's garage, and for years and years and years the Historical Society has been trying to find a place to put that map up, renovate it, and continue to include the long history of hiking in this town, and it was just one disappointment after another about where we could place this map. But then when I called you, you were like, "I want the map." [chuckles]

**0:40:25 Helen Russell:** Yeah, I want that map.

**0:40:27 Debra Schwartz:** "Where's the map?" [chuckles]

**0:40:28 Helen Russell:** Give me the map.

**0:40:28 Debra Schwartz:** But there was no real space except on the building.

**0:40:31 Helen Russell:** At 34 Miller, on the side.

**0:40:33 Debra Schwartz:** But at the time, we didn't have the cooperation of the current —

**0:40:38 Helen Russell:** Yeah, and I called him and asked, I said, "Why wouldn't you want this map? Why wouldn't you want people standing there reading the history, enjoining the story right around from your front door where you can sell them ice cream next?" It's like, ice cream, history, families —

**0:40:58 Debra Schwartz:** Outdoors, fun.

**0:41:00 Helen Russell:** And he's like, "No, I don't want the map." Well, he's long gone now.

**0:41:04 Debra Schwartz:** And so one day I get a call from you —

**0:41:07 Helen Russell:** I want the map.

**0:41:08 Debra Schwartz:** "I've got the building."

**0:41:09 Helen Russell:** Yeah. [laughs] We took over the lease.

**0:41:11 Debra Schwartz:** "I'm in the building. I took over the lease. Where's that map?" [chuckles]

**0:41:14 Helen Russell:** Right? And we got it up.

**0:41:16 Debra Schwartz:** We proceeded, and now we have a beautiful placement for the map.

**0:41:20 Helen Russell:** You know what, it's just about saying yes. There's no reason to over think these things, you know? [chuckles] It's just like, this is our history, this is our town. People come here to walk, and you know, you run the history program in town, looking at the clock at the depot —

**0:41:37 Debra Schwartz:** Oh, the history walks, yes.

**0:41:39 Helen Russell:** The history walks. I mean, every corner of this town — the stories that have graced it, it's just, it's amazing.

**0:41:49 Debra Schwartz:** Often I think of history as the capillaries that start to root you to the Earth below you. The more history you know, and the more you connect to the actual story, the land around you, the more rooted you are in the place you are, and the more rooted you are, the more you care.

**0:42:05 Helen Russell:** Yeah.

**0:42:06 Debra Schwartz:** Talk about your business ethic. When there's something that happens downtown, like the roof falls or there's a flood, you leave the coffee out for the firemen or the policemen. "Help yourself. Thank you for your service." And you give in other ways, too. Can you discuss that a little bit, not just the business side of things, but your ethic about supporting the community?

**0:43:03 Helen Russell:** I think it's really important as a business owner. Growing up, I saw my parents work really, really hard, and having incredible health insurance was, in the end, so important for them. You know, we have 133 employees and they are the community internally, and they all have health insurance. I think that's one of the reasons why we have such great people working for us, because none of the folks that you see at Miller, that work Equator, or down at the surf shop, can afford to live in town, but they will come and work for us, because we're paying them well above minimum wage. We're giving them an opportunity to learn something and an education in coffee. They can go on from being a barista, they can be an assistant manager or manager, they can come over to the wholesale, they can be an accountant manager, they can be a trainer, they can come into our roasting plant, and they can close boxes, taste coffee, buy green coffee.

**0:44:05:** There's so many opportunities in specialty coffee to grow. And all the young people that you see behind our bars, they're all very educated. It's really been important for us that we provide a safe place for them to work, that they feel protected, that they

feel nurtured, that they want to come to work. I feel that same way for the people that come into the stores.

