IS THIS A STORY OF A FAMILY ENTERPRISE FAILURE OR THE REBIRTH OF AN ENTREPRENEUR: ARIEL BACAL OF BLANX?

As the third-generation family business leader, Ariel Bacal faced overwhelming obstacles in his footwear manufacturing and retail business in Colombia and Venezuela: an onslaught of cheaper products, a plunge in currency exchange, and ever mounting pressures from the fashion footwear industry. After countless pivots and desperate measures, it became clear that the only option left was to close the family business.

Hear Ariel Bacal candidly share his business story: how he decided it was the right time to close the family enterprise and the lessons he learned through failure. And why, only four years later, he resumed his entrepreneurial journey with BLANX, an innovative online shoe company. In this episode, we explore the element of timing in the Family IN Entrepreneurship Model as well as how the stories we tell about ourselves shape our understanding of events and our identity.

Ariel Bacal:

When I start to read about biases, it was like a eureka. I mean, this is what happened to me. You have many biases, but everything can be summarizing confirmation, availability because everything is basically telling yourself a story. You believe the story and then you go to reality to find sparks in reality that confirm the story, either because you always trying to read about the success of the three or four entrepreneurs that did it. Nobody wants to read about the thousand entrepreneurs that didn't do it. Twitter is full of guys telling you, look how I did it. Then please book a call for me because I can do it for you for a $10,000 retainer fee. That's magic.

Nobody wants to talk about it. No one wants to hear about it, but you learn much more in failure, than you learn about successes.

Esther Choy:

Early on in her career, our show’s advisor, Jennifer Pendergast and a colleague wanted to write a book about failures so readers can learn from it. That’s a great idea, except that they couldn’t get a single person willing to come forth and share their stories. And who can blame them? No one wants to talk about failure unless it all ended with success. But in this episode of Family IN Business, we are going to talk about failure.

Hi, My name is Esther Choy, the executive producer and your host of the John L. Ward Center for Family Enterprises’ own podcast series: Family IN Business. A podcast that features stories of leaders, their families, and the family enterprises they transformed.

We’re going to tie in with the stories that we’ve covered in the past three episodes, how more and more family members in family enterprises want to create their own legacy, how they can leverage family business assets of very many different kinds, and how discovering one’s own niche takes deep knowledge, but also keen observation, curiosity and relentlessly asking the question, why not.

Because only when we tie in the adventurous journeys that led to happy endings, with the eventful experiences that led to unhappy endings, could we see a clearer and more complete picture of entrepreneurship and family business.

Ariel is ready to tell his story. Who is Ariel?

Ariel Bacal:

My name is Ariel Bacal. Right now, I run a yoga studio business with my wife here in Miami. I have also a nice sneaker brand based on collaboration. blanx.me.

I finished economics in Bogota, the Andean University de los Andes. Then I started a short career as an investment banker. In 1999, I was 22 years old, I moved to Venezuela. I'm from Colombia. In 1999, I was 22 years old, I moved to Caracas, Venezuela to open our business. My family had business in the footwear industry, so we used to have a big factory and also retail stores, export business, wholesale catalog. So I moved to Venezuela because the situation in Colombia wasn't that good and Venezuela was booming. So somebody has to go there to run the business. So I said yes, and I moved at the age of 22.

I worked in Venezuela for 11 years, opening stores, bringing also licenses to Venezuela. Hush Puppies, a very important brand in the US, but it's more important outside the US. So I was the youngest Hush Puppies licensee to sign a deal. I was 24 when we signed it for Venezuela and then from Colombia. Then I move again back to Colombia. I took care to work in the business to be like the CEO. Then I move here. So basically it's like 25 years of family business

Esther Choy:
Ariel is now based in the US. In his office where we’re talking, he told me about his family business, its hay day, and the long days when he was doing everything he could to save it. I’ve never had a conversation with someone so frank and introspective about a topic a lot of people avoid even thinking about, much less going on record to talk.

So, here’s the main portion of the interview. You will feel like you are right there with us. So, I will invite our guest experts professor Pendergast and professor Allen to comment towards the latter part of this episode.

