

****Jered:**** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist and it's a podcast that's just that. We got coffee. We got journalists. We got lots of good conversation. I'm Jered Martin. I'm the Co-founder and COO at OnePitch.

****Beck:**** And I'm Beck Bamberger. I'm also the Co-founder of OnePitch, the CEO of BAM Communications and the host for today's podcast so we are going to jump in here. Sophia Kunthara is our gal that's on for today's show and she is lovely. A new journalist at the SF Chronicle and investigating quite an array of things there.

****Beck:**** Okay, today on Coffee with a Journalist is Sophia Kunthara from SF Chronicle, a reporter in time, and a fellow.

****Sophia:**** Hello, thanks so much for having me Beck.

****Beck:**** Thank you, thanks for being here. We're in our very professional studio, located in San Francisco, aka the WeWork. Here we are, not with coffee, some people do not drink the coffee, but we are ready to chat. Where would you like to start because it says very ambitious millennial in your biography?

****Sophia:**** Does it really?

****Beck:**** It does, It does. Your official one. it does.

****Sophia:**** I don't remember writing that, but thank you, I appreciate that. Yes, I am a very ambitious millennial reporter. I work for San Francisco Chronicle now. I cover general assignment business news and startups. It's nice because I get to write about a bit of everything and I learn a lot about a lot of different things.

****Beck:**** Let's go back to where, and you've had notable internships. It seems like you were an intern for quite some time.

****Sophia:**** I was all through college.

Beck: Starting all the way back into, yeah, your college time. Did you know you wanted to be a journalist? How did this whole, oh I could stories, get paid for it, happen to be?

Sophia: It started in college. Well, a bit before that, in high school I did yearbook, and I always knew I liked writing. I decided to major in journalism. I went to the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University. Go Devils.

Beck: Great school, yes.

Sophia: It is, I love that place.

Beck: Then you got a master's degree.

Sophia: Yes, from there. Really my passion for journalism started in college when I joined a student publication there that covers downtown Phoenix news and I went to the downtown Phoenix campus there. It was called, "Downtown Devil," and I joined the publication at the beginning of my freshman year. It was there that I wrote my first news story because although in high school yearbook I did some writing, it wasn't quite the same. That is where I did my first stories and I loved it. I loved reporting, I loved going out and talking to people there. I felt like I just learned so much about the place that I was living. I grew up in the Phoenix metro area, in the suburbs. I didn't know very much about downtown Phoenix when I moved there for school, so I felt like I learned a lot about the community around me just by being a reporter there.

Beck: Do you remember what your first story was?

Sophia: I do remember what my first story was. It was about business collaborations in downtown Phoenix. It was about how a lot of the small businesses there would share a space or would use each other's products for their own business. There was a gallery, where I, it was a company that made leather goods, they also setup shop in there. One of the restaurants used homemade ice cream with the milk from a nearby dairy, it was about that. I remember going out and doing the interviews for that and everything and having a lot of help from my editor.

Beck: And you were there the whole time, so four years. You eventually were the executive editor, so that must've been cool. You worked your way up. How many people were at that paper?

****Sophia:**** It was just a website, but it kinda varied because we had our staff, which was around maybe twenty-ish to twenty five. We had a lot of contributing writers too. One great thing about Downtown Devil was that our door was always open. There was another student publication, the official paper, the university was the State Press. They are great, but you have to apply there, and it was a little more rigorous to get right through the door. We were pretty open to accepting people of all different skill levels. When I was there we really did try to make it a learning experience, we were like a teaching publication. I learned how to write a lead there, because I didn't know anything coming straight through the door. So the point of all of this is we had quite a big contributor staff as well.

****Beck:**** Were people nice about that? Did you ever get slag once you were editor? Like, "that's not how you write a story," or "who wrote this piece." Did you ever get anything, I'm just curious.

****Sophia:**** From the staff?

****Beck:**** No, just from people reading it, or any consumers or any students or any trolls out there.

****Sophia:**** Actually, one thing I was pretty proud about Downtown Devils, they were a very loved among the community. Most of our readers actually were a lot of students, but a lot of people who lived in downtown Phoenix because there wasn't any other publication that served just downtown Phoenix. A lot of people did read it, and we had rigorous editing processes to make sure everything looked good, like when we had a freshman who has never written a story before, make sure it still comes out nice. We didn't get a ton of that, but of course every journalist and publication will get some pushback on things, you're never going to make everybody happy.

