

Masters of Scale Episode Transcript: Sara Blakely

ANDRÉS RUZO: My grandfather in Lima told me this legend of the Spanish conquest of Peru. The few Spaniards that returned from the jungle come back with these horrible stories. They talk about giant snakes that can swallow men whole, spiders as big as your hands that eat birds, fierce warriors with poison arrows that can kill you in a nick. One of the details in this legend was a river that boiled. That's really where our entire story starts, a detail in a childhood legend.

REID HOFFMAN: That's Andrés Ruzo. He's a National Geographic explorer and geothermal scientist. He studies natural sources of energy. And in 2010, he began a search for an energy source like none that had ever been documented.

RUZO: Every company that I'd work with, every geologist I could get my hands on, I'd ask, "Hey, have you heard of a boiling river, a large, big, thermal river in the middle of the Amazon? I heard about it in a legend." Some people just laughed it off and said, "Ah, whatever."

The very last time I asked that question was actually kind of funny. I was at a mining company. I had just given this presentation, and it went really, really well. There was a much older geologist, very put together, who was sitting back there, and I was talking to him about it.

Things had gone so well that I loosened up a bit ... I was like, "Hey, one random question..." I asked him about The Boiling River, and I asked him if he had heard about it. His response was, "Andrés, your geothermal work is very interesting, very innovative, but don't ask stupid questions." I walked out of that meeting with my tail between my legs.

HOFFMAN: Most people thought he was asking a stupid question. But Andrés had grown up between Peru and Nicaragua. He was fascinated by the Amazon. And he believed, as a scientist, that the Boiling River could exist. Like any explorer, he found help in some unlikely places.

RUZO: I've been asking around for two years, case closed, no boiling river in the Amazon. I go to a family dinner, and my aunt asked me about my research. I told her about The Boiling River and the legend and how it doesn't exist and how it can't exist.

Well, she looks at me very seriously, and she says, "But, no, Andrés, it's real. I've been there."

And then my very straight-laced psychoanalyst uncle chimes in, says, “No, Andrés, she's not kidding. It's protected by a powerful shaman. It's at least as wide as a two-lane road. And it's so hot you can not only not touch the water, but you can't even put your hand on top of it because the vapor will burn you.”

My aunt used to do indigenous rights work and had worked in the central Peruvian Amazon and made friends with the wife of this very powerful shaman who protected this sacred, thermal river. She ended up leading me into the jungle and then that's where I met Maestro Juan Flores, the shaman of The Boiling River, someone who's truly changed my life.

HOFFMAN: Andrés found allies in the local shamans, who saw his respect for the sacred site, and for traditional spiritual practices that had protected it. The shamans offered him guidance. Still, the road ahead wasn't easy. And it wasn't exactly a road.

RUZO: From Lima, it was a one-hour plane ride, followed by two hours by four-by-four on dirt roads, then another hour on a motorized canoe, and then another hour hiking into the jungle.

HOFFMAN: Andrés is quick to tell you that he wasn't trying to “discover” the boiling river, which was already known to local cultures. Rather, he was trying to document it for modern science. There were several false starts.

But then: the fateful moment.

RUZO: I walked out of the jungle and when you think of jungle, you have to think of shade. It's dark in the jungle. You see these 60-foot walls of green, which are the trees shooting straight out of the jungle. Then, among the treetops, you see a cloud of smoke just going up towards the heavens.

You start following that cloud down towards the earth, and you see it's coming from this river. It's hot. It was like a veil of steam just covering the clear, turquoise-colored water, and there were these beautiful just ivory-colored stones on either side, the bedrock.

I get there, and I was just dumbfounded.

I ran down to the edge of the river. There were these kind of rock steps hewn into the side of this little cliff, and I climbed down. I remember almost being hugged by the vapors. You take your first breath in, and there's not too many places in the world where you're conscious of your lungs.

