- Good morning, Virgin Islands and welcome again to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. My name is Amelia Headley Lamont and I am joined this morning by a very special guest who I will let you know who he is shortly. First, we'd like to thank all of you who regularly listen to our previous shows, Ability Radio, You and Your Health. It was a series of programs that focused on your right to appropriate healthcare under the hospices so to speak of the Affordable Care Act and how it extended to the Virgin Islands. But this series of programs is called Ability Radio, You and Your Life. And it's to help individuals live life to its fullest and promote awareness of what the US Virgin Islands offers from different perspectives and in particular, for our purposes from the disability perspectives. You will hear and learn from individuals, groups, programs that work here and/or visit the Virgin Islands and are dedicated to maintain and preserve an inclusive community while focusing on our history and culture. As always, there are certain rules that we must abide by. We request that there be no use of names, no personal attacks, no unfounded allegations, no product pitches, no profanity, and the opinions expressed are those of the individual host and those of the guest. We are very pleased today to have someone who was born on the island of Saint Croix, grew up on the island of Saint Croix, is spending time with his parents during the holiday season on Saint Croix. And his name is Caleb Marshack. Good morning, Caleb.

- Good morning, Emilia. Thank you for having me.

- Oh, I'm delighted that you're able to join us. Welcome back. Thank you for agreeing to participate on the show.

- Uh-hmm, of course.

- Okay. Caleb, you are working as a product designer. You graduated from high school in Saint Croix, went to, where did you go to college?

- So I graduated from Country Day and then was fortunate enough to get an opportunity to go to Stanford University out in California, attended that for four years in the product design program. Yeah. It's what I'm up to now.

- And product design is in what school?

- It's in the mechanical engineering school. So it focuses on, well, I'm sure we'll get into this a lot more later but it's basically the combination of technology, psychology, understanding humans and business. I'm trying to combine those three different pillars to making this very unique discipline.

- All right. Well, I'm quite intrigued to hear that product design also involves psychology. Okay. So tell us just generally what you're doing now and then we will, again, go back to the whole concept of what product design mean because for some of us, product design is an inanimate object and that's been my sense of it. Tell us a little bit more about that, please.

- So to answer your first question, right now I'm working in San Francisco at a company that specializes in local marketplaces. So if you don't live on Saint Croix and know everyone in your community, it's a lot harder to find your plumber. It's a lot harder to find electrician, even your wedding photographer. And so right now, I'm working on a platform that tries to enable people to find these professionals in any place in the United States of America. To go to your latter question about what product design is and I think you hinted that you're interested in psychology. I think it's actually the most important part of what I do. In any object, you'll see many, many, many people create things that they hope consumers will buy. But a lot of them fail because they don't really understand the human need behind them. And so my job as a product designer is to really focus on needs and problems that people have and then letting technology and letting, like, my engineering skills try to solve problems for them.

- We see that in our line of work. For example, we refer to it as assistive technology, okay? So let's say if somebody had difficulty in walking, developing a device, an assistive tech device. You know, we call it a cane but it could be a certain design that might make your ability to move from point A to point B a whole lot easier, right?

- Yeah. I think what's interesting, you mentioned the cane which it seems like a very simple technology except there's a lot of creative things you can go beyond there. And in product designs especially, we stand on the shoulders of giants. We're not really creating new things necessarily. We're, or we are but we're repurposing and looking at the world and finding how people are solving problems in other areas and saying, "Wait a second. This doesn't have to be unique to this. It can also be used here." In one of my early psych classes at the beginning of class, the professor talked to us about a building that was on fire and the firefighters tried to put it out by shooting water directly at it, that wasn't doing it. And eventually, it came out that the solution that they came up with was to surround the fire from all sides and start pouring the water and start [inaudible] hosing the water down from all sorts of directions. And then he continued on with the class. And 45 minutes later, the idea of someone had a cancer. And they were shooting radiation at it and it wasn't going away. It wasn't, it was still as strong and effective as it was at the beginning. And the professor then asked the class of, you know, a hundred people, "Does anyone have any idea of what you can do?" And a hundred hands raised, there are a hundred students who raised their hands and said, "Obviously, you just surround it with five different lasers." And so it's just this concept of taking knowledge that other people are utilizing in one aspect and translating it to, in a whole new way to somewhere else.

