

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Tobi Fairley**

[The Design You Podcast](#) with Tobi Fairley

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 55.

Welcome to *The Design You Podcast*, a show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth, and joy. Here is your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey friends. I hope you are ready for some fun today because I am bringing you an interview with one of my besties, Denise McGaha. So Denise is a fabulously successful interior designer in Dallas, Texas, and she is just going gangbusters right now with her career, with product lines and all sorts of fun things and amazing projects, so you might know her.

If you don't, you definitely should follow her on Instagram. Her stories are hilarious and just creative and super fun and authentic. So find her there, but for now, tune in, sit back, relax and enjoy my interview with one of my besties, Denise McGaha.

--

Tobi: Hey Denise, welcome to *The Design You Podcast*. I'm so excited you're here.

Denise: Me too, thanks for having me.

Tobi: I mean, this is so fun that I get to talk to one of my besties and it's actually my job.

Denise: And everyone gets to listen in to what we talk about normally anyway, so it's kind of fun.

Tobi: I know, and we've been bad about keeping in touch the last few months. We've both been nose to the grindstone. So this is really kind of just like a friend conversation that everybody gets to hear, so you're right, it's going to be good. So I mean, have you had an amazing year or what?

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Denise: And it's just the beginning. What is it? First or second quarter now? I can't even remember, but yeah, we've had so much going on already this year. I'm kind of in a whirlwind. It's great.

Tobi: And even last year too, I mean you've launched national product lines, you won an arts award for designer of the year. I mean like, accolades out the wazoo. I'm so proud of you, it's so exciting.

Denise: Thank you.

Tobi: Love, love, love it. But today, we're not going to talk about design stuff. Well, we might a little bit. If it creeps in, I mean, it's okay, but what I want to talk about is all the other stuff because we're used to talking about all that, especially you on social media, which we're going to definitely talk social media today. But I just think what people don't ever hear is the behind the scenes stuff like how do y'all do it all, what does that look like, how do you travel and still have any kind of sanity, which we don't. But I think that that's the kind of stuff we should dig into today and let people really hear, like you said, kind of like a girlfriend chit-chat.

Denise: Really that's what I wanted to do with you today and when you wrote to me and said how do you feel about it I was like, I think it's what people really want to hear. So let's get started.

Tobi: Okay so tell us. I know you get this question all the time because for years I have gotten this question all the time, especially when you get to the point finally where people are learning about your business and your brand and who you are and you really are kind of all over the place and everybody says how do you do it all, right? How do you do it all? So what is that answer? How do you do it all? Or do you do it all? Or what - I mean, what does that look like?

Denise: You know, we talk about having a team all the time and I'm a really great delegator, much to the chagrin of my family. If there's a list of things that need to get done, I divide it up equally between all of them and then they turn and look at me and say what are you doing? But I really am a

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

great delegator at work and in life and I try to find people that are better at me than certain things and I give them those things to do.

Tobi: Just playing to their strengths, that's all. You're not taking advantage, right?

Denise: But I do think - I grew up in a household where everyone had a job and it was someone's job to take out the trash and it was someone's job to buy the groceries, and if everyone had a consistent job in the household, then they knew what was theirs and it was obvious if it didn't happen who was responsible. And I think that when you treat your life and your work that way, it sets expectations. My children know what I expect of them all the time. My team members know what part of the job they're supposed to be doing, and so I'm really good at creating those areas of expertise and then letting people do what they do best.

Tobi: Wasn't there a hilarious Instagram story not too long ago where Scott, your husband, which people can find him @chefdaddyscoti on Instagram, wasn't he going on a little rant because he didn't like being delegated to about something?

Denise: He did. He really loves to remind me that he doesn't work for me. He said, "I don't work for you and I'm not one of your employees. I need to remind you that I'm your husband and your life partner and you can't just bark orders at me." But he also loves to say that if he's too sweet to me, then I use that as an open-door invitation to ask him to do one more thing.

Tobi: Well, and this is funnier to me because I know both of you so well but I really thoroughly - I think I sent you like eight billion emojis to that story. I was laughing out loud like in my bed like, I watched it four times because it was so good.

Denise: I love that people get a view into our lives. We are definitely a team and he does certain things well and I do certain things well. And he will tell you don't give me anything to do at home. I don't have him work on anything at home. I hire that out. I have a plumber and an electrician and a

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

painter and I have a team of guys that move furniture. I would never even think to ask him to help me to do anything like that.

We also have a great balance on the weekends. He gets up at 6:30 in the morning on Saturday and leaves. He's gone. He's gone on Saturdays. He goes and has breakfast with his buddies and he goes to his shop and works on old cars and motorcycles and I never ever even touch base with him on Saturdays. He shows up back home between 2pm and 4pm and then if we have something to do on Saturday evening, we do it together. But we each have that time to do what we love to do and there's no strings attached or any requirements for us to do things together and it really works well.

