
Jaime: Welcome to *Eventual Millionaire*. I am Jaime Masters. And today on the show, we have Heather Maio-Smith. You can check her out at storyfile.com. She's the cofounder and CEO. I'm gonna let her explain exactly what her business does. But let me just say William Shatner is on the home page, and you can have a conversation with him. So, thank you so much for coming on the show today.

Heather: I take it you're a big William Shatner fan.

Jaime: Yes, I was very impressed.

Heather: He's a great guy. So, we do conversational video. And what that is for anyone that probably doesn't know yet because we created this space is you are able to actually talk to video. So, you can have a conversation with an individual that's been previously video recorded.

For the most part, it's only really been used for individuals up until now, but there are so many different applications. Think about all the questions that you have for individuals or those people that answer the same questions over and over and over again.

They can do a StoryFile. And they can just send out their StoryFile and have those people ask those questions, have that conversation. And then if they by chance get to meet that individual in person, then they can have a completely different conversation because you already have the base. You already have the basics done. So, it allows for a deeper connection with people.

Jaime: I was even just thinking how you started. And I know my grandmother. She had Alzheimer's. And I asked her when I was in third grade to write her autobiography because it was an insane life. And my kids will never experience being able to talk to her ever.

Heather: Absolutely.

Jaime: So, tell me a little bit about how you got into this.

Heather: So, I was an exhibition designer, and I had kind of fell into this niche for holocaust education. So, I was having a lot of conversations with holocaust survivors and their families. And I was getting so much out of these conversations. And it occurred to me that my grandchildren – just like you said, your children – my grandchildren would never have the opportunity that I had to learn

from them.

So, I said there's gotta be a way to replicate the conversations that I'm having even when those people aren't physically with us anymore or even able to do it, like your grandmother with Alzheimer's. And it's so sad. I've been through this, and you don't realize how quickly it happens. So, I would encourage everybody to do a StoryFile before it's too late.

But it allowed us to capture these survivors, and now holocaust survivors can have them in their museums talking to people, answering their questions in a completely different way than we thought of 20 years ago. We thought – they're gonna be gone. What are we gonna do? So, now they will continue those conversations. They will be able to let people know a little bit about their story and then open it up to Q&A with the kids.

It's really great. I've seen this firsthand. And people come through, and kids have their own questions. And if you make it about curiosity and you make it user led – and we call it user led. But the person and the individual can actually engage and ask their own question. You learn differently, and you become a participant in that learning. And you gain knowledge in a deeper sense than you would otherwise passively listening to it.

So, that's what we did. And then when that project was coming to a close, the one question I kept getting from everybody was – can I do this myself? So, that project was very, very expensive to do. So, in order for everybody to be able to do it, we had to create this online web-based platform that would enable people and give people the tools – and by people, I mean individuals, companies, enterprise, celebrities, athletes, anyone that has information and knowledge to share. And believe me, that's everybody.

There's not one person on the planet that I don't think I can learn something from. So, we had to enable them and give them the tools to tell their own story and to use those tools to create StoryFiles for other people to engage with and learn from.

Jaime:

Well, I was just so impressed too that even just the William Shatner thing on your home page – it seems so intimate. I was trying to ask questions that maybe weren't in there, but it was just really impressive tech-wise too because it's one thing to do it for an exhibition. It's another thing to actually have people randomly put in their stuff tech-wise. It's a whole different thing. So, how

did you, especially the beginning start-up, deal with the tech stuff? Do you have a lot of tech experience?

Heather: So, that's one question that I have to put in my StoryFile because I get that asked all the time. No, I don't. And I think that actually helped me looking back. And here's why. I didn't know what was not possible.

And I think that sometimes when you learn something and you become an expert in something, you start to get kind of tunnel vision on – oh, this is possible. And you're not expanding that. You're not allowing yourself to think outside the box because you've been told and you've been taught that this is your parameter. This is what we're working with.

