

# Founders On Purpose Podcast with Lisnen's Founder, Eyra Abraham

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>> Welcome to the Founders on Purpose podcast. I'm your host Andrew Moss. We're here to share the journey of purpose focused entrepreneurs, who are tackling important issues facing our society and planet. We'll explore the story behind how the founder ended up doing what they do today, the challenges and opportunities they face and their vision for the future. I hope you'll be inspired by the stories as I have. Enjoy this week's episode. This week's episode of the founders on purpose podcast is brought to you by MJD Creative Consulting, a boutique content strategy agency focused on bringing the power of words and digital marketing to your venture. MJD Creative will help you explore ideas, connect with your audience, and foster business growth. Learn more at [www.mjdcreativeconsulting.com](http://www.mjdcreativeconsulting.com). Today's guest is Eyra Abraham, founder and CEO of Lisnen. Welcome to the show Eyra.

>>Hi, how are you?

>>I'm good. It's great to have you here.

>>Thank you.

>> Yes. So normally, in these interviews, you know, I start by focusing on the business and how it's doing today. But having met you before, I think it's really important that you also share the backstory that led to you thinking of Lisnen in the first place, so people can understand your background. And then you can also explain what Lisnen is about and what problems it's trying to solve. So maybe you could start us with that story.

>>OK, sure. So, I grew up I think it was about three years old when I had lost my hearing, so I'm hard of hearing, I have a profound severe hearing loss. And my parents, I've always lived at home. And I've always been accommodated within the hearing world. And when I left home to live on my own, I had an incident which was kind of my wake-up call. So basically what happened was I went to bed, it was around 10:00, at the condo that I was living at the time, they had an emergency fire drill, and they wanted people to be evacuated and they were taking attendance. Of course, I was not there. So but I actually found out a couple of days later. And it was a letter from property management talking about how serious fire alarms should be taken and why people were not evacuating the building. And at that moment, I would just sort of like, Oh my gosh! I can't believe it like, all of this was happening outside, and I didn't even know anything. And so I started to realize that there must be an alerting device for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to help them at night time, especially for myself that I wear hearing aids during the day. And so when I went I didn't realize how difficult and lack of accommodation, the product were. And so that when I just decided I need to make a product myself, something more convenient for who I am, modern, not something for typically used for seniors who

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were stuck in one little location sitting on the couch all day. Yeah, something more flexible with some people on the go.

>>Right. Brilliant. So on the website, you talk about two sort of purposes for the company.

>>Yes.

>> One is the very specific solution to an alerting device for the deaf and hard of hearing. And you also clarified it there. This is for the active mobile traveling people that they are on the go, not always sleeping in the same location, day to day. But you also then talk about empowering the community. And obviously, I'm assuming in the deaf and hard of hearing community, you know, the ability to be alerted, but also the ability to be able to be mobile and engage in a normal life is a huge driver for people. So talk to us about both of those objectives and sort of how you see Lisnen, helping achieve those.

>>Right, now, apparently, there is a very wide range of groups within the deaf and hard of hearing community. One group are the people who are born within a deaf family. They have parents who are deaf, and generations that might be a hereditary disease, not actually disease but those who already have a genetic opportunity, what's the word I'm looking for? Hereditary genetic opportunity. Yeah. And then there are people who like myself who are born within the hearing family. And so what is you start to see is that within the community, there are a belief that within people who are profoundly deaf and who have been born deaf and there deaf family, ASL is the primary language is an American Sign Language, or any kind of sign language should be the primary method of communication. And then the English and other languages should be secondary. And then within people like myself, we were, because our parents were hearing, we actually went into learning English. And then that became a big challenge for many of us, because we don't always hear everything, hearing aids, whether you have hearing aids or cochlear implant, they're not perfect tool, they don't give you the 100% ability to hear, that there's a lot of challenges. And that comes through employment opportunities, there's always some challenges with navigating the world. And anything that is hearing, hearing a sound, everything at the from, sort of like the main form of communication. So I realized that, you know, there's got to be an opportunity to realize that, yes, these are challenges that we face, but how do we overcome them. So that's where the mission of the company really came from. But at the same time, we have the product itself, which is essentially an alerting device that we wanted to help to detect sound in the environment. So whether you are in an Airbnb, traveling somewhere, or you're at home, in your work, you are able to function where critical sound whether the fire alarm, or sirens or running water, some of the issue that we people who are hard of hearing always faced. Yeah.