Tobi: That's so good. When I was going through my life coach training a couple years ago, that's one of the things that I learned that was so helpful is that if you're each responsible for your own happiness and you're not expecting the other person to make you happy, then you can just show up that way without expectation and it makes life so much better. It's really cool that y'all do that.

Denise: And it's great. I mean, that gives me time to go get my nails done or go grocery shopping or go have lunch with a friend, which I did this weekend on Saturday. And I love it, he loves it, and it seems to work really well in our marriage.

Tobi: Or for the last four months when you were getting up and going and taking care of a goat, right?

Denise: Actually, from August until March, we were the parents of a goat for my daughter, so yes.

Tobi: Which a lot of people don't really know that that apple is falling so close to the tree because your whole background was agri, right? It's so funny because you're so glamorous now and you were in agriculture and FFA and had all your farm animals and all that stuff.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Denise: And I do. I grew up in the country in a tiny little town. There was a population of about 300 people there. My grandparents settled it and so we had land and cattle and I grew up riding horses, we raised chickens. My father actually liked pigeons and we had a what I would now call an aviary, but it was basically a place where we raised pigeons and he had a fascination with the certain breed of pigeon that's called a tumbler and they fly up in the air and tuck their wings and tumble down through the air and they're kind of like trick pigeons if you will.

So I have a very varied background and we moved to the city and I married my husband and I never thought my children would be interested in that, and somehow my daughter has found her way back to her roots. And so yes, we now have chickens in our garage.

Tobi: I was just about to say you're now raising chickens again so...

Denise: Raising chickens again. So I really do think there's a lot to be said for your genetics.

Tobi: That's really fun and interesting. So back for a second to that zone of genius idea of you being in yours and Scott being in his. I mean, one of his is for sure cooking. If people haven't followed him, I mean honestly, I'm not jealous of a lot but I'm very jealous of your husband cooking beautiful healthy meals every night. Because my husband cooks too but they're not healthy. They're not made with like, coconut flour and all the things that I want in my diet. So that's his zone of genius, one of them. So what about you? What are your zone of geniuses at home or work?

Denise: You know, I'm responsible for at home, the yard, and the garden and our pool and that whole outdoor space is mine, which is wonderful. I really don't have to check in with anyone and get approval. I do what I want to do. And my grandmother was a big gardener growing up and so I learned a lot from her and one of my first jobs out of college was managing a lawn and garden retail center for a year, the first year I graduated from college.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

And I got my Texas nurseryman's license, so I really, really, really love gardening and outdoors. So that's kind of my zone of genius and obviously Scott loves to cook and it started - I started traveling so much with work. He basically came home one day and said I cannot eat one more fast food meal and we have got to change something in the house. And I said okay, well I'm leaving Tuesday for a week so you have fun with that.

Tobi: I remember when this was exactly. I remember when he first started showing up on social media and just texting some of us or whatever or you texting me like look at what Scott just made.

Denise: And he really is, he'll tell you that he's a self-taught chef but I think necessity is the mother of invention and our family needed good healthy food, he felt like it was important, I was on the road a lot and he started cooking. And he actually had a completely different Instagram handle and I said you should start posting these meals on Instagram, I think they're inspirational and I think that a lot of people think that men that cook are weak.

But some of the best chefs are men and it's almost like the woman is supposed to be cooking and I really would love to take that whole gender box and blow it up and show people what you do and what our modern family has managed to work out in our schedules and the needs that we have. And so he changed his Instagram to [chefdaddyscoti](#). He gets requests from all over the world asking him for recipes, people sending him ideas or things they've seen that they want him to cook and for us to try, so it's a really great interactive tool for him as well, which he loves.

Tobi: Yeah, he's creative anyway. You can just tell by his personal style and his dress and he's very confident but that's a really cool creative outlet. It's fun and man, seriously jealous that you get to benefit from that. That is the one thing I would say if I could have something from Denise's life that I don't have, it would be I want my own personal [chefdaddyscoti](#) at my house cooking my meals.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Denise: And I do think that you realize as your children get older and they become teenagers that having the house that's cool where everyone likes to come is what you want as a parent, you want to know who your children's friends are and who they're hanging out with, and Scott cooks a lot for my kids and their friends and Friday nights they'll do all kinds of different things. And it's been a way for us also connect with our children's friends over food and we're southern, you and I both, so you know what it means to connect with food and friends and family. So it's also that.

Tobi: Yeah, I agree. Okay well let's talk about the travel because you mentioned being on the road a lot, which I have lived that lifestyle. And a couple years ago I really calmed mine down because it was a lot. But you - I think you enjoy that piece a lot more than I do. We're very similar in a lot of ways and I think we even have the same personality type, like on Myers-Briggs, but that's the difference in that you really just thrive in that kind of travel environment and social setting. So talk about that a little bit, how you keep all that going and how you balance the health and the wellness and the family and a lot of that with the amount of - and even tell us how much you do travel because it's a lot.