****Beck:**** So then, walk us through, here you did a two month stint at Reuters News agency.

****Sophia:**** At Reuters, Reuters, yeah.

****Beck:**** I always mispronounce that one, every single time.

****Sophia:**** No, it's okay, everyone calls it, "Rooters," at Reuters.

****Beck:**** I know, that's me. It's like my mom, she says, "worter," for water. It's a Pennsylvania thing.

****Sophia:**** Right after I graduated, I did a two month internship in New York and it was great. I learned a lot about business reporting, that was my first real business recording internship experience. I did a bit of it in college, but I learned a lot there for sure.

****Beck:**** Did you apply to the internship months in advance, did it happen upon a connection, I kinda want to know how did you get into it?

****Sophia:**** A little bit of both, I did apply for it, but one of the professors at ASU, we have a partnership connection with Reuters, where they try to send around two interns out there. One digital and one for video, but I was the digital intern. I definitely wouldn't of gotten it without my professor's help, but also applied for it and interviewed for it as well.

****Beck:**** And then from there you became a fellow.

****Sophia:**** Everyone in the Hearst Journal is a fellow, yep. In Connecticut, moved just one state over.

****Beck:**** How'd you land that?

****Sophia:**** I applied for it, my last year of school, when I was a grad student. One of my friends had done it a couple years before me and he really spoke very highly of it. It seemed like a great opportunity just to get a variety of experiences. Basically how the program works is you are sent to one Hearst's newspapers for one year and then transferred to a second location for your second year. The idea behind it is growth through a variety of experiences, so you do different things in different cities. I applied for it my last year of school, I was hoping to get it but I wasn't sure and if I don't I will apply for other things. The process is, eventually they twiddle it down to around 15 finalists I think. We went out to Huston for a two day, I want to call it final judgment, but it's like a two day testing period.

****Beck:**** Oh wow.

****Sophia:**** Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

****Beck:**** You're downplaying it.

****Sophia:**** It was an intense two days for sure, but it was also enjoyable.

****Beck:**** What happened in the two days?

****Sophia:**** For one day, I know they've changed the process since then. The first day was kind of test, writing exercises, just to make sure I think that you know how to write a story, and you know your spelling and your grammar, you know how to report, and you can turn in a clean, accurate, copy. So, it was a lot of that. We went out and did a mock interview thing where we went out and did a story. We took a bunch of different writing tests, headline writing tests, all that. That was just the first day and the second day we did our big panel interview, which is where they gather all the judges. They're usually all the top editors of all the Hearst papers, and the clients. It was nine people around a boardroom table and me.

****Beck:**** Wow, and you said fifteen?

****Sophia:**** I think there was fourteen or fifteen, I think they picked six or seven of us. I think it was the most intense interview I've ever done.

****Beck:**** After you stepped out of there did you go, "Wow, yeah, I nailed that," or did you go, "ehhh."

****Sophia:**** Not quite. I think coming out of it, I really felt like I did fine under the pressure of it because they were very critical of me during the whole process. I think the whole purpose was to see how you react under pressure for sure. Fortunately, even when I'm screaming on the inside, I look calm on the outside, so I was like okay, I think that went fine. When I stepped out I was waiting, I was calling my uber, and one of the judges did step out, and she was heading to the restroom, and she said, "You did a good job, we were impressed." I was like okay, I think I'm

okay. Then I found out pretty quickly after that, I think it's fine, there is nothing else I can do about it.

****Beck:**** Did they call you?

****Sophia:**** They did, they called me two days later.

****Beck:**** What did you do when you heard?

****Sophia:**** I freaked out, I was so happy. I was so happy I called my parents and my friends and my professors. It was awesome.

****Beck:**** That's huge. So, now you're a fellow, you're in the second year, what happens post fellowship?

****Sophia:**** The idea behind it is that you end up staying either with paper you're at or somewhere within Hearst, but it is a little dependent on availability of jobs, so we shall see.

****Beck:**** Okay, so it's up in the air.

****Sophia:**** It's a little up in the air. I love the Chronicle, I'd love to stay, but we shall see.

****Beck:**** Okay, let's talk about the current role in what you're doing. You mentioned at of the show you are coving startups and what's going on in the city and such. Was that handed to you, did you get to influence any of that? How does it go with selecting the stories you do?