Okay. So your grandfather came, moved from Moldova to Cali, Colombia. He bought this business and then your father, after studying industrial engineering in Haifa, Israel, went back and he grew the business. It was thriving and successful in the seventies and eighties. Then when new flood of products coming in from Asia, from other parts of South America, then the business saw a different kind of challenges and different level of challenges. What were the major, do you think, were the, let's say, three biggest obstacles once that happened?

Ariel Bacal:

There are two ways that you compete in a business like footwear, either with price or with variety. So price, at that time and now is also the case, you can bring very cheap products from China, now Vietnam, Bangladesh. In variety, you can bring beautiful product from Brazil because you need clusters. To have variety, you need a big cluster. Let's say that right now the fashion is in a skin leather. So tanner is close to you, and then you need a certain material for the outsole so you need suppliers. To manufacture stuff, you need clusters, like in cars, in everything. So we were located in a place which we have excellent labor, but very, very thin cluster. So we didn't have the price competitiveness of China nor the beauty and the ability to do nice stuff like Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Spain.

So to do a variety, we have to import everything from Brazil, Mexico, or Italy. So we end up with huge inventories in raw material or we have to go and have the same price of the people from Asia, from factories from Asia, which was impossible. On top of that, you have something that nobody talks about in Colombia. Colombia, unfortunately, is the biggest exports of cocaine, of illegal drugs. I didn't invent it, but that's the case. So the way they launder the money is by doing smuggling, smuggling of brands, smuggling of shoes. So in Colombia, you can go to the city center in any big city and you can find Nike's and Adidas at a very, very low price because they buy it and they dump it and they sell it at lower than the cost because they need to launder the money. So if you are in Colombia competing with Chinese smuggling, Brazil and Mexico and eventually Italy and Spain. So it's very hard. It's very, very hard.

Esther Choy:

What did you try to overcome all these insurmountable challenges?

Ariel Bacal:

So basically we've built a brand which was one of the best brands in Colombia, Reindeer, which is a women's sandals based in comforts... It was a very nice brand. Reindeer. So we took advantage of that. So we have the brand, let's go straight directly to the public and let's build stores. So we avoid the low price competition. We can do some things in the factory, bring from Brazil and from China, the things that we don't manufacture and build the brand based on that. So that's the way that we did it and the way many brands did it when they had these type of challenges. Okay, let's open stores, but it's not that easy. It's very hard and it's very costly.

No, what we did actually is going to the market that was also part of our natural market, which was Venezuela and trying to sell in Venezuela the volume that we were not selling in Colombia. Venezuela was at that time booming. So it help us... The fact that we were not competitive yet, so that there were not business yet because the competition was so hard. We had this opportunity in Venezuela. Venezuela had the oil was at that $120. There was money in the market, everybody was selling the good, the bad, the cheap. Everybody was selling anything.

So I went to Venezuela. We had very good years until it ends. It ended with Chavez and all the economic circus that they did there. So basically Venezuela was like a cream, no, like an aloe cream, that we put it to the wound to survive more years, which were very, very good years. We had a very deep problem in our business, which is we were no longer competitive. That's why. So Venezuela gave us the volume and the margins that we needed because Colombia wasn't giving that, but until it finished. Then we opened Venezuela and we opened stores. So we did the two things.

Esther Choy:

So you went to Venezuela, you leveraged a brand, you opened retails and you still have the factory.

Ariel Bacal:

Yes.

Esther Choy:

So you have fired all cylinders. Why did it not work at the end?

Ariel Bacal:

First of all, to have a retail company is very different than to have a manufacturing company. Both are expensive and both are working capital intense. So if you're going to keep both, you have to finance both. If you don't have a perfectly balanced and booming revenue, I mean people are buying your stuff and paying you on time, it's very difficult. So you have to go to banks. So we end up with inventory in the factory, inventory stock in the stores. Every dollar in inventory you have to either profit or bank or receivables. I mean, accounting is the most beautiful thing that the human ever invented. I mean, if you do this, you have to bring that. So if you increase inventory by $1 million, either you made a profit of $1 million, or you have to bring $1 million in debt.

