

**Episode 2,373: The Woke Mob Came for Levi’s Brand Manager; Here’s Why**

**Guest: Jennifer Sey**

**WOODS:**  All right. Well, I have a gymnast in the family, so she is rather intrigued that I'm interviewing the 1986 US women's all-around national champion.

And I wasn't expecting to learn anything about that in this book, but I did a little bit. The book we're talking about is *Levi's Unbuttoned: The Woke Mob took My Job But Gave Me My Voice*.

Jennifer was chief marketing officer and then brand president at Levi's. And I think if you remember our previous conversation together, you'll have something of the outline of what happened there.

But I was going to say to you before we started recording and then thought, why am I sucking the life out of this? Why don't I put this in the recording? This is not exactly the book I expected. I learned an awful lot more about your personal life and your background and your upbringing than I expected to.

And is that because you feel like it's kind of all one story and that one thing really does build on the next? Or that you learned lessons from earlier periods in your life that served you well later?

**SEY:** Yeah, I mean, that's exactly it. I set out to write a memoir. And it's in fact my second memoir. I wrote one that came out in 2008 called *Chalked Up*, which was really about my experience in gymnastics and the abuse and cruelty of the training environment.

And I was the first person to talk about it. It was the first first-person account of that. And as I sat down to write this, I knew that of late, people, if they knew who I was, it was more about my sort of Covid dissenting.

But as I look back on my life, those early experiences as a gymnast and child athlete subjected to this abusive training, is, I think what really kind of prompted me to stand up for children. So, I thought it was important.

And I also thought it sort of paints a picture that if someone like me who kind of grew up in this really obedient and obedience-enforcing environment, if I can do it, if I can find the wherewithal to kind of withstand the name-calling and the mob and do the right thing and stand apart, then you can too.

Because I started at a deficit, in a sense.

**WOODS:**  Understood. And yet, I would – because we have only so much time. I would like to focus on the Levi's portion of your career. And you do spend some time talking about working there before everything that made you a household name took place.

**SEY:**  Yeah, and I thought that was important too. Because it sort of demonstrates my commitment to the company and how devastating the unfortunate end of my time there was. I'd spent 23 years at Levi's.

That is very unusual in the world today, for somebody to stay in a company that long. And it kind of tracks my rise up the ranks, and how difficult it was in some ways to be a woman in corporate America in the '90s and the early 2000s.

But in some ways, it was a love letter to Levi's. How much I loved the brand, how I'd worn it since I was a young child, and what a blessing it felt like, to me, to have the chance to work there and help set the brand up for another 150 years, hopefully.

And also, the emergence of this – what I call in the book, "woke capitalism" – they would call it "values-led marketing". And how that might have started from a good place, but it came to, I think, eclipse any good that it might have driven in the beginning.

So, I think the larger context of the book is about this move away from what I call "normie capitalism" and focusing on product and inspiring marketing and treating employees well into this, what I would call, a charade of woke capitalism.

And Covid was part of that. So, if someone's looking for a Covid screed, it's definitely (as you've indicated) not that. But there is plenty centered on that as well.

**WOODS:** Given the length of time you spent at Levi's, you more or less were a spectator to the introduction of this way of thinking. I mean, you were there at the company before it really became part of this whole corporate trend. So, you actually watched it unfold.

**SEY:** I did, and I experienced it. And I'll be completely transparent, I think drove some of it. For those that want to hate me, that's fine. You can say: *This is your fault!*

But I try to explain where I was coming from in the beginning of this trend, and how then it sort of took over and ate me alive, essentially. And I think it is now very bad for business. I think ultimately it is not the right path for businesses.

But Levi's as a company, from the very early days – it was founded in 1853. I think, viewed themselves as not just a company in business to make money, but to do so ethically and help support the communities that they operate in.

So, I tell the story of Levi Strauss, the actual person, who donated the first profits that he made to a local orphanage. That was really kind of in the DNA of the company.

And then I think they took some stances over the course of the '50s, '60s, and even into the '90s that were really developed to treat employees well, with fairness.

So, they integrated factories in the South before the law required it. They offered same-sex partner benefits in 1992, before marriage equality was anything anyone talked about. And for me, that was something I was very proud of. It was about extending equality to all employees.

But at this point, all of the policies have become so – I'm going to call it "progressive" – that they fail to actually treat employees fairly. They fail to actually be inclusive because you have to have one view and one view only, and that's the view of the Democratic Party.

And then there's also a moment in time, somewhere around 2017 or 2018, where they sort of take these policies and turned them outwards. It's no longer just internal communication and internal policy, but an insistence that good people, good consumers, think this way.