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>>It's great. So so the device, will it be, it's a phone-based device?

>>Yeah. So essentially, we're using leveraging the mobile phone. Our cell phones are powerful technology that can be utilized for many purposes. And we're trying to make it simplified in a way that we can use AI, essentially training sound that we all know, the way the human brain functions. When we hear a fire alarm, we react, we stop, we know. We, obviously, we're taught that as a child, so all that it's the same thing that AI can replace and help with the deaf and hard of hearing community.

>>Interesting. And so, excuse my ignorance on this, but how if the phone hears a fire alarm, how is the phone then going to notify you in a way that you will recognize?

>>Right. And so this is where we're working on to make, sort of conduct a lot of customer interview and find out what's the best way. Through earlier research, some people say like, I would rather know with through notifications in my hearing aid, or I'd rather know through my smartwatch, or I rather I have a checker that I want. Though with definitely pairing with hardware technology, obviously the goal, that wearable will be essential to this component, because it gives you the flexibility to have a notification on you at all times so that you can be alerted and use your mobile phone to pick up the sound.

>> Sure, that makes total sense. And so you're in right now sort of development mode of the app and also talking to a lot of potential customers?

>> Yeah.

>> And what's the reception been so far?

>> You know, it's been very positive, I have to say that a lot, I was, because I knew I needed it, I wasn't sure whether everybody else had the same vision. And just nice to see that people reacting to it or finding me through other people that they heard, and just saying, this is awesome, I wanna see that happen. And being very supportive that way, I think it changes the market. Like I said before, the technologies in the market had been always, typically for seniors who are stationary in their home, the product don't move. So they just have this device that just sits on your table, and you look at it, and then you're tab notifies you. And but if you go to another room, you don't really know what's going on unless you go back to the room and you see the flashing light and then you can be alerted that way. And so I think the cost of that is really what people are driving people because they're saying this makes so much sense. And knowing that the possibility with that, couldn't a lot of people didn't really think of it that way. It does open it, especially with the fact that AI can really make this to happen for us.

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>> Right. And I would assume are the signals, the emergency signals different in different parts of the world?

>> You know what, it's interesting enough that it's something that I would have to explore, in terms of North America it's different, in the US, so they have a different sound signals, particularly with fire alarms. Initially, when I was looking to buy an unloading device, I bought it from the US. And I wanted to test it here and use it here in Canada, but they don't pick up our fire alarm sounds 'cause we have a different sound pattern for our fire alarms than they have in US, but they're becoming more universal. And I think it will be so much though in the other parts of the world as well, if people would like to be more globalized, and there's opportunity for standardization within Pacific Sound emergency notification and stuff like that.

>> Right,. But the AI would overcome any differences?

>> Exactly. Once you have the sound file, the training can be processed and understood that this is typically a pattern for what I would see the file on maybe in South Africa versus something in the UK, it requires certainly a large amount of data to be able to develop that. And that is the long-term goal. But right now, the focus is in North America. Yeah.

>> Sure. Great, so amazing journey so far. Maybe we could go back. And you know, how did this all like, how did this all come to be like, not even the company but what were, you know, what was your sort of path of your life going through high school, you know, post-secondary? What were you thinking?

>> Well, I had a very interesting, I'm not really linear in terms of my career and path, it's actually interesting. So I grew up in Nova Scotia, in the Lower Sackville area, and I graduated high school and my initial career aspiration was to be in architecture. And I just was hoping to do at McGill University, and though I got to be accepted to McGill, which is awesome, because that's where I had my first choice University and I wanted to move away from Halifax, and mostly because my parents worked in the university, I have sisters who are ten and eight years older than me. And so everybody knew my family. And I would just always be the daughter of so and so, the sister of so and so, so I was really happy to go as far away as possible. And so McGill was there and I really was very active in being, getting an architecture in high school, I did internships, so I really had my plan made to be an architect. But to get on an architecture program at McGill was very challenging. I think they accepted 40 students every year. And you need to be like exceptional in terms of marks and drawing abilities and your portfolio. And so I tried for two years. And I after the second rejection, I just sort of like OK, now I need a major, what am I gonna do? And that's when I did Computer Science. And then, and I

