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Sheila Long: Hello, everybody, welcome to the Head of the Table Podcast. My name is Sheila Long, and I will be your host for today's show.

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We are here today with a wonderful guest, Sarah Blackwell from the Blackwell Law Group. And I'm very excited to hear her story, and to let all of our listeners out there, in on the great and wonderful things that she's doing. So welcome to the show, Sarah.

Sarah Blackwell: Thank you very much, Sheila, it's such a pleasure to be here.

Sheila Long: Great. We're doing this on Zoom with the order, safer at home, so we are very grateful to the Edge Marketing and Media Podcast Studio for figuring out how we can do this. And it's just a new way, technology just keeps evolving, right, Sarah?

[0:01:41]

Sarah Blackwell: Absolutely.

Sheila Long: Absolutely, who would have known. So, you're not originally from the US, right?

Sarah Blackwell: That's correct. I was born in London, England. My family immigrated here in 1968 when I was 8 years old. My father got recruited by a pharmaceutical company, and they stayed, they've always been here, but I thought -- went back to England, and lived there as an adult, from the time I was 25 to 39, until I finally realized that it was okay to live close to my parents again.

[0:02:20]

Sheila Long: Oh really? Okay. Interesting.

Sarah Blackwell: And like so many people also, being with family was a huge motivating factor for immigrating so that my parents and my brothers were all here, whereas my daughter and I were by ourselves in England. The year that I decided to immigrate back, my grandmother had died.

Sheila Long: Oh really?

Sarah Blackwell: And she was my only relative left in England. And so, it seemed like kind of a nature time to want to move, to be closer to my family.

[0:03:02]

Sheila Long: Yes, that always -- something like that sometimes happens, and it just causes you to like look at the world a little bit differently and kind of shift your priorities.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah, definitely.

Sheila Long: So, you are a member of MalamaDoe, you are one of our newest members, so can you tell us a little bit about what your business is?

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Sarah Blackwell: Yes. My practice is immigration law firm, and I've been in business since May of 2006, and that was when I graduated from law school. I actually went to law school as an older student, I was 43 when I started law school, so I was 46 when I graduated, and literally, the day that I got admitted to the bar, was the day that I set up my practice.

Sheila Long: Wow.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah. Well, when I was in law school, when I started law school, I was actually not going to do immigration law. I was going to do health law, because before going to law school, I've been working in health care management for close to 20 years.

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And so, it kind of seemed like a natural thing that if I'm going to do law as an old student, then when I graduated, I want to get myself a competitive edge against my 25-year-old classmates. And so, healthcare seemed like a natural way to do that. But while I was in law school, I got a job working part time for a lawyer, against as a strategy for kind of getting some work experience that would give me an edge on my classmates.

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And it turned out, he was an immigration lawyer.

Sheila Long: Okay.

Sarah Blackwell: And yeah, very quickly, I figured out that, oh, this was definitely the area of law for me. And I never looked back from that.

Sheila Long: Oh, really?

Sarah Blackwell: And so I felt -- when I've been working with him for two years, in law school, I thought that I had enough practical knowledge of immigration law, to set up my own practice, and that, combined with 20 years of management experience, gave me, I think the confidence to start out and set up my business as a lawyer, literally on the day that I graduated from law school.

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Sheila Long: Wow, what an inspiring -- yeah, what an inspiring story. That is just great. You never know the value of an internship, like what you learn there, how it can just totally change the trajectory of your life.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah, yeah, definitely, definitely.

Sheila Long: So right now, with COVID-19 in your background in healthcare management, like, what do you think? Do you feel like your business is going to shift at all or will you continue to do immigration law?

Sarah Blackwell: Oh, I will continue to do immigration law. You know, one of the things that's been kind of interesting in the last week or so, is that, I've been quite terrified that immigration law, the demand of immigration law services would drop right off the radar.

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For a very simple reason, most of the people that I work with, are not affluent, they are working class families, typically Mexican and they don't have a lot of money to throw around and not a lot of money setting aside in savings.

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Sarah Blackwell: So that when something like COVID comes along and disrupts the economy and they lose their jobs, the first thing that they're going to do is hunker down and just try and start their immigration processes, it's going to be the last thing on their mind. But one of the pleasant surprises has been that, in fact, at least in the last couple weeks, things have been a little busier than --

Sheila Long: Really?

Sarah Blackwell: But of course, that might not last.