- And that was the answer, essentially.

- Well…

- Attack it from a variety of fronts…

- Absolutely.

- …so to speak.

- Yeah.

- Okay. Okay. Well, tell me how psychology has, comes into play with respect of product design.

- Yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, my job is to create something. And you, to your point about product design, you think of an inanimate object. The iPhone is the pinnacle of product design or, you know, the toaster oven. But what they're really doing is solving a human problem. I wanted my bread to be crispy, you know.

- Okay.

- I wanted access to the internet…

- Yeah.

- …from my pocket and all the, you know, wonderful things and terrible things that provides. It starts with what a person believes they want or believes they need. And, you know, the people in America, wealthy people in America, these needs are very different than, you know, a starving child in Mongolia.

- Uh-hmm.

- An iPhone is not necessarily the thing they need right now.

- Right.

- But at the end of the day, what you're doing is you're finding what society or what the people you're trying to build a product for need. And to do that, you need to understand humans fundamentally. So that's where psychology comes from. If you're just, if the iPhone was made without talking to humans,

then it would be a complete flop because one person in a room can't solve the world's problems. It's really a collective thing that we do.

- So for example in your line of work, how do you get the information to even identify what a person's needs are?

- Well, I'm in a, an interesting space because the problem, interesting. People have always needed these local services. And what we're trying to do is create a consolidated place to be able to find and accomplish those tasks. So the general framework already exists. And my job is to go in and try to really fine-tune and understand the unique needs of a plumber, the unique needs of a photographer, the unique needs of, and on the other side, the unique needs of the consumer. I mean, we leverage that through user research. We leverage that through data. And that's just from how people are behaving on the sites and apps that we build. And it's this constant effort to try to get to a source of truth. There's not necessarily one right answer but there are definitely markers that lead you to the correct direction, in the correct direction.

- A source of truth. That's a very, that sounds very spiritual.

- Yeah. Well, I mean…

- What does that mean, a source of truth?

- That humans inherently behave in, like, humans behave differently than what they might say, in ways that they might say they do.

- Uh-hmm.

- Or just that there are, there are wrong ways to do something and there are, there are right ways to do something. And you know they're right because people respond to them. And it doesn't matter where they're from, who they are, they respond in the same way because it is the way they do it.

- Can you give me an example of a success? And then an example of something that wasn't quite so successful?

- Oh, wow. I can give you…

- A lot of failures. And, you know, that's fine too, that's how you learn.

- Yeah, a lot, well, but that means, I'm, I don't, yeah, I don't think of failure as a destination. It's just the path door. It's finding the right answer. With every failure is, there's a step closer to that truth. And that truth is a, is a moving target. It is always changing because minds change and…

- Needs change.

- …needs change, tastes change. It's, I was on, coming here, you knew you're gonna be working on the professional team, so trying to make our platform better for professionals, giving them a better shot on our platform to succeed. But before, I worked on Growth, which is, you know, it's kind of a broad term but essentially the idea of making people who come on to your platform, or your side, or your apps understand and use it, and see the value of it. And, you know, there are many Growth tactics. Someone, trying, I'm trying to figure out with a proper one to share with you might be. Successfully, we found that if you're trying to hire someone who's gonna come in to your home, a home cleaner, an electrician, a name and a few stars are enough to make you feel a certain way about a human.

- Absolutely. You're inviting someone to your home and you don't know who this person is, yeah.

- I'm not gonna talk about my company but I can, I can say there had been companies in San Francisco who focused on house cleaning. And there's this, there's this perceived notion in the Valley that if you Uberized everything or make everything on demand and at your fingertips and expendable essentially, and that's what people want. They just want convenience and convenience alone. And there was a company called Homejoy which tried to make the Uber for house cleaning. And they failed as a company because they didn't understand that this is, this isn't a commodity in the same way like getting a ride is. Having someone come in to your home, clean your things, see your personal spaces can't just be farmed out to anyone. And so that was a company that didn't do the research early and released them. They got a lot of money and had a lot of runway but ultimately failed because they missed that fact. I don't know if I answered your question but that's how a company can fail in this space. And then a success is really, really understanding your audience. Airbnb for instance, you know. They understand that trust is…

- Just let the people know what Airbnb is. Some people, yeah.