**0:44:36:** I remember this woman came to town, and she had just got into the Redwoods. I saw her walk by, and she looked in and she was very hesitant. She had a cane, and I went over and I walked her in. I said, “Come in.” And she said, “Oh, I was just coming by.” And I said, “Well, where do you live?” And she said, “Oh, I just moved here.” And I said, “Where do you live?” “The Redwoods.” I said, “Look I want you to sit down. I’m going to give you a cup of tea, and I’m going to give you a little piece of lemon cake. I just want you to see Mill Valley from this corner from inside.” And she said, “Really?” I said, “Yes.” I said, “I’ll sit with you for a minute, but I want you to see it from here, so you can see the people walking by, you can hear the noises and see what’s going on.” Because I’m sure it’s a lot when you just got here. And so, it’s having that empathy and that understanding that we all want to feel as if we matter, that we’re valued. And being kind is just so simple. It’s just about being observant and about being curious.

**0:45:40:** We try to hire for kindness and then teach them how to make coffee, not the other way around. For me, the most important attribute is empathy. Because if you have empathy, there’s so many things that you can do. You can help people. When I get on an airplane and I sit down, I look around and see, “What elderly person needs me to put their bag up?” I just don’t open my book. These folks at the airlines now, they’re not helping people anymore like they used to because they’re not getting paid, they’re not feeling valued. But I’m not going to stop myself from not helping them. So, we try to instill that in our team. That’s where the community comes from. I always describe it as, “Whether you’re three or 83, it’s like a Katy Perry concert, you’re going to feel good inside our store.”

**0:46:32 Debra Schwartz:** What people can’t see right now is that as you’re describing this you’re running a circle on the sheep skin.

**0:46:38 Helen Russell:** Yep, I’m enclosing them with love.

**0:46:40 Debra Schwartz:** You’ve got a circle and you’re looking inside that and that’s how you’re holding people.

**0:46:45 Helen Russell:** That’s how I want to hold people. I want people to feel safe, I want them to feel valued. There was a woman down at Proof Lab — I’ll never forget this — an older woman, and she’s sitting there and she’s smiling, and there’s a gentleman next to her with a tank top on, his hair is crazy wild, blowing, and he’s smiling at her. And so, she’s a substitute teacher, probably 76 years old. She said, “Helen, I love it here. I just love it. I just feel so great.” She felt like she belonged there. And looking up at that surfboard, she said, “Yeah, I could’ve done that.” [chuckles]

**0:47:22:** But it’s that feeling of like, “I can do this. I can be here.” That feeling of belonging. That’s all I think about 24/7 with our two stores here because this is an

extension of Brooke and I, our living room from Homestead. It's like when I wake up in the morning, I look at the cameras and I'm like, "Oh, there's Katy Coon. Oh, there's you up here."

**0:47:41 Debra Schwartz:** Do you know everybody's name?

**0:47:43 Helen Russell:** I pretty much do. I want to know everybody's name. There's Donna, there's Todd.

**0:47:48 Debra Schwartz:** I was just at Equator with you, and I don't know how you ever even get through that place.

**0:47:54 Helen Russell:** I don't want to. [chuckles] I want to stay there. I just want to be with them. I want to clean everybody's table.

**0:47:57 Debra Schwartz:** Everyone's dog, everyone's child, every grandchild, every couple.

**0:48:02 Helen Russell:** Like that little baby, she was in her mother's stomach and here she is now, and I just hear she's moving to Australia. I'm like, "I'm going to miss you." But she'll be back, right? It's this life thing that goes on. And there's something about Mill Valley that if you just look around, you can see so many things. Whose parents are visiting from the East Coast that have got the baby out? Who's thinking about buying a home here? Who's visiting and dreaming of living here one day? You see them all. They all just sit there and they look around. I remember when my dad came out here the first time when I moved out here, it was probably early '90s, and we're sitting on that little round bench there across from Peet's, it's right there across from the bank. We're sitting there and I gave him a cup of Peet's coffee before we had the coffee. And he says to me, "Does anybody work in this town?" [chuckles] I said, "They're all authors and they do big things." And he's like, "Wow, everybody's out." [chuckles] So he said, "It's like a movie set." And I said, "It is like a movie set."