So inventories start to pile up, expenses start to rise because you have to pay rent, you have to pay also the factory. The more we sold on retail, the less we sold on wholesale. Not because the customers or the clients told us, "Ah, you're open in stores, we're going to buy you." They won't buy our product because we were more expensive. So community were up. Colombia was also booming. Banks that were lending a hand to fist. So we were managed to grow the business with bank money, mainly dollar denominated debt, which very, very cheap, was very cheap.

Esther Choy:

What period was that approximately?

Ariel Bacal:

It was from 2006 until 2010, 12, 13, 14. That period of time after the 2008 crash. So that interest rate went down, down. Just to give you an example, a company in Colombia... I was able to take loans in dollars at 4% interest rate. Now, mortgages in the US are 8%. So we were risky, I mean, we were the classic financial time bomb, but people were lending because when money flows and everything goes right, nobody's asking tough questions.

Esther Choy:

No, no. Yeah, that is a classic time bomb. So then what happened at the end?

Ariel Bacal:

So basically we had this big company, lots of inventory, lots of working capital, lots of debt. Then the peso devalued from 1800 to 4,000 when the oil prices went down. So we had double the debt, half of the sales because they were in peso so if you translate it to dollar, which was very tough. So I decided that we start to work with the lenders to get refinance, a workout agreement rather than a chapter 11. So we started a workout agreement. Then it didn't work out so we went to chapter 11. The negotiation process in the chapter 11 was also tough. So at the end of the day we decided to take it to liquidation, which is chapter seven in the US law.

Esther Choy:

You had to make the announcement March 18th, 2016. Can you take us back to that day when you were speaking to your employees?

Ariel Bacal:

Yes. I mean, it was very obvious for the people that something is going to happen. Before that announcement, during 2015, I decided that we have to sell in the US market. It's the biggest market. We have to sell it in the US market. Actually we started to sell to big companies here in the US, magically, because it's not an easy task to do. So we start to sell actually to company owned by Berkshire Hathaway. The prices and the thing that I was willing to do was too much for the factory. We didn't have money and we were making orders of shoes that we are not used to do it and we did it. The workers in the factory were staying for long hours to have that order ship on time. I mean, everybody was very involved in the process, trying to save the factory.

So I got a phone call from one of the biggest client hearing in the US. He told me, "Ariel, you did a fantastic job, but you know what, we are moving our program from your factory to the one that we have in Brazil. Although you did fantastically, but you have to understand Brazil, they have cluster. They're much better equipped. We really don't know how you guys did it, but you did it. Nevertheless, we're going to Brazil." So I decided at that time that it doesn't make sense. So we started in the process of making the arrangement to close the factory.

So in that day, I was 39. March 17th, the other day, was my 40th birthday, I mean, 40 years old. I make the announcement. I wanted to do it myself, not through the lawyers. Yes, we went to the cafeteria and I said that this is the last day. One of my family members, Juan Bachal, leads the factory. I told them that they know how much we struggled, how much we fought, how many new clients we tried to bring in, in so short period of time, but we have to close. So everybody started to cry. It was very, very, very hard.

Esther Choy:

How many people were there? Do you remember approximately?

Ariel Bacal:

Approximately 300 because we were cutting staff, we were cutting, so like 350, around that.

Esther Choy:

How did you get yourself ready to make that announcement?

Ariel Bacal:

You never are, you're never ready. I mean, when you don't have options... One of the bad things of not having option of the silver lining is that you have to do what you have to do. So my only option is telling someone else to do it and not me. That wasn't an option.

Esther Choy:

Was your father around?

Ariel Bacal:

No, because during that process, a couple of years before, my father went to live with my mother in Israel. They wanted to retire. My mother very wisely, seeing all the problems that we have and giving me some space. Okay, let Ariel deal with it because he cannot deal with this, plus maybe also because it was very hard for me, you can imagine for my father. So they decided to move to Israel and to take a sabbatical year. So my father wasn't that day and he was actually in... No, he was in Cali at that day because they moved back to Colombia because my mother started cancer treatment the next day. March 17, my mother went to here, to Florida, to start her cancer treatment.