Denise: You know, I think that the way I travel has changed a lot over the years. I've gotten to where if there can be a formula, I have a formula. I always take a super early morning flight. It allows me time to get wherever I'm going, get settled. I do believe in making sure that I go when I land, thank god for Uber and grab fresh juices if the hotel doesn't have them or healthy food to eat. I also used to work on the plane and I don't do that anymore.

I actually use travel as downtime or me time so I listen to podcasts, I will download an episode or two of a Netflix show that I'm watching and I really kind of zone out. I used to be an aisle seat person and I'm no longer on the aisle seat person. I'm a window seat person. I actually prefer the ability to get into the plane, I sit in the first five rows. I'm usually 9A or 10A. I'm in the window seat. I snuggle in, I put my headphones on and I kind of block out the world, and it really becomes - sometimes I meditate, I listen to



## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

meditation on my headphones or like I said, I use it as a moment to get a break from work. And that's been a huge benefit for me. Huge.

Tobi: And it's so smart. I used to do the same thing, not to that extent. I think that's very inspiring, I love it. Now I'm going to make sure that I do, but I definitely would use it as a reason to unwind and escape a little bit and just kind of really - a lot of times I would check in to kind of my gratitude when you're looking out over the blue skies which can be so relaxing and beautiful, but I always loved that unless I logged onto the Wifi, which I tried not to do, nobody could talk to me as long as I was in the air, which was like you say, kind of really like self-care in a sense.

Denise: Well, and it's an escape. And I will tell my team I'm going to be in the air. In the beginning I would have the Wifi and I would work and let's be honest, everyone's on the Wifi now. It never works and you have to pay for it and it's just - it was an exercise of futility, so I stopped doing that. And I really use it as an escape and it's been wonderful. And on my travel days, I really make a commitment to check into the office once and that's it.

And so my team has to send me an end of day email with any questions that they have or any issues that came up during the day and I address them at night or first thing in the morning in my hotel room and get all their questions answered so they can be efficient and keep projects rolling. But other than that, I really work hard to stay focused and engaged in whatever it is I'm doing when I'm on the road.

Tobi: So a lot of people talk about how difficult it is to travel because of your sleep habits and your eating habits and your exercise habits, how do you manage that stuff when you're in and out of hotels a lot?

Denise: I really just bring all of those - I mean, your habits come with you so I either get up and go to the hotel gym if it's cold outside and walk, but if it's nice and it's a certain time of year, I'm a big walker as you all know, and I love to go walk or explore or take a class of some sort. I can also workout in my hotel room. Thank god for streaming exercise classes. I love yoga

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

and Pilates and I started a Pilates practice this year and I'm really enjoying it. So those are the types of things I've been able to take with me.

Tobi: And you're really good at getting settled in hotels because one of our funniest favorite stories is that...

Denise: I know what story you're going to...

Tobi: I do it too because you rubbed off on me, but three or four years ago we were rooming together for fun for a conference and I came back from having gone on an errand or something and you had unpacked my suitcase for me and hung all my clothes up because you were like, girl, you cannot live out of the suitcase. You have to put things in drawers and hang things up. Now I cannot not do it because you're in my ear. I'm like, Denise would be just offended at the state of my suitcase. I've got to put all this stuff away.

Denise: You do, and I do think that when you are organized, maybe I was Marie Kondo before Marie Kondo existed, but I really believe that when you're organized like that, you do sleep so much better. It's not a stressful experience. It really is an opportunity - there are times in my personal life when things can't be organized the way I want but I can have control over that hotel room.

Tobi: And I'm very organized too and I always did that, like if I went to the beach for a week or whatever and I put my suitcase away, but what was cracking me up is I think we were in New York that time for like, 48 hours and you were like, oh no, I don't care if it's 12 hours, the suitcase gets unpacked and everything gets put away.

Denise: It does because I will sometimes carry more outfits than I potentially need and if they're all hanging up in the closet, I'm able to put my fashion groupings together so much easier that way. Maybe that's...

Tobi: I didn't even think about talking about fashion but you really do have a fun style. You and your hubs both do, but yours is I don't know, just a little

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

bit edgy and a little bit vintage with some classic thrown in, but you really enjoy that creative piece too. So talk to us about what fashion, how it's important to you and how you do all the stuff you do and still have that little bit of edge about your wardrobe and your presence.

Denise: You know, if you really were over my shoulder in my downtime, I would tell you that probably 60% of my downtime is spent reading fashion, following fashion, reading blogs, looking at websites, and online shopping. I am a huge fashion lover. A lot of the Instagram personalities that I follow are in fashion.

So it is a passion of mine, it's where I started my career with Neiman Marcus as a buyer and ended up eventually after my seven and a half years there on the team that launched the website. And so I really do deep down have still such a passion for fashion and what's important to me in my fashion is I'm really more about street style than I am the perfect catalogue images that you'll see in a studio. And I'm about the mix, and my interiors probably follow suit.