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liked computer because I was very fortunate, my father working at the university, we had access to computers, we even had a family fun, who worked in the university with IBM and that we, he always brought, like, the older versions of computers that we can get it for free in our house. So I got to play around in the back in the days when it was DOS and you had to type everything, there was no user interface or anything like that. And I was really engaged in them. And my parents are like, you know what, you should just do Computer Science and I was like, I might as well and there's lots of opportunities. Although that changed, because I seem to have a habit of like graduating during recessions. So my first recession within after the dot com crash. And that was pretty much hardly any hiring opportunity there. And I was pounding the pavement trying to get into and at that time, there was like a lot of interest in graphic and like computer graphics. So I just thought, OK, you know what, I'll do that, I'll go into there, that did not happen. And then I was just sort of said, OK, I need to make a career change, a whole pivot. And that time I really wanted to go live overseas and get an opportunity to travel and work obviously. So I went to the UK, pivoted my career in event management. Yeah. And there is, you'll start to notice now that there is a sort of common theme, although it's not as obvious. But I started to realize that I like taking ideas and bringing them into conscious conception, which is substantially what architecture was for me and event planning was and now so entrepreneurship is. And so I had a really great opportunity to do event management in the UK, working for a really good company, like the London School of Economics, the British Council, and just doing big community events. And I brought it back, kind of like what led me back here to Canada. After the recession in 2008, that kind of ended my career and life in London, I moved back. And I wanted to figure out what will be my next step. And it wasn't really until a year ago, a little over a year ago when it actually this idea came up. Because it's always essentially I was waiting for somebody to do it. I was waiting for this product to come and I kept buying things that I thought would be closely like it, kind of hack it myself. And then I realized, you know what, why are you waiting? Why don't you do it? And that's how I came here.

>> Wow.

>> Yeah.

>> It is interesting and it's not unusual to hear these stories that sound like a very wandering tale. But as you noted, it makes a whole lot of sense now, right? And so building this solution, and creating this from scratch for your community is obviously something that it's gonna be a huge undertaking.

>> Yeah.

>> I'm sure, you know, you've learned that already. What are some of the challenges, you know, as you've started doing this, that you weren't expecting that have shown up in front of you and how are you dealing with those?

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>> You know that's a good question. So one of the biggest challenges, I think it's timing and expectations of how everything's gonna fall into place when you think it is. That is a big challenge. So for me, I devoted full time, in the last six, probably now seven, eight months to this business, to really push through and get to make some traction through it. And I, one of the things is that you are in this, when you're in the start-up community there is so many ideas, there's so many possibilities out there, and you, so you start to listen to them all. And then you find yourself kind of going all over the place, because you're not sure what's your best approach. And for me, I thought, you know, I'll attempt the Invest in Ruse, that was my initial kind of push, then focus. And what, 'cause I thought I had an idea, and I knew the chances are very slim. But my philosophy was, I wouldn't know unless I try. And it worked fine if you, it was a good experience to get the feedback that though it is challenge, I had an idea space to get investors to come in and particular here in Canada. And I like going to the space for potential meeting with investors there. And but overall, like people wanna to see some kind of level of traction. And so that was one of the biggest challenges. And how do I build a business when you have limited resources? And what I started to realize is that, you know, we're going to take time, and it's gonna take a slow process. I like this idea that I heard from somebody, really I'm starting my business in year negative five. So I have to build up years zero is when everything kind of breaks even. And things are, you get them flow, and you got the team and you got a business, essentially. But right now we're working towards that. And just it really is not as quick as we seem to hear all the time and portrayed in the media and the public. There is not all businesses are like that, there was really a slow progress and stage testing, revising the hypothesis that you think about what your business should be doing, testing it with the market, going back and making changes, there's a lot of stop and go.