And if you like our values, you'll buy more stuff. And that's where I think it becomes very exclusionary and ultimately not good for business.

**WOODS:** I hope you don't mind if I rewind a little bit because I realize that there is a part of the story I'd like you to tell. Because when you decided to leave gymnastics – which, I'm sure there was a time in your life, maybe early on in your gymnastics career, where that would have been unthinkable.

For example, there's that movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer* about Josh Waitzkin.

**SEY:** I love that. Yeah, love that movie.

**WOODS:** Well, do you know Josh Waitzkin doesn't play chess anymore?

**SEY:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** He left. He decided that: *This is not bringing me fulfillment and I'd like to go do something else.* And I thought: *Well, good for him!* That he didn't feel like: *Well, everybody expects me to play chess my whole life.* He decided not to do it.

And likewise, you had very, very good reasons for leaving. But at the time you did leave, it must have seemed (as you kind of indicated in the book) as if you just don't know: *How do I reconfigure my life? How do I even conceive of my life post-gymnastics?*

How do you go from that spot to becoming brand manager at Levi's?

**SEY:** Yeah, it was a very difficult time in my life. I think, unlike chess, gymnastics, you have a shelf life. It's a young person's sport. So, I guess I should have known that I was going to have to figure something else out.

But when the psychological and emotional and physical abuse became too great, and I literally began to unravel when I turned about 18 – it was actually a little before that, 17. I stayed in the sport for another two years, but when I ultimately left, I just felt like a complete failure.

And I also felt exhausted. I'm leaving for college and I'm feeling like I'm going to the old-age home. I'm only 18 and everybody's excited to be out of the house for the first time and kind of forging a new path, and I just feel like I need to get some rest.

And I'm a little angry because I'm also in college with all these other athletes who were at the same level as I had been. But they were going to be able to build a professional career from it, which is not really the case in gymnastics. That's not an option.

And so, I kind of began that process of figuring out who I was and who I was going to be without this sport. And ultimately it was a little bit accidental. I got through college. I was a good student, but not a passionate student.

And I needed a job. It was a recession in the early '90s. I was very independent. I didn't want to ask anyone for help. And I took a job at an ad agency. And I was skeptical. I didn't really think I wanted to work in business.

I thought I wanted to do something more creative, write books and make movies – which is ironic because I did end up doing that. But I found I really liked it and that I was quite good at it. And it was an accidental career, in a sense.

I did not have corporate ambitions. And maybe that's why I could walk away from it. It wasn't this sort of lifelong dream and passion to be the CEO of Levi's. And every step I made, I was sort of surprised at how far I'd gone. But I did really like it.

And the part I liked the most (and this is perhaps what was so hard) is building a new culture within the company. And giving the folks that worked with me and for me, the chance to build a really meaningful career and participate in reinventing this brand. I mean, the company almost went bankrupt in 2011.

So, it was an honor and a responsibility to kind of try to pull this iconic brand out of the depths of despair. And I love that, the team aspect and giving people opportunity. And these people were my friends.

And ultimately, when I went through my dissenting phase around Covid, no one came to my defense. No one stood by me. And that was pretty heartbreaking.

**WOODS:** Somebody like a Bill Clinton or a Donald Trump, they almost relish being a lightning rod. They relish controversy and being in the limelight. And you say at one point in your book that you're not by nature a contrarian.

And that none of what eventually happened to you, and your response to what happened to you, did not come naturally. You're not the sort to outspokenly take a position that's radically different from everybody else's. And yet you wound up doing it.

**SEY:**  I mean, I try to do what's right, but I don't start fights with people for no reason. And my husband – which, I think I talk about in the book. He and I have been very aligned from the beginning of Covid on everything we saw and experienced.

He has a very different tone and a different approach. And he's more aggressive and he doesn't mind the fight. I don't like it. I tend to be very diplomatic, and data based, and I have sort of faith in my ability to communicate.

And I think that: *Well, if I just say this the right way and I listen and I'm open and I'm empathetic, people will maybe hear me out*. Which was not the experience I had at all.

Because as I started to push back on Covid policies from the very beginning, March 2020, instantly I was just vilified, called all manner of names – I'm sure other guests have talked about this with you.

Everything from a racist, to a murderer, and a conspiracy theorist, and QAnon, and all this crazy stuff that makes you pretty unemployable. I mean, who wants somebody who's a QAnon conspiracy theorist, racist leading their brand?