- Oh, sorry. Airbnb is a company that started out in San Francisco, that is, opens, people open up their homes on this, on this marketplace, on this platform, and let others come in and stay with them, just kind of disrupting the hotel industry.

- Yes. That's been a big issue, yeah. They don't…

- Yeah. I mean, and it's interesting, it's, no one thought it would work because the home, again, is so personal.

- Right.

- And so the way that they succeeded and moved forward is to really double down on trust, trust on the platform, it's the ultimate currency for Airbnb. If you wanna let a stranger in to your home or if you wanna go into a stranger's home, on both sides, it's a very awkward, it's a very awkward transaction. And so they've done a lot of things on their platform to try and really, well, I mean, it's a ten-billion-dollar business now and still growing, and it's worldwide, so I think they're doing quite well.

- Okay. I mean, there was some blowback though about persons, you know, people of color. They're not, you know, they see a picture and they like not to invite you or they say, you know, vacancy is no longer the case.

- Yeah.

- And I suspect, well, not suspect. I know Airbnb has now decided to do more services. You know, like if you were in a particular region, here's some information about, you know, the city or the town that you're visiting, that type of thing.

- Yeah. There's this, there's this mindset in the Valley that you can't do one, but once you've grown too big in one thing, you should find other verticals to tackle.

- Now, you're speaking very West Coat.

- I'm sorry. I'm sorry. There are a bunch of other categories that they might be interested. So it started at the home and now they're trying to do experiences. So, you know, there's a lot of companies that sell things, old products, and there's this whole space of experiences that can be opened up, and they think they have the platform that can leverage it because again, ultimately, that company boils down to trust. In terms of the discrimination issues that Airbnb was facing, is facing, it's, the world is facing it right now. You can see that from England to United States, in France, in Europe, like the world is shaken right now. They're doing a lot to take steps to figure this out and then only want to allow people who are inclusive on their platform. But it's a very, very difficult thing to try and, try and solve.

- Right.

- On the one hand, it's a horrible feeling to be rejected because of your gender, your skin, your ability, your language. But on the other hand, I don't wanna be in those homes.

- Right, right. That's true.

- So it's two-sided. But, so I do have hope that the world is gonna go in a positive direction. And like I said earlier, there's this moving target of what needs are. First, when people started on Airbnb like, "Oh, this is actually cash. I could bring people in my home." And now, you know, they have to solve this huge problem of discrimination, prejudice.

- Right, right. I should let our listening audience know that you are young. How old are you, Mr. Marshack?

- Woo. I don't know if that's a professional question. I'm 25.

- Okay.

- But I am from Saint Croix and moving to San Francisco. I once mentioned this to my mother, it's the first time I've ever felt black. On Saint Croix, I was Caleb. I am Caleb. And in San France, in San Francisco, I am two. It's just you're much more aware of your differences when everyone else is homogenous or white or…

- And San Francisco's supposed to be such a, you know, cutting edge, progressive city.

- Well, yes, in many ways. By the way, it's just, before I move on to that. There's a, there's a lack of diversity in color but, you know, that's changing. But there's also a lack of diversity in thought where all, as more and more people pour into San Francisco due to take on their dream jobs intact. In any bar conversation, you hear a restaurant, it's tech-finance, or tech-medical, or, so it's, diversity I think is, having a diverse perspective is important as well as having a diverse population of skin, and language, and ability.

- Right. Understandable.

- Sorry, I lost track of the other question you asked me.

- Well, now, I lost track. But no, but I did wanna go back to something that you had mentioned about working on a professional level or professional platform in your position now. Tell me what will that involve.

- So it's, in a marketplace, there are two sides, at least our marketplace and that is people providing professional services, plumbers, cleaners, photographers, we, tutors, clowns, like we have a plethora of categories, around a thousand.

- Oh, my goodness. Okay.

- A thousand unique categories, probably closer to two or three hundred that can be, you know, umbrella.

- Any thought of this extending to Virgin Islands, is that a possibility?

- You know, absolutely. Once we've cracked this egg because marketplaces are incredibly hard for anyone to start and we need to really succeed and do well. And I think we have the pieces in place and, well, only we can get in our, in our way, our own way. But also Saint Croix, in the Virgin Islands in general like I said earlier, hinted that earlier, are different beasts because you know your community. You know your community very well. And this is, I don't think it's a bad idea. I think it's wonderful exposure. I think everyone is always looking for a new business and having an online presence is becoming more and

more than norm for the world, for good or for real. And so I do believe that one day we, our reach will extend to the Virgin Islands and beyond.

