



FOCUS on Leadership – presented by FOCUS St. Louis

Episode #2:

YEMI AKANDE-BARTSCH: Celebrating 25 years of leadership in the St. Louis region – this is FOCUS St. Louis Leadership Podcast. I’m Yemi Akande-Bartsch, President and CEO of FOCUS St. Louis, and your host. Join me as I talk with great leaders and visionaries inspiring our world to be a better place to live, work and play for all of us. Ready, set, talk.

Welcome to the Leadership Podcast, and my guest today is none other than Marcy Bursac. And I have to say, I’m really excited to be talking to Marcy because I’ve known Marcy for quite some time, not just as a Women In Leadership alum but you’ve done a couple of pivots in your personal life and also in your professional life and we’re going to get an opportunity to talk about that today. So some of you may know Marcy as USOA Mrs. Ohio 22, what do we say, you’re the pageant, yeah, that’s just who you are.

MARCY BURSAC: Well, I don’t know right – I entered a pageant this summer, I’m not a pageant person – I’m learning, I’m learning this platform. It’s kind of a way to bring the echo that I’m trying to put on foster care adoption and bring that into a really positive space. So it’s a new thing for me.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That’s great. So we’re going to learn about that today. But she is an incredible woman. She has served as a mentor to me in going through the adoption process so I’m glad that she could join us today not just as an alum of FOCUS St. Louis but also as a woman who went from working at Connections to Success, doing great work in the community, to then waking up one day and saying, “You know what, I need to pivot in my career and I’m going to go into IT” and you went through I would say an expedited training to do so.

BURSAC: I did.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: And now you are at Spectrum just doing incredible work there. But that’s why we’re here. For those of you who don’t know her, she’s also a graduate of Belmont University, Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. At Belmont, you graduated with a degree in psychology, minor in education. At Saint Mary’s University, you have a Master of Arts in philanthropy and development. And what’s this thing that I hear that you’re also working on an MBA – a woman after my own heart – collecting those degrees so she can be the practitioner academic that she was destined to be. I’m excited that you could join us here today. Welcome.

BURSAC: I’m excited to be here – thanks for the invitation to come.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Oh absolutely, you were one of the first people that I thought about when I started to think of bringing our leadership podcast here. So let's start out – tell us your story, how'd you get to now?

BURSAC: I think so much of that, Yemi, in like a sentence, is just sometimes you can know enough about what you're wanting that you need to take a step forward, and that step forward has absolutely no promise, but it's what you're supposed to do. And so, I was a first-generation college student. I didn't have a lot of direction on what to do, fell into the nonprofit world, fell into philanthropy work. I loved it, I got a degree in it because I wanted to be really good at it. In the process, I adopted two kiddos who are biological siblings through the foster care system. And I have this moment of - oh no, I never thought about my mom goals. I never thought about where I wanted to be with my kids. For instance, what I knew I didn't want was putting them to bed over the phone heading into a 6 pm meeting. This isn't what I want but I never thought about it. And the answer for me then was pivot. You're going to have to get out of the nonprofit world, so I went through LaunchCode, based in St. Louis, spread across the country, was in their coed program and then got my foot in the door at Spectrum. I did some time in software development, I've pivoted a little bit and kind of combined my leadership skills and my strategy skills and now I'm more analyzing some of the internal things that we're doing. But it's definitely been an incredible journey of just stepping out, like when I career pivoted I had no idea. Could I learn this skill? Could I get a job? I didn't know that when I signed up to adopt my children, I didn't know if I would be chosen, if my husband and I would be chosen to have them.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: But you went in – you went all in.

BURSAC: Right, because I feel like so much of it – and I'm learning that in this pageant world now too – I don't know if I'll win a national title, I'm preparing as if I will. But at the end of the day, I'm proud of myself for seeing an opportunity and saying yes. Saying I will grow in this space. I'm happy to be in front of people and fall on my face. Like if I totally do this and it means the voice that I'm trying to echo for children who are waiting is bigger, that's a win to me. I'm like I don't care if my dress is pretty. Now I'm doing all this stuff ...

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I was going to say, don't forget the pretty factor.

BURSAC: Right, I gotta go do some shopping and learn some skills and learn to walk in five-inch heels ...

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Five inch? I didn't even know they existed but good to know.

BURSAC: At Walmart – can you imagine that? I talked to someone that's like, "Oh yeah, you buy Johnathan Kayne. They're suntan, like a nude color, and they're five-inch heels." And I looked it up and I'm like Walmart carries those, ok.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I did not know that.

