

Ep #65: Business Truth Bombs with Christopher Kennedy



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Tobi Fairley

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You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 65.

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.

Hello friends. It is another interview day on *The Design You Podcast* and this one is so good. It is so much fun. It's with my friend, Christopher Kennedy who is super cool and chic and lives out in Palm Springs and we all will want to be him. If you don't know him, you will once you see him, see the work he does, see the show house he puts on and all the amazing things he does. You definitely want to be living as Christopher Kennedy in your life, I promise. Or in your next life.

But today's episode is so much fun because as always, with all of my guests, we tell the truth about all kinds of stuff, including show houses and book writing and licensing deals and I mean, just so much goodness for the creative and interior designers out there. So if you've wanted to know anything about any of that stuff, even if you're not an interior designer but you want to know about writing a book or having product lines or whatever in your own industry, you are going to love this podcast. So I hope you enjoy my interview with Christopher Kennedy.

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Tobi: Hey Christopher. Welcome to the podcast. I'm so happy you're here today.

Christopher: I'm thrilled to be here. Hey my friend, how are you?

Tobi: I'm so good. I say this every time I think for every podcast but it always takes some coordinating to get the busy schedules of a bunch of creative people together, right?

Christopher: It is. I'm a bit of a mess. Listeners, full disclosure. I did cancel on Tobi last week about 10 minutes before...

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Tobi: I've canceled on other people too so I was not pouring salt in the wound. I was not rubbing it in. I'm just saying like, there's a lot because it was a legit thing. You were like, hey I hate to do this but I have like, my licensing agent. I got to go make money Tobi, I'm sorry, I do not have time for free podcasts. I've got to make some money.

Christopher: You mean I'm not getting paid to be on? Oh, okay.

Tobi: Your check is in the mail, I promise. No, I'm so glad you're here. It's always such a joy for me to have this excuse to hang out and just talk with my friends for fun and talk about some of my favorite topics and things that are very creative, and things that sound super exciting and most of the time they are. But before we get into the long fabulous list of things we want to talk about today, let's tell *The Design You Podcast* listeners a little bit about you, who you are.

You're an interior designer obviously, and you can tell more about that, but we've only known each other - we've kind of known each other in the online world for a while but we've been friends personally probably, what? A couple of years maybe?

Christopher: Yeah, not that long. Sort of crossed paths a lot. Or High Point we would both wave like hey, I know you, I've seen you, got to go.

Tobi: Exactly. So tell us about you.

Christopher: I am just a working interior designer in Palm Springs, California. I'm from California, was born in San Francisco and raised on the central coast and found my way to Palm Springs about 15 years ago to kind of reinvent myself and get back to my roots in design. I went to school for architecture. I got a five-year degree in architecture, then I got my MBA, and long story short I kind of got caught up in the tech bubble if your listeners are old enough to know what the tech boom is. I moved to LA in 2000 and got a job as a stockbroker. Surprised my parents, surprised myself. Kind of turned down Disney and some other goals. That's a different story.

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Tobi: For another podcast.

Christopher: Yeah, the bubble burst the second I got to Los Angeles. I blame myself for that to this day. So I kind of stuck that out for a couple years somewhat successfully but obviously it wasn't my passion and my heart. And in the meantime, my father passed away and my mom got very sick and I kind of realized life's too short not to do what you love and at 27 years old I moved to Palm Springs to get back to my roots in design and architecture. Seemed a good place to do it and 15 years later I am still a working interior designer.

I now have a retail store in the uptown design district of Palm Springs. Some of the high-end vintage stores. I'm sure our listeners might buy first dibs on things. And now I'm doing some licensing and some other books as well, so yeah, that's me in a nutshell.

Tobi: That's all. You're like me. You only do a couple things. That's it. Well, one of the things that we have to talk about first I think, because especially for the people listening that are interior designers and are kind of in the whole design universe know you likely because of the show houses that you put on in Palm Springs. So tell us about what that is, how long you've been doing that, and then we can get into the nitty gritty of show houses because people always want to know like, should I do one, shouldn't I? Do they work? Do they bring you business? Are they expensive? And the answer is yes and no.

Christopher: Let me take a big sip of my green tea. I wish it was a martini.

Tobi: Exactly.

Christopher: So about six years ago, I had been in business almost 10 years and kind of like, when you first begin your business, kind of you like, have your head in the sand or the first 10 years and you're just working and digging and trying to find your way. And I came up for air after 10 years and said alright, I'm doing okay and I'd like to give back to the town that had really given me a lot.

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And for several years I'd heard kind of talk in the industry in Palm Springs with ASID and contractors and architects like, shouldn't there be a showcase house like there is in Pasadena or Kips Bay or Dallas or a lot of great cities have show houses and Palm Springs is a world-class resort town, kind of known for architecture and design and we didn't have one. So I just thought - I'm kind of told I don't know what I shouldn't do, so I thought I'll just do it myself. No big deal, right? Because I have a goal setting...

Tobi: And boundaries and saying no.

Christopher: I always give credit where credit's due, and Windsor Smith, I'm sure you probably know who she is. She had a year or two before built an equestrian estate from the ground up, ran it to publish it, she built a new house, called it The House of Windsor, had her famous designer friends do rooms. She sold it to Gwyneth Paltrow for like, 14 million dollars. Mine was much, much, much more modest than that, but kind of like, well if Windsor can do it than so can I.

My favorite quote is if one can than so can I. If you see someone do this then why not you? So can you. And these paths have been forged before so it's just not copying but look at someone who's done something that you admire and look what they did and copy it and be inspired. Ask them. They'll probably tell you how they did it if you're a good person. Most people are, I like to think.

So anyway, I'm like if Windsor can do it, call it The House of Windsor, then I can do it, I can call it The Christopher Kennedy Compound. And long story short, we got Lux to publish it. Full disclosure, I purchased the house, I paid for the renovation, so I did do a lot of investments to make it happen. And now five years later we raised about \$150,000 for preservation of architecture in Palm Springs.