**0:49:07 Debra Schwartz:** And this is my movie and I've been conducting it quite well. [chuckles]

**0:49:10 Helen Russell:** And I'm in this movie, and I feel so comfortable here. I feel like this is my home.

**0:49:17 Debra Schwartz:** I always say about Helen Russell, best hugger in town.

**0:49:22 Helen Russell:** Yeah.

**0:49:22 Debra Schwartz:** How many hugs in a day?

**0:49:26 Helen Russell:** I love hugging. [chuckles] I'm not running for mayor, that's for sure. I'd be in trouble, but that couldn't stop me. Oh, 15, 20 hugs. I just like to hug. It's



that feeling when you can connect with someone and just hold on to them and that spark between you, that I see you, thank you for being here, thank you for staying in the line. It's that appreciation that I have because there's a lot of choices for coffee, and there's a lot of great coffee in the Bay Area. And the more coffee that we can sell, the greater impact that we can have. All I think about is selling coffee, whether it's at the retail stores or on the wholesale or on the website. That's why we started roasting in New York. Brooke's from Manhattan, I'm from Boston. Our executive VP, she's from the Bronx, she was our number one employee. We're roasting out of New York now.

**0:50:31:** Why? Because we want to keep growing this company and layer it with the next generation. We have a very multi-generational company now and we really want to be the Patagonia of coffee, where we the founders are still here. But those that are coming in, rolling through the company — we want the company to be infinite. We don't want it to be finite. I don't want Equator to go away. I want to be going through some little spot in New Hampshire 10 years from now and seeing an Equator bag on a shelf. I want the company to continue because the bones of the company are such that you can come into this company, you can learn a lot, you can do well. I tell my team, "I don't care if you're here for two weeks, two months, or 20 years. We're going to give you everything that we have so you know what that bar is when you go to the next company. That bar is high, and if they're not treating you this way or thinking about you this way or valuing you this way, you don't do it."

**0:51:32:** A lot of them are young and they don't get it yet. Then they go to the next location, or wherever they're going, because the millennials are like that, right? They're not sticky. And you don't want them to be sticky because they're young. We want them to move on and we want them to go and learn other things. That's how you gain empathy, if you're curious and you're working in many environments.

**0:51:53 Debra Schwartz:** This sense of belonging, do you think it was always with you or is it life experiences that has forged that in you?

**0:52:07 Helen Russell:** I think it's making people feel loved and valued. I was fortunate growing up. I always felt loved. They loved us. They held us, they walked us around. My parents were children too at one point in time and their parents were kids too. The love that they gave to me and that feeling of security — it wasn't that you can do anything, because they didn't give me that, but they gave me love no matter what I would do. I was loved and I just want that to perpetuate. I think about it all the time, because when you own your own business you have a lot of employees that are representing you as the founders. So, you'll see me go in there, and not only is it me but I want them to see me put a sticker on a kid. Like a little kid yesterday, he tripped and he hit his little head on the door down at Proof Lab, and he was screaming and crying. So I said, "Oh, let me get you a donut. You want a donut with the sprinkles?" Immediately he stopped crying. The whole world was right because I was going to get him a donut. [chuckles]

**0:53:30:** His mother looked at me like, "Oh my God, thank you, get him a little donut." And his brother was there and I cut it in half, and the tears are going down his face and I

said, “I bet a little orange juice is going to help now.” And he said, “Orange juice? Yeah, I can’t believe it.” [chuckles] So, it’s just about interceding and just doing anything that you can to make that little person feel —

**0:53:52 Debra Schwartz:** You’re like the town mother.

**0:53:53 Helen Russell:** Oh, you know what?

**0:53:54 Debra Schwartz:** Do you not feel that way?

**0:53:55 Helen Russell:** I just want people to be happy. There’s so much going on.

**0:54:00 Debra Schwartz:** That’s absolutely true.

**0:54:00 Helen Russell:** There’s so much going on.

**0:54:02 Debra Schwartz:** It’s daunting.

**0:54:03 Helen Russell:** It’s daunting and I just want the people that come into my orbit to be sent out in a different way.