Esther Choy:

Wait, so your parents, they were already living in Israel and during this time when you were doing everything you could to save and revive the business, were you solely in charge or what was the sort of role of responsibilities fall in between you and your father or other family owners?

Ariel Bacal:

No, I was solely in charge with my team. We had a CFO, we had a very good team, but I was solely in charge. When we started the negotiation process with the lenders, I was the one who went there and put my face. I don't know how to say it, but yes, I think that it was the best thing to do. It was a difficult process, but if you want to have some mercy of the lenders, the owner have to be there. You have to sit and talk with the banks, talk with the suppliers, talk with the workers, with middle management. So basically I tried to brief my father in everything that we were doing, but I don't want him to be extremely worried. After my mother's health deterioration, more so.

Esther Choy:

So were you the CEO then? You're solely one of the owners as well as the executives in charge?

Ariel Bacal:

Yes, indeed.

Esther Choy:

How did you feel before and after making the announcement?

Ariel Bacal:

I remember getting that call from the big customer here in the US and I was a little bit of relief. I mean, I did what I did. If they were keeping sending me those orders and pushing me to still do these orders at the price and the condition that they want me to do, I mean, I would say yes, but it was impossible. So when they say I go to Brazil, I told them I completely understand. Hope to see you again soon. Bye. That time, you know you have to make a decision, but you don't want to make it. So there is this little, I mean...

Esther Choy:

Spark.

Ariel Bacal:

Spark. Well okay, I have to make it. There is no other choice so okay, I'm ready. Let's do it. So let's start the process and let's do it.

Esther Choy:

Okay.

Ariel Bacal:

It's like many, many entrepreneurs that they... Many, unfortunately. They're closing their business. They struggle, they struggle, but maybe they get the message or the phone call from the VC. We're not doing another investment or there is no money. So I think that getting that call is better than not getting any call. That type of spark gives you... Okay, this is it. I'm sitting here, I know my options. If you are trying to figure out and drowning and drowning and drowning and drowning, you end up dying.

Esther Choy:

Looking back, were there anything you think you would've done differently?

Ariel Bacal:

I think that what will make sense would have make sense at that time. Sorry, my English is not, you know Celia Cruz is a Cuban singer.

Esther Choy:

Of course.

Ariel Bacal:

Yes, Celia Cruz. She always said, my English is not very good looking. So my English is not very good looking. So I think that the correct way of doing things, it was to close the business after the Venezuela market stopped giving us the volume that we needed. That was the day that we should say, you know what, let's close it. We have good liquidity, let's pay everybody, and that's it. It's very difficult because we were at the top. We were selling and selling and selling and selling and opening stores. So it's very hard. It's almost impossible to close, to stop your business or what you're doing when you are nearly in the top. You always wait until you're drowning. That's human nature.

Esther Choy:
Most amazingly, since the closing of his family footwear business that his grandfather started in Columbia, Ariel is back at the entrepreneurial venture again. It's called Blanx. And you can find it online B. L. A. N. X. .ME

And what kind of business is this?

Footwear.

That's right, another footwear business but this one is very different.

Ariel Bacal:

So basically Blanx, it's a brand that is based on collaboration. A sneaker brand, which leveraging two things. One is collaborations, but collaboration, not with celebrities. We collaborate with artists and influencers. So we both launch small sneaker drops of Canvas sneakers, which are print, not on demand, but almost on demand because print on demand sneakers is not... The technology is not there yet, but we partner with influencer or with the collaborator to drop sneakers into the marketplace. So it's taking the Jordan Nike model and bringing it to the masses.

We have a collaborator, we have a tattoo artist from Mexico. We can have a Broadway actor also from New York. We can have the drummer of Imagine Dragons. The idea is that if they have a story to tell and if they have also an audience to help sell the shoes.

I guess it wasn't because we launch it during Corona. I started to entertain the idea of having some sort of brand that you can have a variety of product, a variety of the design with a very concentrated product. So the problem with footwear is that in order to have two good sellers, you have to develop 20 or 50 models. So it's very time consuming and the inventories is a mess. The research and development to develop is very hard. So it's like a casino gambling, every collection that you make.