We've done five in the past six years, and you know, when I first started all I could do was call companies I knew and liked like Wolf Subzero and Cosentino and Ron Cochiden. I didn't think they'd all say yes and they did and I called designers who I knew and didn't think they'd all say yes and

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they did. I stalked Celerie Kemble at the Henredon showroom in a different building in High Point. She was like a trapped bird in a cage, she couldn't leave. She was stuck there and you know, now she's a good friend.

But I literally went and accosted her and she said yes and so then I'm like, well now I have to do it and we did, and five years later I think it's regarded as a very influential show house and certainly did some wonderful things for sort of my reputation and being known in the industry, but it definitely is a charity event. It takes a lot of time, it takes four to five months of my time every year, so it is a trade off in terms of paying clients and things like that, but it's definitely been wonderful and done great things for me.

Tobi: That's amazing and huge commitment, but it's very high profile. I've seen things that you've put - I've never gotten to come out, I should come out to one soon, but I've seen you post all the fun celebrities that have been through and it's just exciting. Super exciting.

Christopher: Thank you, yeah, so it's definitely fun. Yeah, I think show houses are kind of gaining in popularity. Would you agree? I'm not saying that I had anything to do with that but not saying I didn't. No, I do see them cropping up in Detroit last year, that looked wonderful with Corey Damon Jenkins and lots of other really great designers, so if there's a little bit of a resurgence in them, I think that's wonderful.

Tobi: Yeah, I think that there has been for sure and I know some of the magazines in particular, I know Traditional Home really got on the bandwagon of the show house and has put a lot of those into play. So that's all amazing and that's the positive, beautiful, glamorous side to show houses. What's the truth for designers? So not putting one on but participating. Should they? Shouldn't they? Does it help? Does it get clients? What do you think is the lowdown on show houses?

Christopher: I guess I go into them kind of hoping for the best. I'm an eternal optimist, as you may know and I always believe something is going to - something good will come out of it. You don't always know when. So a designer outside LA, Maya Williams, she did our master bathroom in 2017

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and she just told me she's like online, I've seen her Instagram, she's doing all this work for a high-end developer, doing a multi-million-dollar spec homes in Calabasas in LA like with the Kardashians.

And she met that developer at the show house that she did in Palm Springs, so I love that. I definitely hear tons of success stories that you do get clients. I think if you go into it with the expectation of at least it's good marketing, you're going to get some great photos, you might get to express yourself in a way you don't get to do with clients. You can kind of do what you want. I think you should invest in the photography. I think you should invest in the time to be in the room I think is most successful.

If you're going to spend the time and money, it does take time and money. You have to furnish the room, you have to hang the wallpaper, you got to pay to get the furniture there. If you're going to make that investment, make an investment and the time too and be there as much as you can during the run of the show. I think the people that I know that have gotten clients out of it were there in the room to meet the people face to face.

Tobi: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Christopher: That's definitely a piece of advice that I would give if you do a show house. Definitely look into what it's going to cost if it's going to be out of town. Be realistic. It's not going to be \$100 or \$1000. It's going to be a pretty sizable investment, so just kind of go into it with open eyes, that I think they can be wonderful business building.

Tobi: You know, something you said I've never really thought of that is so smart and it's so common sense, I don't know why I didn't think of this before because I've had great experiences with being in show houses, as far as getting the publicity and the marketing and using it all the way you said and leveraging it myself. I didn't get a slew of clients for most of them, although when I did do show houses in Arkansas, which I haven't done a ton - I used to do them more here years ago but we have such a small market.

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And I think to those I definitely got a couple of really good clients but the other ones I've done have been like, in the Hamptons or in New York or somewhere, and they're fun and high profile and glamorous, but they didn't get me a lot of clients. But the common sense kind of duh moment is they were out of town. I just suddenly saw that yes, you drive over if it's in your town in Palm Springs every day and you stand in there and you work the crowd, well, that's a totally different ballgame than being there for the opening and then never being there again until it closes or something, which is smart.

Christopher: So I think look at it with the agenda. Yes, if it's going to be out of town, you're probably not going to get clients, but it's probably a more high-profile one like the Hamptons or Kips Bay. And then that's just a wonderful place to be in and you get to meet other designers and you learn something from them and you know, you're working with the best of the industry from across the USA.

And there's absolutely value in that. You get to talk to them and you get to know them and trade secrets and trade advice, and that's something you get out of it but it's not necessarily a monetary thing but it'll help you in the long run, but it's not a client that's going to pay your rent next month. But if you do one in your backyard, then you probably are going to get clients. So they're kind of two different goals I think.

Tobi: That's really, really smart and I haven't really thought about it that way in a long time because it's been years ago that I did several in Little Rock. It's interesting. So the expense is pretty high. I've never done a show house space that I can recall that I spent less than \$40,000 out of my pocket.

Christopher: Oh my gosh.

Tobi: Maybe \$25,000 at the least, but I mean this is because I'm going to the Hamptons or I'm going to New York City or whatever. I mean, I remember just the freight to New York and back with my product was like, \$16,000. But I mean, I'm pretty much in for multiple five figures but of

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course I'm doing full rooms. I'm not doing just a laundry room or just a closet or something.

Christopher: And that's a great piece of advice that I had friends, a mutual friend in Dallas, Denise McGaha. She did the laundry room in our house in 2016 so other than her travel things, which had a cost, she got to be on the roster of designers. She had a great time, and our clients paid for the construction so she didn't pay for the cabinetry or the install. We cover all those costs and she got the splash of it. She came out, took great photos, and got to do it with a much less investment.

Tobi: Yeah, and Rachel Cannon did one too, right? She did a laundry room as well.

Christopher: Right. She did the laundry room. So if you want to do it, I think for your listeners, if you want to do a national show house, do an easier space and you still get all the benefits but you don't have the overhead.

Tobi: Yeah, I know Denise did a powder room before too. Now, she's also done big fabulous - she did a whole huge room in Dallas, but she was right there to work the room, so that makes a lot of sense.

Christopher: She is a smart woman, as you know.

Tobi: Really good advice. Okay, well - and your show houses are all very niche specific, very mid-century, very like, the epitome of Palm Springs, right? They're very much that look, kind of Mad Men, 1960s glam, the whole thing, right?