None of that was grounded in reality, of course, but it didn't matter. And it's a very effective tactic. It didn't stop me, but it certainly kept others quiet. And I believe that's why it's done. But yeah, I don't like to fight with people.

I'm fine having conversations with people I don't agree with on everything. I like to keep it diplomatic, and I like to listen and try to learn. And I'm open to always changing my mind. But yeah, I don't love the fight.

So, it's been a rough few years. But you get kind of used to it and you learn to kind of compartmentalize and kind of set the names aside, because they're not true. It's a tactic and it's a pretty vile tactic.

**WOODS:** What was the very first thing you did that involved uttering an opinion that was – I hate to say "out of the mainstream". Because nothing you said was anywhere remotely unreasonable. But was it on Twitter?

**SEY:** I actually think it was probably Facebook. And I think I lay some of that out in the book. I wasn't all that active on Twitter. I had had a Twitter account, but I didn't use it all that much. I was more prone to using Facebook to chat with family and friends.

And as early as February of 2020, I started to share articles and ask questions about the effectiveness and viability of what I saw coming down the pike. They were planting the seeds as early as February that we were going to go into lockdown.

And I ended up just getting into fights with family and friends. I didn't fight. I didn't kind of raise my proverbial voice. But others attacked me pretty viciously.

And I moved off of Facebook. I mean, I still have an account, but I moved off of it pretty quickly, because I didn't want to fight with family and friends.

And I also found that on Twitter (as you know) you can meet people that you don't know. You can engage in conversations with people you don't know. I could DM doctors about specific data and they would answer my questions.

So, I was very curious and trying to educate myself. So, I moved over to Twitter fairly quickly. And it's interesting. When I went back and I was writing the book, I looked back at some of the Facebook conversations I had remembered, and many of the people who had attacked me had deleted those posts.

**WOODS:** Oh, is that so?

**SEY:** Yeah. I couldn't find – I wanted to print some of them in the book, or use some of the arguments that folks made. And I remembered one conversation in particular. It was driving me crazy because I couldn't find it. But I found my part of the conversation.

But on Facebook, I don't think you can see that it's deleted. On Twitter, you can see when something's deleted. And I was so confused. And then I realized that person had gone in and deleted everything.

Because in hindsight, it was ridiculous. It made no sense. I was correct. Schools were harmful. I wasn't a teacher murderer. And so, I can only imagine they felt some shame in how they had spoken to me in that interaction.

**WOODS:** You eventually went on with Laura Ingraham on *Fox News*, and you report on this in the book.

**SEY:** Yeah, that was the kiss of death.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that was. Because for some reason, we've moved into this phase of American history in which if you go on somebody's show, you are therefore on that person's team and endorse everything that person thinks.

**SEY:** That's right. If you talk to somebody...

**WOODS:** And by the way, I deal with that as a podcast host. Because if I have person X on the show, that means I endorse everything person X thinks.

**SEY:** Yeah, it's ridiculous.

**WOODS:** What kind of a boring show would that be?

**SEY:** Yeah, it's ridiculous. I mean, you should have friends you don't agree with on everything. My husband and I don't agree on everything. I mean, it's just ludicrous. But yeah, what happened was it was a year in.

Because I had been kind of dissenting and expressing my views on social media, but also, I led rallies to get the schools open. I wrote op eds. I attended school board meetings. I wasn't just banging away at the keyboard, I was really trying to move this thing forward and get the schools open – unsuccessfully.

No media outlets would cover Open Schools Moms, as we called ourselves. No one would give us a platform or a voice in the conversation. It was all just more of the same.

It was the teachers' unions and Randi Weingarten and the politicians in the left-leaning states saying: *If you open the schools, you'll kill all the teachers.* Which we know is false. We knew it then and we certainly know it now.

And so, in March of 2021, I had moved my family to Denver, Colorado, so that my young children could attend school. I had a kindergartner at the time, and his only experience thus far had been in Zoom school.

And that was not the experience of school I wanted him to have. When I shared that on Twitter, the *Ingraham Angle* reached out to me to appear on the show, and I consulted with my fellow Open Schools Moms.

And I said: *I know this is going to be controversial, but what do you think? Should I do it?* And we had been agitating to try to get ourselves in the mainstream media to no avail. And they all said: *You should do it. Stick to your talking points. Don't say anything you don't mean.*

I'm a trained media professional, as the brand president, so I knew I could do it. So, I agreed to be on the show. And of course, that unleashed everything you just alluded to inside the company and outside the company.

And suddenly that was just reinforcement that I was a white supremacist in disguise. I didn't care if black children died. That's what was said.

