

**EPISODE 155**

*“SI: Throughout that process of going into retailers, I learned whether people took the product or not, that they always seemed to organically share their stories of highs and lows. Even you mentioned your grandmother and having Alzheimer's. I assumed that was a very low point in your life. I figured that out, and so I said, ‘Okay. Well, how do I reach millions of people with this message, not just the one person I'm talking to at the counter?’ It was about the time where Instagram was starting to blow up. I said, ‘Okay, there's these people with millions of followers. What are their stories of highs and lows?’ I started researching them.*

*Back in the day, people used to have their own emails right in their bios, people with millions of followers. Like no one knew what was going on. I emailed, and I said, ‘Hey, I know you experienced this in your life. This is my product, Lokai. Can I send you some?’ People would post about Lokai when they got the product, tell their own story, and it just became a ripple effect.”*

[INTRO]

**[00:01:09] LW:** Hello, friends, and welcome back to The Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary folks just like you and me, who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified as their mission in life. In doing so, they've been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who've either heard about their story or who've witnessed them in action or who've directly benefited from their work.

This week on the show, I'm in conversation with Steven Izen, who started an inspirational bracelet company called Lokai while he was still in college. So long story short, Steven's grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and then that became a very low point in Steven's life because he was extremely close to his grandfather. But the experience also cost Steven to reflect on how the nature of life has many highs and lows. He thought, “What's the highest point on Earth,” which is, of course, Mount Everest. Then he said, “What's the lowest point on Earth,” which is the Dead Sea.

Then Steven had an epiphany. He said, "What if I made a bracelet that contained actual water from Mount Everest and actual mud from the Dead Sea? And what if those symbols could remind the people wearing the bracelet of the balance of life?" When you're going through a high, there's probably going to be a low at some point. If you're experiencing a low, you're probably going to have another high at some point. In other words, he wanted to help people find the balance of life by embracing the idea of impermanence, which is an ancient Buddhist concept that suggests that the nature of life is ever changing. It's never going to be the same thing all the time.

As a part of his original mission, Steven chose to donate 10% of the proceeds of this company that he had yet to start to charity. So the first step was he called up some manufacturers in China, and he found one who would be able to inject water from Mount Everest into a white silicone bead and mud from the Dead Sea into a black silicone bead. So that became the original idea for Lokai bracelets, which Steven went on to sell from store to store in Manhattan. He ended up getting rejected 99% of the time.

But something interesting was happening. As he was telling the story of his own personal highs and lows that led him to this idea and the thing that happened to his grandfather, he noticed that whether the store owner chose to carry Lokai bracelets or not, that person ended up sharing their own personal story of a high and low that they experienced. That's where Steven really started to realize that he was on to something special because it invoked conversation in people. So he kept going.

After about five years, finally, Lokai took off, and celebrities were wearing it, and the whole thing started to spread like wildfire. To date, Steven and Lokai have been able to donate nearly 10 million dollars to charity. So in this interview, we go back, of course, to the early days where Steven was talking about the experiences he had with his grandfather and then the moment where his grandfather got diagnosed, when Steven was on a family vacation, and how that led to the idea, and how he came up with the name for the company. We talk about all of the in-between moments as well.

We also went into how you can start a mission-driven company like Lokai that leaves a positive impact in the world. I think you're really going to love this one, especially if you have an idea of

something that you've been wanting to do that has a heavy philanthropic component and an inspiring backstory. So without further ado, I want to introduce you to Mr. Steven Izen.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:05:27] LW:** Steven, it's an honor to have you on my podcast, man. I've heard some good things about you. I've listened to several of your other interviews. I've read a bunch of articles about you and your work. I'm excited to dive into your story for my audience. So thanks so much for coming on.

**[00:05:42] SI:** No, thank you. I really appreciate you having me.

**[00:05:45] LW:** Absolutely. So my first question to you, have you seen the movie *Air*?

**[00:05:49] SI:** I have not, but I really want to see it.

**[00:05:52] LW:** You would love that movie, man. As someone who started up a company and created a lot of success around that, you know what it's about, right?

**[00:06:00] SI:** Yes, of course.

**[00:06:01] LW:** It's about – yes.

**[00:06:02] SI:** Jordan. Yes, I've heard the story and the shoe.

**[00:06:05] LW:** Well, yes, yes. Really about the shoes and the risk that Nike took. But it wasn't even really Nike. The way the movie portrays it, it's one guy who worked for Nike. Fortunately, Phil Knight gave him a lot of leeway to explore this Michael Jordan angle. But he still had to work really hard to convince Phil to take the risk. I won't ruin the movie for those of you who haven't seen it, but it's worth watching. It's one of the rare movies that I actually would go see twice. I never go see movies twice. But I would go see that one again because it's just so inspiring, as someone who has an entrepreneurial spirit.

