An interview with Steve Keith

[00:00:00] **Carolyn:** We all have a story. Sometimes it's a story we choose and sometimes it's a story we fall into. That choice can either work for us or against us. Now, according to experts Gallup, on average, we spend 81,396 hours at work over the course of our lifetime. And in fact, the only thing we spend more time doing than working is sleeping.

[00:00:28] And yet, as Gallup's research shows, only around one in 10 people in the UK truly love the work they do. And that's the reason for this podcast - to help the nine out of 10 who dread the thought of weekday mornings. I remember myself how that felt before I changed my own career story.

[00:00:44] So, if the thought of those weekday mornings fills you with dread, or that quiet voice keeps telling you there is something better waiting for you, why not join me for a conversation with an inspirational guest about how they've successfully changed their career story?

[00:00:57] Full of ideas, strategies, and insights drawn from those real-life stories, the Change Your Story Podcast will help you to discover your why and what else really matters to you so that you too can create a working life you love. My name's Carolyn Parry, and I'm an award-winning career and life coach, and every fortnight I'll be joined by an inspirational guest for a conversation about their career journey, the highs, the lows, and the lessons they've learned, which I hope will inspire and entertain you as part of your journey to finding your career why.

[00:01:32] Welcome to Change your Story.

[00:01:35] So, welcome back to another episode of Change Your Story, and I'm absolutely delighted to be able to welcome Steve Keith today. Steve, you're going to be sharing your story full of pivots and changes in what is essentially a three parter in a way, as you move from education through corporate and into freelance activities. Let's start with the beginning of your journey, growing up in Flookburgh, the land of sticky toffy pudding, potted shrimps, and Kendall mint cake on the southern edge of the Lake District, by the coast. Sounds idyllic. Tell me a bit about what that was like growing up there.

[00:02:11] **Steve:** Yeah, of course. So yeah, I grew up, in the Lake District, just on the outskirts of that, right on Morecombe Bay. You can see Morecombe Bay from the, living room window in the house.

[00:02:21] I had a very good childhood, local school just down the road, lots of friends that were living locally. We actually live in a small hamlet that's just on the edge of Flookburgh, that was built as a place for engineers and builders, construction people that were building the airfield down on the coast, and it's a really, really great community. I'm living back here at the moment, actually I moved back largely because of Covid, but other reasons, and it's been really nice to reconnect. A lot of the people that I grew up with are here - slightly older, but their sense of community's fantastic and it's probably the one of the best decisions that I made.

[00:02:55] **Carolyn:** That's great to hear that, Steve.

[00:02:57] There's always an influence from parents a shadow if you like, or a ray of light and hope over the next generation, what did they do?

[00:03:04] **Steve:** My grandfather's business was a haulage company, just in the village here. And my father and my uncle were training to be mechanics, to help support with the business. And that's where my parents met. So, my Mum was a secretary at the firm that my Dad was doing his apprenticeship at,

[00:03:20] And, that's where the things blossomed between them. My Dad's career then moved from, that training into working within my grandfather's firm. He was one of the truck drivers, driving nationally around the UK. Me and my brother would go on trips with my dad sometimes, so there were sleepovers in the cabin and those big breakfasts with all the other truck drivers up on the A66 in the middle of winter and stuff, which was cool.

[00:03:47] and then when my grandfather passed, my father, and my uncle took over the family business. and, once my grandmother had passed, decided to shift the business more firmly into, cars and automobile rather than trucks.

[00:04:01] And then about five years, I think ago it was they decided to sell the business. my dad wasn't ready to retire yet and became a taxi driver. And he did that for five years and then he just retired.

[00:04:15] **Carolyn:** So, some entrepreneurship themes there from family background, the family business, which always is something that goes through the DNA

[00:04:23] that sense of entrepreneurship goes through the generations, doesn't it?

[00:04:27] But you didn't study business at Sixth Form, you did chemistry, geography in math, so heavily down the sciences.

[00:04:32] And then there came that point of choosing university, first generation of your family straight into a Russell Group at Durham. What was that like?

[00:04:40] **Steve:** Durham for me was a fantastic experience, some of the best years of my life. I won't say the best far because I think there are probably other years since I've graduated that would trump now. But at the time it was the best four years of my life. I was incredibly proud not only get to university, but to be the first person in the family to go to university and for such a prestigious university as well. It was a huge achievement. and when I was picking my GCSEs and my A levels and things, I didn't really have a clue what I wanted to do as a career. You'll know this, career guidance within schools isn't what it should be, not through the fault of the professional delivering it, of course, but just through whatever limitations there are in a school environment around that, whether that's budget, resource, time, and things.

[00:05:26] And we literally just had one conversation and I was sat in front of a computer, and I can't remember the name of the computer program, but I put in some information, answered a few multiple-choice questions, and it told me I was going be a florist or a lawyer. I did an elective whilst I was at Durham in introduction to law and I failed it.

[00:05:44] It was one of the things that nearly stopped me progressing into my second year at university. So, that was obviously something that, wasn't meant to be. And anybody who has seen me try to, I'm getting slightly better now, but arrange flowers, will know that that's not the career for me either or looking after plants indeed.

[00:06:02] **Carolyn:** That just shows something though as well, doesn’t it, that when you need to help somebody make a careers decision, tech doesn't always have the answers, you need a person to help you navigate it.

[00:06:11] **Steve:** Absolutely,

[00:06:11] **Carolyn:** So, you navigated to geography.

[00:06:15] **Steve:** Geography was always a standout subject. We can all pick a teacher that we will remember. And mine is Mrs. Weir, my geography teacher. and she was amazing, and she inspired me with that subject. And there were of course, other teachers as well. But she's definitely the one that influenced that decision for me to go and study geography.

[00:06:34] I was very strong academically, and that that influenced that opportunity to get my foot in the door in Durham. I just wanted to be happy, So, I picked the subjects that made me happy and they made me happy, largely because I either enjoyed them or I was good at them.

[00:06:49] **Carolyn:** The trick is to enjoy something and be good at it, and then the triple trick is to get paid for that. So, you, you pull things together, those two things together, find where the need is, and then that gives you a, a happy life where you do work it feels like fun and pleasure. So, the geography thing, did the degree. And then another choice point that usual transition that you have to make: "Do I go in further study or do I go on to work?" And you decided you were going to go and do a Master's in management and business in the Business School in Durham. Why that pathway rather than more geography?

[00:07:20] **Steve:** You know, I went home that summer after I'd graduated and hadn't invested any time in exploring what I was going to do. I think there are lots of positives of you, of, as I said, like investing your energies into things that you enjoy, that you're passionate about and you're good at.

[00:07:38] But I wasn't thinking about where it was taking me, so I found myself at a bit of a point where I didn't have any plans. I didn't know what I was going to do. And quite honestly, I remember sitting and having a conversation in the patio outside with my parents, and them saying, "What are you going to do next?

[00:07:53] And me saying, "Well, my friend Melissa's going back to do a Master's, so I might go and do it as well.". And that was at that point, literally the start of the decision-making process. But in the back of my mind, I had thought to myself, "Well, do you know what, I have a lot of influence around me, whether it's from Dad running his own business, whether it's from the, the moves that Mum's made since she, stopped secretarial work and has become self-employed as a, a dog sitter, for example."

[00:08:21] My brother ran his own business as well at one point, but I've always had that influence around me, and so I felt like I would go and give it a go, because going back to the question that you asked earlier, business was something, that I teetered on the edge of whether or not I wanted to do it at A Level, but I plumped to go for the three subjects.

[00:08:42] The Master's course itself, although it was at Master's level and it was very demanding, was almost like an introduction to business at Master's level.

[00:08:51] So it gave me that opportunity to tap into and experience something that I'd considered in the past but hadn't necessarily gone down that pathway.

[00:08:59] **Carolyn:** It's quite clear anybody who knows you will have seen that you have a strong interest in marketing and branding. Is it there when you did that Masters, that you came across the concepts of marketing and branding particularly, and how did that land with you?

[00:09:11] **Steve:** No, it wasn't. I mean, I came across those concepts, but the course itself didn't necessarily go into any detail with them. It was much more kind of the nuts and bolts of business. So, there was modules on accounting and finance. My dissertation was on emotional labour.