That dense, thick, hot air goes into your nose, goes into your body, fills up your lungs, and then you exhale. It was awe-inspiring, in the most honest sense of that word.

HOFFMAN: Andrés first observed the river in 2011. It would take him another three years to prove that it was a naturally-occurring phenomenon. And that was still only the start.

You can read Andrés' full story in his TED Book, *The Boiling River*. It's a delightful short read, full of adventure and science.

Like any great explorer, Andrés knew what it would take to succeed in this search. He had a guiding idea of what he was looking for and he constantly surveyed the environment for clues. He recruited useful people to help him each step of the way. He had the resilience to overcome the inevitable obstacles and setbacks, and he just kept searching. It's the classic hero's journey.

And like Andrés, successful entrepreneurs are always on the search for their big ideas. They aim for it, they track it, they keep their eyes open for clues. They surround themselves with a team who can help, and they rebound from dead ends and false discoveries.

I believe there's only one way to find your big idea: Look for it. Look for it. Look for it. And then act.

[THEME MUSIC]

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman. Founder of LinkedIn, investor at Greylock, and your host. And I believe there's only one way to find your big idea: look for it, look for it, look for it. And then act.

I often play the role of mentor to aspiring entrepreneurs, and the question I'm asked often is: How do I find my big idea? And how do I know it when I see it?

I always compare launching a startup to jumping off a cliff and assembling the plane on the way down. So this week, we'll look at the earliest step of scaling a company: finding the idea you'll jump off the cliff with. You have to have an idea of the kind of plane you're building and then you have to jump.

There's a myth amongst entrepreneurs of the "lightning strike" — or the "aha" moment when an idea just comes to you. In reality, it's rare to find a successful scale entrepreneur who simply received an idea. It's more likely they were already on the hunt. If you want to find your big business idea, you have to constantly search for it. Surround yourself with the human equivalent of a pack of bloodhounds. And when you find yourself on its trail, follow the scent relentlessly. And be ready to act when you think you've found it.

What differentiates successful entrepreneurs from everyone else with a good idea? They pursue it.

I wanted to talk to Sara Blakely about this because her story of spotting, pursuing, and realizing her big idea is both legendary and highly unlikely. She came up with the idea for Spanx at age 26 by cutting the feet off a pair of pantyhose. With no background in fashion, fabrication, or business, she grew it to a billion-dollar company that reinvented underwear — without ever taking outside investment.

I believe the key to her success happened before the idea popped into her mind. She succeeded because of her clarity of purpose; her consistent optimization of her own best thinking; and her willingness to act, and her persistence to follow through. Her story is the perfect parable for any entrepreneur looking for their first — or their next — big idea.

She's also really fun to talk to. For a tech guy like me, I don't get to have many conversations like this.

HOFFMAN: One of the things that I love talking about to you is my world is this whole digital world and the people who actually build things. That's super cool.

SARA BLAKELY: I know my world is all about butts, Reid.

HOFFMAN: Hey, it's, it's you know, it's different.

HOFFMAN: Whether you're making undergarments or iPhone apps, great entrepreneurs are always on the hunt for the idea that changes everything. Sara is no exception. For her entire adult life, she's spent her waking hours hunting for that big idea.

BLAKELY: Well when I was in my 20s, in college, I had a visualization that I created for myself that would mean that I had arrived. And my visualization was me sitting on the Oprah Winfrey Show because in my mind if I was sitting on her show it means I had done something really right and done something amazing with my life. And I had no idea how I was going to get there.

HOFFMAN: Sara was constantly looking for the clues, trying to figure out what moves to make so she could do something so amazing, that even Oprah had to notice.

BLAKELY: And then I called the next 10 years of my life filling in the blanks. I was always thinking, "Is this what's going to get me on the Oprah show?" You know I take the LSAT and go to law school because I thought maybe I'd try a famous case and that's how I end up on Oprah. But then I failed the LSAT twice and couldn't get into law school. And then I did stand up comedy for a while and I thought maybe something here is how I end up on Oprah so I was consciously and subconsciously pursuing things that I thought could ultimately get me to that that snapshot that meant success for me.