There is no way to have a very systemic way of doing things in fashion. So I started to think five years ago, okay, how can I take one or two products, very plain vanilla, very like a commodity, a simple canvas shoe, and then print several designs on the same product. So the product is the same in the production floor, in the factory, but with one exception. You print it differently according to demand. So that's why, based on that we created Blanx, which is based on that technology and that supply chain way of doing things. So it's five years ago, but we launched our first batch of collaborations during Corona.

Esther Choy:

Okay. Now the most obvious one, the pink elephant in the room. 2016, when you had to make the announcement and then liquidations afterwards, 2020. 2020, barely four years later, you are back at it again, and shoes. Why?

Ariel Bacal:

Okay, if I close it, if I sell it, what am I going to do? Maybe I have some saving, which is great but if you don't have it or you have not the amount that will give you tranquility, so what is it that you're going to do? So usually you pivot to something that you know. That's why you feel comfortable and that what you are doing and what the levers are. So that's why I'm doing again the shoe stuff.

Jennifer Pendergast:

All our narratives are made up by us.

Esther Choy:

That’s professor Jennifer Pendergast, our show’s advisor, and the executive director for Kellogg’s John L Ward Center for Family Enterprises.

Jennifer Pendergast:

The story you tell about who you are and your origin story, the story I tell is largely a story I created in my mind by putting together pieces of things for how I choose to make sense of what happened to me. And this is very much a psychological phenomenon, and there's a whole line of psychological research around generativity and our desire to create this legacy and the story we tell about who we are.

And I do think there are families that do things like that well. They tell the story about the things that failed. And that's a good thing.

Esther Choy:
It’s not just that telling failure stories is a good thing for learning, but it is also extremely helpful to think how we frame our stories to begin with. From the beginning, I said we’re setting to listen to a story about a failed family business. Perhaps that is not right all together.

Matt Allen:

You've probably heard, you should fail fast. You should fail early. You're going to run into problems, you're going to run into mistakes. And the idea is to overcome or work around or whatever you need to do to get past.

Esther Choy:
That’s professor Matt Allen from Babson College, also a visiting professor at Kellogg’s Ward Center this year.

Matt Allen:

I think in family business, you're going to find it is a little bit different because of the mindset that families have about the core family business. I'll give you an example. I had a student in my office and we were talking about family business, and he said, "Oh, I wish that I could have been part of a family business, but my family is kind of a failure at family business."

And I said, "Oh, that's interesting. Tell me what you mean." And he said, "Well, my grandfather started a business. It was a very successful, but he sold it before he passed it onto my father. And my father also started a very successful business, but he sold it before he passed it on to me. And now I've started my own business, but we're really a failure at family business," was his response, which I found quite interesting, right? Successful businesses. But his view of failure was the fact that none of these businesses as specific entities passed from one generation to the next. And I think families sometimes will look at the original family business and success or failure depends on whether that business continues. But if you look at the history of long-lived family businesses, very often the current business four generations later or three generations later, has almost no resemblance to the original family business.

I think we talked about that before with the accountants that end up in the newspaper industry.

Esther Choy:
Matt is referring to Zack Richner's family business. He is the guest of episode 3 in Season 3. Zack's grandparents were originally accountants when they purchased their first local newspaper company.

Back to Matt.

Matt Allen:
Their original, if you were to call them entrepreneurs with what they started originally, doesn't look at all like a media conglomerate later. And you could look at this case that you described almost in a similar way. The core family business, which manufactured shoes is gone. Is that a failure or is the entrepreneurial legacy continuing in this third generation family member? And I would even add what gets really interesting is whether or not the family has multiple businesses. Because if there are lots of businesses, let's say three or four that are going on and one goes away, well the other three are continuing, and then maybe they pick up a fourth and it looks like this family business is continuous throughout.