[00:09:25] So, there was a module on that. There were modules on, how do you set up a business? How do you do the competitor analysis, everything like that.

[00:09:35] One of the other Master's students that was on the course had picked some electives that were quite heavily influenced around marketing and branding. I remember having a lot of conversations with her, so maybe that's where the seeds were planted, now I'm thinking about it, but there weren’t light bulb moments there where I'd kind of gone, “All right, this is how I'm going to use this now.”

[00:09:54] **Carolyn:** Isn't it interesting how we come across things and they store away in the back of our brain somewhere and they start to wriggle their way to the surface and then blossom later on. Your first job wasn't in business though, was it?

[00:10:05] **Steve:** No, that it was in teaching, and again, I remember this very clearly, um, largely because of, and maybe again, this is something now I'm talking about it, that's influenced me. I remember very vividly the stand at the careers fair for Teach First. They had a graffiti campaign that year and I remember looking at it and thinking, "Oh my God, that's awful use as a campaign for teaching.” A lot of my family members particularly commented whilst I was growing up and whilst I was, doing part-time jobs and things whilst I was at university of how good I am with people and all young people and whether or not I'd ever thought about becoming a teacher. I'd always dismissed it and gone "No, not something I'm interested in at all." And it was the program itself. I remember having the conversation with the recruiter on the stand there and hearing about this fantastic opportunity. I was very nervous about going into the workplace because at that point I still hadn't really decided what I was going to do next.

[00:11:10] I'd put it into more of a funnel I guess, and gone, “Right, I really love geography, but what realistically, what career can I get out of that? I'm going to look at the business side of things cause that's something I want to revisit. And the Teach First program combined the two, because it allowed me to spend some time a classroom teaching a subject that I love, on a leadership development program that would further build on the skills and the knowledge and everything that I've had within my Master's.

[00:11:39] And if I'm completely honest, it bought me another two years to think about what I was going to do next.

[00:11:46]

[00:11:46] **Carolyn:** What, let's have more time to think about it while I'll go and footle around doing something. So, for those who don't, who are listening to this and don't understand Teach First as an organization, maybe not very familiar with them, they are a charitable organization which works to address education disadvantage by placing top graduates in some of the most challenging schools in complex urban areas across the UK.

[00:12:04] Very different from views over Morcombe Bay.

[00:12:07] **Steve:** Very different. Yeah. And you know, when I went to university in Durham, one of the reasons I chose Durham was because it is a city, but it doesn't feel like a city. And in a way that helped facilitate that step into working in London as well. I will say that the school that I was placed in on the program for the two years was on the outskirts of London. It was in zone four in technically in Essex. So, it wasn't really in an urban environment in a way. A wonderful area, and there's the school that I got placed in. I was, I don't know whether or not fortunate is the right word, but part of the struggle with the TEACH FIRST program that you are, the expectations are very clearly managed about when you are recruited, is that you are going to potentially be put into some of the worst schools slash classrooms with heavily disruptive pupils that have got behavioural problems as well.

[00:12:56] I was fortunate that the school that I got placed in for two reasons, I guess. So, they never put you into a school by yourself, so there's always somebody else that's on the program in your cohort. So, you've got somebody to do the experience alongside. But I was one of seven that went into my school which was quite rare as well, the school needed two geography teachers. I had another geography teacher with me, my good friend Grace. It was great because, weirdly as well, we'd been on the same degree course doing geography at the same time, but never met until we ended up in that school together in Essex.

[00:13:32] **Carolyn:** Was it brave to go and work in that environment? Did it feel like a brave step going into work in a challenging Inner-City school?

[00:13:40] **Steve:** I mean, probably on reflection now brave is a word I'd use. Back then, it was probably bonkers, stupid - words that will come with it. it encourages you to invest in yourself by throwing you in the deep end. I love learning by doing, so I think that was what I'd been missing throughout university. When I'd done my geography degree, yes, I focused quite heavily on the physical environment, but I wasn't able to afford a lot of the trips that were happening.

[00:14:11] Durham at the time was world renowned for its sea level research and things like that, so there were trips that would go up to Greenland. There was some that were going out to Gran Canaria to look at volcanoes and stuff, and I couldn't afford that. And so I think the practical application of what I was learning didn't really come out of the degree whereas when I was doing my Master's, a lot of the case studies, my dissertation things actually involved applying learning. Things started to click and it didn't take me as long to process stuff and to get it, I suppose. So being told I could go and do six weeks of intense teacher training in the summer and then go straight into a classroom in the September as a full-time teacher. So, I had 12, 11, 12 classes, nearly 300 pupils straight away.

[00:14:58] **Carolyn:** That's not an easy walk in the park, is it?

[00:15:00] **Steve:** It's not, no, and all the things that you have to learn, all the names, you've got to be able to plan your lessons, you've got to do all the marketing. It was not an easy two years, but it was probably the two years that made me who I am because it encouraged me to kind of really just start taking hold of opportunities, and to things as well. I've always been very curious and it encouraged me to be curious, more curious about a subject that I thought I knew inside out, but because I had to think about how you would teach very high level concepts to somebody that was 11 years old, for example.

[00:15:40] So, the curiosity of how you actually do that and how people learn, but the curiosity of how I learn and how I thrive, and it was a fantastic two years and I loved it, but I didn't see myself being a teacher beyond the two-year program. And as I said, part of the draw of the program itself was that you signed up for a two-year commitment and then you were able to walk away if you wanted to.

[00:16:04] **Carolyn:** I think what was interesting in there, apart from the sense of personal development that you talked about is you talked about taking complex topics and making them simple for 11-year-olds, and that communication strand is one that stuck with you all the way through, I think, hasn't it?

[00:16:19] **Steve:** It has, and I suppose that's where the branding and marketing passion started to come from, particularly when I moved into corporate environment.

[00:16:28] **Carolyn:** Hold the graffiti. Let's just do it clearly.

[00:16:31] **Steve:** Without graffiti, yes! But the best teachers are the ones that are able to simply explain very complex at times, processes, issues, anything that somebody's got to learn. You've got to be able to get into their head and learn how they want to learn, and understand them, and that's been something that's come right through my career.

[00:16:52] **Carolyn:** And of course, that was a time when you really saw some significant disadvantage close up, I suspect.

[00:16:59] **Steve:** Yeah. It's one of the things at the moment when I'm having conversations, particularly with my father, but around kind of the whole issue of asylum seekers and I've seen these young people that get thrown into a classroom and can't speak a word of English and have just arrived in the country. They were some of my pupils. At the other end of the scale, in the classroom of 30, I'd have somebody who I couldn't keep up with that I was constantly having to give extension tasks to. The diversity of the pupils that were in front of me and the spectrum of their ability to learn was huge and again, it was really, really daunting, but it got me out of bed in the morning. I used to love being a teacher and spending that time with those young people. One of the things that I used to get criticized, or feedback rather on as a training teacher, was that I didn't necessarily always teach to the test when I should be teaching to the test.

[00:17:54] But that's maybe more to do with my own personality of wanting to be a bit disruptive and a bit of a rule breaker at times.

[00:18:00] **Carolyn:** That's the entrepreneur in you.

[00:18:03] **Steve:** Maybe, yeah, but I, I would rather have the light bulb moment where a young person got it rather than constantly trying to hammer learning into somebody because they've got to sit an exam on it.

[00:18:14] **Carolyn:** One of those is much more useful. And I think we both know which one is the one that really helps people, don't we? You've talked about getting out of bed. What was that about?

[00:18:22] **Steve:** It was those individual interactions with the young people that suddenly got something that, told me or made it appear that they didn't enjoy my subject, suddenly start to thrive at it and to come into the room and be enjoying it themselves I was fortunate in the school that I was placed in as well because the head of department taught A Level and she was finding it quite demanding to teach it herself.