So, it was an interesting challenge because I came to a lot of engineers and said, "I wanna figure out how to do this." I had one tell me, "Will you please explain to Heather that that's against the law of physics." And I said to him, "It's okay. Don't worry. We're all here to help you find an answer." And we did, actually. It's not the ultimate answer maybe, but it's a good stepping-stone. And from that, you find ways in which you can see actually building that ultimate vision. So, it's a process.

Jaime: 100 percent. I love though that you didn't stop when all the engineers are like – because technology eventually also catches up. We didn't have the things that we have now, and it's insane the speed of technology with this.

Heather: Well, that was one thing. When I started this project, it was 2010. So, we're using Skype right now, actually. So, funny enough, this was before Skype actually became ubiquitous. So, the concept of actually talking to video, even if I was talking to you real in person, didn't really exist. There was no FaceTime. There was nothing like it.

And, in fact, when we went out into the public and we started asking the public to talk to the individuals, a lot of times I would get – oh, is he on Skype with us? Or, oh, hi. And they would literally talk to him as if he was there. And that didn't go away, which was weird, because we told people before they would talk to these individuals, "This is a video recording that we've done of this individual that you're about to have a conversation with. You can ask them anything you want."

And they would forget that we said that. One woman said to her daughter when she asked, “Where is he?” And she said, “Oh, he’s probably in another room in the museum,” like they were teleporting.

But you’re absolutely right. The technology does in fact catch up. The key is building something that you can see the technology helping you along the way that it is going to get better. And it is going to be possible to do X and then building something to the point that you can build it in the moment but knowing that it will always get better.

Jaime: Yeah, because technology and the speed of it, you’re like, oh, okay, great. So, you’ll have to wait a few years. I mean 2010 – totally different era than we’re in right now to be able to video.

Heather: Yeah, we could not have done what we do now with the online platform and all the tools with video until about 2017. We saw that there was gonna be the infrastructure that could possibly make it possible. And then you start thinking – well, if we were to build this, what would it look like? And can we do it? And we spent three years building this platform for people to be able to do their own.

Jaime: And I know you probably get this question a lot also, but deepfake is becoming a thing also. So, now we have these videos of people. Tell me your stance on that – what people should technically be worried about or what good things can come out of your platform.

Heather: So, we’re not a deepfake platform.

Jaime: Oh, yes, yes. I didn’t mean to reference – no, they’re definitely not.

Heather: This is the huge difference. First of all, no one has really solved the uncanny valley. You guys can look that up if you don’t know what that is. But nobody’s solved that issue to date in the way that we would need to use it. But for us, we’re about the authentic individual. So, nothing you say on video is ever edited, manipulated, characterized, or made an avatar of you.

It’s you, and we want you to tell your story in your voice. And here’s the other thing that technology – I don’t think that this could ever actually be done through technology. It’s the nonverbal communication. And that tells you just as much as the words you’re speaking. Audio is good because you can hear the

intonation. You can hear whether a person's excited or they're down, and the mind can kind of go there.

But then there's also the fact that you're looking into someone's eyes and you can tell as they're telling this story, you get all of it. You get the whole essence of communication really through these videos. So, no, not a big fan of deepfakes. However, they do serve a purpose.

For us, the way I would look at it, is if the individual is no longer with us, there is the opportunity to use maybe archives or use previous video or autobiographies or things like that or diaries that they've written. And there's a way to craft it so that you can say that it's authentically – as much as you can build an individual's StoryFile, you can kind of authentically do it that way. And there's some visual that I won't go into, but it would have to be done a certain way for it to pass our kind of authenticity test.

Jaime: Well, I appreciate that too. Integrity is an important thing.

Heather: Yeah, it's not easy to do. And they are several companies now that are getting really, really good at the lip sync. And the benefit of that is it'll be easy to translate it into different languages and have them speak those same words but in different languages. The problem is when you put words in their mouth that they didn't say. And that's where we absolutely draw the line. That's not us. So, that's where I would draw it.