BURSAC: Yeah, so I sometimes practice. Just because you have to like put your feet in front of each other in a way that is not as natural as we walk, so it's a new skillset. But I can embrace the skillset, and I don't know where else I'll use that skill to walk in those shoes. But it's a new uncomfortable space, so it's how do I find a way to embrace change that is living it out loud. How can I embrace learning something for the sake of I'm growing, and I don't know what I'm doing but I know that I'm learning and willing.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Talk about a growth opportunity ... when I saw that you were going to participate in this pageant, I had to go back and read your LinkedIn. What did I miss here along the way in just my knowing you? But at the same time it brought me joy that you were trying something that was outside of what we know you for. It almost gives people permission to do other things, to lean in to the discomfort without any, "I'm tying expectations to this, it's all about the winning" as it is about the experience.

BURSAC: Right, and so much of that Yemi it's interesting to hear your perspective because I remember when I just felt like, "Oh, I should go research this. What am I doing – this isn't me. I don't do this stuff." But if I'm supposed to, maybe I should. It's interesting because I've learned that so much of what kind of is expected or what is needed to do something different – whether that means you're going to a theater program and becoming an actor and you've always wanted to or learning an instrument or you're taking a dance class – whatever the thing is, I'm learning that all it is is you saying, "Ok, I'm going to do this. And I'm going to invite people in to help me know how." So you ask people how, you ask people where. And it's the skills that we've used, or at least that I've used in other aspects of my life that I'm just using those again and saying, "I don't know how to X, Y and Z. So who can I ask that does?"

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Absolutely, and it reminds me of back in the day when I was working on my journalism degree one of the things we were told to keep in mind when you go into any situation where a story is concerned is to ask the who, what, when, where, how. And it sounds like that's what you've done in your experience of just pivoting and diving into different aspects of life. And to hear you talk now at the beginning of this interview I'm reminded of this quote by Howard Thurman, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is more people who have come alive." And that's you.

BURSAC: That's so good. Well, that reminds me of during the pandemic when I was like, "I need to scale what I've been doing and write a book." I had never written a book before.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That's true. And how long did the book take you to write?

BURSAC: My goal, because I had tried like a year before and I had used an online template and it just didn't feel good. So I kind of put it away. I worked on it like a month, on the weekends and was just like, "Uck." And so during the pandemic I just felt an urgency of now is the time. So my goal was to write it in the of August. It was like at the very end of July I wrote it all down on paper and I talked to my husband and I totally forgot Yemi that the very first weekend in August we had a weekend out of town to celebrate our anniversary.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Oh wow.

BURSAC: So I was like, “I kind made a goal, and we kind of have this.” And his response Yemi, I’m just so grateful. He said, “Well great, we’re going to go to a library while we’re out of town.”

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That’s awesome.

BURSAC: And I’m like, “We are?” “Yeah, I can do some other things and you need to move forward on this goal.”

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I love your husband.

BURSAC: Right?

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Awww... that is excellent.

BURSAC: It was so supportive. So I ended up because I was like calling, I talked to a publishing coach, I talked to some entrepreneurs that knew writers, I learned what to do along the way, so I came out 25 days later with two national endorsements and a manuscript that had already been vetted and edited along the way.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: That is an amazing story. So to all the book writers out there, myself included – I’ve been working on a book for 12 years now and I keep on telling people, “It is going to come out any minute now.” You’re basically telling me that it is doable.

BURSAC: It is.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: And it sounds like it is just a matter of focus, getting organized, and having perhaps process goals to get you to the end of the road. Where now, you not only have a book you also have a podcast and you’re getting an opportunity to tell the greater world about foster care adoption, the stories and also the realities. Because I’ve tuned in to your podcast as well. So to our listeners I want to say out there that if there’s something that you’re thinking about doing and you’re just wondering, “Is it time?” I don’t think there’s necessarily a right time as it is you’ve made that decision to go forward.

BURSAC: I agree.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Then you can leap.

BURSAC: Absolutely. And I think so much of it, to your point, how do you move it? How do you move this thing you thought about, tried and didn’t do, and I’ve talked to other people that are like, “Marcy, I have this book idea, what do I do with it?” I’m like, “You ask yourself, realistically, when can you have your draft done?”

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Sure.

BURSAC: It’s as easy as that, right? For some, it’s ok, well I have these other commitments and dynamics so next summer. Well tell me what month. You have to name it because if you can

say it out loud and especially tell someone else. I wrote mine out, I printed a month calendar and wrote in pencil, had “done with manuscript” written and then I told people in my inner circle .. I wasn’t like “hey world.” A little bit later I posted I’m close to being done on my manuscript, but having that tangible deadline for yourself held me accountable.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yeah, and you had accountability partners in your inner circle.