But the more that I can mix different periods or different styles together and create an individualized look, the happier I am. And about three or four years ago, my eyesight changed. I've worn contact lenses and glasses since I was in fifth grade but I started having to wear readers on top of my contact lenses and I was constantly losing my readers and I just couldn't see anything. So I stopped wearing contact lenses about a year and a half ago and started just wearing glasses. So my latest fashion obsession is my eyeglasses and I started a nice little collection of glasses.

Tobi: We have that in common as well because I lost my reading ability as far as my eyesight about probably going on five years ago now and I actually just left the eye doctor. I have two new pairs. I'll have to send you pictures later. Two new pairs today but I'm with you. My mom and I - that's our favorite obsession. We're like, what glasses does Oprah have on, who else has really cool glasses, where are they, and that's our favorite things because kind of glasses are so fun. They're kind of like shoes.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

You don't ever change sizes and it works for different seasons and so to me, I think they're one of the most fun things to buy. So where do you shop for either glasses or for really cool finds? I know sometimes you wear a little bit of vintage or unusual things. What are your favorite places to shop for these things?

Denise: There is an optician near where I live and they carry an Australian brand of frames called Andy Wolf and I love Andy Wolf's frames. And they will, as many fashion insiders will know, when they have a trunk show, they're often bringing one of a kind or special pieces in and so I've had the option to purchase from those. I shop antique and vintage shops a lot.

When I travel to Europe, I like to shop there for - I think the Europeans really have eyewear fashion down pat so I love to shop when I'm overseas. And I just - it's all about the mix and it's almost like I have different personalities. I can be this person or I can be that person and I often dress for who I'm seeing that day.

Tobi: That's fun.

Denise: And what I think my personality - which personality I'm bringing to the table. If I'm in the field with a contractor, working in 102-degree heat, I'm probably not going to wear a certain look as opposed to when I'm presenting in my studio to a couple who are in fashion or he's a CEO of a technology company. I tend to adjust my attire for my audience and that makes it fun for me and it keeps it from being boring.

Tobi: I was going to say that is really fun because so many people just get - myself included a lot of times - just get in a rut of wearing the same things. You kind of end up with those uniforms. And sometimes it's nice to have a few of those just for ease, but I love that you are really good at continuing to make that a priority because that's something that I think definitely falls by the wayside, especially when you are traveling a lot, when you are busy. But I think also because it's part of your creative expression, that's what it looks like to me from the outside, I think that that's a really probably fun piece of it for you too.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Denise: It is and I enjoy the hunt. I think that's probably why I enjoy vintage fashion is that finding that one special thing that no one else has. As much as I love labels and I'm a - you're a Chanel girl and I'm a Gucci girl, a lot of times it's more fun for me to find something that doesn't have a label or a brand and make it my own.

Tobi: Yeah, it's way more of the designer mindset to find something unique and give it kind of a whole new look or life. That's fun. You inspire me to - I need up my fashion again. My glasses and my shoes are great but I would say the kind of what's in between the neck and the feet maybe could use a little more interest because I'm just so - I mean, I like classic clothing and it's so easy for me to wear the same things a lot or know that I'll like it for a long time.

And I guess my fear, which you're so good at this too, is that if I buy that will I actually wear it, will I actually want to put that on, and I think you're really good at wearing the things you buy and shopping your own closet and I think that's a really cool trait that you have.

Denise: You know, I know that when you're talking about fashion, there are certain things that fit me really, really well and I know that I have broad shoulders and that I'd look better in a V-neck rather than a crew neck. And so I can instantly tell when I look at something on a model online or on a hanger whether that's going to look good on me. I know what size I am and I have a great tailor. And those three things really work well for me. I always buy a size up and tailor to fit almost anything. Probably my sweaters, my dresses, definitely my suit jackets. And so I'm a pretty tried and true size in my pants but I always have to tailor my jackets and shirts.

Tobi: Yeah, that's really smart. And people don't understand that and you don't have to buy the most expensive thing if you have it fit to your body and it can look exquisite. That's really good advice.

Denise: I agree. Well, men have figured it out. What's taking us so long?

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Tobi: I don't know. Who knows? We try to make things harder than they have to be, I guess. Well, let's talk about your social media because I remember - I don't know, six or eight years ago sitting in my driveway in Little Rock and I was like, Denise, what's up, get on social. And you're like, I don't know, I don't want to be all over the place, it feels like I'm more private than that, it feels a little wonky. And here we are eight years later and you are the Instagram story queen and I love it and it's so entertaining and fun, so talk to us about that. How did you shift your thinking, how did you go all in, what did you do to make that work so well? How do you come up with ideas? Is it literally just like stream of consciousness? Is there planning? Give us the deets on all that.

Denise: Oh my gosh, I wish there was planning. There's absolutely no planning. None whatsoever. And I think maybe that's the beauty of what my followers enjoy and I want to back up and answer that question. So eight years ago...