>> Yeah, that is absolutely a common sentiment of founders, and not just in the social venture space. But I'd say the social venture space is especially challenging in this, especially from the investor point of view, because the metrics that you're offering them, are not necessarily the dollar and cents metrics that they're used to seeing on an app that, you know, people are paying for, or generating revenues for a business. So how do you talk about the impact that Lisnen will have as a business, when you're talking to people that maybe aren't from your community?

>> You know, it really, I'm getting to the sense of what the possibilities are, where we are right now, in terms of the community and what the opportunities that exist for them, and how we can make that change with the product. We're really focusing on the products impact on the community itself, not so much on the money, part of it. But at the same time, there is opportunities to, it is not like a charity or anything like that. At the for profit, we do work at trying to generate revenue. In that part of the process of doing, figuring out where you can meet a pinpoint of your customers and then how do you monetize that, so they can pay you for it. And within, there's so many layers, particularly, in accessibility technology, is we have a lot of government influences as well. They do, they are able to contribute to the product purchases, to help the community and because obviously there is a level of disadvantage, they wanna make it opportunity for people with disabilities to be able to either go to work or navigate in their home in a comfortable manner that they are willing to support. And so you have all of these layers and stakeholders involved. As so, they're just looking trying to find a new

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model basically, a new business model that fits their space, which just hasn't been really touched on with the technology, you know.

>> Yeah, it's a fascinating challenge to overcome. But yeah, it's a great point that the government subsidies to support a solution like this will help in the sense that you can put a value to the solution and there's help for people out there to access it. I guess, when you get into looking at other tools that you may provide to the community, those could also be revenue generation opportunities?

>> In terms of like other tools like...

>> Yeah, I mean, when we earlier in the conversation when you're talking about, you know, this is not just an alerting device, potentially. Now, we don't know what it's gonna be beyond that. But some of those other solutions could be revenue opportunities?

>> Yeah, it certainly is. There are, because this is so new, and the opportunity for empowering the community for various ways, the channels might be different. I thought I said it's a matter of kind of figuring out what is the back, how they want it to be, what do they want and who are the right people interested in that? So certainly there are opportunities there. I have to say; the government right now is heavily on the tech side. And because there are limitations for the community in terms of employment, and they have been heavily financing unemployment for anybody with accessibility, 'cause generally statistics say that I think it's like over 50% are not in an, you know have work. So they try to, they're trying to figure out well, how do we accommodate and get people and the ability to go into the workforce? Yeah.

>> An interesting challenge.

>> Yeah, I know, there's a lot of layers. And so you see a company like mine, when you have multiple stakeholders, multiple impact, who is the best one to target? Where's the maxima? Where do we maximize our energy and our focus? And it might not necessarily be an ambassador for that purpose, it might be the government, or it might be the actual community themselves who are willing to step up, because they have somebody who understand and able to deliver their needs in a way that hasn't been done before. Then so yeah, so it's gonna be a learning curve. Right?

>> Well, it's such an important. Yeah, it's such an important learning to have though, not just for your company, but for other companies that are trying to serve under resourced communities. Is, how do we leverage, you know, all of these stakeholders that do have resources available? And how do we see them? The benefit of and how do we see, help them see the monetary benefit of helping

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up level a community, versus, you know, just being in a subsidy, you know, employment insurance kind of perspective? Right?

>> Yeah. No, it's one of the things that a lot of people, particularly within the acceptability market have been advocating for it constant. It doesn't help when you and I know the intent behind the government supporting people through unemployment, but it does keep people in this the same state and there's no progress for them and to be able to utilize their skill set, and it becomes just kind of vicious cycle because then of course, the workforce don't really get to see the opportunities and the skill set that the people are able to deliver on. And, yeah, so it's all about trying to break that cycle for them. And it will be a challenge for everybody in the process because just as a little bit of comfort going through the easy way was just sort of like just pay out the money. But in the end of the day, you know, we have, for me, and I always think about it. Like, if it gets really, when I'm in my work and I see it, I see a lot of the same situations and same things that are happening to the younger generation, people very much younger, and who are going through the same process. And we think by now like it would be able to change. And so that's where there's got to be a lot of emphasis and focus to really help move that and just 'cause we don't really need to repeat our history, knowing that what's not working.