Christopher: I mean, they are. I'd think to think that we're pushing it forward. This year if you saw the photos, last February, Joe Lucas did the living room. It was probably a \$300,000 to \$400,000 room. Not his cost. Just the price of the things that were in there. And it was not what I think you expect of mid-century. So we're always trying to push it forward. Of course we're going to have that vibe and that ethos, but I don't - I think the designers, they're coming from across the country so they're all interpreting

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the Palm Springs vibe through their unique lens, which I think is the most fun part of it.

Tobi: Well, let's talk about your lens of the Palms Springs vibe because you work in that look mostly, and we talked about that before, you and I, just that whole - you've heard me many times say the power of a niche strategy or a niche strategy and really getting a foothold and there's pros and cons of course, and everybody's afraid to do it and afraid to be specific. But what's your take on that and how has that played out in your work and your career?

Christopher: Well, I think to thy own self be true is certainly a piece of advice that I've always loved, and when I moved to Palm Springs, I went to school for architecture, I went to Europe to study the Bauhaus and the modern masters. I was doing contemporary back then so I guess it was fate that I found my way to Palm Springs. And when I moved here, I was doing contemporary. I wouldn't call it mid-century. This was maybe in 2004 but the entire popular look in the desert here was like, Tuscan and that's what was popular in Orange County, in LA and the suburbs of Palm Springs. It was all about the McMansions and all of that and I was doing contemporary.

I got a slice of the business and I did fine and I've grown but I wasn't sort of doing what was popular, and then of course Mad Men when on TV and we could do all podcasts, why mid-century became popular. I guess I was in the right place at the right time. So, suddenly I was doing more mid-century than just modern contemporary and so that work began to get published because that was popular and it was the TV show, so I definitely got skewed more mid-century.

I don't ever think that we do something cliché or a time capsule or kitsch-y. I like to think my work's not kitsch-y. But I definitely have as I've pursued licensing and things, you know, you kind of have to pick a lane. You kind of have to become known for something and have a look, and now the big money in my area is actually about 45 minutes away where the houses are

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worth eight to 10 million dollars, where in Palm Springs they're a million to three million.

Those people down there don't want mid-century. So while I get a little bit of that work, I don't get a ton of it. I'm doing fine. I'm not complaining. But having a niche can kind of be a double-edged sword. I'm doing great. I'm known for something, but you know, while I'd like to do that kind of work and I think it would certainly be within my capabilities, I'm not getting those phone calls. So you know, it pays off but it kind of is tricky. Something I didn't see coming. Something I didn't anticipate.

Tobi: That's really fascinating.

Christopher: Make it work for you.

Tobi: It's sometimes easier to get published I think and easier to get national recognition if you do have a very specific look but then again, in the day to day, you're like, but what does it do to the bottom line? It's not necessarily safe, it's not necessarily neutral, it's not all of the things that maybe the bigger piece of the general population is saying I want that.

Christopher: Exactly. So unless you can make it super popular, like Joanna Gaines, Chip, she took something niche and made it really popular, so I guess we could all take a lesson from her book, and we are. Yeah, so it's something...

Tobi: The work you do and the work I do are both more specific, more dramatic, a little more bold. It takes the right kind of personality to want to live with that all that time.

Christopher: It does, but you know, it's like all you need is one or two, so I believe in that as well. And there's been times I've had to work a bit harder to get the job just because they didn't necessarily see it immediately what they want online or I just sent pictures of my work that maybe I wasn't showing on my website, but you know, it's still doable. You can definitely still get the work, but I mean, having a niche, it's interesting.

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Tobi: I think there's most pros than cons for sure.

Christopher: I would absolutely agree.

Tobi: Well good. So let's talk about - you mentioned licensing. Let's talk a little bit about licensing because you have some - tell us about what collections you have and then we can talk a little bit about what that's been like.

Christopher: Our big licensing deal right now is with Wendover Art Group. We have about 200 pieces for Wendover and we're launching more licensing later this year. But yeah, that's definitely a long-term plan so we can talk about that a little bit if you like.

Tobi: Let's do because I was going to say, when we talk about the other things that we're going to talk about like your book and your retail store, like you're really hitting - and I've done the same thing. We kind of have this long-term plan of for me, I wanted a fabric line and I wanted other licensing. I haven't done a book yet but we'll get there soon and so you know, talk about that. What does that look like for you? How did you make it happen? Has it been what you thought it would be? What else do we need to know about it? Give us the details.

Christopher: So how it happened is about - gosh, time flies. About probably eight years ago I was still in my early 30s and I had some employees for a very - for a long time, all my employees were older than I was and I was lucky enough to find people that had moved to Palm Springs that had retired early because they could, they were successful, but they were - they kind of got here and realized they weren't just the kind of person to play golf all day.

They came to work for me and I didn't have to pay them a whole lot and they're much smarter than I was or more experienced, which was amazing. So people like that have built my entire career and I owe a great deal of debt to John Patrick and Francine and Felix. So we sat down and they believed in me when I was just a kid with a dream, and we had a retreat,

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which I should probably do more often. But we had a retreat in a hotel and we kind of say down and said okay, we believe Christopher Kennedy can be a lifestyle brand and what does that look like and how do we get there.

And I was a 32-year-old kid in Palm Springs. No one was going to walk up to me, just hand me a licensing deal for artwork. So we decided to look at people who we admire like Michael Berman, Victoria Hoggin and people and I said, okay what do they have? And they had high-end to the trade furniture lines and that was something which I could make happen with the right boot-strapping and resources and financial investment. I'm like, you know, I can't get a licensing deal but I can launch a furniture line.

So we decided that we would launch high-end because you can go downward but you can't go upwards. So it was the recession came shortly thereafter. Luckily I got - I found factories in Los Angeles before the recession were busy and wouldn't have taken on our line but they did, and I got a few showrooms across the country. And it just helped establish Christopher Kennedy as having a brand and having product. So that was kind of the first.

We sort of made this decision to launch this thing 10 years ago, so it didn't just happen and there were times, five years ago, I had a publicist and I'm like, I want this and I want that. She's like, it will come, give it time. A piece of advice that I have is like, time flies. We want everything right now. Did I want it by the time I was 40, sure, but now I'm 43. It's fine. I think we often overestimate what can happen in a year but underestimate what can happen in a decade, or in five years.