HOFFMAN: At age 26, she found herself pretty far from the destination she had aimed for.

BLAKELY: I was selling fax machines door to door for a living.

HOFFMAN: Door-to-door fax machine sales. Not exactly disruptive tech. It was a dead end career, and Sara knew it. She had to get out.

BLAKELY: I literally had a moment Reid, where I pulled off the side of the road and was like I'm in the wrong movie. This is not my life. Call the director or the producer or I'm not supposed to be being escorted out of buildings and business card ripped up in my face all day cold calling.

HOFFMAN: On the side of the road that night, Sara's despair led to a clarity of purpose. And that clarity became the catalyst that sparked the big idea.

BLAKELY: And so I went home that night and I wrote down in my journal "I want to invent a product that I can sell to millions of people that will make them feel good." This was something that I set intention for, I had really asked the universe to give me an idea that I could bring to the world.

HOFFMAN: Different people have different ways of expressing how ideas came to them. Sara will tell you that she asked the universe, and the universe answered. I would interpret it a bit differently. I'd say Sara kept asking the same set of interesting questions, starting with "Is this my big idea?" And one day, inevitably, the answer was going to be "Yes."

It came to her as she was getting ready to go to a party, and found herself aggravated by her wardrobe options.

BLAKELY: I wanted to wear my cream pants to a party and I was a frustrated consumer that had no undergarment to wear under them that wouldn't show. So I cut the feet out of my own control top pantyhose so I could throw them on under my pants and wear any kind of great strappy heel. And it worked beautifully except for they rolled up my leg all night at the party and I came home that night I was like "This should exist for women."

HOFFMAN: Sara just uttered three words that flicker like a neon flashing light over a truly big idea. Those three words: "This should exist." They're your clue that you've stumbled onto something with real potential. If you feel, as a consumer, that you need it. If you can imagine a crowd of others nodding with emphatic encouragement, this just might be your idea.

And Sara had spent years scanning the horizon for that neon sign pointing to her big idea. When she saw it, she followed the sign. And you may ask yourself: How many other women had mutilated their pantyhose in exactly the same way? The answer, apparently, is: plenty.

BLAKELY: I meet women all the time that have been cutting the feet out of their pantyhose for years trying to solve undergarment issues for themselves. And they're always like why didn't I do Spanx. And I really just think it's because I had been looking for this and was prepared in my mind to go for whatever idea presented itself.

HOFFMAN: Sara was prepared to go for whatever idea presented itself. So when the idea struck, she was ready. All the other women who had the same thought simply went to their party and back to work the next morning, leaving the neon sign “This should exist” behind them in the night.

And this gets to the heart of a major misconception around entrepreneurship. There is a myth that big ideas drop out of the sky, land in your lap, and transform you into a billionaire the next day. Ta-da! This almost never happens.

Yes, Sara did have a key moment of inspiration, in her bedroom getting ready for a party, and that matters. But you have to look at what happened before that moment. Sara had already oriented herself squarely in the direction of a big idea; she'd been on the hunt for the last 10 years.

Whatever kind of idea you're staking out, you have to be intentional about looking for it. Think about our explorer Andrés Ruzo. He knew his “find” was in the Amazon, and he could make some informed ideas about his launch point.

As an entrepreneur, you have to put yourself in situations where YOUR great ideas are likely to strike. Sara has made a science of staking out her own great ideas.

BLAKELY: I've identified where my best thinking happens and it's in the car and I live really close to Spanx so I've created what my friends call my “fake commute” and I get up an hour early before I'm supposed to go to Spanx and I drive around aimlessly in Atlanta with my commute so that I can have my my thoughts come to me. And I thought of the name Spanx in the car.