>> Right. This may be a bit of a can of worms question, but I'll ask it anyway. But you know, I mean, you're at a stage of your life where you could be quite a role model for young people with hard of hearing or deaf in what is possible for them in their lives. And obviously, you grew up in a household where your parents chose to treat you as no different than your brothers sister, right? And so, you know, when you talk to young people, what's the message that you're delivering to them?

>> You know, it was really about and what I think that made me who I am today, and really essentially, going out of your comfort zone, trying new things, pushing yourself, like from what you normally do, and building those new skills, because they're essential. And I find that when I was growing up, I had my parents, that was a key, like in terms of teaching me everything that I needed to know, they wouldn't have no excuse for, I could never use my disability as an excuse for not doing anything. And so I was that kid who was in the gymnastics, I was in swimming, I was in piano. Piano was obviously the one that they kept me in, and despite, if you ever do the Royal Conservatory examination, like they, like the person, for somebody who's hard of hearing, it's hard, because some of them, they'll do the playback, which essentially you have your back behind and then the examiner, he is playing a piece, and he expects you to go on the keyboard and replay it. And I'm hearing a sound, but I don't know what that means. Like to me it's what, where I put my fingers on the keyboard is how I do it. And even though it wasn't, I never got 100% on those, I always did well overall to pass and make it to I think grade eight out of grade ten at the Royal Conservatory. But so my parents that, that was like and everybody around me was just it was just that was the wall, like no excuse you keep going. And I think that is really important skill set that I could teach to the younger generation, that there should be no fear in anything that you can do, going out there and picking yourself up. But you're not gonna always be perfect, but you just keep going at it 'cause you

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do, you should not and I always think it's important that we should not lead within with our disabilities, but we should lead with our skill sets, you know, what our strengths are. That is their secondary. But 'cause we are unique in that sense with our challenges. For me, I'm excellent at figuring things out. With have not having a hearing loss, sometimes you miss certain things, I can fill in the blank really quickly and figure out what people are saying even before, I don't need all the detail. I got a lot of skills in being able to, you know, be better writer and other areas in my life. So there are things that we can leverage into whatever we do, because we've gotten a lot stronger than most people in the population because of our disadvantage.

>> That's beautiful answer. And certainly one I hope, not just people in the hard of hearing and deaf community listen to, but those outside it because I mean, you have demonstrated that's brilliant story of the piano of what is possible with mindset and effort. And just sort of the inability to see excuse as a reason for not moving forward, which is great and will serve you well, I suspect in doing what you're doing today. I'm trying to start a brand-new business with brand new technology...

>> And not even knowing a thing, like I'm I don't have a background in entrepreneurship. I've never done it before. I never studied it before. And so for me that because I had that in my path, I'm not afraid to try and see what it gets, what opportunities of life, I mean what the outcomes are. And that's intentional.

>> That's great. So the next year or so for Lisnen, what is the big objective? Where do you hope to be a year from now?

>> Yeah, I mean, a year from now, I would love to have a product on the first version and go out in the market and really build upon it and understand and sort of get in that momentum in the community and more awareness on the product. But I think the key thing is getting the product out there starting to look at it partnerships, as well, in terms of who are the people going to be impacted most by the product, not just the deaf and hard of hearing community. But other companies that have a strong mission for whether it's mobility or travel or in the, I'm thinking about, like just movement, anything that's related to movement. And having them being part of the product and company is essential, because I think it would give opportunities where other people whether they didn't have the device or pool, can leverage within that partnership. So yeah.

>> Great. Well, that's exciting. And if people want to learn more, if they want to throw a bunch of money at you, how do they reach you and learn more about Lisnen?

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>> Yeah, they can contact me at my email and I'll give it, eyra@lisnen.com. You can check my website, [www.lisnen.com](http://www.lisnen.com) And, yeah, I'm happy to hear and talk to anybody. And please feel free to chat with me. I'd be happy.

>> That's great. And we'll put all the links and contact information in the notes for the episode. And thank you so much Eyra for coming in. It's been a pleasure to get to know the whole story and really look forward to seeing where you take this in the future.

>>Thank you very much for that. Thank you.

>>You're welcome.