**0:54:17 Debra Schwartz:** Life lessons, as we get ready to close. Have you had mentors, besides beautiful Brooke?

**0:54:25 Helen Russell:** Beautiful Brooke is an amazing mentor. If you look at my reading table, the spiritual books are on one side and the business books are on the other side. I really think I’m more focused towards or centered towards the spiritual side, but the business side I had to learn, so I’ve been reading *Inc.* magazine for 20 years. I read *Fast Company* for 20 years. So, I have these two sides to me, and I’m really trying to understand what my purpose is and what’s next for me as I enter my 60th year and transition at some point out of the CEO role, really pushing the company to grow in Northern California, Southern California. I will be the chairwoman of this company, I will not leave this company, and I will be majority person in this company, in terms of ownership, but coming in and doing more of the communal aspects of the company and building community to make people happy.

**0:55:50:** There have been a lot of lessons. I read everything that Dr. Wayne Dyer ever wrote. So, if I were to have one mentor it would be Dr. Wayne Dyer. I remember being 16 years old and I put an IZOD shirt on the back of my closet door in Medford, Massachusetts, and I said, “I’m going to leave that IZOD shirt up there,” because I thought it was a status symbol, with the little alligator, “and I’m not going to put that on until I feel as if I’m worthy of that shirt.” And I thought, “Well, how do I get worthy of that shirt?” I was thinking that financially I needed to be in a certain area. I always wanted to be economically viable from a financial standpoint, not because I could buy more things, but because I could have more options.

**0:56:26:** So if something didn't go well for my brother, I could help. If something didn't go well over here with my sister, I could help. But you have to find people. You have to know where your holes are and you have to go out and bring people to help you fill them in. Brooke was great for me because she had a very high expectation, and no one had ever had a high expectation for me, and so I think I purposefully went towards her because she had that high expectation. It wasn't that just because I was funny and a good person, it was like, "Look, you can do whatever you want to do, you just have to go for it." My mother used to say, "When money goes out the window, love goes right after it."

[laughter]

**0:57:48:** And there were times when, when we sold Mill Creek Meadows and bought the roaster and got the lease, we were down to zero. And it's like, it's go time. That tells you a lot about who you are as a person, it tells you a lot about your relationship, it tells you a lot about who you will become. But we stuck through it, we went to our corners several times, but now when I go home to Homestead or see her at a meeting, it's like, "Oh my God, I'm so glad we spent 30 years this way or 25 years in business," because we worked so hard. But to be able to be with your partner —

**0:58:24 Debra Schwartz:** Who understands, truly understands.

**0:58:26 Helen Russell:** Who understands and has been there since the get-go. Yeah. And she'll come to the stores with me but after the sixth person comes up to me, she's like, "I'll see you at the house." [laughs]

**0:58:34 Debra Schwartz:** "I see you don't need anything."

**0:58:36 Helen Russell:** "I'll see you later." Once it goes over four, she's done. But Brooke comes down, she goes, around to all the stores, and she tastes all the coffee, she goes to the roastery, meets with her team. And then Barbara — I don't know if you know Barbara, I don't know Barbara's last name, but she's one of our locals here. She just walks, she lives at Blithedale Canyon, you've seen her with the little hat, and she comes to Miller, she comes to the store every afternoon. I'm going to get her a little plaque that says, "This is my seat." She gets there about 3:30 and then Brooke comes down and has coffee with her and they talk. They talk about what was in the *New Yorker*, what's going on in the news and politics. But once it gets to three or four Brooke's like, "Okay." She's up.

**0:59:16 Debra Schwartz:** Speaking of the private/public space, I was at the LinkedIn building in San Francisco, and there is a whole map of POPOS, which is an acronym for the Privately Owned Public Open Space. All these pods of beautiful little spaces, which you think are private, but they really aren't at all.