HOFFMAN: Sara knows that she does her best thinking in the car. So she intentionally creates the time and space — first thing every day — to open herself up to new ideas. This may seem like an interesting bit of trivia. But it's more important than it seems.

When I interview guests for this show, one question I ask every single person is “What is your favorite place to think big?” Here's what some of them have said.

HOFFMAN: Your favorite place to think big.

BRIAN CHESKY: Oh my god. The Walt Disney family museum.

MARIAM NAFICY: Running by the Golden Gate Bridge.

MARK ZUCKERBERG: My lawn, pacing around in circles.

NANCY LUBLIN: Anywhere with you, I mean, when I'm rubbing elbows with other people who are not in my space listening to them talk about what they do, makes me better.

REED HASTINGS: My living room at home in Santa Cruz.

PETER THIEL: Somewhere beautiful nature.

CATERINA FAKE: I keep very strange hours, I have this span of time between 2:00 AM and 5:00 AM, usually, in which I do a lot of thinking and a lot of work.

HOFFMAN: Ah. So, it's kind of a when, not a where.

FAKE: It's a when, not a where.

EVAN WILLIAMS: Walking anywhere.

SHERYL SANDBERG: The treadmill.

SAM ALTMAN: I think getting a feeling of a good office down is really important for good thought. I saw what I thought was the perfect office which was a Japanese teahouse basically with beautiful custom wood by itself in a forest.

PAYAL KADAKIA: A dance studio.

BILL GATES: Taking walks and driving, are for me, a good time to think about things.

MARK PINCUS: My surfboard and then my bike.

JOHN ELKANN: In the nature, because on one side, it really grounds you to see how incredibly extraordinary nature is. On the other, it really stimulates you to think big, to dream and be ambitious.

HOFFMAN: Sara and I had already discussed her "fake commute." So by the time we got to the "lightning round", the answer was pretty obvious....

HOFFMAN: And this is the one that you get a laugh, your favorite place to think big.

BLAKELY: My car. Ding, ding, ding.

HOFFMAN: I haven't had the chance to answer my own lightning round questions -- yet. But if I did, I'd be torn between two answers. The first is that I do my best thinking with other people. Usually with just one person at a time. I have a thick skin, and I don't mind being challenged. In fact, I usually ask people to tell me all the reasons why my idea will fail. This lets me take a spark of an idea and shape it into something that can win. This gives me an edge when it comes to spotting landmines and roadblocks, even before I act on my idea.

But my second answer is about location. Some people think big in familiar places, like the shower, or their favorite running path. And it makes sense - familiar spots let you go on autopilot, while your mind wanders. But my favorite thinking spots are ones that are brand new...

HOFFMAN: I do my best thinking essentially in Cafe's or new spaces. Places that I haven't been in a lot, usually requires a little bit of bustle, it doesn't have to have people or not, but it has to have a thing where I can really focus on just a purely blank page, new part of thinking.

There's a number of events where the content on stage is super boring, but I'm locked in my chair because I can't walk out. That's the reason I always bring a notepad with me, because what I'll do is I'll start working. I have the focus of the fact that I can't leave, I can't get distracted, I can't go work on something and I can't do email, and I'm just sitting there with my pad of paper.

I'm sitting there going, "Okay, this is really fucking boring," and I pull out my notepad and I start working.

HOFFMAN: Sara has some great practical advice for anyone looking for their next big idea.

BLAKELY: I get my ideas all over the place. I mean in a magazine I'll see an image or see a color in nature. I'll see someone wearing something that just sparks something, I'll overhear a conversation.

Anybody could do this exercise: Go home and look at 15 things in your life and write them down on a piece of paper and then write down how and why they could be better. You'll have probably a big idea right there on that sheet.

HOFFMAN: Let's say you've found your perfect thinking place. And you stumble on that big idea. The one that starts the "This should exist" sign flashing in your mind.

That's great. And I'm happy for you. But that's just the first step of the entrepreneurial journey.