[00:18:49] She was more of a human geographer, and she wanted to be able to give the physical geography to somebody else and I jumped at that opportunity. And it was those moments as well where I wasn't necessarily spending an hour with a group of 11 year olds trying to get them to sequence six pictures to show how a meander in a river happens, which nobody's ever going to need to know in their life, let's be honest, but that spectrum of spending an hour doing that, or an hour where I tried to come up with a classroom activity around contours that involved young people holding hands and then not appreciating that the boys and the girls that “11 year olds are not going to want hold hands in circles, Steve”, right up to teaching glaciology to my year thirteens, and seeing the sparks with them then. Then one of my students went on to study geography at university in Queen Mary's London, and it was those moments of pride in the young people that I was working with and knowing that I'd had a part in helping them to get to that point that got me out of bed.

[00:19:51] **Carolyn:** And that's a theme that carries on, doesn't it? And you reference there that sense it was all around engaging people. And of course, you then moved into a graduate recruitment officer role. Was that to do more of that engagement piece?

[00:20:04] **Steve:** Yeah, it was, I realized that I had a talent for, or I like to think I've got a talent for speaking to people and understanding their motivations, what gets them out of bed, for example, as well, and their passions and everything. And as I said, whilst I was enjoying teaching, I hadn't necessarily seen myself as being a teacher.

[00:20:23] I don't think our education system is fit for purpose in many areas, particularly around geography.

[00:20:30] The beauty of that program was that I could get out after two years. And so again, I didn't really know what else I wanted to do.

[00:20:37] And one of the great things about Teach First at the point, was that they were looking for recruiters to join the graduate recruitment team. And one of the desirable requirements of the role was that you had a lived experience of teaching, preferably on the Teach First program.

[00:20:56] And this idea of essentially becoming a paid ambassador sitting in campuses. I basically used to just rock up in the coffee shop one day a week and sit and drink coffee and eat cake and talk to students all day long,

[00:21:10] And that was one of the things that I loved about the role and the transition coming out of the classroom. We were encouraged to talk about the struggles we'd had as well as the success we'd had because they wanted young people graduates to be very aware of the fact that this is not an easy route into teaching. It's not an easy route into any career, and to be able to attract the right people, you have to be realistic about what you're going to get when you join the workplace. it was a fantastic role and it got me out of the classroom but kept me engaged with teaching. And again, as well as I was saying, those moments when, I'm working with young people in the classroom and you see that spark and you can get a bit of a skip in your step and you go home feeling like you've achieved something. I was still getting that when I was going home in the evening because there'd be at least one or two graduates that day, or undergraduates, that would say, "I'm going to go and apply for this", and then would get onto the program.

[00:22:03] **Carolyn:** You left your marking and your lesson prep behind, but you got the buzz, you got the light bulb moments in other people's eyes.

[00:22:08] About a year of that, and then another change, Steve, let's time into a leadership development officer role. What prompted that and how did it feel?

[00:22:18] **Steve:** Two things that prompted it. So, the first thing was that there was a shakeup within the team that I was working in. The responsibilities that had been set amongst the team, were regionally zoned out in terms of delivery. So, I'd been given the London recruiter role.

[00:22:34] There were other recruiters that, for example, lived out of a suitcase throughout the week and were based up in the northwest or went all the way up to Scotland campus and I was given a stretch project over the summer when we were quieter to review recruitment for the last six or seven years.

[00:22:50] And I came up with a new strategy, and they adopted it. And I shot myself in the foot because it meant that my role was going to change.

[00:22:57] **Carolyn:** Did you learn something useful there, Steve?

[00:23:01] **Steve:** Something very useful there, yeah. To be fair to my head of student recruitment at the time, they'd split the roles. There were still elements within London and they'd made an assumption that, giving me some Northwest Universities was a good idea because I was from the Northwest and it would give me an opportunity to spend more time back at home.

[00:23:21] And at that point, I loved spending time back at home, but I didn't want to be spending two days a week in the Northwest when I'd moved to London and lived in London.

[00:23:29] **Carolyn:** Yeah, I get that.

[00:23:29] **Steve:** So there was, there was that within there as well, but there was also another new opportunity that I saw. I didn't want to be sitting there in five years’ time trying to talk back to a version of myself or a version of education that didn't exist anymore.

[00:23:45] **Carolyn:** Was there a part of you, because you've talked about this love of learning, that “when I've done a year, I've learned all I'm going to, in this role, I need to move”?

[00:23:52] **Steve:** There was, yeah, there was. And then that's probably still quite prevalent in the way that I approach learning now. I love having something on the go in the background. So, I've done two qualifications in the last 12 months around mental health, for example, through adult learning, and maybe there was an element of me kind of feeling like "I've achieved something. I've got to that point, like what next?" without necessarily thinking about how I could use that time propel my career forward in the same direction, but maybe that came from a lack of uncertainty as well.

[00:24:21] I was going to make me sound like I've kind of just stumbled my way through my career, but being very honest about it, I feel like I had until about 10, 12 years ago.

[00:24:30] **Carolyn:** I wonder, you know, if that's a stumble or if it's the entrepreneurial characteristic of seeing opportunities and going for them, but not always doing the bit that I think we all need to do sometimes, which is considering whether that opportunity's right for us. We see an opportunity, somebody flatters us and said, we think you should apply for that, and you go, "Okay, I will" rather than going, "I'm writing my story, this isn't somebody else writing my story for me. I want to write my story". And it's that tipping point, isn't it? As to whether you take the opportunity and go with it, and sometimes that takes you in a direction that doesn't suit. Is that what happened when you moved into the leadership development officer role?

[00:25:03] **Steve:** Yeah. I think it was, yeah. And there's something that happened a few years later in another role I was put in a position where I was asked to read out a quote, that resonated with me on the Westend stage in London as part of a course that I was on and I chose the speech that Steve Jobs gave at a university graduation that talks about connecting the dots up, and I suppose that's where when I got into later parts of my career, it became a strength because it became part of my narrative, and I could clearly articulate how I'd ended up, where I'd ended up.

[00:25:39] **Carolyn:** Okay, so the ability to analyze your career steps and then understand what's connected them, and that's really important, particularly when you're looking to create that next step, isn't it? So, there you were, leadership development officer, feeling a little bit, not quite in the right place. So, you being you, you wanted to learn something else as a bit of a side hustle, a new strand...

[00:26:01] **Steve:** Yeah, so I remember one evening, and this is just to rewind a couple of years backwards back into teaching of, working late one night, and it was dark. It was probably around December time. It was just dark and miserable, you know how it gets in the evenings.

[00:26:17] And the bus that got me to the train station that then got me onto the tube that then got me home, only came half an hour at the end of the school road could see it when it was about to set off. And so I ran for it and managed to just catch it in time, but I was panting like nobody's business. I was dripping with sweat. I was clearly, massively unfit and got onto a bus as well that had a load of my students on that just then berated me for being, so ridiculously unfit at my age. And it encouraged me to start taking my physical health a bit more seriously. When I was at school, I hated PE, absolutely loathed it. I didn't have very good experience because of the teacher, if I'm completely honest as well.

[00:27:04] There was a a lot of toxic masculinity around PE when I was growing up in school, and if you didn't play football or rugby, then you weren't considered to be a proper man. And that's still quite prevalent even within the, the village now.

[00:27:16] I get that feeling sometimes when I'm walking around that I'm not good enough in that respect. But I decided to join a gym, and me being me again, thought, "Well, I've got no idea what I'm doing, so I'm going to hire somebody who can show me what to do". So, I hired a personal trainer and had lots of great conversations with them whilst they were training me, and over a period of about six to nine months, saw some massive gains in my fitness. I started to really enjoy exercise, which had never happened before, and asking questions of my personal trainer, as I do with most people when I meet them? "How did you get to where you are in your career today?"

[00:27:56] And he showed me some of the courses that he'd done and the learner inside me just went, "Ooh, that'd be good to do". So, I decided to embark on a diploma for personal training, and at the same time to enter into the London Marathon ballot thinking "I will never get this", and got in so ended up qualifying as a personal trainer whilst I was working in that role as a graduate recruiter and moving into leadership development officer role and running in the London as well in the April of 2010. The first day of the role that I moved onto after the leadership development officer role, was the day after the London Marathon, because I remember having to travel to Cambridge to these two days of residential and not being able to walk.