And so 10 years later, my master plan has kind of worked. They've actually shut down the high-end furniture line, that whole business category is a whole podcast in and of itself, the holt to the trade takes 18 weeks, costs a fortune, we don't have to delve into that.

Tobi: Nobody wants to wait any more.

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Christopher: I mean, if you're selling it, god bless you. My clients are not buying it.

Tobi: Get out quick. Run. Run.

Christopher: If you have the clients who will do it, more power to you. I do not. So it's served its purpose. I've actually shut it and we're talking about licensing, all those pieces to someone who knows how to make furniture. I didn't own the factories. I didn't know how to build furniture. So it took a lot of time and it took a lot of resources and it served its purpose. And then about that same time we launched the show house and it helped with the - or about five years later we launched the show house and then that helped the brand.

And then we did the book, so I just think that you have to - I was given a piece of advice by Sid Goldberg who is an icon in the industry. He's with Kravet, long story short, for like 60 years. He's on the board of directors. He launched Kravet's whole business model of their agents who run the show rooms and he gave me - secret Tobi actually, I kind of forgot about this.

Sid saw my collection 12 years ago. He took it to Kravet and they wanted to license it but they wanted the 12 best pieces. Not the other 40 and I said no. Looking back, would I probably have said yes to Kravet, I probably would have. I still don't have a collection for Kravet but I'm doing okay. But Sid gave me this piece of advice over breakfast. He said you have to make your name valuable. No one's going to want to license your name if there's no value.

The designs can be great but they can hire in-house and not pay them the world for you to design a great piece of furniture. So really what a licensee is bringing to the table is you have to have value to your name. So I spent 10 years basically making my name valuable.

Tobi: Yeah, and it's crazy how much money it takes to make your name valuable, isn't it? Like hundreds of thousands or millions, literally. No kidding, over the years.

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Christopher: I was going to let you say that

Tobi: No honestly, I mean, me too. Just thinking of all the show houses and the trips and the investments. I mean, it's literally hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not a million dollars or more. And I think that that is - I've talked a lot about the dirty little secrets of the design business and kind of the smoke and mirrors piece, and I've never really said that out loud before, not that I didn't want to. I just hadn't thought of it. But I think that that is so important because in a way, we kind of have to buy our brand along the way. It doesn't just happen like you get discovered or somebody gives you - you're literally spending thousands of dollars all the time to create the whole thing, right?

Christopher: Generally, yes, and I'm an optimist. I never want to discourage someone, but I also - I kind of think that there's a false care in our industry. This is a bit off topic, and I think you should do whatever you set out to do. But I think that not everyone should have a product license. Not everyone should have this, or to be on TV. I think that it's like being famous on Instagram. You know what I mean?

I think that what's undervalued in our profession right now is just being a good designer. There's a lot of great designers making a lot of money like my old boss who you've never heard of. Each of his jobs was a million dollars in furniture here in the desert. I don't have that now. Mine are maybe half that if I'm lucky. He was making - or Joan Behnke in LA. You've probably heard of her, but a lot of us - if you've not, she's just making a ton of money being a great designer and serving her clients.

And I think that's really being undervalued in our business and if I'm a hypocrite for saying it because I bought my name and I'm doing these things, I apologize, but I think just being a great designer and making money, serving your clients is a worthy goal. I think that we're not making it a goal these days in our business necessarily or in our industry. It's underrated.

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Tobi: Yeah, I think that's very true and I think that you're not being a hypocrite. You didn't know that when you went on this other path and it's kind of like well, you're already this far down the path and that's kind of the path I was on as well. But I have sort of known intuitively and not necessarily that it was a secret, but I've sort of always recognized that a lot of people making the most money in the industry over the years, whether I was working as a designer or working as a consultant and working with designers were always just these little solid businesses in certain towns that were literally just cranking out the work and they were the go-to people.

And most of the time they were not the people with the most visibility, the biggest name, the biggest - I mean, a lot of people like in the Little Rock community that are making the most money, even literally the community has never even heard of. And the whole - maybe a whole group of affluent clients all kind of share the same designers, but it's not necessarily me or the other people that are well-known in our city for design. It's really fascinating.

Christopher: It is fascinating, and I mean, it takes a lot of time to do these things like to fly to the trade shows and launch your collection. Guess what you're not doing? You're not working, you're not serving your clients, you're not building those hours. My husband looks at my travel bill, every month is like Christopher, is this paying off? I'm like, it is now but it took 10 years to pay off.

Tobi: Yeah, what's your ROI?

Christopher: He's like, you could just be selling some furniture. I'm like well - so it's wonderful and it's valuable. I don't think it's for everybody and I think that just being a good designer, making the money and serving your clients is a goal that we should all aspire to. Or is certainly in and of itself.

Tobi: I agree, and not that everybody has to aspire to it because there's all different looks of our industry but I think that if you just want to make some good solid money and just live your life, like just actually focusing on that

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and doing the work, I think that you're absolutely right. And they're almost, as you say that and we sort of know this but nobody really differentiates is they're really kind of two separate things.

It's almost like the celebrity designer path and then the designer path. And not that we don't do actual work, but when you look at the amount of time like you said, you spend four or five months a year doing this show house and have to squeeze your work in around it and then you're doing licensing and then you're writing a book and you're going to High Point market and I'm doing the same things and I have a consulting business, when you look at that it's like, how much time do you really spend designing? Is it 20%? Is it 30%? But it's definitely not 100%.

Christopher: No, it's not even 50%.

Tobi: No it's not. Isn't that fascinating? And that's so true for the people that aspire to be like the designers that they've seen, they're not thinking that oh, I aspire to be like that designer but they're only actually doing design work maybe 30% or 40% of their life. That's interesting.

Christopher: I mean, I've been fired by clients. I had a great gig and it was - and the show house was a month away literally, I was fired. That too money out of my pocket that next six months. So it has its pros and cons. Certainly being a celebrity is worthy and I'm glad I did it but I just want people to kind of be aware of what it takes. I've talked to Kelly Ellis and Celerie Kemble and they're like, I've been fired so many times, I've had that happen so many times. It definitely happens.