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Sarah Blackwell: That might not last. And then -- because it was -- the more that the economy turns down because of this epidemic, then the more people who are going to be struggling financially and I don't do a lot of immigration quote work. And so that means that the people who come to me are people who are voluntarily wanting to start their immigration process, they're not being forced to do it.

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Sarah Blackwell: When you get referred to immigration quote, you don't really have any choice. Now you've got to get on to something. Sorry about that, that's my phone.

Sheila Long: It's okay. You got clients calling, right? You have work, you're done, it's another person wanting to become a US citizen.

Sarah Blackwell: It's cool, yeah. So --

Sheila Long: Oh, it's my phone -- yeah, don't worry. My computer has been beeping too with phone calls throughout. That's just part of it. It's part of the safety measure and we're all adapting.

Sarah Blackwell: Has forced me to make some changes.

[0:08:02]

Sarah Blackwell: Also, this week, I stopped physically meeting with clients at my office. And I did my first initial consult by Skype. It was a lot of fun. But one of the most --

Sheila Long: Was it?

Sarah Blackwell: -- immigration law is even under circumstances that they're not in, under normal circumstances, I can do most of my work remotely. I don't have to be physically present really, in order to help them with their immigration law problems.

[0:08:38]

Sarah Blackwell: So, in some ways it's an ideal business in some respects to be in as long as people have money to be hiring me to do that.

Sheila Long: Yeah, that does make it more ideal. So, I just grew up surrounded by lawyers, actually, so I know the value of having good legal representation.

[0:09:03]

Sheila Long: And do you think it's different when you're not sitting side by side with them versus being over -- ?

Sarah Blackwell: No, I don't. I think one of the big things though that troubles me always is that of course all of the forms that are associated with immigration are right up on the government's website, [uscis.gov](http://uscis.gov). And so, a lot of people who go there and they will look at the forms, they're often like, "Oh, this doesn't look so complicated."

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Sarah Blackwell: "I don't need a lawyer to help me with this." So, they don't realize is that the instructions on those forms are actually incomplete. They don't cover every possible situation that could arise. And so, what that means is that there will be some people who decide to try to do their immigration processes by

themselves, they'll fill out the forms, they'll send them off and then something bad happens.

[0:10:00]

Sheila Long: Really?

Sarah Blackwell: Because there was something in the instructions that was missing that should've been there, that should've alerted them to the fact that they've been on to difficulties.

The best example I can give you with that is there's one form that's called I-90, when people fill it out, you get a replacement Green Card because their Green Card has got lost or it's been stolen or it's just expired. There is nowhere on that form nor any instructions, a place for you to fill out your criminal history.

[0:10:30]

Sheila Long: Wow.

Sarah Blackwell: But if you have a criminal history, filling out that form and sending it off to USCIS, could result in you being potential removal proceedings instead of getting a new Green Card. I've had that a lot. So that's an example of when it's really dangerous to try to do immigration processes on your own. At the very least, anybody who is thinking about doing an immigration process should consult with an immigration attorney about what they want to do.

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Sarah Blackwell: And if after consulting with the immigration attorney, they feel comfortable that they can do this on their own without the help of an attorney, well then, go for it. Lots of people do that. But what's hard is when people don't do that initial consultation and so they don't really know what they're walking into. Because typically if a situation where somebody has run into difficulties, they run into difficulties, they come to me and they want me to fix the problem.

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Sarah Blackwell: Now, sometimes I can fix the problem, but almost always it's going to cost them more money than if they hired me in the first place. But there are also times when I can't fix the problem.

Sheila Long: Wow.

Sarah Blackwell: You know? But if they come to me in the first place, I could've at least said, "Look, if you do this, you're going to get yourself into your own mess."

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Sarah Blackwell: "So if you still want to go forward with that, that's okay, but if you don't want to get into that mess, then you're not going to do anything."

The best example that I can give you is somebody -- a young adult comes into my office. They're around about 21, 22 years old, they were born here but the parents weren't. And finally, they reached the age of 21 and they're now old enough to sponsor their parents for a Green Card.

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And so, if they don't come to see me, first of all, you'll let go off -- you go off and they fill these forms out and to sponsor their parents. And then their parents came in to the country illegally. So, the parents have to go back to their country to have their immigration interview, so they leave the country to their immigration interview. They go to the interview and at the interview, they're told that they can't come back for 10 years.

Sheila Long: Wow.