Because if you wanted the schools to open, public schools, which are disproportionately populated by low-income and black and brown students, that I clearly didn't care if those children died.

And it really – I mean, I lasted at the company for almost a full other year. But that just started this kind of employee outrage inside the company. Because I had basically, in their minds, revealed my true colors as a very right-leaning racist.

I mean, that's what they assumed. And when I say the noise got loud inside the company, it was still a small, very punitive group of employees. But they created a lot of disruption, and they emailed HR and they emailed my boss, CEO.

And they got sick of it. The leaders in the company got sick of it, and they were very afraid of what that might do to the reputation of the company. And there was that same sort of pushback on social media.

**WOODS:** At this stage, right now, every reasonable person realizes you were right. I mean, there's no debate left. All you have to do is just look all over the world. All you have to do is look at the Sweden example. 1.5 million kids, not one of them died. Not one.

Teachers there had no higher mortality than any other profession. I mean, there's no denying it now. Absolutely none. Is there anybody who has said to you: In retrospect, turns out you were right.

**SEY:** No.

**WOODS:** Not one Why is mankind like this?

**SEY:** Yeah, it's pretty crazy. And I would just kind of go back to what you were saying. Not only would any reasonable, thoughtful person do some introspecting, even if they've been on the other side, and say: *You know what? I was wrong. In hindsight, we needed to open the schools, the harms done have been grave.*

*And those countries outside of the United States (and those states within the US) who did open the schools earlier had no higher mortality, when we looked at all-cause mortality over the course of the time frame*.

But I would also argue, my tone – You know, I went back and looked at all my tweets and the TV appearance on Laura Ingraham. I stand by everything I said on that show. I would say it again, despite the outcome it led to for me.

I would say it to her again. I stand by my tone and all of the content, in every appearance and every tweet. So, people would also look back, if they were reasonable, and say: *There was nothing aggressive, there was nothing murderous. She was very reasonable the whole time.*

But you do have a small percentage of people – I do think it's a minority – that will stand by it no matter what. And we even had in congressional testimony yesterday, Congressman Bowman saying: *More people, more children, more teachers would have died if we opened schools*.

All evidence to the contrary. We know that is, in fact, completely untrue. But they stand by it because I think the alternative is so egregious. The alternative is, you did this thing. You knew better. You harmed a generation of children.

It was inevitable that was going to happen, and you did it anyway. And there was no benefit. I mean, I guess imagine having to wrestle with that if you were a person that drove it.

Because this was a policy choice. Government leaders in deep blue states and cities influenced by teachers' unions and the boards of education decided to keep schools closed for 18 months for half of American children.

That was the decision. They have to own that. And they're not going to. They're not going to.

**WOODS:** And that's disappointing because we have had people who have said – we had physicians who have said: *You know, I thought one thing, but then when I looked at the results I realized, obviously what I thought was wrong.*

But the thing is, it's rare in personal life, too, to come across somebody who really offers you a genuine apology. It almost never happens. It's one of the rarest, most cherished things, when somebody has the humility to say to you: *I was in the wrong*.

And so, it's such a shame that people feel like they have to circle the wagons and dig in their heels instead of just being human and saying: *Look, I really did you a grave, grave injustice and I owe you an apology.*

That's all. You can't even get it.

**SEY:** Yeah, you can't. And in fact, I would argue that despite the fact (as you've indicated) there is an acceptance at this point – because the data is inarguable. There is acceptance that the learning loss is severe and harmful to a generation.

The absentee rates are severe and caused by the school closures. And of course, the mental health impacts. That's sort of inarguable at this point. So, even those that acknowledge it and say: *Perhaps we closed too long.*

They still defend it because their rationale – and I think this was very obvious in a piece that Professor Emily Oster wrote. This idea that there should be a "pandemic amnesty".

That the people who did these things, made these terrible policy choices, well, they were doing it out of the goodness of their hearts. And they were doing it for the right reasons, so we should forgive them.

Well, no. First of all, I don't believe it. I think they were unduly influenced by the teachers' unions. They were not basing these decisions on firm data. They were trying to assert themselves in their position as the "good position", the position that good people take.

And they were willing to vilify and demonize anyone who stood in opposition. To the point of calling them these terrible, unemployable names, and trying to get them ousted from their jobs. I don't have forgiveness for those people.

I'm not willing to say: *Well, you did the wrong thing for the right reason.* And that the other thing I get is: Well, you might have been right, but you did it for the wrong reason. What?

**WOODS:** Yeah, what does that mean?

**WOODS:** What was wrong about my reason? Exactly. And so, no one has reached out, at any level, friends, lost family members...