****Sophia:**** It's a bit of both. When I came into this role, I knew it would be generally assigned on business and startups. Obviously I moved here from Connecticut, so starting off I didn't know a ton about the city and about what exactly to look for. I have great editors at the Chronicle that give me a lot of guidance for sure. They're very receptive to you in both you pitching stuff and giving me assignments as well.

****Beck:**** And local government you also get to cover?

****Sophia:**** Not here really, I've written some things that are about policy I guess, but that was in Connecticut I was doing that.

****Beck:**** Got it. What keeps you excited with the role in San Francisco at the Chronicle, right now? Do you like the startup stuff?

****Sophia:**** I do, I feel like everything is just so fast moving here. There is always something happening, there is always something to write about. Especially in the startup space, there's so many of them. I don't cover them as much as I used to, but there's always a new company, there's always something going on. When things are moving that fast, it's easy to I guess stay excited about it because it never gets boring.

****Beck:**** Coming from Connecticut was it a big cultural shock here?

****Sophia:**** I actually grew up in Phoenix, so west coast wasn't like too much of that. San Francisco is a very unique city for sure. I've visited before, but I've never lived here. It is very different from Connecticut for sure, I think going to Connecticut was more of a culture shock, I would say. It's definitely different, but I like it a lot. It's fast pace, it's exciting, there is a lot going on. What I'm doing is a lot different from what I was doing there, but it's been great here so far.

****Beck:**** How's your inbox look?

****Sophia:**** Oh my gosh, it's like flooded all the time. Part of that is because for some reason they couldn't get me off of some Connecticut list service, it's all the same email. I feel like I'm spending half my day trying to delete emails out of there.

****Beck:**** What is it, is it pitches and everyone just trying to get after you, is it the startups themselves?

****Sophia:**** A lot of pitches mostly. A lot of pitches. I like the ones that you can tell are more tailored to me and what I do. You can tell that they've read my work and know a bit of what I

cover. There's so many people and a lot of times they're repeat offenders. They feel like there blindly pitching, like maybe I'll write about it.

****Beck:**** What do you do with the repeat offenders?

****Sophia:**** If they have nothing to do with what I'm doing, I usually immediately delete it. A lot of the times, sometimes we cover Bay area business, and a lot of times people will send me stuff about things going on in New York. These companies, like this place is opening up a store in New York, it's cool but I don't write about that. I probably should just block them, but who knows.

****Beck:**** Really, they're opening a store in New York and they're sending something to the SF Chronicle.

****Sophia:**** I got a pitch about that today. I was like yep, this was sent to me, it wasn't meant to be sent to the Connecticut house, so I immediately deleted it.

****Beck:**** Do you get them all cleared out or how do you manage?

****Sophia:**** I try my best, it feels like an ongoing battle.

****Beck:**** When you said also that there is personalization, it sounds like it's coming to you specifically, what does that actually look like because we have a lot of publicists listening? Is that somehow in the subject line of personalized, or in the body of the email, or is it really short and sweet, or did they follow you on twitter? What would you say?

****Sophia:**** I would say, usually in the body of the email, and it's usually saying, "I read some of your stuff about this, like I thought you might be interested in this." It's when I can tell that they, like it's not just a copy and paste, like it's not just a copy and paste, "Hi."

****Beck:**** Have you ever gotten the "hi blank?"

****Sophia:**** I have, and I have also gotten, this just annoys me. Yesterday, I got one where they misspelled my name, which is... if it was like a really difficult name...

****Beck:**** They misspelled Sophia?

****Sophia:**** Yeah, they spelled it with an 'f'. It just isn't a good first look. The most ridiculous is kind of funny but also just like what. They said, "hi Sonja." They called me Sonja, which is a little funny because my sisters name is Sonja and maybe we do look a little alike. When we were younger people used to always confuse us. She's gonna be a dentist, she is not in media at all, so I know they just got my name completely wrong. It was also just a totally irrelevant pitch, so I was just like okay, not for me.

****Beck:**** Do you have any good publicist friends, people that you would rely on? How do you craft those relationships, if at all?

