

Elisa Lyew, MC '07, Interview Transcript

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham and Marymount alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career.

Matt Burns:

Some have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Either way, expect an insiders guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Sarah Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives.

Matt Burns:

And I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement. And with us today, we are thrilled to have our very first Marymount alumna, Elisa Lyew, Marymount College, class of 2007. Thanks for being here, Elisa.

Elisa Lyew:

Thank you for having me.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

So I read that you grew up in Panama, and then came to the U.S. To go to college. Is that correct?

Elisa Lyew:

Yes. I was an international student at Fordham's Marymount campus. And I think I was one of the very few international students at the time.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And what was your Marymount experience like?

Elisa Lyew:

It was great. I really liked being in New York and also in the suburbs. So I had the best of both worlds. And I made some really great friends, some of who are my friends still today. And I learned a lot, I grew up a lot. So I made a good choice when I came to Fordham.

Matt Burns:

So you chose theater and media major. Is that correct?

Elisa Lyew:

Yes. So that was actually a great thing, because I wanted to study theater because at the time I just wanted to act. So that's what I wanted to study. And then my mom said, well, I don't think you should major only in theater because what's going to happen if that doesn't work out or if you want to try something else? You're just going to have a theater degree and then what are you going to do? So I said, okay fine. And then I decided to major in theater and media, and then I got a whole other side of the business and other things that really opened me up to a whole bunch of different career options. So I think, what my mom said to me, that was the best advice anyone ever gave me.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And what did you want to do with that major once you graduated?

Elisa Lyew:

When I graduated, I figured, okay, I don't want to starve. I actually want to start making some money. So then the acting thing didn't seem so appealing anymore and I didn't want to have to constantly go on auditions. So I figured I liked doing it when my parents were supporting me, but I don't think I want to do this as a job where I have to constantly look for gigs, and look for audition for things and hope that they pick me. So I decided, okay, what else can I do? And I had done an internship with an events company while I was still at Fordham, I think it was my sophomore or junior year. And I said, okay, I really like events. I really like the whole PR marketing side of this thing. And then I got a job offer after graduation at a PR firm. So that was my first job.

Elisa Lyew:

And I figured, oh, okay, my mom was right. Theater alone wouldn't have cut it. So I'm glad I ended up here. And that was great. I did it for a couple years after school and I liked the work for the most part, but I just didn't like going to an office Monday through Friday, sitting there for eight hours, and the whole cycle. It seemed a little too square for me. But I did like the benefits and the consistent paycheck and all that fun stuff. You know you're going to get paid no matter what, so that was fun. And I made some good friends, met some great people. I got to work with some really cool clients. And then, when the economy crashed, I ended up losing that job. And that's how I ended up transitioning to what I do now.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And what do you do now?

Elisa Lyew:

So now I am a chef and a business owner. So I am a pastry chef and I own a bakery called Elisa's Love Bites, here in New York City. And the fun thing about that is, I always liked baking since I was a kid. I loved it. It was my favorite hobby, I liked doing it just for fun. I never wanted to do it for work, because I thought if I do this for work, I'm going to hate it. And I never wanted to go to culinary school, I never wanted to do any of that stuff. So eventually it found me anyway. So I figure out it was my calling and it was what I should have been doing all along. It found me in a weird way. It found me.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

So you lost your job during the recession?

Elisa Lyew:

Yes.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

You picked yourself up and decided I'm going to be an entrepreneur. I'm going to work for myself. I'm going to start a bakery.

Elisa Lyew:

It wasn't so clear cut. Actually, it was a very winding, weird road. So I ended up working in a restaurant where I knew the owner. In my head, I was telling myself, oh, it's only for now while I keep applying for PR jobs. But then I didn't find anything. And I ended up realizing, hey, I actually like doing this. I like coming into a kitchen and being creative and running around and be on my feet instead of sitting down all day.

Elisa Lyew:

And, eventually, I stopped looking for other things. I decided, okay, I'm going to stay here. I'm going to keep doing this. And I stayed in the first restaurant that I worked at for a couple years. Then I ended up moving on to a few different restaurants, always with the thought, okay, at some point, whenever it becomes feasible, I'm going to open my own place. I knew I didn't want to work for other people forever. So I tried to learn as much as I could from the people that I worked for and the people I work with. And, once I felt at least a little bit confident that I could do it, then that's when I actually made the decision to go on my own.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And, for someone listening who wants to do something similar, can you walk us through what you had to do to go from idea to actual storefront?