**WOODS:** But imagine, Jen. Imagine what that commits them to. That's saying: *I was wrong, but I was wrong for the right reason*. That's incomprehensible.

**SEY:** Yeah. It's so convoluted and ridiculous, I can't even take it seriously. I can't really take anyone who would say that seriously. These are not serious people. They don't take their responsibilities seriously and they are sort of laundering their own reputations both for themselves and for the public.

With politicians, you have Gavin Newsom, who's never going to admit that he was wrong and that he was a hypocrite the whole time. Because as of September of 2020, he sent his own kids to in-person private school while pretending he wasn't.

He never going to admit that. I think we can all see he's trying to put his name in the hat for a presidential run. It's such an egregious mistake. He's not going to admit it. He's going to either not talk about it, which is mostly what you get, or kind of refashion it into something positive that is based on a lie.

So, politicians aren't going to apologize. My workmates are not going to apologize, because that puts them, I would argue, at some risk legally. And friends, I would expect that they could, but they're not going to apologize either.

**WOODS:**  Now, was it just the school issue? Did you eventually get drawn into broader – because your husband certainly had a wide array of opinions on Covid and mitigations and all that.

Were you focused only on the schools? Or eventually could you just not take it anymore and you were commenting on everything?

**SEY:** [laughing] It was hard to take the rest of it. I stayed largely focused on schools and children, broadly. So, playgrounds were closed in San Francisco for nine months, for instance. I definitely talked about playgrounds. I talked about toddler-masking.

I was very careful not to talk about any of Levi's policies or anything that could be associated with Levi's policies. So, I didn't talk about masking adults, for instance. Because we had a masking policy, although I was not supportive of that.

So, as I reviewed my whole history, I would say 90%, 95% of it was focused on children. I think I thought children would be a bridge issue, that no one wanted to harm children. I thought there was a little more permission to push back on that.

I chose not to go to an anti-lockdown rally, for instance, in 2020 that my husband led. Because I was trying to build a bridge and stay focused on children. That said, there were times when I commented beyond that, but it was few and far between.

**WOODS:** You have some material in the book about wokeness other than Covid. Because of course, this period also includes the whole matter of George Floyd. So, how does that fit into your story?

**SEY:** Well, for whatever reason – I mean, I guess as I sat and wrote the book, I sort of had an awakening which had been building around this idea of woke capitalism being this sort of reputation laundering, and not really doing any good in the world and ultimately being pretty divisive for employees and ultimately consumers.

And we see the repercussions of that now with any number of examples like Bud Light, which happened well after I wrote the book.

They put divisive messaging into the market, this big broad reach brand, and now they're feeling the impact of that with sales declines on any given week, somewhere between 20% and 30% declines, and not abating anytime soon.

And Covid really became this woke policy of the progressive left: *We need to stay shut down forever.* *We're doing it to protect the vulnerable.* When in fact it harmed the vulnerable the most. It became – I don't know why. I'm not sure I'll ever understand it.

It could be because there was a presidential election coming and they wanted to demonize Trump and his policies. Although he helped support the lockdowns, so that's neither here nor there. But it just became highly politicized. I would argue, because the left politicized it.

And so, it's all part and parcel with all of these "progressive" or left-leaning policies and programs that companies are furthering in the world today. It became kind of all one and the same. And clearly Covid and the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 sort of merged.

For some people, that was their awakening. They were going: *Wait a minute, why is public health saying thousands can gather for these rallies but not other reasons? It doesn't make any sense*. For a lot of people, I think that's when they went: *Yeah, this is kind of bull.*

I was making the case long before that, but they became merged. And then in the summer of 2020 (I wrote about this a lot in the book) companies across the country sort of made their pledge of allegiance to battle racism, and ultimately spent a lot of money.

And I would argue, did nothing really to help the people they claim to want to help. It just was sort of a way to funnel lots of money to these sort of DEI experts. But ultimately, I don't really think it helped anyone.

And that was frustrating for me because I felt like: Y*ou know what's going to help, folks? Opening schools for their children.*

**WOODS:** Opening society, yeah.

**SEY:** Yeah. You know, if you're pledging to fight racism and all the ills that come along with that, nothing can do that as well as an education. And public schools are critical to that. So, it all felt really false and, like, a charade. And it was a big lie.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I think there is a big, big amount of bureaucratic self-interest at play that hides under a veneer of moral superiority. But then when you peel that back, it's just: I want a sinecure. I mean, really, some of the basest human motives are at the root of it.