BURSAC: Right.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: To help, hopefully in a friendly way, go “When is that book coming out?” Any minute now, it’s been 10 years. And that helped you just be able to execute on that. So congratulations on that. So I’m curious – what drives Marcy?

BURSAC: What drives me?

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yes, what are the values that drive you? That just keep you rediscovering aspects of yourself that you didn’t even know was possible.

BURSAC: This question is an interesting one because I’m like, “What do I not know about myself that I don’t know was possible?” I know at my core I’m a learner and whether degreed or not, I love just trying new things. So I’ll get a book and just kind of skim through it and try to take out of it what I can and I often repurpose. Like maybe this was meant for this industry or like an example I used in the coding world when I started at Spectrum was there was this process to create data that people were taking almost the entire workday to create just kind of a test data set. And I was like, “Wait a minute. If we use mail merge, I think I can do this in like 10 minutes.” Yemi, I could! These things don’t go together. You don’t think about using Microsoft Word mail merge as a software developer. You think programming languages. So I think just the idea of how can I allow myself to be outside the box. So I love that as one of my values. That things are not always created for all their purposes. Because sometimes you can repurpose those things.

But I think what gets me up in the morning is this drive and desire that, and I don’t know exactly the core of it, but making the world better. I feel like I’m indebted as a human being to do that. Whether that means encouraging someone or sending a note or playing with something that is a concept I’m trying to play with for the future or whatever it is, but I feel like there’s such intentionality to my spirit that I’m like, ok, now that I met this person or I want to meet someone in this case or, case in point, with representing the state of Ohio even though I live in Missouri, the opportunity presented itself because my partner, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, their founder Dave Thomas was adopted from foster care so they’ve supported my book, they provided tools to me when I was adopting through foster care and this opportunity was, what if I could represent the state of Ohio where the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is based? Well in turn, this is amazing. So I went up to Ohio just around Thanksgiving and did a book tour throughout the state and I was at a local bookshop in Columbus and as I’m talking with the store owner a few weeks out and we’re kind of planning

things, she said, “Marcy, I just got these totebags. Hold on a second, yeah, there’s information inside on foster care adoption, should I hold these for when you come in town?” And I said, “Well hold on, who dropped them off? Because I want to talk to that person.” Well fast forward, she made sure that was ok to connect with this woman and her name is Lynn, and Lynn is a social worker with the state that works on foster care adoption.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Get out.

BURSAC: So she’s been a partner. We text and we email and we call and we’re working on ways to streamline the process to get licensed to adopt through foster care. It’s a government program, we don’t ever think about our taxes being easy, we don’t think about signing up for food stamps as being easy, it’s not simplified. So she and I are trying to streamline what we can do to help this bigger process that impacts 120,000 kids. So there are things like that. Yemi I didn’t know when I say yes to Ohio that there would be something like this along that path but I found a kindred spirit who knows so much about a system and I can just say, “I have these questions. I’m wondering from the outside – can we do this or that or is this even a thing?” And she’s able to go navigate from the inside.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I have to say, it’s the fearless Marcy. I love it, because you’re open, you’re having this conversation, you don’t know where it will lead, but you’re still open. And that openness is what I think is what’s helping sort of expand your world. And you remember this, I moved here from Ohio and I can’t tell you, it almost seems as though everyone on their way somewhere needs to connect to Ohio or needs to go through Ohio. I can’t tell you how many people I’ve met just nationally that have made their way, born, raised, passed through, drove through Ohio that I’ve connected with.

BURSAC: There’s a good energy. Before I ever said yes to serving with the United States of America’s pageant system I have a sibling who lives up in Cleveland, Ohio, and I have a good college friend in Columbus, and so I reached out to them and said, “Ok, what do you think?” I reached out to the Dave Thomas Foundation as well and said, “Hey, what do you think – I have this opportunity.” And my sister was very supportive and my girlfriend said, “Well hold on.” She’s a mom blogger and there’s a huge network of mom bloggers in her city. She said, “Let me kind of inquire for you.” So she did her research and came back and said, “Marcy, listen, here’s the word on the street. As long as you’re not from Michigan, we all love you.”

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Ah, ok! I won’t go the Michigan route because I think I may have a guest from Michigan but I’ll accept that. That is awesome.

BURSAC: Sure, because of the state competition, professional sports, which is adorable. I was like how embracing.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Absolutely.