Tobi: I don't know, wasn't it something like that? It was a while ago.

Denise: I'm trying to think.

Tobi: Six, eight, I don't know. It was years ago.

Denise: It was probably about that long ago. I really think that I was afraid and I think a lot of people are afraid to put themselves out there on social media. At that point in my career, I think I felt a little inauthentic about who I was and what I was trying to achieve, and I didn't have the confidence of hey, this is who I am, this is the type of work that I do, these are the type of projects that I put out there.

I didn't have that yet. I didn't have that body of work and I think as you start to build a body of work and you start to work with a certain type of client, someone who appreciates you and understands your value and their life as a professional and a consultant and the interiors decisions that they're making in their life, you develop a confidence. I also think with age comes

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

this not caring so much about what people think about you anymore and just being yourself.

Tobi: Yes, absolutely that.

Denise: And I will say that social media gives you an instant feedback one way or the other. Either you're going to find your followers or you're not. If people aren't interested in what you're doing, they're going to move on. So the people that do follow you are interested in you and respond to what you're putting out there and they just like following you. So you already kind of have a built-in tribe of cheerleaders or people that want to chat with you.

And to me, that makes me feel like if they didn't want to follow me they wouldn't be here, so why not be myself. Why should I be someone else? They're here for me, they're not here for someone else. They would go follow that person if they were.

Tobi: And you get that. As you're talking, I'm thinking well that makes perfect sense too because the part of you that enjoys people so much when you travel and in social situations, you get to kind of recreate that relationship building but right there on social media from your phone or your computer and kind of in real time. And that - I hadn't really thought of it exactly that way before, but I can see how that would be a really good fit for your personality type.

Denise: Well, and I get a ton of interaction on my - I get a ton of direct messages of people asking questions or following along and I think probably about a year ago I started realizing the type of reach that I have. I have a very specific voice. People recognize my voice. It's deeper, I've got a little bit of a drawl when I talk and so people recognize that or my glasses and, in the airport, I was standing in line probably six months ago and I could not get my boarding pass to load on my phone.

And there was a girl behind me, I said, "I'm so sorry, go ahead. I'm having problems getting my boarding pass to load," and I was right in front of the security officer. And so she looked at me and she said, "This is going to

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

sound really strange but is your name Denise?" and I said yes, and she said, "Oh my god, I follow your stories. I thought that you was you. I recognized your voice."

She goes, "I promise I'm not a stalker." And so many people will come up to me now that I do not know that watch or follow my stories and say, "Is your name Denise? Are you an interior designer?" And you see that number of the people that watch your stories and you know, each story, depending upon the time of day and the engagement, and I don't have a huge following, will get anywhere between, I don't know, 600 and 1000 views. Those people are watching me and I don't really equate it to people until something like that happens.

And then I was like, okay if I think about this too hard it can be kind of creepy but it's actually really great because I'm telling a story of my day and my life and what it's like to be an interior designer and a mom and sharing my authentic self, and when I'm frustrated I share it and if I have something that I think can help people I share it. And that's who I am as a person, so it truly is me. I want to help other people be great and successful and I want my clients to feel happy in the homes that we create for them so I share a lot of that. And it's fun for me, you're right. It is exactly who I am as a person in real life. I'm the same person on social media, and it does fulfill that need that I have to connect with people.

Tobi: And I think you do a good job of not caring so much about looking perfect all the time, which I think is very admirable too, but it also makes people relate to you even more because you're on literally when it's still pitch dark outside on your way to Pilates with no makeup on but as you jokingly say, but a really good filter.

But I think that that's really - I love that. Was that scary at first or did you used to try to be more like made up and picture perfect or have you always been comfortable now that you started with stories just putting yourself out there in real time? What was that evolution if there was one?



## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Denise: I think there was an evolution. I think that what's fun about it is you can kind of test on social media and see what people respond to and what they don't. And the more authentic I was, the more engagement I got, meaning the more messages I got, the more people seemed to relate to me. I mean, let's be honest, we're all humans. We all - I hope we don't sleep in our makeup still but I mean, we all...

Tobi: I do sometimes.

Denise: I'm doing skincare at night and washing my face and I'm pretty - on the weekends, it's a rare occasion on a Saturday that you'll find me with makeup on at all. So I think that we should put out - I think I should, I don't know what everyone else should do, but for me it feels most real when I'm myself and I really find that clients are attracted to that as well. I have clients - I'm always dressed and have my makeup on when I see them but then they follow me on social media too and they'll reference something I've said and I'm like oh crap, they saw me with no makeup on and my sports bra right when I came from working in the garden or whatever, and they still hire me. So I've really learned that the more authentic we are, we're really just like a lot of the people that we work with and that we're in this industry with.