[00:28:40] **Carolyn:** How did that go?

[00:28:41] **Steve:** Well, I quite clearly remember the CEO who was there, doing the training with us saying to me, "If you'd said you were doing that yesterday, we would've let you come on Tuesday!".

[00:28:50] **Carolyn:** But your tenacity and dedication meant you turned up.

[00:28:53] **Steve:** Well, yeah, exactly. I was like, “I've been hired to do a job and whilst I, am a very a strong proponent for working flexibly and trying to blend things together, the marathon effort was something that was a personal activity, a personal goal for me” In my head, it had nothing to do with my job and I didn't want to ask to start a day later because I'd chosen to do something in my personal life.

[00:29:17] **Carolyn:** I get that totally. But it was connected with your job really, isn't it? It helped you develop resilience and tenacity and commitment and discipline and all those things that are fundamental to a decent career that an employer is looking for and expects.

[00:29:32] So, you've moved by then through the leadership development officer role, where you'd been doing some comms between departments and developing trainee teachers and started this fitness trainer activity and joined vInspired as a schools advisor, how did that go?

[00:29:47] **Steve:** Not as expected. I think it was the first time when I'd made a move in my career when I regretted my choice, and not because of anything through my own fault. That year there was about three or four of us that moved out of that leadership development role.

[00:30:03] We'd kind of gone into it and we're in similar places. We didn't really know what we wanted to next and we'd made a wrong move. And so we'd seen this opportunity with these schools to go and work with young people in schools, in boroughs that could be allocated to where we live. So, I was allocated Lambeth and Wandsworth, which was fantastic because I was living in Brixton at the time, so I could walk to work every day and go and work with young people developing their employability skills. And I really thought I'd managed to find something that was going to be huge for me in my career. I'd started in that role in April 2010 and three months later, we all came into the office one day in Old Street, I remember, and our manager sat us down and told us because this was about three or four days after the general election had happened, that funding that had been from the Labour Government had been withdrawn and we were being made redundant. We were going to be paid whilst there was a consultation that went on throughout that redundancy process, we had to come into work once a week to show our face to show that we were still working, which seemed ridiculous to me at the time, I remember, but I was made redundant and I spent the summer of 2010 lying largely on Clapham Common and sunbathing, and I suppose ignorantly and naively at the time then thinking, I'll figure something out. And so, I remember a friend saying to me when we'd gone to Spain on holiday at the end of the summer, "So, what are you going to do next?” And me going, "I don't really know and the money's running out!"

[00:31:35] **Carolyn:** So. what did you do?

[00:31:36] **Steve:** I'd made good friends with somebody in Clapham and they'd been chatting to me a lot and they worked at the professional services firm, EY, one of the Big Four. And this is the beauty of networking rather than it being nepotism. They had said, to me, "My friend that works in the graduate recruitment team at EY is looking for recruiters right now. You've done graduate recruitment. Why don't you apply to that? At least get yourself a job at least for a recruitment season, to get yourself back on your feet." I wasn't necessarily as low as I have been, but I was starting to get really worried about where my career and where my life was going. So I applied for that job in the graduate recruitment team as a recruiter, went for the first interview, went to this big, you've been to the EY office in London Bridge, big class building. I'm used to going at this point into schools, into classrooms where you're lucky if the internet connection's working to being in the centre of London and a lot of walking around with my mouth wide open moments and thinking, "Is this really me? I'm going to give it a go. I'm going to embrace it. My friend has looked at my CV. I know I can probably ace this interview.” Went for that first interview, and then a couple of days later got a call from the recruiter and was rejected and as somebody who likes to self-reflect and develop, before I even had the opportunity to say, "Well, could you give me some feedback on why you've decided not to take this application forward?", the recruiter said, " There's actually another role within the employer brand team, which sits alongside the student recruitment team and with your school's experience over the last four years, the Head of Employer Brand would like to have a conversation with you. Would you be interested in that?"

[00:33:22] And that was one that I met Jane Robinson, who you've met.

[00:33:25] **Carolyn:** Yep.

[00:33:27] **Steve:** I remember the interview with Jane, I said this to her when we've worked together since, that it felt like one of the hardest interviews that I've ever had in my life. Maybe it was because somebody had seen something that I hadn't seen.

[00:33:41] And so I remember being incredibly nervous about messing it up. I'd spent some time doing some research into the firm and thinking, as I said, "Is this really me? Is this where I want my career to go?" and when Jane offered me the role a couple of days later after that interview, I remember her saying to me, "There's a lot of things in me right now that saying I shouldn't be making this offer because you've got no branding and marketing experience, and that's what I want for this person in this role, but I know I'm confident enough to say that I am happy to mentor you, coach you, develop you, and help you learn those skills. What you have that nobody else that I've seen has, and that I need is an understanding of what 14- to 18-year-olds are like, how they behave, what they're looking for."

[00:34:33] It felt like somebody had thrown out an olive branch and gone, "Have a go at this. I believe in you. I think you could be amazing at this, I have spotted something that you've haven't seen”.

[00:34:42] **Carolyn:** Was there an element of imposter syndrome at the back, which is what made you go, "Really? Can I do this?"

[00:34:48] **Steve:** Yeah, totally. I'm confident in myself, but I do have a lot of moments even now where I doubt my abilities. I think it was because up until that point, I'd had a lot of good managers, but I hadn't had a great manager, somebody who knew how to develop people.

[00:35:04] And I'd started my career on a leadership development course, I didn't necessarily finish those two years feeling like I was a leader and it was that sense of somebody who had a huge gravitas, she achieved so much in her career, had gone, " I will help you".

[00:35:21] It felt like at that time that that penny had finally dropped and I'd gone, "This is what I'm meant to be doing."

[00:35:27] **Carolyn:** How did that feel?

[00:35:28] **Steve:** Very overwhelming to start with because as I found a couple of years later when I sat down with Jane for my annual appraisal conversation and she'd said, "Right, okay, what were your goals for the next 12 months? And I said, “Oh, I haven't really got round to them yet," and she'd gone, "That's not a good enough answer. Come on. I'm investing in you. You are meant to be investing in yourself." And it had given me that drive and it did feel very overwhelming to start with, but it felt in a way like a huge weight. Maybe it was because I'd spent three months being redundant up until that point. I'd lost a lot of confidence in myself and it felt like somebody believed in me. So, it was very powerful in that sense as well and it just gave me a great sense of achievement. It gave me a lot of purpose from that point forward.

[00:36:11] **Carolyn:** I'm sure you know Bandura's work on self-efficacy. One of the four elements of his theory is that when somebody you respect says you can do this, it has the most significant positive impact on that individual's ability to progress, and that sounds like it was exactly what Jane did.

[00:36:28] She said, "I know you can do this, go do." And then you went, "Okay, I'm borrowing some of her faith because she's got faith in me. So, where I haven't got the faith, I'll take a bit of hers and give it a go.” And that's hugely powerful, and you said it gave you a sense of purpose. Was that a purpose to prove yourself to her or was it some different type of purpose?

[00:36:47] **Steve:** Yeah, there was that kind of sense of doing it for her, but a big part of it was doing it for myself as well, and actually going "Right. Okay." And again, going back to that point about the Steve Jobs quote I spent some time before I said yes to that offer, just reflecting and looking back at everything and seeing what the role was that she'd described and going, "Do you know what, like this…, if I've been waiting for something, this is it. So, it's time to grab that ball by the horns, and go for it."

[00:37:15] **Carolyn:** Powerful, empowering, and worrying in equal measure.

[00:37:18] **Steve:** Yeah. Yeah. especially in the first couple of weeks when I was there as well, I'd spent up until that point realistically about by the kind of few months where things were a bit topsy survey with the school's role and the redundancy and stuff, working in an environment where there was a bell that rang that told me what I was meant to be doing every 45 minutes, half an hour.

[00:37:37] Up until that point, my life had been governed by the school academic calendar, but it was really intimidating going into the office,

[00:37:46] I had several moments in that first few weeks where I was just like, "I have made the wrong choice. I am absolutely out of my depth. I should do something else," but I stuck with it there was a moment a few weeks later, I remember my, good friend Liz, who I'm still friends with now, one of my best friends, she was running the, selection and the onboarding part of the schools programs that I joined to do the branding and marketing around. And we were to meet for the first time, at a road show that she was doing in the Birmingham office. And so I'd gone up to Birmingham and we'd met and things just started to slot into place from that point as well.