In this case that you describe, it sounds like there was one family business and it went away before this new online shoe business or the yoga studios or the consulting actually came to be. And so it feels like a very stark time delineated failure. What would it look like if the online shoe business had started three years before the manufacturing business went under? Would we consider that a failure or would we say that was part of the evolution?

Esther Choy:
And would we still have started this episode saying that we're so fortunate to have someone willing to share a failed family business story? OR, would we have probably said instead, we're about to listen to a story of a family business with a dramatically different business because it has evolved with the marketplace?

Sometimes a door needs to close before another door can open. If we zoom out on the timeline of

Ariel's family business there was a four-year gap, between the core business being shut down and liquidated and when he launched his online business, Blanx.me.

This gets to the third element in our Family IN Entrepreneurship Model: Timing. When we talk about timing it could be about the go to market timing, it could be about timing with macroeconomic and geopolitical developments, it could also be the fact that family business has patient capital because family enterprises, as opposed to publicly traded companies, have a very different relationship with time.

But the timing in Ariel's case is that there was a period of INVOLUNTARY hiatus. Do we necessarily default to calling the family business failed because there was a pause when all throughout that period Ariel has clearly leveraged many of his family business assets, the expertise, knowledge, relationship, just to name a few. And he discovered his own niche in this very competitive product category. The entrepreneurial legacy has continued on to his generation, the third generation.

And yet, here's how Ariel describes his story.

Ariel Bacal:

My story, it's like a tragic Greek story. So if you fail, you did something wrong. So my story is about you can fail doing something which is right, but it's not the correct thing to do, but you only will see it when you already failed.

Esther Choy:

When we look at stories that others have written, be it by our family members generations ago, or by storytellers centuries and centuries ago, we tend to use them as our reference. We tend to borrow their plots and story arcs and tell our stories mirroring theirs – unknowingly.

When we look at what Ariel has learned and applied from running his family business into his present venture, Blanx.me, I don't get a sense that I'm listening to a tragic Greek story at all!

For example,

Ariel Bacal:

If you have a software or a technology which has network effects that can scale very quickly without investing too much money. You can invest money in the beginning and try to have that technology grow a lot and then bring profit like Google, like Facebook, Instagram, because those are profitable businesses.

To apply the startup model to a non-technology, to fashions, to direct to consumer, is not the case.

To start a business which is a fashion brand or a brand which requires working capital, you have to bring inventory, you have to invest in acquisition, you have to invest in marketing. Thinking that the more you grow, the less you going to lose, and eventually you're going to make profit and that process will be funded by someone else, is something that it's not the case anymore. I think that people are realizing that it was a mistake because lots of the businesses that they funded are not making profit after many years because acquisition cost gets higher, not lower. I mean, to attract a new customer let's say to a XYZ brand that it's only digital, it will cost you more maybe or the same. It doesn't get any cheaper to attract. Then you need a bigger team. So it's very hard to scale it profitably if you do not do it from scratch.

I would love Blanx to be a brand like everybody was talking about. Doesn't matter who you are, it's a brand, build it from bottom to top. So I would like to build it as a big brand slash platforms for artists and influencers to have a beautiful sneaker and maybe other products in the future. So you can buy a piece of art from a artist from Mexico, from Philippines, or from the US. It's a limited edition. So it will take time, but it take much longer than any startup or any VC funded business will take, but when I arrive there, if I arrive there, I will arrive much stronger.

Esther Choy:
Are you hearing a tragic Greek story? I don't.

Instead, I'm hearing an extremely wise and highly sophisticated industry insider who is seeing a path to build a new venture that crosses the sections of fashion, tech, influencer-based brand. That's because Ariel has not only continued on his family entrepreneurial legacy, he's leveraged all forms of assets from his family business. AND. He has discovered his own niche.

Entrepreneurship is not just about a mindset that solves problems. Entrepreneurship is also about writing our own stories with our own arcs. Kartik Wahi from episode 1 said "I wanted to write my own glory." Ian Rosen from episode 2 was confident when he said, "I can find my way back to the family business." Zack Richner said, "If something has been done for a long time, that means there's probably another way to do it."