Elisa Lyew:

I compare it to having a child. You're never really ready, fully ready to have a child. It's always going to be a new thing that you don't know how to do and you have to learn on the go. So I figured, when I was tired of the job that I was currently working at the moment, I was like, I don't want to work for these people anymore. I think I have enough saved up that I could do something that I don't have to work here anymore. That's when I said, okay, we're doing this, and it's going to be scary. I'm not telling you there's this magic moment where everything lines up. That can happen, but it's more likely that it's a scary thing, a scary decision that you have to make. And, once you make it, then you just have to go with it and ride the storm.

Elisa Lyew:

It's not going to be a straight line. It's going to be a lot of ups and downs. Sometimes you're going to question yourself if you're doing the right thing. Sometimes it's going to feel like you're not doing the right thing, like, oh my God, I should have just stayed at my job, because I would've been getting a paycheck today. But that's starting a business. That's how it is. And, if you want to do it with your own money, it's a lot of sleepless nights. It's a lot of sacrifices and that's the kind of person you have to be to own your business. If you're not that kind of person, don't do it, because it will ruin you.

Matt Burns:

It's interesting that you ended up going the entrepreneurial route. Still quite risky, after saying, hey, I'm not going to go the acting route. I want the steady thing. But that's the kind of person you are and it still pulled you back there.

Elisa Lyew:

Right, because I feel, if something is meant for you, there's nothing you can do to get away from it. It's going to find you anyway. And, if it's not meant for you, then, no matter what you do, it's not going to happen. So I feel like baking and owning a business... It was for me. So even though I try to go the safe route, that was never me. That was never what I wanted to do, even though I told myself that was a safer thing. And I guess part of me wanted to show my parents, you spent all this money on my education so I want to show you that it was for something. I don't want to be a broke actor going on auditions and living with four roommates. I wanted to show my parents, look, I'm making money. I have this great job. You did this for me. So I did that. And then I realized, I'm not the office, nine-to-five person.

Matt Burns:

So you're not a nine-to-five person, but I know being a baker can still be quite time consuming and-

Elisa Lyew:

Oh, yeah. I work way longer than eight hours a day.

Matt Burns:

What's that day-to-day like? Because, when I show up to a bakery, I see something delicious, I buy it, and I eat it. But when are you waking up? What's the production timeframe like for you? Walk us through that.

Elisa Lyew:

Some bakeries, the kind of places that make breads and that kind of thing, they have to be there at two, three in the morning. But that's not the kind of life that I want. So I've designed my menu to be things that can be prepared ahead of time, made quickly. So they're still fresh. But, the night before, I'm just going to prep all these things. So then when I come in the morning, I only need a couple hours to bake everything. And then, through the day, we keep baking as we run low on things. So I don't want to have to come to work at two in the morning. So I just come in around eight or nine, we open at eleven. So we're not a bread, breakfast type of bakery. We're more like a dessert place, so we don't have to open so early. And that's by design because I could make whatever I want.

Elisa Lyew:

I just don't want to make the kind of thing that you have to show up at two in the morning for. And that's the other thing, I wanted the freedom to design what my day looks like. So I'm not a morning person, so I don't want to have to wake up at the crack of dawn and have to go to bed at nine o'clock at night. So the days are long, because I'm the owner-manager and I'm also the chef. So I have to do all the paperwork and all the boring numbers stuff and all the backend stuff. And then I also have to create a menu and be there. And I like meeting my customers, so I like being there. And I like saying hello to everyone that comes in. My staff is awesome, so I like hanging out with my staff too.

Elisa Lyew:

So I'm not the kind of owner that's never there. I'm a very hands-on owner.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And it's a vegan bakery. Correct?

Elisa Lyew:

No, it's gluten free.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Gluten free. Okay. And how did you land on that?

Elisa Lyew:

Well, I decided that I didn't want to eat, I have a sweet tooth, but I decided I don't want to eat garbage all the time because most sweets are made with white sugar, white flour, and refined sweeteners. And, if you buy something that's been sitting on a shelf for a long time at the supermarket, it's full of other things that you shouldn't be eating. So I decided, okay, there has to be a better way to make desserts and still eat pretty healthy. So I decided to get rid of white flour, that was number one. And get rid of white sugar. So everything is gluten and free and free of refined cane sugar.

Elisa Lyew:

And we don't use anything artificial. There's no Splenda or any sweeteners like that, no artificial sweeteners. So it's all natural stuff, clean ingredients, things that have nutritional value in them. And they're still tasty. So it's not like you're eating like granola. It's actually a tasty dessert, but it's giving you some nutrition and it's not harmful.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Do you want to grow it? Do you want to come out with a cookbook? Do you want to open several bakeries? What do you think is next for you?