HOFFMAN: Some people have a bunch of ideas for products but that doesn't mean they

have an idea. It's like, "Oh, I had an idea for a smartphone, because I thought what if you had a computer in your pocket?" And "well, thinking about having a computer in your pocket is not the same thing as having the idea for the smartphone." So it's actually, can we build it and can we make a business out of it?

HOFFMAN: So an idea isn't complete until you figure out how to build the business. And we're about to see how Sara does it. But it's useful to spend another moment looking at how some of the best business minds find that initial idea.

HOFFMAN: This happens a bunch in Silicon Valley, we tend to go "Oh, there's a platform shift, which businesses does that open up?" Now we have mobile phones, what businesses are now possible? Now we have cloud storage, what businesses are now possible? Now we have artificial intelligence, now what businesses are possible?

HOFFMAN: Another way that entrepreneurs find their ideas is by noticing a more abstract pattern or trend, and building toward it.

HOFFMAN: "I can see this model for how the components can come together, and even though there's no initial demand for those things, I figure I can build to that." LinkedIn is one of those, Airbnb is one of those. There was a little bit of demand for Airbnb but not a lot of demand. It was "I want something really cheap, I want to stay on someone's couch, like there's this thing called couch-surfing." But the "I want to rent someone else's room in their apartment or their apartment for a night." That's a new thing.

HOFFMAN: No matter how quickly you translate those patterns into ideas, chances are... other people will be doing the same thing. The difference between you and them is your willingness to actually do something.

You can't scale an idea that only lives in your head. You have to act on it—because that's the only way to find out if it has legs.

And great entrepreneurs know: Not every idea is going to succeed. But every idea should be treated like it could. You can only know in retrospect which ideas go the distance. But even if your first idea doesn't take flight, it may land you at the doorstep of your next big idea.

Sara's big idea came to her after she improvised her undergarments.

BLAKELY: I came home that night and was like, "This should exist for women."

HOFFMAN: This is a pivotal moment in Sara's trajectory. She calls it the moment that Spanx was born. But here's the thing: It wasn't born just because Sara came up with an idea. It was born because she decided to do something about it.

Sara could have just kept cutting the feet off pantyhose every time she had a party to attend. She could've just tolerated her makeshift contraption rolling up her legs all night. Instead, she saw an opportunity—and seized it. It started with a little reconnaissance.

BLAKELY: I went to Neimans and Saks and asked: “you know what do women wear under these white pants?” and the sales ladies would always say, “well we don't really know!” or they'd point me in the direction of the shapewear that did exist and it was really thick and dreadful and too much control or not what I was looking for. And then there was like regular underwear which left a panty line that was visible so there was this big gap.

HOFFMAN: At this point in the episode, I want to acknowledge that women's shapewear is not exactly one of my personal areas of expertise. But every great investor spends time understanding underserved markets that are not their own. So for those of you in the audience who are NOT in the Spanx target market, here's what you need to understand.

Spanx may have started as normal pantyhose with the feet cut off, but that isn't where it ended. The classic Spanx, which women by the millions now rely on, are the length and shape of bicycle shorts. They look great under pants and dresses, never creating seams or lines.

You could compare them to old-fashioned corsets, except that Spanx are breathable, flexible, and invisible under clothes. They're architectural marvels. The waist lines have an incredible non-sticky grip that keeps them in place. The legs don't roll up or show through clothes. On top of all that, they have a funky, provocative name that says, “This ain't your grandma's girdle.”

But none of this existed yet when Sara first had the idea. She saw a gap in the market, and started building toward it.

BLAKELY: So I was doing two things. I was trying to determine if there was a market place beyond just my own thought and what I wanted. And at the same time I was iterating the product.

HOFFMAN: Mind you, Sara had no background in fashion design or clothes fabrication. But that didn't stop her.

BLAKELY: I tried to make the prototypes myself. I went to fabric stores and bought elastic and tried to like paper clip it to the end and then I tried to sew it. It was through the iteration of the prototype that I really started to love it and love what it could do for my wardrobe.