Tobi: And thankfully I think social media has been trending that way in the last year or so too of people just so over everything so perfect all the time and I do think you see more and more people that have tons of followers or that are even celebrities that are putting themselves out there. Maybe not always perfectly, like the way they look when they woke up with their hair sticking up but at least a lot less of an orchestrated situation than just not that many years ago.

Denise: And if I don't have anything to say, I will just post photos with captions. I'm still there, I'm just not talking in front of the camera. But I feel like people tune in every morning to watch my Insta stories, so that's why I post at the same time almost every day in the morning, either over coffee

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

or on my way back from Pilates, or sometimes even before Pilates if I'm just dying to say something or tell all of my followers.

But I feel like it's that - one of my really, really good friends lives in South Carolina and she's in the design industry and we talk on the phone almost every day, sometimes twice a day and I'm just sharing my day like I would with my mom if my mom called. What did you do this morning or what did you do today or how was your day, and it's like I'm sitting around the dining table with all my followers just telling them what happened today.

Tobi: So is that really how you go about it? You're just like, what am I going to talk about now, what's happening in my life.

Denise: I told everyone on my stories today that I was going to be recording a podcast with you and I talked about how long we'd known each other and our friendship and I'm sure there's a ton of other things we could share about our relationship and our friendship over the years and I just think people are - we all have friends and we're all the same people. I just keep saying that again and again but we are. We're all humans, we all - if you really boil it down to experiences, pretty much all of us have had very similar experiences in our life. It's so interesting to watch how other people deal with challenge or joy or the stress of a day or whatever's happening in their lives. It happens to all of us.

Tobi: Well, that's a great segue into one of the other things - two things I want to ask you about before we wrap up. One, I want to ask you about what you're excited about in your life and business right now but don't answer that yet. Let's first talk about what are the most challenging things you're dealing with in life and business right now. What's the hardest stuff?

Denise: In life and business, well I'll tell you that my teenagers are getting to the point where one is a junior and one is a sophomore. They're about to be a junior and senior next year and I'm looking at my life from a different perspective because I'm thinking the clock is ticking, we only have so much time before they leave home and we've got to think about connecting with

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

them or giving them wings or teaching them what they need to know before they leave.

And so I think there's that underlying tone in our life right now. I also think that Scott and I both have aging parents and we have a lot of challenges with our parents right now and their health and I moved my mom to be closer to me recently. Scott's father is in hospice, and when you take those big dirty hairy life things like that and you layer them onto the stress of running businesses because Scott and I both...

Tobi: I was just about to say, not to mention that you both own your own businesses. So it's not like one of you has an eight to five steady job that you go to. You literally both are running small businesses and we all know what one entrepreneur can feel like if you have your own business, but think about two in the same household.

Denise: And having a partner like Scott and being that we both have businesses - a funny story. He got a call yesterday from the police. Someone had run into his building. They jumped the curb, the car ran up, they'd hit the water main. There was water flowing everywhere. You don't call the maintenance guy, you call the guy's phone number that's on the front of the building.

Tobi: No matter what time of day it is, right?

Denise: No matter what time of day, and if you take that - I mean honestly, we are still the face of the business and the one who runs the show when you run a small business. And so our life is hairy enough. I can tell multiple stories about that, and there are many of us going through that phase of our life if we have aging parents or there's Alzheimer's or cancer or whatever those big hairy life things are that are in your life that we don't talk about that often, that's what's happening in our lives.

And so I think that maybe that's part of what makes me want to connect with people a little bit more. Sometimes I need a distraction. Sometimes I just want people out there not to feel like they're alone in this world

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

because we're all dealing with something. So that life part, there's a lot going on in our lives.

There's also a lot of really exciting things going on in our lives. Business things, I'm excited - my daughter's about to start driving, my son already drives. So that's exciting for them and doing things like having chickens and raising chickens this summer at our house, that's kind of exciting and fun.

Tobi: So is that a test project or is that a long-term goal?

Denise: That is a long-term project commitment. I think a lot of it goes back to food and health and wellness and making sure that we - I've grown my own food for years growing up and we want to have our own eggs. I always go buy eggs at the farmer's market. I'm all about organic, and I just think it's another layer of what we do as a family and what we're trying to teach our children about being responsible and having something that they have to do every day and get up and care for and be committed to. So I think it's also a really great lesson like that, but it's fun.

Tobi: So when the kids are in college in like, two years from now and you're traveling, are you going to be hiring a chicken sitter?

Denise: That's a great - well, I will tell you when I came home yesterday, Scott and Joy were in the garage with the little neighbor girls. They're twins and they're six years old and they were showing them all the chickens and everything and all I could think was oh, these are perfect little chicken sitters.

Tobi: That's awesome. So what about in business? Anything particularly challenging right now? All the climate - for those who are designers or even other creative fields, you know the climate is just so much about how the customer has changed and the industry has changed and the internet has changed and all this stuff like, what does that look like in your life right now? Are things easy right now because you live in a bigger city and you

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

have more of a pool of customers to choose from or have things changed a lot? What does that look like?