**SEY:** Yeah. I mean, they want to seem like they're doing something without actually having to do the work of doing anything.

And they want to generate positive vibes from seeming like they're doing something from posting black squares on Instagram but not actually do anything for the folks in the communities that are purporting to help.

And it is really sort of reputation laundering because it shields them from any scrutiny from the press or from employees. Because they can look at this stuff and they can say: *Oh, look how much they care.*

And it's like under the covers, they're doing all this stuff that's not helping, and in many cases it's hurting. And yet no one questions because the public facing image is one of do-gooders. So, it's really a charade.

**WOODS:** Well, meanwhile, so you've got these professional challenges facing you. But then, like anybody who has a family, you had challenges, no doubt, caused by the alleged mitigation measures. In fact, you moved from one state to another during this time.

**SEY:** Yeah, we did. And I had lived in San Francisco for over 30 years at that point – or, in the Bay Area, and most of that in San Francisco. So, it was very difficult for me. It was sort of planned temporarily at first, but we quickly – we moved to Denver in Colorado because the schools were open.

But we liked it and life was much more normal here. It was probably the best of the Democratic-led states. I'll give our governor that bit of kudos. And so, we ended up staying.

But it was a year of living here because we were still working virtually. No one went back to the office. So, I was able to do my job from Colorado for that year before I left the company.

**WOODS:** And what were the – I mean, you must be tired of telling this story. But for the sake of completeness, we have to. What exactly was the final chapter of all this?

**SEY:** Yeah, well, I moved in March. I did the *Ingraham Angle* show that March. And by June I was asked (this is a 2021) to do an apology tour in the company. That's what it was called. I was supposed to apologize. I accepted. I said I would do it.

I did not apologize. I just explained myself. And that apology tour was sort of a Zoom session where people could ask me about why I was so racist, essentially.

And I was sent an email ahead of time from a colleague who told me that I needed to prove I was one of us, not one of them, that I was one of the good guys, not one of the bad guys. The bad guys, presumably, being a Trumper and a plant person, I think was the implication.

And there were specific questions laid out: *Do you realize how your advocacy is racist? Are you a conspiracy theorist? Are you an anti-vaxxer? Are you an anti-masker? Are you anti-trans?* Like, all this stuff?

And I remember getting the email at the time, Tom. This is in June of '21. And I was like: *Okay, I'll answer the questions*. And I looked at it now. It's not in the book. I found it after the fact, after I'd written it.

And it's so crazy, this email. It's like a CCP struggle session. That I have to prove – I mean, they're, like, re-educating me. And I have to kind of prove my loyalty and my fealty to the cause, which is, you know, the Covid cause, the Democratic Party platform.

I'm proud of the fact that I did not apologize. I just explained myself. And I thought I had built some bridges doing that. And I got a few nice emails after saying: I understand better now. And of course, this is the summer of '21 and San Francisco schools still haven't opened.

So, people are getting frustrated at this point. But it just got worse from there. I got a little bigger following in social media, so I had some trolls that were more notable. And yet I was concurrently – like, our business was good.

And I was credited with much of that. Our stock price had doubled since the depths of Covid. Our sales rebounded strongly from our stores being closed. So, my boss, the CEO, was having meetings with me about taking his place and becoming the next CEO, the first female CEO.

In fact, I was the first female brand president. And so, those conversations are unfolding over the fall of '21. And at one point – he keeps telling me: It could be you if you'd just stop with this advocacy. And I kept saying: *No, I'm doing a good job. I'm not going to stop. Children are still being harmed*.

And ultimately, he asked if he could do a background check. And he was sort of holding out CEO at this point. But I think what he wanted from the background check was just the "proof" that he had to push me out the door.

But I agreed because, again, I'm trying to hang on to my job. And ultimately, in January of '22 – and at this point, employees (like I said) have started email campaigns to HR. It's not a lot of people, but it's enough that they're sick of it.

In January of '22, they told me there was no place for me at the company because of my social media presence. I had no contract that indicated I could not be outspoken on social media. And I had been, about my politics, in the past.

And that was no problem because they were left-leaning politics. And I was offered $1 million. I was told I needed to stay until they found my replacement and I would be paid $1 million – slightly more, actually.

I would have to sign a non-disclosure agreement to get that money. And I decided I didn't want to do that. The thing that was more alarming at this point was the suppression of speech and the viewpoint conformity that was demanded.

And I wanted to be able to talk about that. And it felt too hypocritical to silence myself with a non-disclosure agreement. So, I resigned and then published a very public op-ed in February of '22 explaining everything that had happened.