[00:38:22] I think as well, the part of it to start was that I felt like I was the only person, because I was, the first person that was focusing on schools within the team. So, I'd been given this huge amount of responsibility. Jane had been very clear that she would give me that responsibility, but she'd also held me accountable to any decisions that I was making.

[00:38:40] I'd been given a six-figure budget to work with and I was looking at it and going, "Oh my Lord, there is so much that could go wrong here, but there's a lot that could go well. I just need to have some faith in myself. And when I met Liz that day, we started to bounce off each other and we sat down for a good three days, I remember after that and built out our strategy and started to lay out the table of what recruitment for schools at EY was going to look like and had a vision of where it was going over the next five years because the business was demanding that. And I'd never worked in an environment where somebody wanted to know, well, what you were going to be achieving in five years’ time. I'd always worked in an environment where you were working towards somebody sitting in an exam to get a grade. So, it's an annual cycle.

[00:39:25] And just that vision and that ability to see forward and go, this is what we're working towards. That was the first time in my career where I'd had that and it anchored me incredibly well because had those check-in points where I could see how I was doing, but it gave me like a good push behind me all the time.

[00:39:44] Anytime I tried to, not necessarily slack off, but if I felt like I was just taking my foot off the pedal a little bit too much, encouraged me to push it harder and keep going.

[00:39:55] **Carolyn:** So, a move through from that employer brand advisor for the schools piece to senior employer brand adviser, and then onto an assistant director role leading on the apprenticeship side of things as the employer brand attraction selection manager.

[00:40:10] **Steve:** Yeah.

[00:40:10] **Carolyn:** and a raft of awards that came with all of that work. You talked just now about "Every time I took my foot off the pedal, I felt I needed to push it harder to achieve” - all of those awards in a place like EY, driven by targets that inevitably come in any corporate role, was there a personal cost?

[00:40:29] **Steve:** Oh absolutely, yeah, there was. I've just finished reading a really interesting book actually, which has been set on my shelf for about five or six years. But it's Matthew Syed's Black Box Thinking, and it's all about how important it is to learn from our mistakes.

[00:40:45] And up until that point, yeah, there'd been things that have gone wrong in my career or there'd been things that I've done wrong in my day to day, but I could just sweep them under the carpet because they weren't that big a thing. But there was that personal cost. I was taking a lot of risks. I was working in a market, which back then, sounds ridiculous to say now. because there's so many employers now that recruit from school into apprenticeship roles, it was very much like working blind a lot of the time. And whilst that vision became very important for that because the personal cost of me was me failing, and at that point, I still don't to a degree, but I wouldn't have coped very well with failing at that point, I don't think.

[00:41:24] I had so much self-belief and confidence in myself that I could do this that if I'd failed, it probably would've broken me. But it did later on in my journey there at EY, I guess. But that, that's that shift, that stepping up a few gears into that assistant director role and then taking a sideways move into the marketing and comms lead for the UK for apprenticeships. It was an opportunity. My manager went on maternity leave, and I was given all of the responsibilities that she had on top of my own. And I sat there one evening I remember, and I thought to myself again, I'd constantly been sitting with Jane and saying, "I want to be promoted, I want this, I want that, I want to...". And she'd been saying, "Well, sometimes you'd need to do your time in the trenches before you go out on the battlefield", to manage my expectations of me feeling like I was ready, but her knowing that I wasn't. And again, and this doesn't happen very often, I don't feel like, it certainly wasn't my experience from others around me when that person went off on maternity leave, I was asked to step into her role rather than them bringing somebody in to manage above me. Again, Jane had that faith in me. Others had faith in me in the team that I could sit alongside. At that point as well, the apprenticeship levy was coming in, so there were some big changes happening in the business and my name had apparently been brought up in a number of conversations where they'd said, "We need him to lead this now. He's going to have to do it whether he is ready or not, and whether you are ready for him to do it." And so I did it, and again, it was the magical part of the role, everything started to slot into place. There were things like the Recruitment Advertising and Design awards, we won the Best School Leaver Apprenticeship Campaign three years in a row in the early careers market. We became the number one employer for apprentices. That was, one of my career highlights - that day when I was sitting I remember with the person from the organization that was running the awards there or the ranking, I found it really bizarre.

[00:43:18] "Well, why are we having a coffee? We've already done our media plan. We've already done this, that, and the other, and they're like, "I'm just wanted to let you know that we're about to announce the fact that EY has become the number one employer.

[00:43:29] And I managed to hold myself together quite well in that conversation, but then I remember it, we moved to a new office across in Cannon Street and I left that meeting and I cried in the street, pure, of tears of joy, was a chef's kiss moment for my career, it really was.

[00:43:46] **Carolyn:** So, a magic moment

[00:43:47] **Steve:** Absolutely a magic moment. Another 12 months later probably a curse because we fell quite far down in the rankings a year afterwards. it was a ranking based on employee experience, so there were things that were beyond my control that happened the year after, but it certainly gave me a bit of a bump back down into reality. So, it was a danger at that point where your head could be just stuck in the clouds, and you could just become completely ignorant to everything that was around you. And that certainly woke me up.

[00:44:18] **Carolyn:** Yeah, that happens, doesn't it? You've referenced it being a curse, and yet that curse gave you other opportunity and it gave you a different perspective.

[00:44:27] **Steve:** Yeah, it did. It was a gift as well, now I'm thinking about it, but I think if that had happened to me three or four years earlier, I probably would've just run for the hills. But I just embraced it.

[00:44:37] For me, it was just important that I held onto my credibility and that I could show that I was still the leader that they thought I was, and it opened up some fantastic opportunities for me because it gave me the opportunity to have some very difficult and uncomfortable conversations, but they were great conversations with the managing partner for talent and the CEO for the UK himself.

[00:45:01] **Carolyn:** That's, that's a big thing, isn't it? You talked a minute ago about working blind.

[00:45:06] **Steve:** Yeah.

[00:45:06] **Carolyn:** I'm going to just draw a connection, I think with entrepreneurship again, because what anybody who runs a business does is that they, they are horizon scanning and spotting early opportunities and they are first adopters.

[00:45:17] And I suspect that's actually what you are doing when you are talking about working blind. And an example of that was the EY’s parental advice campaign that you kicked off, because we all know that the most vocal element of career choice, and you talked about it in your own career choice, is the power of the parent.

[00:45:34] And yet the parent is there asking questions, expecting the young person to move forward, but they're giving advice, looking in their rear-view mirror, talking back to the time when they were that age. And things have clearly moved on since. So, that parental advice campaign was really important. Talk me through that a little bit and how it came about.

[00:45:50] **Steve:** A lot of it was from, conversations, going back to Maggie there, for example. regular meetings with somebody so senior and her having a vested interest in my work.

[00:46:00] She had two teenage sons, one of them was about to do their GCSEs and one of them was about to do their A levels and we had this fantastic conversation about her children, about her own career, about just the general early careers market and how employers needed to be supporting young people more, and the campaign, I suppose, was born out of that in many respects, because I remember going back into the office the next day and having a meeting with Jane and saying I've been given the green light by Maggie, to invest quite heavily in parents as part of our, employer branding strategy. That was a gap that we weren't addressing. And as the managing talent partner, a woman who had two children, she expected it to be filled.

[00:46:47] **Carolyn:** It was a big gap and I think I'm right in saying that EY was really trendsetting in doing that because I can't recall any other of either Big Four or anybody else doing stuff in that space so, so visibly and so clearly, and that was definitely ground-breaking.

[00:47:03] **Steve:** We were the first to my knowledge. We'd done some research up until that point. One of the things that I loved about working within Jane's team at EY that anything that we did was based on research, so that we knew that it was correct and that we were speaking to the people that it needed to be speaking to.

[00:47:18] It was an opportunity to engage parents that in a really meaningful way to start a conversation. And I don't think anybody's come close to that since and it's still a huge area that employers aren't interested in.