Denise: You know, my business has always been about - I keep saying this, but relationships. And how and where I get my business is what's important to me. So I really look at where my business comes from, who I have relationships with, and who sends business to me. I do think there's still probably that customer that goes out on the internet and looks, googles interior designer Dallas and all these websites come up and they look at the portfolio and they're like, I love that room I'm going to hire that person.

But I think they're probably one in a thousand that do that. I think most of them are talking to a friend, have seen a project in a magazine while they're flying - I do think that where I get my business is through relationships with architects, realtors, and builders. And so making sure those relationships are super strong is important to me. I've always been a huge networker and that is what I'm focused on, honestly.

Tobi: But as of right now, it's not seeming especially hard in your market or area, or are you thinking that kind of insulates you from some of those changes because it's such referral based?

Denise: It does insulate me about those people know where my value lies and it doesn't lie in laying out a floor plan so that they can then go shop at Restoration Hardware. Those are just not my customers, those people that want to buy everything online. My clients are a little more educated on that, thanks to the referral sources that they come from. And they're wanting something that's special and unique to them, thank goodness. And I can help them achieve that.

It's also very much how I create my life and my fashion. It's tailored, it's individual, it's very curated, and every one of my projects looks very different because every one of my clients is very different. And the value for me comes from creating something special just for that person.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Tobi: Well, that's what's so smart about showing that part of your personality. That's now why you do it, but as you're talking, I'm like, that's really, really smart that you are showing all those facets, not in just the curated images on your Instagram feed, but in real life. That's super smart because you're definitely attracting a customer that is not just trying to get a project done or just having a roomful of furniture or something that their friends would have, but somebody that's actually interested in that same hunting and gathering and mixing all of those things. That's pretty cool. I hadn't really thought about it that way.

Denise: And you know, quite frankly, if they want to add to it or change it or they move or they want to have their person, and I'm their person, "Oh we'll just call Denise, she's the person that helps us with that part of this project." And being that person is probably one of my largest skills. I'm their person.

Tobi: Yeah, and that also speaks to your love of people because not everybody wants to be somebody's person all the time. And I've even heard you mention on your Instagram and other things that you're like, well I could send someone else to check on this light fixture and see how it looks in the home, but I want to drive out and do that myself. Not that everybody has time to do all of those jobs either, but that's one of the things that you prioritize is that hand-holding and that high touch part of your projects.

Denise: And I know where my value lies, and that's where my value lies. My value does not lie in other areas of my business and I have fabulous people that do those things for our clients every day. But I'm not great in those things, so that's what they do.

Tobi: Like, what's one thing that comes to mind that you're not great at?

Denise: The operations of my business, when there's a damage on a table, calling the warehouse, getting the photos, speaking with the manufacturer, getting the customer service person to approve a repair; just the monotony of the details of those 22 steps they have to go through makes me want to jump out of a building.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Tobi: I agree with you.

Denise: I will drive an hour to come look at your light fixture that's being installed by the electrician and placing the height just perfectly, but do not ask me to deal with that nightmare.

Tobi: That's so smart though. It's so good to know and I think so many people think that they have to do all of those things, especially the stuff that seems like the grunt work or the bad work. They're like, I couldn't possibly ask other people to handle this when it's not that you think you're too good for those parts, it's that you don't think you are good at that stuff. So why would you be the person doing it?

Denise: I suck at it, I'm horrible at those things. Like, our postage meter at the office has run its course, we don't need it anymore. We pay all of our bills online now, thanks to online banking. And we've had this postage meter for, I don't know, seven years. Well, there's this huge process you have to go through to send it back. And I'm like, I can't deal with that, can someone else please handle that, I cannot. Don't ask me to do that or we'll have it another 10 years.

Tobi: And it's not just about the details because we think, well design is a very detailed job, but it's still knowing which details you're good at and which things you should leave to other people. Super smart. Before we wrap up, let's talk about what you're excited about in life and or business.

You said a little bit about the kids, you're excited about some of the things they're getting to do, driving, they'll be looking at colleges soon if they're not already I'm sure, but tell us what – because I know you get to a point, I've been at that point, where you're like okay, for so long, my goals were to get nationally published or to get a national product line or to get some of these boxes checked off. And then once those boxes start getting checked off, which are wonderful and amazing things, for me, I found myself standing in kind of a blank space, like a blank sheet of paper going, okay now what? Now, what do I want to do? So have you had that experience at all and what is it that you're super excited about for the future?

[The Design You Podcast](#) with Tobi Fairley

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

Denise: Absolutely, sure I've had that feeling. You know, honestly, I love doing design and I'm working on some really super out of the box projects right now. That's huge for me. Had I not had some of the national recognition that we've had, I don't know that I would have those opportunities, so that's exciting for me, number one, because I truly, truly love working on design projects with clients.