****Sophia:**** A lot of people when I first moved here reached out to me and asked if I wanted to get coffee and I love doing that. They've been helpful and going forward and stuff. I've appreciated that every time I meet someone in person, I remember them, so that has definitely helped as well.

****Beck:**** And they've been helpful you've said, is that give you some other story ideas or some insights?

****Sophia:**** Yes, some insights or other story ideas. Sometimes I'm like ah, this is a great story but then my editors aren't feeling it as much, but either way I think it's a good way to meet more people and have those relationships.

****Beck:**** So, there you go, having coffee with journalists, is a good idea. Do you on average spend, how many coffees a week would you say, or maybe a month, is it a frequent thing for you?

****Sophia:**** I actually am trying to do it more to be completely honest because I feel like I haven't even been doing it enough, I would like to do more, so I would love to go to coffee with you guys.

****Beck:**** Okay you guys, yes, hit her up. We're going to talk about your Twitter handle and everything else in just a second, so people can find you and follow you and such. How about, what would you hope publicist do more for working with you?

****Sophia:**** For sure like knowing what I do and what I cover, that is a huge thing. And knowing the Chronicles place in terms of like San Francisco Media, what we cover and what our stories are like. And I guess also just more pitches that are more tailored to what we say we are looking for or the kinda stories that we write, that's what I would ask for.

****Beck:**** You'd think that knowing what you write about is something just so basic, not misspelling my name, something like that.

****Sophia:**** Yeah, if it was a really phenomenal pitch, like looking at this exclusive for you, obviously I wouldn't be like you spelled my name with an 'f', but it was totally irrelevant, and my name was misspelled. I have gotten a "hi blank" before, which is obvious that you are sending this to everybody.

****Beck:**** But the worst part is they didn't even fill in the blank, that's the bad part. So, don't send that publicists, we do not want the "hi blank." That should be a new hashtag for us, "no hi blank." What about the future of journalism? I like to ask people about this, now interestingly in your case, your new in this career, relative, you haven't been in a ten, you know I've talked to people who've been in it twenty years. Would you do it again I ask them, if you knew what you knew but still I think it's relevant to you. First question is, now knowing what you know in this role, would you pursue journalism again?

****Sophia:**** I think I would, I mean I know I would. It's something where, it sounds cliché but every day is different. I feel like it's a career in which you are constantly learning and you get to meet a lot of interesting people. I think journalism is a great career, it's a super necessary role in society for sure. The future of journalism is going digital, but it's going to be more exclusive information. Exclusive information is for sure more value than news aggregation sites. I think that will be something that people will for sure, I think they already kind of value it, but I think more and more publications will be doing that instead of seeing more aggregation sites kinda pop up.

****Beck:**** Do you even think more of a focus on the more features, the more in depth type pieces too will be happening?

****Sophia:**** I hope so, I think those are the kind of journalism that brings value to readers lives. Information is a commodity, you want to add value to that, you know? You don't want it to be something that everybody else has. You want to add something new to it.

****Beck:**** And if you had to talk to a future fellow, if you were on the other side of that?

****Sophia:**** I just did.

****Beck:**** Oh, you did, oh okay, what did you tell them?

****Sophia:**** They asked me about the interview process and I told them about that. I told them a bit about my experience about how much I enjoyed it, I talked to them more about the program than journalism itself. I told them this is a great program where you have the opportunity to be a full-fledged member of newsrooms, but you also have, they also understand that I was moved from Connecticut, so my editor was like... they checked in with me and asked, have you found housing, they sent out a note to everyone saying we have a fellow coming, he needs to find a place to live. They're also very aware of the fact that you're just starting your career, but they still treat you like a full member of the newsroom, job responsibility wise.

****Beck:**** So, is this person coming hopefully, there're sold?

****Sophia:**** I hope so, yeah, I mean there interviewing at some point.

****Beck:**** More graduates in the newsroom, I like it.

****Sophia:**** I think, you know definitely need diversity of age for sure in newsrooms because those different perspectives are what's going to help you spot different kinds of stories.

****Beck:**** Sophia, thank you for being on today.

****Sophia:**** Of course, thank you so much for having me.

****Beck:**** Coffee with a journalist, sans coffee today, but it was good. Water with a journalist, maybe we should upgrade to liquid with a journalist.

****Sophia:**** Yes.

****Beck:**** There we go. That's it.