And that's exactly what the guest of our next and last episode of Season 3 has been doing. She writes her own entrepreneurial stories in her own terms, on her own time, with her own story arc. I hope you won't miss that!

Thank you for tuning into Family IN Business, a podcast sponsored by the John L. Ward Center for Family Enterprises. Thank you, Arial Bacal, co-founder and proprietor of BLANX.ME.

Our show is supported and advised by Dr. Jennifer Pendergast, executive director of Kellogg's Ward Center for Family Enterprises. Kane Power is our podcast engineer. And I am Esther Choy, Kellogg Class of 2009, CEO and Chief Story Facilitator of Leadership Story Lab, and author of the book *Let the Story Do the Work.*

Esther Choy is the President and Chief Story Facilitator of Leadership Story Lab, where she teaches business storytelling to organizations and professionals who are searching for more meaningful ways to connect with their audiences. Leaders trained in storytelling find compelling narratives to communicate authentically, inspire others, and create unimagined, lasting impact.

Since 2010, Esther has combined the science of persuasion and the art of storytelling to help her clients gain a competitive edge. Since launching Leadership Story Lab, Esther and her team have served clients across industries, including United Airlines, West Monroe, fairlife, ZS, McCormick Foundation, Brookfield Asset Management, Adyen, Moore, Kwik Lok, US Cellular, and SC Johnson.

Esther is the author of *Let the Story Do the Work: The Art of Storytelling for Business Success*. Her work appears regularly on forbes.com, virgin.com, entrepreneur.com, and ama.org. She is a graduate of Kellogg, as well as Texas A&M, holding an MBA from the former and MS in Higher Education from the latter. Her podcast, Family IN Business is sponsored by the John L. Ward Center for Family Enterprises at the Kellogg School of Management, where she is an adjunct lecturer.

Every Monday morning, you'll find Esther beginning her week with a 1,000-meter swim and a raw jalapeño. She's a mom of two trilingual girls, wife of a German who's not very punctual, and is a very humble student of kitesurfing. Esther spent nearly half her life in Hong Kong, and now lives in Chicago with her husband and two daughters.

Established in 1999, the John L. Ward Center for Family Enterprises pioneered much of what is known about the collective challenges that family businesses and their leaders and owners face, making the Ward Center synonymous with new ways of thinking about the ownership and leadership of family enterprises. Clinical Professor Emeritus John Ward, along with co-founder Lloyd Shefsky and numerous faculty and staff aligned with the Ward Center, developed a world-class teaching and research center that provides cutting-edge thinking and guidance for family business purpose, vision and strategy, governance, leadership, succession, entrepreneurship in family business, family engagement and cohesion and family business culture.

The Ward Center has built a collaborative family business community among Kellogg students, faculty, alumni and family business scholars, and has developed a global network of successful business families who can learn from - and connect with - each other to generate innovative solutions to current and emerging challenges faced by family enterprises. The Ward Center also creates unparalleled executive programs and conferences to drive strategic conversations about innovations and best practices in the field of family enterprise.

Renamed the John L. Ward Center for Family Enterprises in 2020, the center today is in a unique position to transform the decision-making and strategic thinking of future generations of family enterprise leaders. The Ward Center is dedicated to producing rigorous and relevant research into the unique demands, strengths and evolutionary paths of family enterprises. Results of this research are delivered in the classrooms to all ages of family business leaders.

In addition to our focus on the complexities of family enterprise leadership, governance and strategy, we integrate Northwestern University's and the Kellogg School of Management's authoritative expertise into our curriculum to create a world-class, comprehensive, cross-discipline family enterprise resource. Our fusion of this deep academic capability with knowledge gleaned from our global community of high-impact business-owning families helps create the Ward Center's unique theory-driven, evidence-based frameworks.

The Ward Center has a three-pronged approach:

- Providing MBA curriculum and programming for students who are part of a family business, as well as students interested in the fields of private equity and venture capital
- Offering executive education courses that cover the full gamut of family enterprise management issues including family business strategy, governance, succession planning, entrepreneurship, family offices and family business culture

- Conducting groundbreaking research, both academic and practitioner-based, to better understand the challenges facing business families