**[00:06:41] SI:** That's great to hear.

**[00:06:43] LW:** Yes. Love to hear your thoughts once you go see that movie, after having read your story. Let's get into it, man. I want to start with childhood and then sort of work up from there. I know you grew up in New York, correct?

**[00:06:57] SI:** Boston.

**[00:06:59] LW:** Boston. Okay, all right. Well, I know your dad was an entrepreneur, and his dad was an entrepreneur. So thinking back to little Steven or Stevie or whatever they called you when you were just a kid, what were some of your favorite ways of spending time outside of school?

**[00:07:18] SI:** I was huge into sports. I was on every team as a little kid; soccer, baseball, basketball, football, track. I was just constantly playing sports when I wasn't in school, all the way through college. I ran track in college as well. But I always was a very competitive kid and just loved to be on the field, competing.

**[00:07:40] LW:** Was that something that you initiated for yourself? Or your parents introduced you or exposed you to sports and said, "Hey, you should try it out."?

**[00:07:47] SI:** No. It was, for sure, in me, right? As a little kid, I remember being in the driveway with the basketball hoop, shooting free throw after free throw, thinking I was going to be in the NBA. That was just who I was.

**[00:08:02] LW:** What were some of, if you can remember, the lessons or the ideologies that your dad or your mom or your granddad would echo to you back in those early days?

**[00:08:12] SI:** I think you learn a lot by seeing what your parents do more than what they say. On my mom's side, she was someone who always cared and put other people first and always gave back. On my dad's side, the hard work ethic day in and day out. He used to wake up and go to the gym at 4:45 in the morning before work. So seeing them do those things over my childhood I think were very impactful to who I am now.

**[00:08:41] LW:** You mentioned in some other interviews that your granddad would drive you to school. Why didn't your dad or mom drive you to school?

**[00:08:48] SI:** So, me and my sister went to school in totally different places. I have a younger sister. So before I could drive, my mom would drive my sister to school, and my grandfather would drive me to school.

**[00:09:01] LW:** Your dad was, obviously, doing something else he couldn't –

**[00:09:04] SI:** He was at work. Yes, yes. He was at work.

**[00:09:06] LW:** Okay, beautiful. Your granddad also taught you goth and some other things. So talk a little bit about your relationship with your grandfather growing up.

**[00:09:15] SI:** Yes. I had such a great relationship with my grandfather. He lived in the same neighborhood as us. So I saw him all the time, and we're just close. You have that one grandparent that kind of always you gravitate towards and just have a special relationship with. That was my grandfather.

**[00:09:35] LW:** Sometimes, we have mentors in life as a young person. Sometimes, we have people we confide in. Would he be that person that you would confide in? Or did you have an open-minded communication with your parents?

**[00:09:46] SI:** I have a great relationship with my parents. My grandfather passed when I was relatively young and got sick before that. So I was still a kid with most of my memories with my grandfather. But I think just like having fun and doing things. Also, you have a very mom-dad parent relationship with your parents, where your grandparent can kind of be more fun and doesn't need to hold the rules down as much. So whether it was like going to get an ice cream or I remember going to Toys R Us as a kid. I think I wanted Grand Theft Auto or one of those games.

The person at the cash register was like, “Oh, we can't sell you this. You're too young.” My grandfather was right there, and he's like, “Oh, I'm here. I'm going to buy it.” They're like, “No, we can't sell it to you now because we know that it's for him.” So he told me that I could go to the other side of the store, and he walked out with the video game.

**[00:10:43] LW:** I love that. So you're hanging out at your dad's office. You're hanging around other people starting businesses. As a young person, what's your idea of success?

**[00:10:52] SI:** As a young person, I wanted to create ideas and companies that changed the world and impacted people. I was always around entrepreneurs, like you mentioned. So for me, the idea of being an entrepreneur as a career path was a very normal thing. I also just had it, right? I constantly am coming up with different business ideas. I was the kid with the lemonade stands. I was always trying to hustle and make some money one way or another.

**[00:11:23] LW:** Was it literally a lemonade stand? Did you literally have a lemonade stand?

**[00:11:26] SI:** Oh, yes. Yes, for sure.

**[00:11:27] LW:** What was one of the like hustles? What were some of the hustles you had?

**[00:11:31] SI:** Yard sales, lemonade sales. In high school, I love woodworking. It's a hobby of mine. I made custom wood pens, and I was selling into the stores around Boston. So all different stuff.

**[00:11:44] LW:** Final question about your earlier years. You ran track. You ran the 100 and 200. What were some of the lessons that you got from your old track days, perhaps lessons that you still think about today? I will give you an example. I don't know if you've ever listened to How I Built This Podcast with Guy Raz. But he interviewed James Dyson who created the Dyson vacuum and all of that. He used to run track. Dyson used to run track. He said that what he learned from running cross country was that there's a certain point where everybody gets tired. If you could train yourself to accelerate at that point, then you'll always win almost every race. That's kind of how he developed his winning attitude.