Tobi: Interesting. So as far as the licensing and also we can start talking a little bit about your book because you have done a book with Smith Gibbs and we've talk a lot recently about books and I've been exploring whether I'm ready to do a book and trying to figure out the timing for that. But as far as both of those things, licensing and books, there's not a lot of money in books, right? It's a marketing tool.

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Christopher: There's not. I'm like a Debbie Downer on this podcast Tobi. I'm so sorry. I'm like, don't do it. I'm like, I know I did it but don't. Don't do what I do, do what I say, like your dad.

Tobi: Exactly. Just like a good parent would. Do not do that.

Christopher: I know I did, but I'm telling you not to. I know I smoked that joint but you shouldn't. For me, having a book was very authentic. I actually am a good writer, I think as you are too. You know, I won awards all through school for my writing. It was something I always enjoyed. I'm not quite as fast as you are. I didn't get into blogging when it was popular. I guess I was making a line of furniture. I don't know. I never got into the blogging path that I would have enjoyed like you did, Tobi.

So for me, to do a book was definitely feeding the brand and buying my name and all this we talked about, but it also was authentic to one of my passions, one of my talents. So I enjoyed doing it. True story, so I actually have two books that no one really knows about. So my first book, California Modern about four years ago, I had a new agent, Gretchen Aubuchon, you might have known, and Brendan Van Hek worked for her and he has his own business now.

And we were in High Point. I had just hired her and I - right before High Point, wanted to get some deals for licensing and take some meetings. So I went on Shutterfly or one of those computer websites and threw some portfolio pictures there and made a book, kind of a quote book and got it two days later, and I was taking it to some meetings for licensing. And Gretchen looked at it and said Christopher - there were no words. There were five pages of words. It was just all pretty pictures. And true story, all my famous friends have books. I've never read a single word of them, I'm sorry Celerie and Alexa. I've never read a single word, I just look at the pictures, right?

Tobi: I agree, me either and I'm a huge reader and I read - but I agree with you. I never read books ever. I never read design books. I just - just like I rarely read design magazines. I look at all the pictures.

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Christopher: Exactly. So I thought okay, and Gretchen said Christopher, just make a book. So in this day and age - I have a point, I promise - with technology, basically Gretchen published the book. Her company was called Fashion and Décor, it sounds like a title, right? And I had my graphic designer laid out and we sent it to China and we paid for it, and you know, two months later I got 1000 books in the mail from China. And I sold them and frankly honestly, no one ever asked. It wasn't Rizzoli or Abrams or Gibbs Smith, you know, really, no one cared that it wasn't a big publishing house.

Tobi: No one really knows all those publishing houses except for a handful of us designers that are kind of snobby.

Christopher: Right. So if you want to sell it to your potential clients or stores in your town, take it there. I just had to make enough money to cover the cost but it was definitely a worthy investment. Potential clients loved it.

Tobi: Do you remember the ballpark price? Is it like \$10,000? Is it...

Christopher: I think I spent between \$6000 and \$10,000.

Tobi: Awesome, yeah.

Christopher: I probably only ordered 500 copies. I think we paid \$37.50 per book so it's not cheap and I sold it for like, \$65. I doubled it still so I probably gave away a bunch and I sold enough to make up for the ones I gave away. And I love to market and I'm open book, I've told you.

Tobi: But it's so smart. It's like you can hire a book agent and the best editors and get Rizzoli and you can spend \$250,000 even if you have a book deal, getting an agent and getting who is it? Like Doug Turshen and all these people are amazing to write it and it's beautiful and it's exquisite and not saying it's not worth it, but you can spend \$250,000 for your book deal that you got or you can spend \$10,000 and have a book. I love it.

Christopher: Right. In six months versus two and a half years.

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Tobi: Exactly.

Christopher: So and then I went to show rooms at High Point in Vegas and they would do book signings where they didn't care who published it. They wanted it and I sold them and absolutely, no one cared. So that's my first book and honestly, it might have been more successful. No, it was wonderful. So that book got me a second deal with Gibbs Smith who did pay me but I think I was paid like, \$7000, half of it was an advance and half of it was due when I sent in the manuscript.

They did pay for the photography, which is the most expensive part, but they gave me \$12,000 for photography. Luckily my stepbrother is a photographer and filmmaker, and so he literally - so I had that book happen, I got referred to Gibbs Smith, they didn't know who I was but they wanted a book on mid-century and someone said well, you need to call Christopher Kennedy. So again, having a niche paid off.

So they called me, we met during a modernism, which is in February. They wanted to launch it the following modernism week so we did the deal really fast. They gave me \$12,000 for photography. I had my stepbrother come out from Los Angeles. We show all new projects. I'm a simple guy, I have to make things work. I just didn't work for like a month. He came out, he stayed with me and we shot eight new projects in four weeks and I just had to bang it out.

I'm like, I can't let this linger on for two years. I'm too hyper, ADD, so I can't have this drag out. We did it and they wanted the content by August or September because literally it has to go to print and get laid out and then literally, it's on a slow boat from China, literally. So they had to turn in the final art by October, November to get it by February. It takes three or four months on the water because you don't air freight books, right?

Tobi: Yes.

Christopher: So that was a third of the lead time was just waiting for them to get it from overseas. I think I air freighted my first because I didn't do that

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many copies. So that's how the book came about and then I think they printed 1000 and honestly, I've never gone back and asked. I know they went to a second printing and I didn't get a check so I should probably have someone call about that.

Tobi: Let's see, rule 101 of finance and money making. Let's actually get paid for the stuff that we do.

Christopher: Tobi is like, slapping my wrist over the Skype in case you can't see it. She's like, Christopher.

Tobi: Yes, but I love a good creative. But I mean, hey, you made another book for \$10,000 so you have some financial sense. You just got busy.

Christopher: I maybe got paid \$10,000 and it can take three to four months of your time. So was the book worthwhile to do? Yes, but is it going to make you a lot of money? No.

Tobi: Right. So if it's in - if you're thinking it's a moneymaker or if I just get this book, I'll suddenly get all these clients, it doesn't work that way. But if it's part of your marketing strategy and brand building, it's absolutely kind of one of those cornerstone pieces of that process if you have that opportunity. Hey, you don't even have to have it. You make the opportunity, right?