My collection with Currey & Company continues to grow and I have found a lot of satisfaction in designing products. I'm really enjoying that process still. It's not something that I'm not loving and I'm constantly creating more and more. I have a whole new category coming with my collection with Materials Marketing. That's super exciting for me.

And honestly, I'm looking forward. I'm always five to 10 years ahead, but I'm looking forward as well to that time when the children are moving on into the next phase of their life and my husband's able to travel with me. We really enjoy traveling together. I'm looking forward to being able to travel more. There's lots of places that we would love to travel together that are on our bucket list and he's quite the adventurer.

And so renting Defenders and crossing the desert is on his list of fun things to do, and there's a couple of places and adventures that we want to still have.

Tobi: So tell us one or two of those places that y'all dream of getting away to.

Denise: Believe it or not, we've never been to Italy. And we've been to Paris, I don't know, three or four times, never been to Italy – and I'm talking about together – so that's definitely on our bucket list. I love a beach vacation and I've been so bust the past three years, and with everything going on with our parents, we've not had a chance to travel and just get away the two of us. I would love that.

And we honestly love being at home. We like being in our house. We've created a space that's very us and we love hanging around the pool and



## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

barbequing and just relaxing. I really think we don't give ourselves enough time to just be and I'm working really hard on that.

Tobi: So, what would you say are the things that you're doing for kind of going to that little bit more slower lifestyle?

Denise: I have to tell you that I practiced Bikram yoga for about two years. I really loved it, but it was hard and when the going got tough, I stopped going. And I've always walked and been active, but I started Pilates in January and that has been a huge, huge adjustment and change for me and something that I'm so excited to get up and go to class every morning that I take class.

And I think that that part of my life is something that I see being consistent and even more regimented with in the future. So that's something that will shift and change. I expect that I am not going to be laying around in my 50s and 60s, you know, with no activity in my life. I really, really want to travel and be active and we want to hike. I mean, we ride motorcycles, so I want to start riding motorcycles again. We used to ride Harleys. I want my own bike again.

So I'm quite the adventurer and I'm looking forward to that time of being released from being mommy and daddy and being able to go travel and adventure.

Tobi: That doesn't surprise me a little bit. That will be fun to watch. I can't wait to see you and a bunch of dudes on your Harleys. I can see it already. You'll have the chicest headscarf for sure; for sure. Well, this was so fun. Anything else that we didn't talk about that you want to talk about, because I think this is the stuff that people really, really do want to know. Like, what's it really look like? What are they really excited about? What are they really challenged with? And it's been such a fun conversation, but did we miss anything good that's juicy that we need to squeeze in before we go?

Denise: You know, I do think that there's something to be said for – you've been my mentor and my friend for a really long time and I would not be

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

where I am today if I'd not had those moments of complete self-doubt when you've said so many things that I'm saying today to me already. You've taught me to believe in myself and to not care what other people think, and it really is true. I think I'm probably walking proof of what you preach on a regular basis, that the more authentic and becoming yourself that you can find, the more successful you're going to be.

Tobi: Well thank you. That's such a – that makes me emotional. That's such a kind compliment and let's not forget all the times that you've been there for me because there have been many. We've been through a lot of personal and professional things together and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way and I wouldn't have made it through some of those times without you. So the feeling is definitely mutual.

Denise: Same here.

Tobi: Well, I'm so happy you were here today. We will do this again soon. We have to get back to our Saturday morning calls. Now that I know that Scott's not even there, I'll just start calling you regularly because I know that you do not have to be on any sort of duty because he's out every Saturday.

Denise: He is, and you'll have to get in line because I have a standing 7am call with Drew McGukin. He calls me on Saturdays. He's already figured it out.

Tobi: Well, I won't call you at seven then, I'll call you at 8:30. Okay, perfect. Well thank you so much. It was so, so fun. I'm so proud of you. I can't wait to see what you do next and keep us in the loop, as I know you will, on all your stories about a lot of this insider stuff, because I think that's where you can really also bring a lot of value, just those of us who are out in the world trying to make our way, trying to be entrepreneurs, and just the more of that real life behind the scenes stuff that we can see, I think, the better. So thank you for doing that and keep it up and I will talk to you really soon.

Denise: This was so fun. Thank you, Tobi. I look forward to it.

## Ep #55: Behind the Scenes of Entrepreneurship with Denise McGaha

--

So there you have it, friends, my chat with one of my BFFs. I hope you liked it as much as I did. I had so much fun. And I think it was so insightful. It always is good to hear what real life and behind the scenes looks like for other entrepreneurs and creatives, because you know, that's the hard part. We see all of the highlight reel for most people out on Instagram and social media, and so it's always good to know that they're just real normal people, and Denise is definitely that. So thanks for tuning in. Bye for now.

Thank you so much for joining me for this episode of *The Design You Podcast*. And if you'd like even more support for designing a business and a life that you love, then check out my exclusive monthly coaching program Design You at [tobifairley.com](http://tobifairley.com).