Jaime: Yes, I did not mean to infer that you were. But it's an interesting day and age that in 2010 when you started this company you probably didn't even think about – oh, yeah, by the way, we're gonna have avatars, and you could have people saying things that you didn't say is kind of a big deal.

Heather: Actually, the first partner I had in this was called the Institute for Creative Technologies. And, actually, they had created avatars. They created the whole concept of an avatar, actually. So, we did know that you could make a photo-real avatar of an individual, and you could make it say whatever you wanted it to say. In probably – I wanna say 2006, 2008 they were working on this for the Army actually.

Jaime: Of course. So, you were on the cutting edge. You were partnered with one of the cutting-edge people in this...

Heather: Yeah, this team has done amazing work. Actually, the VR headset was developed at the Institute for Creative Technologies.

Jaime: That's amazing.

Heather: And that was also developed for the armed – I don't know which of them, but I think it was the Army.

Jaime: So, I love that going from no real tech experience in a way to partnering with one of the forefront of technology, it's amazing to be able to see that you can partner. How did you get to partner with them?

Heather: I asked them.

Jaime: I know, right? It's always like duh. Well, yeah. So, why did they say yes?

Heather: Because it was a challenge. They're actually a research institute. So, they're not a commercial institute. And the other partner that I partnered with was the USC Shoah Foundation. And they were part of the University of Southern California.

I didn't know that the Institute for Creative Technologies was also associated to USC until I actually met them and got involved with them. So, that was somewhat fortuitous to have two research entities working on it. And it was a challenge, and engineers love a challenge.

Jaime: Yes, they do. So, did you already have funding and you got them to take on the project, or did that have the ability to take on your project and you had to submit for it? I don't know what that sort of process looks like.

Heather: Oh, no. We had to get funding.

Jaime: That makes sense. Getting paid always helps.

Heather: Yes.

Jaime: So, tell me a little bit more about how you started figuring out the business model and pricing strategy because you had this technology, and you knew it would be valuable for people. But I'm sure it was an iterative process figuring all of that out.

Heather: Oh, definitely. We had a mission to make it ubiquitous for everyone. So, when we were building it, we built it with the intent for it to be affordable. And we're pretty sure we accomplished that.

Jaime: Doing so much upfront cost – do you know what I mean? You kind of had to be a start-up in order to try and make it so that it was accessible to everyone, which I appreciate, and so do my – I'm assuming – generations in the future that I'm hoping one day will wanna see me in a StoryFile and be like who the heck is this lady?

Heather: Well, we have customers that want to interview their children, especially when they're younger, every five years. And maybe later they're hoping that they continue it every 10 years. And then you would be able to talk to yourself as a teenager or a child or your children would be able to pick any StoryFile along your timeline and talk to you at any point in your life because we change.

It's fine if you wanna do this just one and done. I would implore everybody to do one at least. But if you want to keep doing it like a diary and answer the same core questions that you chose every so often, it would be fascinating, I think, from a human perspective to be able to follow that. It would be really cool.

Jaime: I didn't even think of that. My kids are teenagers now, and they're trying to ask me what I was like as a teenager. And I can't remember. I was cool, I think? I don't know what I thought about stuff. It was a totally different day and age also. The internet was just beginning. It's kind of insane.

Heather: Yeah, you can get to know anybody from all over the world. And I think that's what's great about this is we wanna encourage other people to really connect with other people or at least get to know them. Personally, they don't have to worry about offending them. They don't have to worry about not ever talking to them again.

They can get to know people and get to know that basically we're all very similar and going through the same things. You were probably a teenager going through the same things that your teenagers – although it's so hard for them to believe at the time. Yeah, it'd be great to see that.

Jaime: Well, even just having them test out for social anxiety and with COVID and stuff like that we haven't even talked to people very much. So, talking to people of different of different cultures and

stuff like that would be huge.