BURSAC: That they were like, we understand what you’re trying to accomplish and if that means you represent where we live but you want to help us, let’s do it.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yeah, I'm such a strong advocate for adoption that our connectivity over that, you know being an ambassador just to promote that. There's just so many kids in the system.

BURSAC: There are.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: And there are so many folks out there who have the love to give and if you don't know the process, I wanna say connect with Marcy Bursac on LinkedIn, listen to her podcast, buy her book, *The Forgotten Adoption Option*, because it's important. And this is how we can grow our future to be parents to the kids that need our love and that need our support.

BURSAC: Exactly. And it's hard, to your point, navigating adoption, whether you go international and adopt overseas or you go infant private and adopt a baby in the United States or you go through foster care and adopt, they're just processes that have steps. I joke with people that I'm like, in the foster care adoption space, there are 52 steps. And you can meet – I don't know if there are really 52, but you can sign up and start the licensing process and feel so overwhelmed because it conflicts with your time, or the social worker leaves – all these different things that I've heard my readers and friends tell me over the years of like, "Ah Marcy, this is so daunting."

But I find that when people know what to expect, right, ok when you're going to make Thanksgiving dinner, you know you're gonna spend some time in the kitchen. Well if that's the expectation, then it's so much easier to say, "I need to set out a whole day ahead or plan differently for how that's going to happen." And so I had a gentleman that I work with, he and his wife are pursuing foster care adoption and just recently he reached out and said, "Marcy, look, we're so close to being licensed and so close to being able to be matched," he said. "But I've got to tell you, we wanted to quit." And I said, "Well tell me about that." He said, "Well, the social worker lost our paperwork and then they left their job and then this training we signed up for ended up not being the night we moved our schedule around" ... all these bumpy things. And I said, "You know, I have to tell you this perspective. We all know what it's like to go to the grocery store and there's the bad cashier, right. You knew when you got in the line, you saw everyone else around you, and you're not moving. You're not moving at all." I said, "The challenge with foster care adoption is you're going to feel like you're in the bad cashier's line. You look to your left and you can look to your right and think, I'm getting out of this line. But I want to ask you to remember that the kids – the kids that are at the other end of the cashier's lane – they're the ones that are suffering. They're the ones that are waiting and they're the ones that are ready, and it's not their fault that they're at the end of that line. And so, if you can level set your expectations and bring some compassion and realize you have to kind of project manage quite a bit, you can get through it." You got through it and adopted.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yes, absolutely. It's do-able. And I would say patience is the name of while you're waiting. And also believing that it will happen and thinking, as you said, it's the children

that are on the other side there that are going to benefit greatly. And the love that's going to come from it, nothing short of amazing.

BURSAC: Right.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: So I want to ask you, what's next on the horizon for you? Since you wake up every morning and you go, "Ok, what is a huge mountain or peak that I need to climb today?" What are you thinking – what are you thinking is on the horizon?

BURSAC: So 12 months ago, Yemi, if you would've said, "Marcy, you published a book – what's next?" I would have been like wiping my hands, "I did the book, I'm done." And I learned, I didn't know this ahead of time that when you write a book, the first step is writing it. There's work, there's so much work to do after you publish it. And I didn't know all of that. And so that opened a whole world, so what I'm doing for me is really kind of phase two of this project that I'm working on. I have a podcast, I spent the first season of The Forgotten Adoption Podcast interviewing either parents that had adopted through foster care or children who are of varying ages that shared their personal stories. In fact, my kids, little sister and big brother, they came on and did a special episode together. It was so fantastic. So you get to hear firsthand stories. And so for me for phase two, what I'm doing for season two, is I'm focusing on the how cause people are coming to me and saying, "Your book broke it down and I can listen to it in audiobook, it's at my library, it's 90 minutes, but I want to hear more how." For instance, my first episode of my second season is two women who are technologists and they have just, in the state of Ohio, piloted their technology to help fast-track kids to pair with their forever home.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: I saw that on your LinkedIn ... yes, yes, yes.