Christopher: Absolutely. And they want me to do a second book and I've literally been putting it off for like a year or a year and a half because I'm like, who has the time? Daddy has to work. I got to make the money. I've got clients who are waiting...

Tobi: I've been show housing for five months, we got to make some money. Speaking of other ways to make money, on that long-term plan for everybody else when they're like, the baby designer or thinking about being a designer, along with product lines and book is always on everybody's list, a retail store, which I've had one. And it was great for getting my business started but wow is it ever a lot of work and my design business pretty much

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always carried my retail store. And I've heard a lot of people say that that's the truth, but everybody still wants one.

Everybody I talk to, they're like, I just want a little retail store. And I'm like, hello, have you ever heard of Amazon? No one comes to retail stores anymore. But there are places and pockets and even in every city, room for one or two really good businesses I think if it's a sizable market at all. So talk to us about your retail space. Like, it's fairly new, right?

Christopher: It is. I have that too, so now I feel really good about myself.

Tobi: You've checked every box.

Christopher: Wow, this is really good for my ego. Thank you.

Tobi: Have any of them made you money is where we get down to the nitty gritty.

Christopher: That check you're going to send me; I feel great right now. So no, we do have a store. We did grow into an absolutely - so I had my firm for about 12, 13 years now and we opened a store like, four years ago when it seemed like the brand was big enough and like, we were doing some licensing and really, David and I wanted a retail store like, seven years ago. We had people say don't do it, don't do it.

10 years ago, when I was first starting, an architect designer who I shared an office with told me, he's like, this little tiny space in the right part of town came open. It was maybe 600 square feet. He's like, Christopher, you should take that space, put a little tiny vignette in it and make it your office. That was good advice too. I didn't take his advice and I mean...

Tobi: I could have.

Christopher: I could have and I didn't. And actually, he was head of interiors for property in New York so this guy knows what he's talking about. But I didn't do it. It took me 10 years later. But that was good advice. So for your listeners, really if a smaller space became open in like, the right

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part of town or even not in town that can serve as your studio too and that can pay the overhead and you just have a great little curated look of a sofa, a lamp, some candles, some pillows, I think that's a great way to go to kind of grow into a retail store, and then you can say you have a storefront so perhaps you can open stock and dealer accounts or wholesale accounts.

You get to say yes, I am a store, you check that box on the application at High Point. So I do think you can certainly start small. That was really good advice he gave me that I didn't take. But now 10 years later, we - four years ago we took a 3000 square foot space not in the chic part of town but kind of closer to where I lived and I thought I could be an anchor. I was I guess having a really ego day thinking oh, I can be a destination, Christopher Kennedy.

Tobi: Where we had told you all the brilliant things you've done, yes.

Christopher: How fabulous I am. So about half of it was our studio and a full kitchen, about 1500 square feet was retail. It made a little money but yeah, the design firm carried it. We had plenty of parking but you couldn't see it so I guess location, location, location is my point. And two years ago, we got wind on a space and it was called the uptown design district. It's two doors from Trina Turk and right in the pedestrian - on the right side of the street where it's shady, people are walking, close to restaurants and all the antique stores.

And literally, the rent was double and David and I - I do okay and I remember us being terrified like okay, this rent is twice as expensive. David and I really thought twice or five times about it, but utilities are a lot less because it's a newer building, 14-foot ceilings, but it was 1500 square feet and we took it. And literally Tobi, our retail business is probably is five times what it was in our old location. So definitely location, location, location. We're blown away every month.

In my spare time, like this morning I was like, walking around, wanting to fluff pillows. I'm like, it's fun and it's like okay, I'm not being paid to fluff but it is a whole business and we're selling a shocking amount of small items and

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travel things. There's a lot of tourists and so it's a whole different merchandise mix, and then we were able to get upstairs from it is a full apartment because it's a 10-year old building and it was built kind of as a live work, so there's a 2000 square foot apartment above and we were able to lease that and break through the wall and so - because that was kind of small too.

1500 square feet for my design business and a retail store with no walls, I was out in the middle of everything for like, a year and it was a little bit too much. So we took the apartment above and that's given us the right amount of space. So we have the upstairs apartment as well that we kind of have as more kind of a furniture showroom, downstairs is more gift-y. And then my office is in the master bedroom of the apartment upstairs and the walk-in closet is our design library.

I have no layout space. My colleague Keith was just complaining this morning, he's like, we don't have any layout tables. I'm like, I know because it's for sale. That table is for sale, don't put your marble sample on it, Keith. It's all about tradeoffs and we're always figuring things out. But actually, this summer, which is our slow season literally go through and say, okay, what's making money, let's evaluate it. Like the Gap, going through every square inch. What's maximizing, what's selling? So I'm trying to do that whole process, figuring out the right merchandise. We're all just figuring it out as we go, right, Tobi?

Tobi: So the slow season in the summer because...

Christopher: It's hot.

Tobi: And people want to come there in the winter to get away from their cold places?

Christopher: Yes.

Tobi: Okay, well I think it's interesting because I don't want you to give all the people that shouldn't have retail spaces false hope that they should

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now - Christopher said I could open one and to start small, it was really good, and I mean, I'm not saying that nobody should have one but I do think that there are some things like you just talked about that are very much supportive of your store, that you have the very specific look that it's in a town with a very specific vibe and people travel there.

And so I think that when you're going to that kind of destination as a tourist, you do want or even if you're not tourist-y but as a traveler, you do want to go kind of like, be in the culture of the place that you are visiting, and I think that that probably adds so much to your success too.

Christopher: It does, and honestly, furniture is really the hardest category - just this morning, one of my employees sent me these chairs he wants to order for the floor as like a knock off of a famous chair and he's like, can we order this? And it's a high-end reproduction and I said - and I went to a lower end version of it, which we also can buy. We generally do for our design clients. I'm like, maybe we should get this version, but then you look at Amazon and it's less expensive than we can sell it for.