[00:47:34] **Carolyn:** It is, and that's the challenge because it's a huge area that needs funding, but there's just not the funding for it

[00:47:39] **Steve:** Yeah.

[00:47:39] **Carolyn:** I remember doing those workshops with you with parents and their teenagers seeing light bulb after light bulb go on over parents' heads as they realized more about themselves actually in the work that we did in the workshops they went through. They actually understood more about themselves and they understood the dynamic and how to handle the dynamic between them and their child, rather than forcing them down a route, which I think a few were quite keen on at the start, to moving towards that position of not the sage on the stage, but the guide on the side and being supportive and opening doors, but realizing the young person has to invest and engage. Now you've been there seven and a half years or so, what happened?

[00:48:15] **Steve:** Things got too much for me. I don't necessarily think it was the pressure that got to me. I'd had my ego massaged so much and felt like I was on top of the world, and I was the expert and everything.

[00:48:28] I got the opportunity to move into a new role. It was being created for me. In hindsight, it was a promotion in name only. I was being asked to continue the work that I was doing, but also lead on internal comms within the business.

[00:48:46] And about six months in, I found myself becoming incredibly anxious about the work that I was so confident in. I'd just at that point as well as part of my "I'm so happy with my career and where I'm at" and been given, four weeks off work to use all of my annual leave entitlement in one go, and I'd been off to Australia with my friend Liz. And I suppose I'd had an epiphany whilst I was out there as well that something wasn't necessarily right, but I didn't feel like I knew what it was. And I remember coming back on that January and Jane having a conversation with me. This was in January 2017.

[00:49:25] And Jane had said to me, "I feel like something's different in you and I'm not quite sure what it is. And I'm a bit concerned that it's the beginning of the end of something."

[00:49:35] **Carolyn:** Wow.

[00:49:35] **Steve:** And we both swept it under the rug, because at that point we were about to start working on this whole parental guidance thing because that was the last thing that I delivered at EY in terms of big campaigns and, I felt like I was working two people's jobs. I was working with a new team of people that I'd never worked with before and working with a team of people that I'd worked with for the last seven years.

[00:50:01] I was overstretched. I felt like anything that anybody was saying from the new team felt like they were criticising me. I became very touchy around those kind of things. I remember one little thing that somebody said to me and me slamming my laptop lid down and storming out of a meeting room, which was completely unlike me.

[00:50:20] I can be a bit of a drama queen, but very rarely in a work setting. Things were not good, and I remember having a conversation, again with Jane December time, at the end of 2017, and she said to me, " When you come back in January, I think we need to have made a decision. We need to have worked out whether or not I need to support you in tackling what's going on right now, or we need to work out an exit strategy." And she was very open and honest about that with me. Six months earlier we'd had a catch up that she'd put in the diary that I didn't quite understand what it was for, and we sat down in the coffee shop in the ground floor in More London.

[00:51:05] And she said, "Are you okay?" And I go, "Yeah, I'm fine." And she'd gone, "No, are you really okay?" And something unlocked in inside me and I just burst into tears in the middle of the coffee shop.

[00:51:15] Jane got up and left me there.

[00:51:18] I remember thinking to myself, “Err, what's going on? People are looking at me. I'm crying. You just left me here." She returned about two minutes later, she'd been upstairs, packed up my stuff, brought my bag downstairs and said, “Go and take two weeks off, You are not okay right now. And you need to have some time to yourself." 2017 was a very difficult year, because it was a year where I realized that that part of my career was coming to an end and I'd suddenly gone back into that territory of, “I don't know what else I could do”.

[00:51:50] **Carolyn:** So, that fear of being lost again.

[00:51:52] **Steve:** Exactly. Yeah. I decided to be brave, embrace it. it'll be five years since I had the conversation with Jane where she said, "So, what have you decided?" And I said, "I'm resigning". I didn't have a job to go to. I had three months’ notice that I needed to work. I didn't have a clue what I was going to go and do, but I knew that I'd got a nice pot of savings,

[00:52:17] I'd worked out how long I could cover my expenses and not be working, realistic about when I'd need to get another job, a plan of what I was going to do, but I wanted to keep that to myself. In the back of my head I said, ""Do you know what, I think now is the time in my career where I don't feel comfortable in the environment I'm in, but I know that I'm really good at what I do."

[00:52:39] So, I needed to change the environment and I needed to change the delivery of how I was using my skills and my knowledge and experience, and so coming back right full circle as well I suppose to that point around my parents' background and entrepreneurship that we've been mentioning, I had decided before I'd handed my noticing that I was going to try working for myself here.

[00:53:02] **Carolyn:** So, a new chapter.

[00:53:03] **Steve:** A new chapter and that's essentially, that is exactly how I saw it. I left the company. There was a shroud of mystery around it. It was really weird. I find a lot in corporate environments when somebody leaves, there always has to be a story of why they've left. So, if this person's left and they're going onto this particular role. Everybody kept asking me where I was going and I was just like, "I'm not, I'm just quitting".

[00:53:24] My perception at the time was that it just wasn't going to go down very well if they couldn't say what I was going to do. So, this narrative was constructed as to what I was going to go and do next, which was completely the opposite of what I was going to do. But I was so low depressed and unmotivated at the time, that I just let it slide and was just like, "You have your story as to where I'm going next. I know where I'm going next or where I plan to be going."

[00:53:49] **Carolyn:** And you took a brave move into the world of freelance.

[00:53:52] **Steve:** I did after I'd had like another three months off. So, I flew out to the Philippines and had a month out there, and I have, another very clear memory of sitting one evening. I'd been with a friend that had flown up from Australia to the Philippines and they weren't feeling too, too well one evening so I'd gone out for the evening by myself and watched the sunset.

[00:54:15] And I've got a photo that I've used in presentations where I've talked about my career of a bottle of Corona, and the book, the Air We Breathe, is that what it's called? It's a book about the regrets that people have about their careers, and watching the sunset over the archipelago and in my head everything was becoming very clear. I came up with the name for the business. I was going to call it the Branding Man. It was going to be a consultancy that was delivering employer brand services for employers that were wanting to target, young people that were interested in apprenticeships.

[00:54:47] And it was going to be the start of a new chapter in my career. And, and that's where I went from.

[00:54:54] **Carolyn:** And so in the early days of branding, man, you did some work with people like FledgeLink, which is an online careers platform, now with Speakers for schools. You did some work with me with the project I was doing during Covid to help the young people who've been totally disrupted from their careers, some work with Police Now as an assessor in their recruitment activities, some report work for UCAS, became a judge for the Business Book Awards, joined the Institute of Student Employers as a one of the steering committee members. And you kept developing it. So, you took this step into the wide blue yonder from the security and safety of employment, a corporate that comes with a complete identity of being a member of a big corporate, like EY is very strong and very different from being a member of an SME for instance.

[00:55:39] It comes with its own territory, doesn't it? Because it has that level of significance and impact on identity And I wonder whether part of your identity got eroded in that corporate journey and that's what caused you to go, "I've lost myself and I now have to rebuild". Does that make sense?

[00:55:56] **Steve:** Yeah, it does. Yeah. I mean, there was some other stuff going on in the background personally as well,

[00:56:01] When people are talking about depression and anxiety and things, it can feel like you're waiting through mud, you're sinking, and it was an opportunity for me to break free of that and I felt it was the right time to go and work for myself. I felt confident in my abilities, which I felt would give me an edge when I was having to deal with all of the logistics and admin and everything that goes with creating a business, and I'd worked over that summer period. Jane had even spent some time with me reviewing copy and things that I had written from my website and my socials and had given me advice on tone of voice for the business slash me as well.

[00:56:38] And it was very scary, there's a lot that goes into running your own business. I didn't necessarily plan for a pandemic to happen either.

[00:56:50] **Carolyn:** No, and I think that sorts out the teenagers from the adults, doesn't it, when you have to deal with something like a pandemic and you are responsible for generating your own income. I feel your pain on that. I think anybody who is self-employed, freelance, or whatever, or running a business actually went through the same emotions, maybe different magnitudes, but it's still that same "Gulp. What am I going to do now? And of course, you had already started a podcast, hadn't you, when the pandemic hit?