And that went a little bit viral. And that's how people might know who I am.

**WOODS:** Right. I can't resist mentioning, though, the first sentence of Chapter 18, which is, *"Everyone at work hated my husband."* What kind of interviewer would I be not to highlight that?

**SEY:** [laughing] That's funny. Yeah, they did.

**WOODS:** But you got in trouble, in effect, for his opinions.

**SEY:** Oh, yeah. One of the questions I had to answer in the apology tour was – I can't remember the exact phrasing. It's in the book. Something about my husband and do I share all his views.

He was very critical of not just vaccine mandates, but the vaccines early on as ineffective and having a sort of side effect profile that was incredibly dangerous and being covered up. And of course, as you know, if you say those things, you're considered an anti-vaxxer.

And he was actually kicked off of Twitter for a very long time for stating something patently true about the side effect profile of the vaccines. So, he was viewed as an anti-vaxxer, which is sort of like the worst thing you can be in this day and age.

It's like worse now than being called a racist, I think. Maybe anti-trans is the worst thing. They're probably in competition. But people had kind of connected us and started following him and were outraged by the things he was saying.

And so, I was made to answer questions about him. And it's just so ridiculous. It's like, can you not be married to somebody that holds different views than you? I mean, whether I agreed with him or not, it's sort of not the point. Like, he doesn't work there.

Which is what I said when I was asked about him in the apology tour: It doesn't matter. I said: *I support his right to say what he believes, just like I support yours*. There are things as a married couple that we agree on. There are things that we don't. It's irrelevant. He doesn't actually work in this company.

**WOODS:** Yeah. I mean that should be obvious enough. And I think it was up until very, very recently. At the end, in your epilogue, you talk about trying to bring things right up to date and what your future holds.

And you say that you were interviewing for a "real job", *"in an attempt to stay sharp in case I end up needing to go that route."*

You say the interviewer asked if you would have done anything differently at the end of your time at Levi's. You said, *"No."* Which, probably not the answer she was hoping for.

But my question to you is, given the knowledge you obviously have and the experience you have, couldn't you just stay on the sidelines as a consultant and not have to be part of the machine?

**SEY:** Yeah, and that's actually what I'm doing right now. And it certainly works for me now, and I have plenty of clients to keep me busy. I do like having colleagues and the companionship and kind of working against a common vision.

And I feel like my skills are a bit underutilized in the consulting space. But it's certainly fine for me now and I have other projects happening. So, it kind of works and fits in my schedule. But I'd love the opportunity to lead the business or a brand again.

I don't know that it will be possible, because at this point it's not about the fact that I was right. No one cares. It's that I was disobedient. I was told to stop repeatedly, and I didn't.

**WOODS:** Yeah. But you would think there has to be somebody somewhere who values somebody who's willing to take an unpopular position even if it means losing something important. You would think. I mean, surely.

**SEY:** I haven't found them yet.

**WOODS:** [laughing] I'm sure they're there, but they're hard to find.

**SEY:** You let me know. I think the part that's maddening about it, though, Tom, is they all like to pretend. I mean, there's all this talk inside corporate cultures about how they want bold, brave people who do the right thing despite pushback.

And they move fast and break things and they're fearless. Like, that's the talk in corporate America. That they want people like that. But when they actually happen upon a person like that, it's very scary. Mostly I think what they want and makes them comfortable is people that will read from a script.

That they'll let legal and corporate communications tell them what to say, that it's all within the sort of boundaries of appropriateness. They certainly don't want somebody who, like, writes their own tweets. Like, they want somebody who's going to say what they're told to say.

And there just isn't – in much of corporate America at this point, they've adopted these sort of left-leaning poses. And there's not much room for someone who doesn't kind of line up on either side, that's a bit more heterodox and independent in how they think about things.

**WOODS:** Well, there may be, probably not quite strong enough yet, but a bit of a backlash developing against some of this. It was interesting to note what opinion polls had to say after that Supreme Court decision on affirmative action in college admissions, when that came down.

And I don't mean to presume that I know your opinions on that, but I just thought it was interesting that if you looked at every single – if you looked at Hispanics, black Americans, white Americans, if you looked at old, young, male, female, a majority of every single one of those groups favored getting rid of that program.

**SEY:** Yeah. And I don't know that I have – I mean, you can't have an opinion on everything, right? So, I see the harms that it's done. And perhaps there was a place for it at a point in time, but it's outlived its usefulness.

And I think largely the decision was the correct one. But there does seem to be a growing backlash. There seems to be a backlash in corporate America as well. And that backlash is happening in two ways in corporate America.