Sarah Blackwell: They're illegally for more than a year and there's no exception for that rule.

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Sarah Blackwell: If they've come to me before that, I could have at least alerted them to that problem.

Sheila Long: Yes.

Sarah Blackwell: You know that's -- a scenario, the only way that that person -- those parents can be helped to get a Green Card is if we get some type of immigration reform that allows them to get a Green Card without leaving the country and going in an immigration interview. So, we have this population that's kind of stuck and when they try to get that problem sorted out without talking to a lawyer, they get themselves into a big mess because all of a sudden, their parents are now out of the country and can't come back for 10 years.

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Sarah Blackwell: And the child is devastated. Of course, you know, the child had been so desperate. He tried to help the parent and all they've done is both hurt -- it's just hurting, that's why it's really sad. It's really sad.

Sheila Long: It is very sad. I know -- I've known a few families where that's -- where they have had -- you know, the parents go back to Mexico.

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Sheila Long: I actually visited this one family in Mexico and it's -- but if you have a community of people that can help alert you but really the best path is just to

go to an immigration attorney and really get the facts and have someone kind of walk the path with you and help you through it. And it's such a stressful process, so thanks for all that you do.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah. And the other thing -- the other thing that will happen is that --

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Sarah Blackwell: Then this happens fairly often, I get a client come in to see me and they apply to become a US citizen and they did this without the help of an attorney. And they had some little black marks on their application form. Little things that if they had legal representation, wouldn't cause a problem. But because they don't have legal representation, the immigration officers denied them.

[0:15:02]

Sarah Blackwell: When they -- when this -- there's actually no reason to do that. And typically, they get denied because they lack -- supposedly lack with moral character.

Sheila Long: Oh.

Sarah Blackwell: So, an example of a young woman who she got denied citizenship because she owes the government \$1500 in taxes. But the IRS has acknowledged in a written letter that, you know, she can't afford to repay those taxes.

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Sarah Blackwell: And that instead, they -- so they're going to sort of close the case, but every year that she files her tax return, they will deduct any refund and credit that towards her \$1500 that she owes. Now the US IRS told her that she lacks good moral character because she owes \$1500 and she's not on a payment plan. My argument is that she is on a payment plan and so that it's not a once a month payment plan, it is a once a year payment plan.

[0:16:01]

Sarah Blackwell: But it's a payment plan and the IRS is happy with it and so that should be the end of the story. And if she had had an attorney with her when she went to the interview, those were the argument -- those would have been the arguments that would have been made. Now she has to go through an appeal process to try to persuade the government to return the original position, that's just extra money that she's had to spend.

Sheila Long: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sarah Blackwell: Sometimes, it makes a little difference even with a felony straight forward case to have legal representation.

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Sarah Blackwell: And certainly, in the last three years, I have seen more and more decisions made at the immigration offices. I'm sitting on the record, that wouldn't have happened a couple years back. You know, this would not have been a big issue then. So, they're getting much stricter or much harsher towards applicants for any type of immigration benefit.

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Sarah Blackwell: So, I think it might – increasingly that it's in everybody's best interest to be represented when trying to do an immigration process.

Sheila Long: Okay, so how could people get in touch with you? Sounds like you'd be a great person to help them walk through the process, right?

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah. Most people -- a lot of people find me by word of mouth. I've helped a friend or a family member, but I have a website.

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Sarah Blackwell: So, people can find me just by googling immigration attorney Milwaukee or something like that. And then you can also find me via like Facebook, that's not necessarily the best way to find me but most people is going to be either word of mouth or it's going to be my website, because I do advertising with Google and so that puts my website up there.

Sheila Long: Okay. All right, so what is the exact website though? Do you know the --

Sarah Blackwell: It is Blackwell-immigration.com.

[0:18:04]

Sheila Long: Okay, Blackwell-immigration.com

Sarah Blackwell: No, with a hyphen. With a line.

Sheila Long: Sorry.

Sarah Blackwell: A dash between Blackwell --

Sheila Long: So, the website is Blackwell-immigration.com?

Sarah Blackwell: Yup.

Sheila Long: Yes? Okay. Great. So, let's talk --

Sarah Blackwell: My phone number is there, my email is there, everything is there.

Sheila Long: Okay, the phone number and the email. Everything is at that website. So, Mother's Day is coming up.