HOFFMAN: Sara loved her handmade versions. But she quickly saw their limitations. She wanted to take it one step further, by partnering with a manufacturing plant that could produce at capacity.

And this is a critical step for anyone developing an idea. You have to surround yourself with people who can help. Remember the river guides and shamans that our Amazon explorer called on. You have to surround yourself with this kind of network.

Sara didn't know anyone in manufacturing. But when she reached out to find them, they instantly understood her vision, right? Not exactly.

BLAKELY: No one took my call.

HOFFMAN: Sara couldn't get anyone to see the genius behind her simple idea. Footless pantyhose? What's the point?

As an aside, I have a sneaking suspicion that Sara was speaking to mostly male manufacturers. If she'd been pitching other women, she may have found a willing partner more quickly — because they would've understood the problem she was trying to solve. Great ideas get passed over. Because the people in charge just don't understand the issue. But I digress.

BLAKELY: I cold called all the manufacturing plants. Every single person thought this was the craziest idea.

They didn't get it but I ended up getting one manufacturer in North Carolina that called me after I did my cold calling round begging all of these people to try to make my product he said, "Sara I've decided to help make your crazy idea."

He said the only reason why gave me the chance was my enthusiasm for the idea, he still didn't think it was a good idea.

HOFFMAN: If you're a regular listener of the show, you may remember our episode with Stewart Butterfield, the founder and CEO of Slack. Remember what he said about getting people on board with your idea? Your ability to show your passion - to tell the story of how you've poured your blood, sweat, and tears into your product - is just as important as the product itself.

And when you have a great story, you'll bring people along. Andrés, our Amazon explorer has another great example of how you get help. In short: You ask for it.

RUZO: At the very beginning, you're begging people to come. Heck, it's true. You're begging people to come. You're asking anyone willing to help. My wife was the first person that helped me.

I had a friend from high school, cousins in Peru, cousins in Nicaragua that came down, actually, and helped out as well, just friends, people who were willing to donate time at

the very beginning. It was really homegrown. I couldn't pay anybody, but people wanted that experience.

You might not have the best and the brightest. You might not be the best funded but as long as you've got a desire to move forward, I think that's where the change really happens. That's it, that's it.

HOFFMAN: As Andrés and Sara's stories both show, you don't need to start with an impressive or high-powered network. All you need is passion, persuasion, and grit.

And Sara's story is one of real grit. Remember, she didn't have any experience with business, or retail, or fashion.

BLAKELY: I was just like, "OK this might be my way out of selling fax machines and being able to sell something that I actually really want to sell and love that I can provide people."

HOFFMAN: That makes total sense I mean one of my theories about how scale businesses work, you build a product that people love and then you scale it. And so it totally makes sense that you said, "Look I cared about scale already coming into it." Right. "That was the that was the thing and I cared about like. 'this be the ticket to transforming my life and millions of people's lives?'"

HOFFMAN: She was teaching herself how to realize every piece of this idea. And that included something I don't think we've mentioned yet in 21 episodes of this show — patents.

Most entrepreneurs don't think to pursue patents right away. In my world of tech, they aren't the most important part of developing a business. But in other industries, they matter. A lot.

So I reached out to someone who knows patents inside and out to get a bit of advice for any would-be entrepreneur or inventor who's just getting started. Michelle Lee is the former Under Secretary of Commerce for Intellectual Property and the former Director of the U.S. Patent and Trademark office. Try saying that five times fast. Basically, she was like the Chief of Ideas for the entire country. And even in an increasingly digital world, she says patents are never going to go out of style.

MICHELLE LEE: People would ask me, "Do I ever think that all the great ideas have been invented and at some point the patents office might run out of ideas to patent?" And I say, "Absolutely not."

In this day and age, our most valuable companies assets are its intangible assets. Its algorithms, its brands, its procedures, its processes.