Literally just this morning I was going through that process. You constantly have to shop - we have to shop ourselves and figure out what can I sell that's not online so yeah, I mean if you're going to do retail, you really have to shop yourself and pick lines that aren't available on the internet. We sell a shocking amount of stuff that you wouldn't buy online like we sell tea towels that say funny things like I think being friends with you is bad for my liver and things like that. So it's just pretty much my motto. So yeah, and it's like, \$16. I sell a slew of them every month. But what we're making money this first two years is not things you can buy on the internet.

Tobi: Yeah. Well, I think that's so smart and I think that what's such a dangerous trap of having a retail store is because you can just go so crazy and I definitely did this when I had one. It's like oh, let's have dishes and china and tabletop and let's have - before I knew it, I was in like, 50 categories of stuff and my mom and I joke all the time because - you've met my mom and she's always my sidekick, especially when I'm buying, going to market and stuff.

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And she now says you know what, I could have bought both of us at full retail every set of china we ever looked at instead of us justifying opening all of those orders that were \$2500 or \$5000 minimum and we were like yes, and now we both have - we love it, but we both have like, 15 sets of tableware and china and we used to laugh about it and she's like, it would have been so much cheaper to buy those from Newman's or anywhere, Tiffany, for goodness sake. Wherever we wanted.

Christopher: Right. And then there are the logistics. It's got to ship somewhere and every day at our backdoor was boxes and boxes of stuff and my glamorous staff who's a little bit older. They're having to open and be the box lady. So we had to open a receiving warehouse to just manage all of that, so it's a lot.

Tobi: And it never comes at a good time. I remember one time at like a Friday afternoon, I had a little retail store outside of Little Rock. I started about 30 miles away in a little tiny community. I had a little old house and I had my first shop there and a little retail store. I don't know, it seemed - to be so brave these days it was easier and less scary than taking on the rent in Little Rock and it was a cute little place.

But I remember one Friday afternoon in like, July when it's 114 in south Arkansas, the Christmas shipment arrived and it's literally 99 boxes because we did holiday and all the stuff and everybody's gone except literally mom and I and this was, you know, 15, 17 years ago and it's not a coincidence that since working for me, my mom has had back surgery and she's about to have her second knee replacement because it's hard work. We're lifting sofas and carrying boxes and...

Christopher: We have a position in my firm called OTG for oh the glamour. Because everyone's like oh, your job is so glamorous and I just smile and nod but yeah, literally we're making beds and we're cleaning toilets and I think we're the help and it's easy to forget that or people just - if I show the school think it's going to be glamorous or your client's best friend. We're still the end of the game the help.

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I heard Jeff Lewis speak recently about this. Even he, being a TV star, he was flown down to Florida for the third time doing this house for someone who's fairly well known. And on the third visit he really didn't like how her husband spoke to her and after she flew him down there on the private plane, he was in the car, maybe they'd had some champagne and he said something about it and he was never invited back again.

And it's like, even Jeff Lewis gets fired for overstepping the bounds. We are kind of the help, but it is really hard work. I have this kind of really interesting perspective of having to get - of getting to watch other designers work because they do a house I produced and it was really interesting to watch different designers. And usually they're very good people and I know them and they're my friends, but I had one designer who came out to do a bathroom and she brought two 20-year-old assistants.

I won't say from where, but not from anywhere close by to install a bathroom, first of all. And the construction wasn't done because it's a show house and the construction's never done and they flew in a week early to install a bathroom. And she's wonderful but she had these two assistants with her, and meanwhile my neighbor on the golf course, I owned this house and he was retired, and he was over volunteering because he was so nervous we weren't going to be done in time.

He's on his hands and knees at 60 years old, scraping the painter's tape out from around the toilet and these two 20-year-old girls are watching him and pointing and instructing and is the crew going to come to clean the bathroom? And I'm like, you're the crew to clean the bathroom.

Tobi: They're here. Here's the mop and some Pine-Sol. Get to work.

Christopher: If your boss is teaching you that being a designer is not about making beds and cleaning toilets, she's doing you a huge disservice because it is.

Tobi: Yeah, and I've always said to my team, even our most amazing lovely clients and they are, we have so many. We've had so few nasty or difficult

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clients, but at the end of the day, I always say to them, you know what, they will be understanding to a point but if your mom dies the day before they're having a party for 60 at their house and they still need all their stuff, they're still going to be really upset and not be like oh, no problem, we'll just cancel. The show has to go on. They're not always going to be understanding. When they can, if they're really lovely people they will be, but it's still - we got to deliver at the end of the day and it doesn't matter in your personal life, right? Or any of that stuff.

Christopher: Right. We're giving a service and hopefully we're charging very well for our service so they're going to have high expectations, and we should think more of ourselves and rise to the occasion in terms of how we present and how we do our bookkeeping and all those things. I know you talk about your podcast and the *Design You* program, which is amazing. It's about - I've heard you talk about this like, designers are always good business people and oftentimes clients get frustrated because we don't have our back office in order.

One of the best things we can do in terms of being a professional and not having them question your bill is just having all your stuff together. Have that in order. Get your financial house in order, which I'm always trying to be better at, but we are giving a service and we are often the help.

Tobi: Right, and you have an MBA, I have an MBA, I have an accounting degree. It does not matter if you know what to do. Just still making it all happen is so difficult. Well, and that leads me to the last thing I want to talk about before we go. This has been so much fun but let's talk a little bit about - because I know you and I offline, just in our personal texting to each other and tagging each other on Instagram, we both really struggle at times with the whole work-life balance piece and the personal health.

And it's so easy to put yourself last and we are trying to keep all those balls in the air and you do have to worry about making money and it's not just for fun and all of that. So talk a little bit about that. What's working for you right now in the self-care work-life balance piece? What's some advice that you have that's - tell us.

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Christopher: I mean, I think people know because I was public about it about two years ago when I was 40, 41, I had a little heart scare because I used to be in great shape when I was in my mid to late 30s. I was working out five times a week and I just carved out that time for myself. I did it at 6am, which isn't easy but that's when I had to do it, and then I launched show houses and I got single-mindedly focused on that. I stopped working out to cope with the stress of it, I drank too much wine, I happen to like wine. It's my go-to, it was easy.