BURSAC: And so the question for the podcast for that one is going to be how can we position ourselves with the right data online? Because if we're helping their databases have the right data, we can help connect more dots. There's another episode, Lynn, the social worker I mentioned, is going to come on and we're going to talk about how you know you're ready to adopt. Because as you said, you're not ever really ready, you're just willing, that's often the case. So for me it's really trying to unpack even more. I didn't know where this would go. I thought, ok, I'm going to take, I've been having people in my home, someone a mutual friend knew that my husband and I adopted through foster care, they knew to send people our way. That's often times, like 50% of people that adopt ask a friend or family member who did it how to do it. It's all word of mouth and the pandemic showed me, ok, I can't really do this in person and Zoom's working, but if I write it down, it can scale. So I've been able to partner and work with people in as far over as Washington all the way to the East Coast in Florida. There's a ministry in Texas that carries my book and anytime someone contacts them, they say, "I'm going to overwhelm you if we talk for three hours. Instead, just have this and then you can go and reference it." So for me it's really trying to figure out how can we help more people, more adults, be aware of the need and the how. And the possibilities. Really, the goal would be, how

can we not have an orphan crisis anymore in our country. I think these kids they're often forgotten, that's why my book is titled The Forgotten Adoption Option.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yeah, aptly titled.

BURSAC: Yeah, I think if I could dream in the future, Yemi, I'll just say it out loud, that I would love to work on a Hallmark movie.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Ahhh, she said it here first.

BURSAC: I did.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Hallmark, tune in.

BURSAC: You've got it recorded. As I've spoken virtually and in person, the one thing about my own journey in adopting through foster care is why. Why did we choose this? And for me it was I went overseas right out of college and I served in orphanages. And these kids were dropped off by mom and dad because mom and dad couldn't afford them. And so it wasn't a matter of neglect or abuse, it was like I can't actually provide the means for you. I remember coming back from that trip thinking I'm going to adopt. I don't know if I can have kids but I want to adopt because I want to bring all those kids home. Feasibly, I can't. I can't like bring 30 kids home at that point but then my husband, when we started dating, we talked about, "Do you want to have kids?" And I said, "Look, I'm not interested in biological children." And I thought this will be a dealbreaker. This is over, bye, see you. And he said, "Well actually, I want to adopt." And this is what I want to do the Hallmark movie with. And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said, "Well Marcy, when my grandfather, when Grandpa Sam grew up, it was the 1920s and there weren't orphanages yet and healthcare was very very different in terms of the types of medicine we had. My Grandpa Sam's mom and dad died within a few months of each other, leaving Sam and two older siblings orphaned."

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Wow.

BURSAC: And the saddest part of the story Yemi, is the community knew this. The community saw this. And the older brother and the older sister were taken in because they could help on the farm.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: It takes a village.

BURSAC: It takes a village. Sam was 7, he was quite defiant, he was a young man, and he grew up on the streets. He slept in the back of grocery stores, he tried to help on some farms to make some money, he got in a lot of trouble because he was rough around the edges, right. And the story is ... Sam has passed away, I didn't get to meet him but the way his daughter tells the story is that Sam knew the police very well and one day he's in the officer's car and the officer said, "Listen Sam, this has got to be the last time you are behind me in my car. So I'm going to drop you off at this church and you're either going to change your life or if you come with me again, it's behind bars. You gotta pick."

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Wow.

BURSAC: Story is, Sam walks in to this church and there teaching is his future wife.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Wow.

BURSAC: And my husband was raised by Sam and Sam created family and Sam made it a priority. He ended up opening a used car business and making a living for himself and creating family. And for me, for like how my husband and I talked about adoption, he said, "Marcy, my only requirements are it needs to be Grandpa Sam. It needs to be a kid in our own backyard who is older." And I said, "I don't know how to do that." I didn't know how to do that.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Right, yeah.

BURSAC: So to me, like, I'd love to work to tell stories, to tell Sam's story.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Wow, that is so inspiring.

BURSAC: There's so much potential.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: It's so powerful, and I want to say the fact that I'm a firm believer in when you put things out into the universe, you have hope, you have belief, and you have faith, it happens. And so I think I'm going to invite you back to talk about your Hallmark movie that you're either going to have, you know, a spot in or you're going to be directing it. I can really see it, and I do believe it. You know, I could talk to you forever.

BURSAC: I know. And now that we've said this out loud, I'm like ok, I have a couple of people I might go filter this past and see.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Yes, yes and your husband is like, "Who's going to play me?" Start thinking. Well, it is always a joy and a pleasure to see you and you continue to live the life inspired. I'm glad that you could join us on our leadership podcast today to tell your story that keeps on evolving. And I'm hoping that our listeners are inspired to do more, to listen to your podcast, to pick up your book and to learn more how they can continue to be in service in your respective communities wherever you call home. Because we have right here joining us today a leader who is purposeful, who is driven and who's just up for anything, but making sure she has accountability partners. So thank you so much for joining us here today, Marcy, on the leadership podcast.

BURSAC: It was a blast. I hope it encourages others.

AKANDE-BARTSCH: Oh absolutely, thank you.