**0:59:39 Helen Russell:** That's a public space, yeah.

**0:59:40 Debra Schwartz:** They're public spaces.

**0:59:42 Helen Russell:** You're in there.

**0:59:43 Debra Schwartz:** I remember when I was at Berkeley, I saw that you had come into the open space there in Berkeley. You're all over the place.

**0:59:52 Helen Russell:** You know, it's funny, it feels like that, I'm sure, because sometimes when you start looking for something —

**1:00:00 Debra Schwartz:** You keep finding it?

**1:00:01 Helen Russell:** You keep seeing it. So, what's great about the residents and people in Mill Valley, the customers, they'll send me photos from the airport at Boston. They're at the Boston Logan Airport and they'll send me a photo and they'll send me a text. Or they're at Terminal 2 or they find it down in LA, which is so great, because they feel like they've discovered something.

**1:00:19 Debra Schwartz:** Plus it's a little bit of home.

**1:00:21 Helen Russell:** It's a little bit of home. And God, my mouth hurts with smiling, but I just want to say how grateful I am and how grateful Brooke is that we have found our way to Mill Valley, back to Mill Valley. I'll go out in Mill Valley, I will leave this life from Mill Valley, and then the tide will come in and the tide will go out, and there'll be more residents that will enjoy the trails that you take everybody on, because this is one of the most spectacularly energetic places that I've ever been in. I think it's beyond special. There's something going on here with the nature. I'm always told to get out in nature more, which is part of what I want to do, because I'm always trying to. "If I just talk to one more person, if I just make one more call, if I just go out on one more sales call, if I just get out one more plane, I can make an impact." What I really just want to do is what you saw me do today, which is just be with the people who are our customers who entrust us with their mood, their feeling that day.

**1:01:41 Debra Schwartz:** Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add to this interview?

**1:01:48 Helen Russell:** There's something super exciting that's happening down at the Mill Valley Community Center. We are going to be working with, it's called ICS, Integrated Community Services. So back in the day, they built out a little coffee bar there in the Mill Valley Community Center in the front. Piazza D'Angelo, I think it was, in 2005, but it didn't work. We partnered up with ICS, and Jim Welty got a hold of me from the Chamber and Paula got a hold of me and —

**1:02:17 Debra Schwartz:** Paula Reynolds?

**1:02:18 Helen Russell:** Paula Reynolds. They introduced me to this woman who I fell in love with. And she said, “Will you help us put a coffee bar in here?” And I said, “Sure. Let me think about it and let me see how you want to do it.” Then she came back and we met with her and I said, “Look, I’ll give you the architectural plans for Larkspur, this is the equipment, this is that.”

**1:02:04:** And then I started really understanding what ICS was. They’re young adults who have disabilities that they employ. So then I went down there and I met with the folks at the Mill Valley Community Center, and then I brought my team down there. And we’re sitting in the conference room, we’re talking about this and this young man Connor went by who works there, and she said, “That’s Connor.” I met Connor, and he was cleaning something or doing something, and she says, “That’s one of our students or success stories.” And I said, “So this is going to be for disabled people to work here? I’m all in.” So, we’re partnering with them, we’re giving them all our expertise, we’re giving them all the equipment that they need, we’re going to open with them that first day. We’re going to help them bring people through that can serve our residents when they’re down there, when the kids are playing soccer or the elderly are going through.

**1:03:43 Debra Schwartz:** That’s new.

**1:03:44 Helen Russell:** That’s exciting, it’s exciting. My sister had a disability. So, ICS is an amazing group.

**1:03:57 Debra Schwartz:** It’d be really nice to be able to do it, because a lot of people are in that part of town.

**1:04:02 Helen Russell:** I know.

**1:04:02 Debra Schwartz:** I mean, there’s so much action over there. There’s almost never parking and they’ve got a lot of parking.

**1:04:07 Helen Russell:** They’ve got a lot going on down there. I mean, there’s so many events going on in the back. And then Memorial Day —

**1:04:12 Debra Schwartz:** What a wonderful idea, but more than just the idea of having a coffee bar.

**1:04:16 Helen Russell:** So, we’ll have coffee there, and we’ll have some baked goods there. Neka’s going to sell some Urban Remedy product there, and we’re just going to help them with the equipment, get it all set up, give them all our training materials. Our team is doing a really good job. It’ll be their cafe, but it’ll be powered by Equator and anything we can do to help them do well there.