Heather: Learning to ask questions – it’s so important that we teach kids just to be able to have a conversation, be able to ask questions.

Jaime: Definitely. Tell me a little bit more about the process. Their dad who I co-parent with has terminal cancer. He’s had terminal cancer for the last year.

Heather: Oh.

Jaime: I know. And so, what I’ve done is I’ve recorded podcasts with him and asked him like questions for when the kids are older. But then I found you. So, tell me a little bit more about what the process is because I know he doesn’t have a ton of energy right now to be able to do a lot. So, tell me a little bit more about that.

Heather: It doesn’t take any energy. He can sit wherever he’s comfortable in whatever setting. I would just encourage you to do it in whatever form you can. You can use your camera. You can use your laptop. You can use your laptop with a webcam, whatever kind of setup you want. You just go on the website storyfile.com. Click on StoryFile Life. Go to StoryFile Life and sign up for your account. And the first thing you’re gonna do is choose questions.

Now you could start with some of our starter packs. I’ve already pre-chosen some questions for you for your father or things like that. But I would encourage you to actually go to all the questions and then go through them. There are over 2000 questions.

Jaime: Wow.

Heather: So, you really have a chance to cover a lot about this individual’s life, their career, all the things that they know about their grandparents and their parents and having kids and families and working. Get the full story, as much as you possibly can. And then you just start recording.

And it’s literally as easy as you point the camera at the person, press record, and they answer the questions. Whenever they’re done, you stop recording and go onto the next question.

Jaime: Awesome. And you can come back and forth just because his energy isn’t great. I mean 2000 questions is a lot, not that you would do that to anybody, but you know what I mean.

Heather: I think the average person on StoryFile Life is usually recording between 250 and 325 –

Jaime: Wow.

Heather: – questions.

Jaime: That's a lot of questions.

Heather: You don't realize it though because you just keep going. It just builds on itself. And you can even add your own followup question. So, let's say they say something, and you're like – wow, I've never heard that story before and you have a couple questions about it. You can actually speak it or write that in, and it will come up as the next question. So, you'll be able to offer followup.

Jaime: The sales process – we can get rid of sales people because literally they say the same thing over and over and over again, right?

Heather: Yeah, it is gonna be amazing. I have questions about the new Ford Mach-E – the new electric car. And I go on Google like everyone does. And I type in whatever I want to know. Two hours later, I'm like are you kidding me? So, you could do a StoryFile with either a salesman for the car or with the car and just ask the question.

Why can't we just ask the question? We want to know X. And you find a person, and they pop up, and they answer your question instead of going through hours and hours and hours and going down all these rabbit holes, and you don't even know what you were looking for eight hours later. It's insane. It's such a waste of time.

Jaime: Yes, it's gonna be archaic where we're like we have to click on things? What the heck? We just ask our question like a real human.

Heather: Yeah.

Jaime: That's amazing. So, I was reading in your file that it's more family for you. So, you have a family and a tech startup. And, usually, those don't go hand in hand. So, tell me a little bit about that and tips that you might have for other families going through it.

Heather: I come from a retail background and a family-owned business. So, that might be part of it. I'm sure of it. I'm used to it. Not only that

my grandfather once told me, “Know what you’re not good at. Know your strengths. Know your weaknesses, but know enough to say I need to find the best person that I possibly can find in order to do X because I cannot do that.” And that’s not my forte.

You also have to have people that you trust around you. And a lot of times, those are your friends. That’s your network. And in my case, it was some family members. And you just bring them along on the journey, and they’re in it with you. It’s their life too. So, we don’t have too many family members actually working in StoryFile anymore. We have my husband though. So, that’s the big thing.

So, how do two spouses work together is probably the question that a lot of people ask. We work really well together. And it’s just like any other relationship. Even partners in business, whether they’re family or related or not, you have to have mutual respect and mutual trust entirely.