- That would be great. So tell, again going back to the professional platform, if I'm using the correct terminology, what will your new assignment involve?

- So I, woo, I'm gonna be joining the pro-success team. And so professionals from all across United States, they, they're trying everything to survive in the age of, you know, Amazon shutting down small businesses and Roto-Rooter's, you know, kind of bringing a lot of different plumbers together. I think people are struggling to find their own voice. And so my job will be helping these professionals market themselves effectively. Make sure that the tool makes sense to them. Make sure that, in its simplest form, I just want our professionals to be successful across a multitude of different categories and that is accomplished slowly because I need to understand that a photographer's way to success and the house cleaner's way to success are very different.

- Uh-hmm.

- And so that's what I'll be trying to figure out within the year.

- So will that involve you engaging with individual businesses so to speak?

- Yeah. I'm going to be making that a priority. I think the lesson from that Homejoy example is if you don't truly understand what's going on, the whole picture, you can't possibly have the right result. You might have the shadow of one but that will only take you so far. And so my job will be to truly understand these needs and try to come up with creative and simple solutions for all.

- Do you think that your experience at Stanford University, did that prepare you for the work that you're presently doing?

- Yeah. So to your earlier point is, I studied animate objects. There's a history behind, you know, the nail behind of, a teapot behind a tea cup. You know, you don't want the hole to be too small or you'll burn your finger. You don't want, like, there's a lot of intricacies in the things that you might find common place now that were well-designed a long time ago and just bolstered over time. But fundamentally, designing for the web, designing objects is very, very similar. The web is faster, getting something out there in front of people is faster and that's why I gravitated towards that. But the studies I devoted to, product design have fully helps me succeed in where I am today.

- Are there any, and this is probably not a fair question, are there, are there any devices that you can identify that would be a need of some tweaking or improvement?

- Ooh, devices that need tweaking? Hmm, I wish I was prepared for that question.

- Sorry.

- No, not at all. So I mean, it's increasingly apparent on new objects that are being brought to the world. For, I mean, this is, this is a very San Francisco answer.

- Uh-hmm.

- But if you're looking at virtual reality which is becoming a new thing. People are wearing these goggles that transform, or, you know, transport you to a whole new world. There's still, there's still a lot of improvement to become fully immersive that don't exist today and, or, you know, I can look at Google Glass is a huge failure if you remember. This was a glasses that you'd wear on your face that give you instant access to the internet by your eye and it was really creepy.

- It sounds creepy.

- It sounds creepy.

- I don't, I don't understand the point of it either.

- I mean, yeah, maybe this is again a very San Francis, this is San Francisco, catering to San Francisco and not understanding the world. Tech for technologies, technology for technology's sake is unhelpful and un-useful for the world and the world will respond as such. It's only true technologies that have value and create value that can precipitate to the, to the rest of the country and the rest of the world. If you look on Kickstarter, you'll see a lot of people trying to improve our everyday objects. Wallets are a huge thing, pens are a huge thing…

- Now, tell me what Kickstarter is for those who are uninitiated such as myself. Is this like an entrepreneurial site where…

- Yeah. So Kickstarter is for people who have an idea and try to crowdsource its funding and bring it to the world. So…

- And by crowdsourcing meaning trying to fundraise? Trying to bring money in to…

- Right. It's…

- …help the product?

- And it's trying to be a meritocracy. It's trying to be, the, I, the best ideas will be funded because that's, you know, this is an idea I could support because I believe in it, not because I believe in necessarily the person. It is helpful. Don't get me wrong.

- Uh-hmm.

- But a lot of very successful thing, I mean the, there was the first smartwatch before Apple had its, made its smartwatch was funded on Kickstarter with $10,000,000 because that's how much people believed in it. In a capitalist society, money is the loudest thing that talks and so that's what Kickstarter…

- So what happened to that first watch?

- It did very well. And it made a second one but when you're a giant that makes 600, you know, billion dollars or whatever…

- They swallowed the little guy and…

- Yeah, they swallowed.

- Okay.

- Now, they're Silicon Valley story.