**1:04:40 Debra Schwartz:** So, listening to your story now, I’ve sort of surmised that you’re really not much of a competitor, you’re a collaborator.

**1:04:48 Helen Russell:** Oh, I'm a total collaborator.

**1:04:50 Debra Schwartz:** You work with Urban Remedy. I've seen you so many times when you see another person might be threatened by, you're like, "Hey, let's partner up."

**1:05:00 Helen Russell:** Totally, yeah. Absolutely. I think collaborations are the way to go. They especially are now. Wouldn't it be great to walk into a place and be able to go to Equator, go to Urban Remedy, and then get an ice cream? [chuckles] It's like it's all there together. And that's kind of where retail's going, because it's so expensive. That's my nature: let's collaborate. So, we hang out with Neka Pasquale of Urban Remedy, and when we got this space down here —

**1:05:26 Debra Schwartz:** You're pointing to the area.

**1:05:28 Helen Russell:** Yeah, 34 Miller, sorry. [chuckles] So we have the commissary in the back where we do a lot of baking, and we do our quiche. And then Paul Colleta, who's their CEO and Neka, who I adore, who's their founder. Paul's on our board.

**1:05:41 Debra Schwartz:** Of Urban Remedy?

**1:05:42 Helen Russell:** Urban Remedy. And I said, "Look, we've got this space in the front. The ice cream folks are going out, do you want to come down?" So Paul's like, "Yeah." Neka was like, "Yeah, we want to be down in center town." They were up on Blithedale. So they came down. That was great then when the Larkspur space came up. I told Paul about it, and he went into the Larkspur space. So yeah, that's kind of what we do. And then when we did the Oakland space, we each dropped two containers in Oakland across from the Whole Foods that were together there. So, it's this collaboration that we have, because we believe in their product, and they believe in ours. I love collaborations. I think they're really, really important, if you can have some expertise to help ICS with disabled youth and young adults, giving them a skill so they can have a dignified life, that's the jam. That's what it's all about. What else is there?

**1:06:35 Debra Schwartz:** That's pretty exciting.

**1:06:37 Helen Russell:** That's pretty cool. So, there'll be a big party down there.

**1:06:39 Debra Schwartz:** I'll be there.

**1:06:40 Helen Russell:** Yeah, you'll be there. We'll do a big opening party. They were like, "We'll do a good job with your brand." I'm like, "I know you will." [chuckles] I said, "Yeah, don't worry."

**1:06:51 Debra Schwartz:** So, we've had this time together.

**1:06:53 Helen Russell:** Yes.

**1:06:54 Debra Schwartz:** There's been fortuitousness, there's been love, there's been true love, there's been good vibes, there's been lots of hugs.

**1:07:02 Helen Russell:** Lots of hugs.

**1:07:02 Debra Schwartz:** Collaboration and appreciation.

**1:07:05 Helen Russell:** Yep.

**1:07:05 Debra Schwartz:** So far it sounds like you're living a pretty good life, Helen.

**1:07:08 Helen Russell:** Yeah, you know, respect, appreciate and value everyone is I think one of our guiding lights, and we need more of that. Look at us, we're surrounded by the Hivery, the Depot, all the great restaurateurs that we have in town. We have everything here. We really, really do.

**1:07:29 Debra Schwartz:** And let's keep the kindness.

**1:07:32 Helen Russell:** Let's keep the kindness. It's always better to be kind than right. [chuckles]

**1:07:38 Debra Schwartz:** I think that that's a good closer.

**1:07:40 Helen Russell:** Okay, we'll take it.

**1:07:41 Debra Schwartz:** Well, thank you on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library, Helen Russell, thank you.

**1:07:48 Helen Russell:** Thank you, Debra.