And that might be difficult for a lot of people, and there might be breakdowns in that, and then relationships obviously end. But I’ve been very, very lucky so far that we’ve been able to become stronger because of it. So, we are in this together. And there’s nobody I would rather go through this journey with than him, and he’s brilliant. So, that doesn’t hurt.

Jaime: That helps. That definitely helps. How do you set boundaries? Because I know it can seep, especially when you’re working with your husband. I have a lot of coaching clients that do this. It seeps into everywhere because you might be excited about business things. So, you talk about it in bed. You know what I mean? Tell me a little bit more about your boundaries and how you’ve kept it, if you have – kept it separate?

Heather: Oh. I wish I could say that, yeah, I have it totally figured out. No, but this goes back to me. My upbringing was so family-business oriented that, yeah, it’s all encompassing. You do have to say, “Okay, now we’re stopping, and we’re doing this.”

If you really love something and you’re passionate about what you do, even if it’s your career and you’re working it, you have to have a spouse or partner or someone that really understands it and that you can talk to about what’s going on in your life because our careers and our work are such a massive part of our life.

So, it's not a negative thing, and I wish that more people took interest maybe in what their partners do and really bring that into their life a lot more because I think that those individuals have the opportunity to connect on so many different levels then. If you only have a relationship and you only connect on this, you might be missing that whole other building block too or that whole other part. So, I don't see it as a negative like a lot of people might think.

Jaime: Well, I appreciate you saying too that there's no perfect scenario because you'll read books, and they're like you have to have boundaries, and you have to not talk about work after 5:00 and blah, blah, blah. And you're like, yeah, you can still do a lot of different things and still have fun and enjoy and navigate through anyway.

Heather: Yeah. So, I'm a lot older than you are. And I grew up in the whole era of – oh, you can work. And you can have a family, and you can do it all and da, da, da. I don't wanna use an expletive on your podcast, but it's not easy.

And you do need help, but you can't do it if you're with someone that doesn't understand what you're going through and what you're trying to do. You can't do it all if the other people around you don't understand, aren't supportive, and really on that journey with you as well.

Jaime: 100 percent. Yeah, 100 percent. It's awesome to be able to hear success stories in regards to this too where you navigate it and figure it out, just like in business. There's always issues. And you navigate it, and you figure it out.

Heather: Yup, that's what we do.

Jaime: All right. So, I know we have to start wrapping up. So, I'm going to last the last question. What is one action listeners can take this week to help move them forward towards their goal of a million?

Heather: Write it right in front of you. I think that it does take time, and it is planning. But I would tell someone that they just have to think of one entity or one individual that could actually help them achieve their goal this week. Think of that one individual, one entity, and go after it with a vengeance and get them to partner with you, help you, work with you, whatever you need to do.

You gotta get it done. You just have to make it work. My

grandmother always said, “There’s always a way. So, just make it happen.”

Jaime: Yeah, I see the tenacity in your family. You can just tell. You’re like I figured it out no matter what. Thank you so much for coming on the show today. Where do we find out more about StoryFile and more about you online?

Heather: Storyfile.com and all the other social media areas that are easy to get – everybody knows.

Jaime: Awesome. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Everybody, go get it. I know I’m dealing with the kiddo’s dad having terminal cancer. You never know what’s gonna happen. Go create one.

Heather: You never know. You never know, and it is actually heartbreaking. We always say, “Make your will, and do this and do that.” No one wants to think about it. I get it. But this is fun to do.

And it’s very interesting for the individual going through it because you’re getting asked questions about things that you haven’t thought about in a long time or things about you yourself that you have to kind of figure out and analyze. So, it’s an amazing experience for the individual to go through as well.

Jaime: Thank you for saying that. Yeah, we love telling our own story. And I love hearing it. So, thank you so much for coming on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Heather: Thank you, Jaime.

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Duration: 32 minutes