Elisa Lyew:

Actually, I've been trying to get a cookbook published, but I was told at first that I don't have enough social media followers to get a book deal. So they told me, oh, you should work on that. But I don't care about that stuff. I don't have time to go out and chase more followers. But that is something I would like to do.

Elisa Lyew:

I would like to help people cook better at home, not just dessert, but every meal. I do want to help people cook better and eat better. And sometimes they don't know where to start, because it's so easy and it's so cheap to eat healthy if you know what to buy. But people just see, oh, this thing's already made and it's 99 cents, so I'm just going to buy this. But they don't turn the box or the can around to see what they're actually eating. I want to teach people how to do that. How you can still shop at Target, you can still shop at whatever store you have close by and eat better.

Matt Burns:

So, fellow alumni, if you're listening, go ahead and give Elisa a follow on social media. We want to get her that book deal.

Elisa Lyew:

Maybe I can get polished now.

Matt Burns:

So, thinking back to your time as a student there, is there anything you learned, whether it was in the classroom or an experience outside of the classroom, that you still use in your day-to-day life now as a professional?

Elisa Lyew:

Yeah. So I remember, one of the first classes I took my freshman year was English Creative Writing with Professor Leo Cooley, who passed away about five or six years ago. And he was also a Fordham alum. He was a little harsh at first with my writing, but I learned how to be a better writer. He told me things like, when you use phrases like many people or some people, you're telling me you don't know who you're talking about. Or when you are too general with something, that means you don't know what you're talking about.

Elisa Lyew:

And things like that made me realize I need to be very specific about how I write, how I convey my thoughts. And, if I don't tell people what the point of a paper or an article is in the first paragraph, they're not going to stay with me. So he really made me a better communicator. And I use that all the time now, all the time. And he made me a better writer. He made me a better reader. So it's easier for me to spot what's BS. If see an op-ed or something, and I see all those phrases that he told me, these are phrases that people who don't know what they're talking about use. It helps me figure out who actually has something important to say, who's worth my time reading their writing, and who is just propaganda and I should just ignore.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Another thing we talk a lot about is networking. Were you able to leverage your networks within the culinary industry to help get the bakery off the ground? Are you still in touch with some of those people that you once worked with?

Elisa Lyew:

Yeah. So a lot of what I do now is because of who I know. Always making friends, it's a very social industry so it's easy to network. It's harder when you're in an office all day, go to happy hour and start talking to people. But, when you're in a kitchen, you're all together all day, you're at a bar, there's a bar in your workplace. It's always happy hour. So I met a lot of people throughout the years that I worked in the industry, and those relationships helped me figure out what I needed so I could be able to open my own place. And then, also, I helped out other people when they were opening their places, I saw what they did right. What they did wrong. And that helped me make my decisions that got me to open my own place.

Elisa Lyew:

So yeah, networking in any industry is essential. So if anyone that's still in college asked me for a tip, I would say network, network, network. And now social media, it's huge. So it wasn't this way when I was in college, Facebook was brand new. It was a stupid thing. And now social media can help you network with professionals in the industry that you want to be in. It can help you get work opportunities. It can help you see what other people are doing that you think you should be doing, how they do it, how you can break in. So definitely use social media as a tool for networking.

Matt Burns:

So, thinking about some of the bigger decisions you made along the way, how important has mentorship been to you? Has there been anyone that you've turned to for guidance when you made those big decisions like opening your own bakery or anything?

Elisa Lyew:

Yeah. So I had a friend, his name is Julian Medina. He owns a bunch of Mexican restaurants here in New York. So when I first decided, okay, I'm going to do this. How do I get money for this? So everyone that funds these kinds of things, they want to see a business plan. I was like, okay, I don't know how to write a business plan. So he actually sat down with me and showed me one of his business plans, explained to me, okay, you need to know these numbers. This is how you get these numbers. You can't just make stuff up. You have to actually look at what you expect to make. This is how you figure out how you can expect to make this much, where you going to get the money, how much money you need. Because, if you don't know how much money you need and where you're going to use it, they're not going to give you a penny.