And you see the development of kind of what is called the "parallel economy". And, sort of, companies kind of taking the equal and opposite view. I think they're all sort of burgeoning. They're none that are really large and successful as yet.

So, it remains to be seen what happens there. But I do think you see a lot of companies that are trying to play it straight up the middle and just say: Let's get back to product. Let's get back to unifying marketing.

Let's treat all of our employees well. I think there's real damage that comes when you, one, focus on all the wrong stuff. You're not actually focusing on the business fundamentals when you suppress and silence certain groups.

They're also going to be silent and censor themselves on matters that pertain to the business, which is not good for business. And I think that's exactly what was probably happening in FTX and Theranos.

You know employees saw what was happening, but they didn't feel they could say anything because there was this kind of suppressive and censoring culture.

That's not good for business culture. And even, like, in the Bud Light situation, the brands that are picking up share and picking up revenue, they're not taking the equal and opposite side.

They're just talking about product. They're just doing same as it ever was, Miller, and Coors, and Modelo. So, I think businesses are going to need to kind of get back to the basics. And there will be opportunity at some point.

But I just think someone who is outed themselves as kind of willing to put themselves out there and challenge certain ideologies and challenge certain things that are seen as the truth is a scary person for corporate America. So, I might be too scary.

**WOODS:** But I do think that it's possible to imagine a future in which we won't have these irrational fears anymore. And by the way, they're not even necessarily irrational fears. It's, ultimately, that we live in a certain kind of a society in which opinion molders expect people, including business leaders, to act and think a certain way.

And I bet there are some company officials who just say: Look, I just want to create my product, and I don't want to be driven out of business or driven out of town or tarred and feathered. So, I don't want a Jennifer Sey, even though she might have some valid opinions.

**SEY:** Yeah, all of that, I think, is true. So, I think it remains to be seen what is going to happen. But I think one of the more disturbing aspects of all of this is what we've seen through Twitter files, and more recently, Facebook files, in the last couple of days.

But that there is no daylight, really, between some of these large companies and the government. And I write about some of this. At Levi's, I don't have the connection between the Haas family, which owns Levi's (or owns majority share) and the governor of California.

When they talk to each other (or not) about me needing to be quiet, they're fully aligned and in lockstep. And so, that's almost more concerning, that they don't even have to talk to each other.

So, you just see more and more the fact – we talk about the capture of certain government agencies, but it goes beyond capture. They're all just in lockstep – government agencies and large corporations. And that's very scary, I think.

And I think if that is the case, then how do you have a job if you don't agree with the leaders that are in power, that are holding office? How do you have a job if you live in California, if you're an independent or a Republican?

It's like, if there is no daylight, then you've sort of signed up at your company not just to support the brand and the business, but the Democratic Party's platform. That's kind of how it is to work in California right now.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I hear that. So, I mean, all we can do at this point is, in effect, be somebody like you, who speaks out, who writes her story. And other people connect with that and realize that: *I'm not alone in thinking the way I do. There are other brave people in the world.*

And we do the best, brick by brick, to build a world in which people like this can thrive and not be viewed as oddballs, but be the norm.

**SEY:** Yeah, I mean, that's my mission, is to kind of beg other people and hopefully inspire them to speak up and to push back a little bit on the insanity and untruths that are furthered as true. The core principle at the heart of the Covid policies was that everyone was at equal risk.

That was a lie. Everything was founded on a lie. And that caused untold damage to, not just children, but young, healthy people, and business owners, and low-income folks. And the whole thing was premised on a lie.

And these things happen across a variety of issues today, that there's policies that are founded on a lie. And I think people are starting to see it. And I think for different people the light bulb moment is different.

We alluded to Bud Light and the sort of gender ideology that underpins that, but I think for a lot of people, this notion that there is no such thing as biology is a bridge too far. And so, they start speaking out on that.

But whatever it is for you, I just encourage people to push back on things that don't make sense, that are lies. And don't fear the names. Because I didn't think people with common sense are the majority and they can see the lies at the center of some of these policies, but they're afraid.

And I get it, because there is risk. But we have to do it because the alternative is worse.

**WOODS:** Yes, that is very well put. So, the book we've been talking about, *Levi's Unbuttoned: The Woke Mob Took My Job But Gave Me My Voice.* You can find it linked on our show notes page. This is episode 2373, so TomWoods.com/2373.

Thanks so much Jen. I appreciate both the book and the conversation.

**SEY:** Thanks, Tom. Thanks for having me back. It's nice to talk with you again.