So you've had a lot of coaches over the years. Do you have any learnings from those coaches that you still think about to this date, "Man, I'm so glad I learned that."?

**[00:12:35] SI:** Yes. I think track is a very special sport because you have a team around you, and there's a few events like the relay where you need other people to rely on. But at the end of the day, track is very black and white. It's numbers and speed. There's no one to look at except for yourself based on your results. You can't hide or rely on someone else to make a great play.

So, that kind of mindset of we're a team. We need to work together. We need to encourage each other. We need to work together. But my success is going to really depend on my ability, how hard I train, how hard I practice, cover. It's really on you. So there's no one else that can run the race for you.

**[00:13:24] LW:** Did you get a track scholarship to Cornell? Or why did you choose Cornell?

**[00:13:27] SI:** No track scholarship. Funny, when I was looking for colleges, and I grew up in Boston, right? So not anywhere warm. The number one thing I wanted at this college was to go to a warm weather school. But I love playing sports and competing and wanted to play sport in college. It was fast. I visited Cornell and loved the coach, Nathan Taylor, incredible mentor. I got in early. When you get into Cornell, you go.

**[00:13:58] LW:** So you walked on to the track team?

**[00:13:59] SI:** No. I was recruited.

**[00:14:01] LW:** Okay, okay. You mentioned that you realized you weren't as good at track as the other guys were.

**[00:14:08] SI:** Yes. I mean, you're in a smaller pond in high school, and then you get to college, and there are some beasts. Bruno Hortelano who was my year at Cornell just ran. He made it to the semi-finals in the 200 in the last Olympics. He ran for Spain. So like, there were some fast dudes on my team. Yes, I was I'd say bottom half.

**[00:14:33] LW:** You say you were a competitive person, though. So why not just push yourself to get better? What was it about that experience that made you realize, “You know what? This is not for me. I'm going to focus my attention on something else.”?

**[00:14:45] SI:** I think in life, especially when it comes to sports, like, one, your body has physical limitations. Some of these guys were just faster than me, and I was never – again, no matter how hard I trained, I couldn't compete with them. Then I would say looking back now, I also, which is a theme of my life, I was pretty balanced, right? I was in a fraternity. I was starting a business. I had a social life. I really cared about my schoolwork.

Not that other kids on the track team didn't care about school, but they were in the training center for hours after practice, taking ice baths, going to sleep early, waking up early, like just putting in the extra effort. I was partying on weekends. I definitely could have been faster if I dedicated my entire college time to running. But that wasn't the experience that I wanted out of it.

**[00:15:51] LW:** You had a family vacation that freshman year, and you got some disheartening news at that vacation.

**[00:15:57] SI:** Yes. It was the summer after my freshman year in college. I was on vacation, and my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. To that point, I had never really gone through an experience like that where death was knocking on the door for someone that I knew or loved. I had never lost anyone up until that point, which I'm fortunate for. It brought me to a low in my life, and it got me thinking about literally the highs and lows that I was going through at that moment. Being on vacation but then also getting this news.

I just thought about how everyone in life goes through highs and lows. It doesn't matter your age, your demographic, your income level. We all have them. So me being my entrepreneurial self, I was like, “Okay. Well, what are the highest and lowest points on Earth? Mount Everest and the Dead Sea. What if I took elements from those two places and incorporated them into a product that people could wear?” Every day is a reminder to find balance in life, staying humble when you're on top of the world and hopeful when you've hit a low. That was kind of the seed that developed into Lokai.



**[00:17:03] LW:** Just before we get into that, I'm curious. What was your mental state like just as a person when you got that news? Would you consider yourself to be a fairly optimistic happy person? Or are you anxious in some ways or anything like that?

**[00:17:15] SI:** Oh, yes, a very happy person. I mean, it was just sad. It's sad news, but you can't avoid it.

**[00:17:23] LW:** What was the prognosis?

**[00:17:25] SI:** He lived with Alzheimer's for four years, and it got progressively worse over those four years.

**[00:17:32] LW:** My grandmother had Alzheimer's. She also got diagnosed and then ended up living another four or five years as well. So you get back to school. I don't know if this is true or not. But I heard that you came up with the idea within a couple of hours. Is that true? Were you like taking a shower or something?

**[00:17:50] SI:** No. That was – no. I came up with the full idea while I was on vacation.

**[00:17:56] LW:** Just like having a conversation? Or you just woke up in the middle of the night and had the epiphany or? Where were you when it downloaded?