[00:57:15] **Steve:** I had, yeah. I am a nosy kind of person. I like meeting people. I like hearing about their careers, and I felt there was a gap to share the career stories of other people. I decided that I wanted to become a podcast host. I'd seen Seth Godin, who is one of the gurus that I look up to within branding and marketing was running a course.

[00:57:36] I invested in the course, and then became a podcast editor and did the whole shebang myself, so the interviewing, the recording, the editing, the publishing and approached initially people that I admired that were in my network that I felt like they would have a great story to tell, yourself included,

[00:57:54] and launched the My Career Story podcast. And it almost became a, um, a hobby rather than something that was part of the business. I took a lot away from the conversations. It helped me to identify strengths and development areas of my own. I'm really proud of that piece of work.

[00:58:13] **Carolyn:** I think podcasts are fantastic. People connect in a different way with a podcast than they do with a book, or whatever, because it's a different medium going into the brain, isn't it? But what I will say is somebody who also does all of the work in producing a podcast too, is that it's not just the length of the time of the conversation. There's an awful lot of time to get a half hour or hour podcast out. It's a little bit like preparing to teach, you know, 10 hours prep for a one hour lecture. it's not quite that, but it's not dissimilar.

[00:58:38] We’re still under the heading with the podcast when it came out of The Branding Man. But that's changed, hasn't it?

[00:58:45] **Steve:** Yeah. So, um, the word curious. I know I've mentioned it a couple of times. I wanted to include it in the original business name when I was, working on it. I had this idea of "curiosity killed the cat", and went down this rabbit hole, and tried to create this convoluted narrative around, and I remember it being one of the first pieces of feedback Jane gave me, where she'd said, and I think you've said something similar to me in the past, when we've been having general conversations of “You're in danger of having a conversation with yourself in the corner there, Steve."

[00:59:15] I tried to be so clever that I hadn't really considered that nobody was going to understand what on earth I was talking about. I suppose the impetus for me changing the name of the company, started, as Covid hit really. I'd started to think about missed opportunities.

So, I am a gay man, so I use the pronouns he, him, cisgender male, and one of my biggest regrets of my career is that when I was a teacher, in the classroom that I missed this huge opportunity to not necessarily be dancing around the classroom and saying "I'm gay" to all of the students, but that when you're a teacher, you are essentially a role model for them as well as their teacher. And I'm not saying that out of all those 300 pupils that I taught, that I could spot the kids that I thought might be LGBTQ+, but I would've liked to have been in that position where if they had been, that they could have approached maybe, because I think back to my own experience of appreciating who I am and sharing that part of myself with everybody.

[01:00:19] I didn't properly come out fully to everybody that I wanted to know that about me until I'd finished teaching. I was 25 by that point, and so, there was those conversations that I was having with myself. The year before that I'd signed up with the LGBT inclusion charity Diversity Role Models, and I'd become a storyteller for them going into schools in London and talking to young people about my coming out story and I was thinking to myself, there must be something here where I can add value, where I can use my experience, where I can contribute to a community that I have got so much out of over the last decade, but I've taken a lot out. I've not put anything back in. And I was looking at student recruitment in general as well. I'd had a lot of conversations as part of the project that I was doing with UCAS where I'd spoken to early careers employers about what their focuses were. And everybody was talking about gender and ethnicity, and nothing else when it came to diversity and inclusion. And yes, they are two huge focuses, two very important focuses, but they are, seen characteristics, if we're talking about protected characteristics within D & I. There's other ones in there like sexuality, like ability I will call it rather than disability, something that I adopted from EY, and your socio-economic background, social mobility.

When I look at it now, I'm somebody who identifies as a gay man. I am very open about my own struggles with my mental health when it comes to anxiety and depression, and I am from a working-class background. Like you said, I was the first person that went to a Russell Group University in my family.

[01:01:59] And so I was like, these are the things that I want to start leaning into. And if I'm going to lean into those, it's the same kind of work. I'm still going to be working with employers within early careers, but it's not employer branding anymore. This is diversity inclusion, equity and belonging work.

[01:02:18] So, the first thing I did was come up with the Queer Student Awards - the first step in that direction.

[01:02:24] **Carolyn:** That piece about intersectionality is hugely important. We're all very, very complex and just trying to be one dimensional is a challenge because it denies the other parts of an individual and that's really important and that's why the Queer Student Awards, I think, really do hit that centre in all of that intersectionality from a different lens. And that's one of the reasons I was absolutely delighted to be one of your judges.

[01:02:50] You've talked filling that gap, what challenge has it brought to you in actually bringing this whole awards process through fruition? Because I know what it's like running events.

[01:03:01] There's a lot of work goes into it. So what challenges has it brought you and how's that helped you develop?

[01:03:06] **Steve:** Yeah, that's a good question. There's, I suppose, a few things to unpick within that. The first one is just the challenge around the name itself, and we've talked about this before as well, so the word “queer”. Just to summarize very quickly, it's an inclusive award celebration that recognizes young LGBTQ+ people and the organizations and our spaces that are helping them to be their most authentic selves.

[01:03:34] So, for me there was a lot going on a couple of years ago when I was thinking about all of this that I still see sadly, of rainbows from the PRIDE flag being splashed on corporate logos once a year and it not really being meaningful and a lot of the community saying that it's tokenistic. So I wanted to be able to create somewhere where we could have meaningful conversations about sexuality and where we could use that as an opportunity to celebrate young people who identify as being LGBTQ + or queer.

[01:04:08] I wanted to use the word queer within the awards because it is a word that is being wholeheartedly embraced by young people right now. I fully appreciate at same time and in that same breath, that it is a very painful word for a lot of people within the LGBTQ+ community. I have people within my own friendship groups or, older people within the LGBTQ+ community that I'm friends with that have asked me why I've used such a divisive word.

[01:04:36] I haven't used it to be divisive. I've used it because for me, the awards are about celebrating young people. So, it goes back to what I was saying about research throughout my career at EY, within employer branding. If you are going to do something that is celebrating young people, in my opinion, you have to be using the language and the narratives that they are using, not what you would prefer to use.

[01:04:58] So that was where the name came from. That in itself has presented a challenge because there's been a lot of people who have seen the work that I'm doing, wanted to know more about it, but then decided not to invest or to interact with it because I've used that word.

[01:05:13] **Carolyn:** Was it seen as being confrontational?

[01:05:15] **Steve:** I did have some feedback that I was trying to provoke and to be intentionally disruptive was a piece of feedback that somebody gave me. And, you know, I put my hands in that conversation and said, "Yes, I am" because for me, there is not enough attention being paid to sexuality in student recruitment.

[01:05:35] So, if I want to get your attention, I'm going to get your attention. And that's one of the ways that I want to be able to do it. And also, if we are going to talk about diversity and inclusion, we are talking about a lot of topics, whether that's going across gender, whether that's going across ethnicity, the two biggest focuses, as I've said, that are uncomfortable that people squirm in their seats about, that they don't want to admit that they hold certain views and opinions. So, why play it safe was my thinking with that as well.

[01:06:09] **Carolyn:** I think any good marketer deliberately provokes a conversation. And that's what you've done with the use of the word queer in there.

[01:06:15] **Steve:** Yeah, exactly. And it is the same as you look at the young people that have been throwing the tins of soup at paintings and things when they, when you actually watch the interviews of them saying why they're doing these things, it's because they feel like they live in a noisy world where it's really hard to get people's attention.

[01:06:31] So you have to sometimes do things and say things that are going to stir the pot a little bit. So, that was one of the challenges I had with it. It's slow burn. I still think there's a lot of people that are being polite when they say no to interacting with it and come up with an excuse about budget or something like that, which is fine.

[01:06:51] I appreciate that it's a journey and that it, I'm bringing something to the student market that is new and as somebody who enjoys being or trying to be the first person to do something, I appreciate that you're going to get nos.

[01:07:06] **Carolyn:** That's that entrepreneurial first mover, isn't it? The entrepreneurial first mover who goes, there's an opportunity, somebody needs to do something. I'm going to go and do it.