[0:18:30]

Sheila Long: We've talked a lot about immigration, you talked about how you've come to the US and left the US and then your parents were here. So, do you have like an inspirational story about your mom that you'd like to share?

Sarah Blackwell: My parents split up when I was 15. And I was living with my mom because she had been a stay-at-home mother since I was born. But before I was born, she was a nurse in England.

Sheila Long: Okay.

Sarah Blackwell: And so, she decided about, I think about a year after she split up with my father, that she would go back to nursing school here in the United States because she couldn't just automatically become a nurse here.

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Sarah Blackwell: She had to go back to school so that she could pass the nursing exams to get license. But you know what? That was really hard for her, you know. She was not a very academically-inclined person. She had left school when she was 16. And then England at that time, it was quite -- you know, it was very feasible that she'd go straight into being a nurse and that was what she did and she was a good nurse.

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Sarah Blackwell: Nursing was also very different in 1976 from 1956 as far more technology evolved. And so, she had to learn a lot and I think that was very hard for her because she was not an academic type of person.

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Sarah Blackwell: She was much more of a practical hands-on type of person, but she did it. She went on to pass the nursing exams and became licensed as a nurse and then worked as a nurse here in the US for almost 20 years and I was really proud of that.

Sheila Long: That is awesome. What a great testament to just hard work and determination and re-inventing yourself in a new country going to -- it is the same language.

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Sheila Long: But still, just a whole different grading system too and really like what the professors value. That is really great. That you had her for that role model.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah.

Sheila Long: You know, it's always interesting to talk to people on this podcast about their moms because there's just -- I don't know. Like some people -- someone said their mom was really clean and I could tell talking to her like that maybe was a bit of that stuff -- but then there are good things and bad things.

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Sheila Long: And sounds like just going back to school and really like the audience that you serve is so kind of like they're trying to just make a better life for themselves, too. Like they came here and they did all this work and now they just want to like finalize and become a US citizen and really contribute to this country in the best way possible and they're unable to do that, not having the full paper work.

[0:21:30]

Sheila Long: So, thank you for doing that and helping all those people.

Sarah Blackwell: Well, you know, one of the things that I -- I've always just -- there's so much public rhetoric around how immigrants are coming here to take our jobs and then they have people and so on and so forth. You know, the people that I work with are really hard-working people. You know, they do jobs that a lot of the other people don't want to do.

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Sarah Blackwell: They fall in love with a US citizen, they get married and they have children and all they want to do is look after their families, you know. And for the most part, they don't get into trouble. They just work hard, really hard. And they're the type of individual who you would actually want to have as your neighbors.

Sheila Long: Yeah. I couldn't agree more. I've -- just this past two weeks, going shopping when you're supposed to, you know, really stay at home even though it was still legal then, but -- yeah.

[0:22:41]

Sheila Long: Just looking at all those people working in the stores, selling the stuff, and a lot of them may have been immigrants or children of immigrants and just -- I have such a huge sense of appreciation for them just being there and for being so hard working. And nobody was complaining. I got excellent customer service.

[0:23:01]

Sheila Long: Anything I needed. Everybody was just there to help and it was just very humbling.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah.

Sheila Long: So, thank you for all that you do to help those people.

Sarah Blackwell: I deal with that. It's a pleasure.

Sheila Long: Yeah, it is. All right. Well, and then that kind of wraps up this podcast. I want to just let our listeners know we really appreciate you tuning in, hearing the stories of all these great women who have founded businesses, who are really making our economy great here and are leading companies and becoming heads of their own tables and we hope that that can continue to grow.

[0:23:43]

Sheila Long: So that's why we're doing this to inspire more women to take ownership of their destiny and lead companies and then to increase the visibility of the women like Sarah who are just doing it so that we can help grow their businesses while inspiring other people to do so.

[0:24:00]

Sheila Long: So, tune in for our next episode/ And thanks to everyone, and thanks to you, Sarah, for being here with us.

Sarah Blackwell: Thank you very much, Sheila. It's a pleasure to talk with you. So good-bye.

Sheila Long: Thank you.

Sarah Blackwell: Yeah, stay safe. Bye.

Sheila Long: Thanks. You, too.

Sarah Blackwell: Bye-bye.

Sheila Long: Bye-bye. Thanks to everybody for listening to the Head of the Table podcast. Please feel free to look for us wherever you find your podcast, let your friends know as well. Thanks, everyone.

Male Speaker: Buying or selling a home is a process.

[0:24:30]

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