- Oh, okay. Okay. So the product, I guess in response to my question. The product that will still, more on some improvement or tweaking is the virtual glasses?

- I mean, it's just the one that jumps to mind.

- Uh-hmm.

- Yeah, the, they, they're uncomfortable, they're bulky. I don't personally like, oh, you know, even, let's just talk about 3D movies. I don't know if that was, made it to Synchro yet. I hope not. They're terrible.

- Okay.

- But, you know, it, it's technology that needs to work for all and if it doesn't, then it still needs to be tweaked and improved upon.

- And it probably doesn't need a basic human need like food, clothing, and shelter.

- I don't, I don't, well, and yeah. And this is what I was talking about with the iPhone. It accomplishes none of those things for a hungry child in Mongolia, in Uganda, in El Paso.

- Uh-hmm.

- And so it needs change, the target changes depending on what your needs are. There's a psychologist called Maslow who had a hierarchy of needs. And forgive me if I butcher it but at the bottom are those basic needs like shelter, security, and as you climb up this ladder with the basic needs being the biggest ones, most important ones but once you've reached the top, the tip if you will, then you, your life is fulfilled. And so it's food, shelter, water, security. There's love from family, from friends, from a significant other, and you go up all the way to something called self-actualization. So finding your purpose here on Earth and being able to express it. And once you've, you can't have anything at the higher level without having anything, you know, below that. It's hard to feel love when you can't, when you're, when you're worried about where you're going to sleep, what you're going to eat. I mean, love does help in those scenarios but it's hard to really, really, really express it without the things, without shelter, without food, without water.

- Very good. This was a philosopher by the name of Maslow?

- Psychologist.

- Okay.

- Maslow, yeah. Just, you can search.

- Google it.

- I was going to say search.

- Search it.

- I mean, I've already, you know, dropped a number of company names but yeah, you can just Google search that and you can see that actual, that actual pyramid.

- Okay. All right. So while you're here in Saint Croix, are there are any activities that you will want to engage in?

- Ooh, without product placement, I got, well, no. I can't. I'm going to go to Rehoboth. I can get myself a pate.

- Okay.

- I already went to Singh, Santana's. I'm here for food. I'm here for the beach.

- Good for you.

- I'm here to just hangout, see my folks, see my friends. Yeah, Saint Croix is a place to, well, for me, is a place to relax and just be home.

- Yeah. Good, good for you. Good for you. Okay. I'd like to thank you for taking the time out of your vacation to, really you shared a lot of very useful information and I'm, I learned a little bit more what your work involves and what product design involves. And it's also very enlightening to hear that college has been a good fit for you.

- Well, you know, before I sign off, there was one thing I was going to mention and you asked how Stanford prepared me for my work but I think the greater education came from being here and I don't mean in school though, Country Day, thank you.

- Uh-hmm.

- But just being around people from all walks of life in such a small community, I think, transformed how I think about the world or not, well, yes, it did but also lets me see how most people don't get that base education, like black, white, Muslim, Latino. We even had an Asian kid in our, in our class. And they were no different. They were just, you know…

- Friends.

- …friends. Your classmates. Your, I mean, even if there was competition, it was respectful. And so part of what I do is trying to empathize with people who are different than I.

- Uh-hmm.

- And that education, you can't get that, you know, private school in California.

- And it's not something you source out either.

- And it's not something you source out either.

- One of the things and I'm sure you, this is something that I've heard from, you know, the young people is, one of the wonderful things about the Virgin Islands is how we greet each other respectfully, you know, whether you know them or not.

- That's, that was the biggest culture shock.

- Yeah.

- Saying hello to someone and then giving you a look, like, no, that's rude if you don't. If you walk into a building, you say, "Morning", you say, "Afternoon". In the States, they'll look at you like you're crazy or you want something.

- Yeah.

- But hopefully, I don't shift.

- Hopefully.

- We'll see.

- We, we're sending you out there to change the world, brother.

- Fight the good work, fight the good fight, hear the good word.

- That's right.

- Anyways, thank you so much for having me in here.

- Well, thank you. This has been wonderful and enjoy the rest of your stay in the Virgin Islands. You've listened to Ability Radio, You and Your Life. I'm your cohost, Amelia Headley LaMont. Thanks so much for listening. Have a good day.