If you've invested your time, energy, effort, and resources creating that something new and valuable, you really don't want someone to be able to copy it, taking advantage of your work.

HOFFMAN: And if you're an independent entrepreneur like Sara Blakely was, Michelle has a message for you.

LEE: Really, the intellectual property system and our patent system is designed to be available to everyone, whether you're not so well funded or extremely well funded.

We hope that the small players grow up to be big companies and that is how the system was designed.

HOFFMAN: I think Michelle would be proud of Sara's patent story.

BLAKELY: I started you know immediately went and researched patent's at the Georgia Tech library and I wrote my own patent. I got a book on patents and trademarks at Barnes & Noble on Peach Tree.

HOFFMAN: I have a feeling a lot of patents have been researched at that Barnes & Noble on Peach Tree Street in Atlanta. Or the one in Union Square in Manhattan, or the one on Almaden Plaza in San Jose. When you find your idea, you should protect it. And if you only talk about your idea to one person, you might want to make that person a patent lawyer.

And that brings me to a fascinating footnote in Sara's story. As she leaned into the idea of Spanx — naming them, fabricating them, patenting them — there was just one thing she did not do.

BLAKELY: I didn't tell anybody my idea for one year.

HOFFMAN: This was a surprise answer to me. I tend to think that the best ideas are produced by networks, not individuals and that feedback is a huge part of scaling an idea successfully. But if you listen closely, you'll hear who Sara means when she says she didn't tell "anybody."

BLAKELY: I didn't want to tell friends and family because I didn't want to invite ego into the process too soon and so I kept it a secret from everybody in my life and didn't seek validation.

But I did share it with like manufacturers or patent lawyers or people who could help me move it along. And by doing that I didn't spend my first year explaining it and defending it. I just spent it pursuing it.

HOFFMAN: It's not that Sara didn't have any input. She just figured out where to get the most useful input, from people who knew the ins and outs of the business. And she shielded herself from the kind of criticism that might have crippled her.

BLAKELY: An idea is its most vulnerable in its infancy and that's also the moment in human nature we want to immediately turn to our right or left until our coworker or friend or boyfriend or boss you know, "I have this idea." And out of love and concern we hear a lot of things that stops us right in our tracks.

"Well sweetie if it's such a good idea why doesn't it already exist?" And "Well you know even if this idea does take off Sara, you're going to spend your savings and the big guys will knock you out of the water in six months."

HOFFMAN: This kind of unhelpful input is very common, and we've heard it on this show before. Remember our episode with Linda Rottenberg, the CEO of Endeavor? Linda has now built entrepreneurial communities all over the world. But twenty years ago, she was a recent graduate with a dream... a dream that was about to be crushed.

LINDA ROTTENBERG: My parents freaked out. And in fact, my parents overheard us plotting this global organization that was going to support high-growth entrepreneurs in emerging markets. And my mother looked at my father like, "You've got to stop this." And my dad gently came over and reminded me that I needed to be financially independent, I didn't have anything to fall back on and this didn't sound like job security.

HOFFMAN: If you listened to that episode, you know that Linda's idea ended up providing much more than just job security. And that's because she held tight to it, even when people tried to talk her down.

It isn't only entrepreneurs that face this kind of nay-saying. It's anyone with an idea that's out of the ordinary. Once again, our geoscientist Andrés Ruzo, has a similar experience. When he talked about his quest to find the Boiling River, he didn't get a lot of love.

RUZO: I spent about two years asking people. In general, I think I could break those down into three groups. Number one, the group who was like, "Hey, that's funny; let's check it out."

The second, more average group, the central part of the bell curve, if you will, was a little more dismissive, of, you know what, that's interesting, but highly unlikely. "While you're at it, you might as well also look for Paititi. That lost city of gold is going to help you fund your research."

There was a final group, really personified best by the gentleman from the mining company, that just thought, "That's stupid. Don't waste my time."