But yeah, it's just how we - I'm not going to work until eight o'clock at night. It was just easy to down three glasses of wine. And so I just wasn't moderating and I gained 30 pounds and at 41, during the heat of the summer, I had a little heart scare and I found myself in this ambulance going to the hospital. It was a wakeup call. It took some time. I'm still focused, I'm still trying to get better about it and I guess what's working for me now is to kind of put everything in this place and to moderate. I'm drinking far less. I've found other ways to cope with the stress.

We all have ways of coping with stress. Whether it's the glass of wine or the Netflix or the chocolates or all of those things I happen to like. But I think that kind of realizing you can cope with your stress in a different way, like now when I work late I'll pour some green tea or back in the day I'd like to kind of stop and take a little lounge or restaurant with a patio and I had their wifi and I was working until eight and it was nice outside in Palm Springs and I liked the atmosphere, but I could down three glasses of wine in this café.

Well now I can go there and have tea, and I've found that actually, it wasn't - yes, the wine tasted good and I enjoyed the buzz but I actually liked just being out, being in the sunshine, being around people and not being in my office. And I could actually go there and have the same experience but not drink the wine. So I've also found that sometimes what we're using to cope as a mechanism isn't really what you think it is. Maybe it's not the shopping spree. Maybe it's what - you can find other ways to kind of get the satisfaction and to rewire your brain.

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It's like yes, the wine was nice but more of it was about being outside, being around people, not being in the office after nine or 10 hours. And so I've found that what I thought was making me feel better really wasn't making me feel better and often I felt like crap the next day.

Tobi: Right, that was the only piece that wasn't making you feel better but the whole rest of the experience...

Christopher: Yeah it wasn't just the wine, it was the whole experience, so I've also found ways to substitute what I thought was making me feel better. I've kind of rewired my brain and also just carving out the time. Now if I don't get into the office until 10 because I work out, you know what, I'm probably going to work until seven or eight, until I guess I've learned to forgive myself and I've heard you talk too that now you let yourself workout at two o'clock in the afternoon or whenever it feels right for your body. You don't have to do it at 6am or 7am and back when I could, that was great.

But I've also kind of allowed myself and given myself the freedom to say you know what, taking care of myself is my job, is my duty, it helps my clients, it helps me, it helps my business and so kind of treating it like a job and as a priority I guess is what I'm trying to say. That thinness component, it's not secondary. It's not optional.

And I've also told my staff, you know what, if I'm not here until 10, that doesn't mean that you come in at 9:15. I have probably been taking phone calls since 7am Eastern. I've probably already checked my email. Working out is part of what I have to do to look good in pictures that I'm going to be in and just be there for the long run, have the stamina. So I think kind of giving yourself that freedom and realizing it's not secondary.

So that's my advice, something I'm getting better at every day if possible, so I'm not quite there yet, but I'm down about 15, 20 pounds. It's a journey too I think you have to realize. It's just a journey and there's a great book called The Compound Effect. I know you love books and I read The Compound Effect. When you take one day off, it's not just that day. It's the momentum that you lose and you just have to start. You know what I

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mean? I think you just have to start and you have to flip that switch in your head.

It's so easy just to not do it to get to that point, and don't get to the point that I was at where you're in the ambulance going to the ER for heart palpitations. Please don't get there. Just flip that switch and say you know what, I'm going to eat right, I'm going to put this down, I'm going to go to the gym, and it just kind of takes that mental shift. It's a big shift. It's simple, but it's not easy.

Tobi: Yeah, I think that's - I love what you said. I love how you just reframed that and you're able to say okay, I don't have to quit going to the place, I can just substitute something. I think one of the things that I deal with a lot and I've really been focusing on lately is I always pretended like the craziness, the busyness, the over-packed schedule was temporary. I would pretend like oh, this is just a season or like we're just going to get through this and then it'll calm down, and every bit of that was a lie.

There was - because I was putting all that stuff in my schedule and I wasn't stopping putting - there was never going to be an end to the season. So I had to learn that - exactly like you were saying, you have to put all of the stuff in, the wellness, the health, the self-care, the exercise, the eating, the vacations, all of it in now because if you're that busy or have that kind of schedule, it's probably never going to end unless you just take control of it. And that's very true for me.

Christopher: I think that's true for everything. You know, I think we often say I'll be happy when. I'll be happy when I get that next licensing deal or that next book or that next client. I'll be happy when I make this much money, but I think anyone can tell you, I've been to enough client's houses who had 10 Ferraris and five vacation home and open that medicine chest and there's the Prozac. I'm sure we've all seen that.

Tobi: It's never enough. No matter where you go, ever.

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Christopher: And you have to come from the place of happiness. That's what makes it all possible. It's not I will be happy when I have this. It's I have to be happy now and these things will come.

Tobi: Yes, so good. I think that's such a good thing to end on. Well thank you so much. It sort of surprises me every time even though it shouldn't how much fun and how easy it is to talk to my friends that I have on as guests and we could just go on for hours and hours like we're sitting together with that glass of green tea. I won't say wine. We would be having wine if we were together I'm sure, but we're going to pretend like it would be green tea. But this was so much fun, it flew by. Thank you so much. I'm so glad we made it work.

Christopher: I'm not sure what the theme was but I'm sure you'll figure it out.

Tobi: Well, it just was so good. I think it's just - what I love to bring from each guest is their kind of areas of expertise and you know, I might call it your zone of genius or just really the insight you have because I know our listeners want to hear the truth, and I love to dig in. And you gave so many truth bombs in this. I mean, it was awesome. People are going to give this amazing feedback like they always do.

I'm sure people have pens and pencils out writing stuff down. If not, they're going to go back and listen again and do that. So I just thank you for being so open and so honest and it was just a pleasure, and I'm so glad you were here.

Christopher: It's my pleasure and honor. Thank you, Tobi.

Tobi: Okay, bye.

Christopher: Bye.

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So wasn't that amazing? I mean, he's just so calm and relaxed and open and it's just cool. I felt like we were having martinis together the whole time. In fact, if you go back and listen again and take notes, maybe you want to pour yourself a martini because it's definitely the Christopher Kennedy vibe. Although he says he's now switched it for green tea to be healthier. But I say martinis for everyone.

So pour yourself a glass and if you want to re-listen, I highly recommend it. But thank you so much for joining me today for this episode and I'll see you again really soon.

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.