Elisa Lyew:

He was my unofficial mentor, because I did ask him a lot when I was first starting and I didn't know where to start. So it's always good to have friends, people you know, people you trust in your industry that you can ask questions. It doesn't have to be a formal mentor, because a lot of people don't have the time. But someone that you can shoot an email to and say, hey, can I pick your brain about this thing? Or can I give you a quick call? It's always good to have people around you who know more than you. If you are the most knowledgeable person in your group, then you need to get a new group. Because it's always good to surround yourself with at least some people who know more than you.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

That's great advice. So, in this COVID world that we've been living in, a lot of people are taking a look at their careers and deciding whether to stick with it or to follow a different passion. What advice would you give to young people who wanted to go completely outside the box and follow something that wasn't really traditional?

Elisa Lyew:

So that's kind of what happened to me with the recession back then. So now a lot of people are experiencing the same thing where it's like, hey, my job isn't there anymore. And maybe I don't want to do this anymore. So there's so many different things that you can do. And, like I said before, social media's super helpful. If you want to just start a business, it's so easy to get a website, get on social media, start hashtagging so people can find you, there's all these online markets where you can sell... There's so many things that you can do with little investments. So for me, in my industry, if you want to start selling food let's say, we can't just sell something because we want to sell something. It has to be

something good. You have to answer the question, why would people want to buy this and not something else?

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Is there a market for this?

Elisa Lyew:

Exactly. So let's say you're making sour dough bread. That's the thing that everybody was making in the beginning of the pandemic. Why is your sour bread different? Why am I going to buy that one instead of the other guy? So you have to figure out, okay, maybe I offer delivery. Maybe mine is made organic. Maybe I use biodegradable packaging. Maybe because I-

Matt Burns:

It's a grandmother sourdough starter, whatever it is.

Elisa Lyew:

Exactly. Maybe it's a really old starter. Maybe because of your nationality, you are different. Maybe it's not the bread itself, but maybe you are different. Or maybe you're part of a different group of people-

Matt Burns:

Use your story.

Elisa Lyew:

Right. Exactly. Infuse your story into the product. So maybe it's not the product itself that you're selling, maybe it's your story. But you have to figure out what it is that you're selling, and why are people going to pick you instead of somebody else.

Matt Burns:

A lot of great pieces of wisdom in there for young people making that career change. A lot of good pieces of wisdom in there, you said for some students too, and that networking, networking really is huge.

Elisa Lyew:

Yeah. And, also, Fordham has a lot of resources that didn't, and I'm so jealous, that didn't exist when I was in Fordham. The entrepreneurial, there's an incubator, there's all these clubs and all these things, and there's TrepCon every year. So use those resources. You have them, they're there for you. So please make use of that, network with your friends, people on campus, people on social media. And, if you're in New York City, you have so many opportunities to go to things, figure out what's happening in your neighborhood. Figure out what's happening online. You don't have to be in New York, even if you're somewhere else, there's still so much going on online because of the pandemic. So take advantage of that because people are going to come back to in-person events soon so, while everything's still online, you don't have to be at the center of everything in New York. You can be in Arkansas and you can still take advantage of something happening in New York, because it's online.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And I think I picked up on something else that you said, ask questions. Even if they're not relevant to what you're doing in the moment, ask questions of the people around you because you never know when you're going to need that advice later down the road.

Elisa Lyew:

Right. So definitely talk to as many people as you can. And advice that somebody I knew who was opening a restaurant way before I opened mine, he told me, I talked to everyone that I can. Everyone that I know who owns a place, I just talk to them. Even if you don't have specific questions, talk to people. And you are going to learn so much. And everybody has their own advice, because I can tell you what my experience is. And then somebody else will tell you their experience. And then you start piecing those things together and you come up with a plan.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Got it. So helpful. So informative. I'm sure people will get a lot out of this. Thank you, Elisa. Where's your bakery located?

Elisa Lyew:

My bakery is in New York City, in the East Village. The address is 441 East 9th Street. We're open Wednesday through Sunday, because COVID has made me realize we don't really want to do the whole seven day thing. We want to have a five day work week like everybody else. So, maybe in the future, when we start getting out more and people are buying more, we'll add more staff so we can be open every day. But, right now, we're open five days because we want my staff to have a good quality of life and a work-life balance. So I don't want anybody burning out. So we're open five days.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

And what's your website?

Elisa Lyew:

Elisaslovebites.com. And my name is spelled E-L-I-S-A.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Well, thanks again for being with us.

Elisa Lyew:

Yeah, definitely.

Matt Burns:

Well, that's another addition of Fordham Footsteps.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Matt Burns:

Find us on our website, forever.fordham.edu/footsteps or wherever you get your other podcasts.