As a whole, I think that we are very much geared towards the average. We teach to the average. We serve to the average. We try to create things for that central part of the bell curve. Just from listening to the podcast, just from knowing other stories, knowing my story, knowing the story of other explorers from National Geographic, for example, who have done amazing things, you can't listen to that average.

HOFFMAN: It's so important — for entrepreneurs and anyone with an outlier idea — to remember that not everyone has the entrepreneurial mindset. Many people will tell you “That's crazy. That's risky. You'll never succeed. Lots of people have tried this and failed. What makes you different? Why don't you just take a nice safe 9-to-5 job?”

So if you're the kind of person who gets discouraged or bullied out of your idea, you might want to do what Sara did — and keep it to yourself.

But there's also a real advantage to feedback. As I said earlier in the show, I do my best thinking when I'm around people who challenge me, who poke holes in my ideas, and who can tell me where the landmines are. This is one of the advantages, in fact, of taking investment in your company. Each time you pitch your company, you get valuable feedback. Even from the “nos” — especially from the “nos.”

But Sara didn't take investment. She started Spanx with the \$5,000 she had in the bank. And while I would never recommend this route to anyone, for a whole range of reasons that center on speed, support, and sanity, you have to admire that she grew a billion-dollar company without ever taking outside investment. Her reason? She didn't know it was an option.

BLAKELY: I just didn't even know that I could go try to raise \$40 million, Reid. And I think I'd be not quite as tired right now. I'm really tired.

HOFFMAN: But well I mean your demonstration of grit is simply awesome.

BLAKELY: Thank you.

HOFFMAN: My advice to each of you: You don't have to be quite that tired. But you will need unwavering persistence. You have to search high and low for your idea, putting yourself in situations where inspiration is most likely to strike. You have to act once you find it; surround yourself with people who can help, and seek feedback from those who can help build your idea. And you have to persist through the inevitable failures and setbacks and naysayers.

And when you start to bring that idea into the world, don't let massive gaps in your knowledge of how to scale your product get in the way. What you don't know can actually work to your advantage.

BLAKELY: I like to tell people what you don't know can be your greatest asset if you let it. If you have the courage. You know a lot of us second guess ourselves and think well I didn't go to school for this or I'm not an expert so we don't ask the questions or we don't pursue it.

HOFFMAN: And after that, you just might reach your goal. Remember how Sara set her sights on the Oprah show? Well...

BLAKELY: So I invented this product and I sent a gift basket to Oprah of the product with a note in it and found out Andre who dresses her put it in her wardrobe and she put it on and loved it and basically has worn it everyday since. So I ended up on Oprah's Favorite Things, which was really helpful.

HOFFMAN: Describing an appearance on Oprah as "helpful" is like describing the Universe as "large." It's a vast understatement. But here's the thing. Sara's entrepreneurial journey didn't end when she reached her goal of appearing on Oprah. She still had years and years ahead of her, where she built brand awareness one customer at a time.

And what about our explorer, Andrés? Remember that moment of euphoria, when he finally breathed in the steam of the boiling river? Turns out: It too, was just the beginning.

RUZO: My goal was to go in, figure out if this legend was real and then, yay, how cool! The Boiling River exists, legends come to life. But there was a darker side, and that darker side was the question of why the jungle is disappearing.

This place is as wonderful as all of the legends and all of this stuff says that it is. What are you going to do about it? Because one thing that is certainly disappearing just as quickly as the jungle are traditional belief systems and traditional respect for the jungle. What do you do? We ended up starting a non-profit, The Boiling River Project. If we do want to protect the jungle, we need to find value in it. We need to find value in those trees standing up, rather than being cut down.

HOFFMAN: You can learn more about the Boiling River Project on our website, mastersofscale.com.

And with that, I'll revise my theory. To find your big idea, you have to look for it. And look for it. And look for it. And then act. And know that this is only the first step in a long entrepreneurial journey.

I'm Reid Hoffman. Thank you for listening.