[01:07:12] **Steve:** Exactly. So, that's been one of the challenges. The first year I did it was a virtual, we just literally did it on Zoom. I did the whole event over the course of three months because it was during the lockdown that we had after Christmas, and so I couldn't plan an in-person event not knowing whether or not I was going to be able to actually allow people in the room without them sanitizing their hands and sitting them two meters apart. So, we did it on Zoom and really great success. Another kind of magic moment for me of our "Queer of the Year" Jack on Zoom, He'd joined the Zoom call in his classroom in his college with all of his schoolmates and they all started voguing in the classroom and cheering him when he won - very surreal seeing that and knowing that you've contributed to that when you're actually sitting in your bedroom on Zoom call, with a camera and a ring light in your face.

[01:08:09] But that was the beauty of it and that gave me the confidence to say, "You know what, I'm going to scale this up. I'm going to try and push it harder." I think it was all bar one of the sponsors invested for a second year and I planned towards running it as an in-person event in Manchester. That was the second challenge I had. A lot of the awards ceremonies that happen around student recruitment happen in London.

[01:08:31] And here's me going, "I'm going to be the first person that's going to run one that isn't in London,"

[01:08:36] **Carolyn:** I think that's quite right though because otherwise you don't shift the balance. You don't move the needle. The needle is always London. And I say that as somebody who lives and works in Wales. I remember having some of the conversations we had around, anything outside the M 25 was definitely foreign territory and the north of the UK and sorry, Wales, where's that? That's actually another barrier that sits in that intersectionality. And that's some of the stuff that needs to move on, isn't it?

[01:09:03] **Steve:** Yeah, exactly.

[01:09:04] I was very fortunate that one of the young people that I've mentored over the years, is a managing director now for an organization called Not Going to Uni, Connor Cotton, who we both know. And, he's got a creative arm to his business now so I was able to stream the event as well on YouTube so that people could watch it from home which in looking back now, I'm really proud of because I'd not only managed to run an in-person event, I managed to run a hybrid event, which is a big achievement and it served me very well because the feedback from both versions of the event was largely very positive, particularly around the, virtual element because Connor's team that filmed on the evening did a very good job of making people feel like they were there as well.

[01:09:53] **Carolyn:** That hybrid piece is really important as well, because that actually opens your audience up massively, doesn't it? And for something like this, where it's campaigning and changing, that's really the door to push on, isn't it?

[01:10:03] **Steve:** It absolutely is. Yeah. And from a social mobility point of view there was one of the young people actually who was a finalist told me that they wouldn't be able to come to the live final because whilst they were really happy that they'd been recognized and that they were, a finalist in the competition, that they weren't actually out to their family.

[01:10:24] So they wanted to watch it upstairs, alone in their room and celebrate themselves and be celebrated, but they didn't want to have to explain where they were going for the night.

[01:10:34] **Steve:** So for me it's super powerful that somebody still got to feel like they were, and again, when I launched it as a virtual, it worked really well because there were a lot of spaces for LGBTQ+, such as bars and nightclubs, coffee shops, and things that were taken away from us during the pandemic, So it was good to be able to, to do that. The keynote speaker, Bobby was fantastic as well – a transgender woman, founder of Trans In The City. We first met when we were doing our training for diversity role models, four or five years ago.

[01:11:05] And her story of getting to a point where she tried to commit suicide because of, a lack of acceptance for her transgender identity was certainly an impactful speech.

[01:11:18] We're going to be bringing the event to Manchester this year again a hybrid event and an amazing keynote speaker as well.

[01:11:26] **Carolyn:** So, what else for Curious Consulting as you are now known?

[01:11:29] **Steve:** I want to be able to create some workshops for, employers that can be either, delivered to their recruitment teams, for example, to help them with conversations, within the team, but also delivered to young people that are onboarding as apprentices and graduates, with regards to mental health going back to those two qualifications that I mentioned earlier that I've picked up in mental health, around mental health first aid and advocacy, but also specific mental health issues and problems that people have in the workplace.

[01:12:03] We talk a lot about the importance of talking about mental health, but it can be quite hard to start the conversation. And unless you are somebody like Jane was for me, and this is an impetus for why I want to create these workshops as well, the power that came out of that conversation that I had with her, she'd noticed and when I've had conversations with her since she'd seen the signs, and she was equipped. What my qualifications that I've picked up will aim to do in terms of the delivery of these workshops is actually break down the mechanics of having that conversation. So, how do you have a proactive conversation about mental health and encourage transparency and honesty in those conversations so that you never get to the point where you have to leave.

[01:12:54] **Carolyn:** That's hugely important. If the pandemic's done anything, it's really shone a light on our fragility and that has not abated in the least bit, There is certainly much more fragility around mental health, particularly in young people, but also people of all ages, and we really do need to open up on that as well.

[01:13:15] We've talked about a huge number of things today. We've opened up the challenges of making the right decision and dealing with the consequences of the wrong decision and then rediscovering yourself and getting back on track.

[01:13:29] We've charted a path through from geography, through education, through corporate, into the world of freelance and all the development that goes with that as well. Mental health underpins all of that, and it's good to see you on the up curve of your journey rather than the lower parts, from a while ago and, and we were in contact in some of that stage as well. Your story's been fascinating, Steve.

I always ask guests to share either a comment about an inspirational person that's well known, or a book or a film, or a quote. What does the final thought you are going to leave us with?

[01:14:07] **Steve:** So, I just wanted to say thank you to you for the opportunity to join you on the podcast today, but for your openness when I've had those conversations with you about my mental health. I really do appreciate that.

[01:14:17] **Carolyn:** My pleasure. If we can't look after each other, it's a bit of a poor world, and that's what we all need to do is just keep an eye out and say, ""Are you all right? No. Come on. Are you really all right". So, to your quote,

[01:14:29] **Steve:** So one of the things, again, won't surprise anybody now having heard this that I did when I first moved back up here was that I did another course. It was by a wonderful coach. Um, I'll be doing her a disservice, so I didn't mention her by name, so Emma Russell Coaching and it was around the work of Brene Brown, and "Daring greatly" and being more vulnerable and, open to addressing shame that the world might try and put on us. And there's a fantastic quote that she uses to frame her work in the book, "Daring Greatly: how the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way that we live, love, parent and lead" that stood out to me a mile and I have it typed up and in a frame on my windowsill at home as a reminder every time I have those moments where I'm doubting myself potentially.

[01:15:19] It's a quote from Theodore Roosevelt: "It's not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how strong the man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strides valiantly, who errs, who comes short again and again, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end of the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails whilst daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

[01:15:58] **Carolyn:** Thank you. There is a massive strength in vulnerability if we could only just open ourselves up a little to it and there's an integrity and an authenticity that goes with it, and you've shown that in spades today, thank you, Steve.

[01:16:11] **Steve:** Thank you.

[01:16:11] **Carolyn:** If you've been listening to this and you want to get in touch with Steve, his contact details are all on the show notes, and I just wanted to finish with a final thought. You are the author of your life. Life is too short to be miserable. So, if you are one of the nine out of 10 people according to Gallup in the UK who are at work at the moment, who are either sleepwalking or acting as saboteurs, you may want to rewrite your career plot and follow some of the shifts and trends and changes that you've heard about from Steve today and move in a new direction where instead you can be a star and get paid to do what you love.

[01:16:45] Often we make decisions to move in a certain direction because we've been given opportunities or have been nudged by others. We know deep down if what we're doing is right, we all have a voice, that quiet voice that knows what's good for us, the voice within which expresses disquiet.

[01:17:04] The trick is to listen to that voice, to trust it, and to take our courage in both hands so that we can move in the direction of something new, which calls to us. As the saying goes, we can't be what we can't see until something in someone else's story inspires us to take the next step to try something new, to adventure.

[01:17:25] If this episode has helped you to do just that, to change your story in some way, then please share it in the show notes that go with it on your social media channels so it can help others to escape from a job they hate and find a career they love. I do hope you'll join me next time when we'll be hearing from another inspirational guest to help you continue to change your story for the better.

[01:17:46] See you soon.

© Carolyn Parry 2023. All relevant rights reserved.