**[00:18:03] SI:** I think I was just like on the beach with the family thinking about it, and it just rolled. I mean, I got books full of ideas. So I'm constantly coming up with ideas. This one just really stuck.

**[00:18:18] LW:** You used to write down ideas then. You like – this is a normal thing for you.

**[00:18:23] SI:** Yes.

**[00:18:24] LW:** What made this idea stand out among all the others that you had collected?

**[00:18:29] SI:** I think it was – and we can talk as we get into the company. But purpose, right? It's easy to come up with a business idea. But what is the purpose for that business? Why are you doing what you're doing? I think so much of that emotion from my grandfather was tied up into the idea. I mean, it's woven into the DNA of what the company is. I think that passion has driven Lokai to be as successful as it has been.

**[00:19:03] LW:** Were you wearing the Livestrong bracelets? Or why did you choose a bracelet as opposed to a necklace or a ring or some other form of expression?

**[00:19:11] SI:** Well, I wanted something you could wear every day, and jewelry really fits that. I was absolutely one of the kids that wore Livestrong bracelets and kind of saw that and had it in my mind. I thought bracelets were probably the most unisex and kind of easy thing for people to just throw on. So I chose bracelet.

**[00:19:33] LW:** Why'd you choose silicone?

**[00:19:35] SI:** Because I wanted people to wear it no matter what they were doing; showering, working out, playing sports. It's kind of a very universal material that people could wear no matter what they were doing in life. Also, I wanted to create a product that was for everyone. I thought the message of finding balance and staying humble and hopeful shouldn't be something that people were priced out of. So I wanted something that almost anyone could afford.

**[00:20:05] LW:** So it sounds great, right, on paper. I'm going to do a bracelet. It's going to be silicone. It's universal. It's unisex. Everyone can wear it. But then when you get to the part about the Dead Sea and Mount Everest, I mean, what did people say when you told them that like, "I want to use water from Mount Everest and mud from the Dead Sea."? In a logistic, people who understand like how businesses run and supply chains and that kind of thing.

**[00:20:27] SI:** I got some laughs when I was calling random places in Nepal asking for water. But people were willing to help me. I think when I told people the story and why I was doing it, people were willing to help. Eventually, I connected to a climbing group who we employ the Sherpas to go up and go collect the water and bring it down.

**[00:20:49] LW:** Did you know that beforehand? Did you know the power of story when it came to a business venture and that that could be more important than the actual widget or whatever it is that you're trying to produce? Or did you learn that while researching all of this? Like, "Wow, they really connected to this story," and you tell the story more.

**[00:21:07] SI:** I didn't have any idea around the story. But the story is so organic. I could have been telling a story that wasn't as powerful or organic, and it wouldn't have had the same impact, even if it was describing the same product.

**[00:21:24] LW:** So the pitch was always, "My dear granddad got diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I realized people had highs and lows." Then people would kind of engage from there.

**[00:21:33] SI:** Yes. From day one, I always wanted to give back. So we donate 10% of our profits to charity.

**[00:21:41] LW:** That was my other question. When you came up with that idea that anyone who, again, is business-minded pushed back and say, "You know, Steven, that's a great concept, but you may want to just do one percent to start with," would you get into that kind of pushback at all?

**[00:21:53] SI:** No. I mean, I was also very ignorance is bliss a bit. I would consider myself someone who when I was younger didn't take advice as much and just kind of ran forward with what I believed. It served me well as an entrepreneur, right? You hear a lot of nos. So I think to be so self-confident in what you're doing and your ideas and your thoughts, it's a double-edged sword. But as an entrepreneur, it can have its benefits.

**[00:22:26] LW:** How did the name Lokai come to you?

**[00:22:28] SI:** I wanted to create a word that we could own and something that encompassed balance. In Hawaiian, lokahi means unity and to blend opposites. So I changed the spelling to make it our own, and that was Lokai, and it just kind of stuck.

**[00:22:47] LW:** Is that something you just Googled? Or you had been to Hawaii and you knew that term? Or how did –

**[00:22:53] SI:** No. For weeks, I probably Googled words about balance, synonyms, antonyms, and just different languages.

**[00:23:04] LW:** So then the story is you go on this website called Global Sources, you mass emailed 2,000 factories, and you tell them exactly what you're trying to do. How receptive were they to this idea of getting water from Mount Everest and mud from the Dead Sea and blah, blah, blah for their processes in order to be able to fulfill your order?

**[00:23:23] SI:** With Global Sources, it's just you just blasting an email. So I started with, "Oh, I need a silicone bracelet." Then I got a couple thousand responses, and I said, "Okay, it needs to be silicone bracelet, and it needs to be multi-colored." The ones that said no I knocked out. The ones that said yes I kept. I just kept doing that over and over again until there were only a few that kept saying yes that they could make it.

The factory that we still work with today started with four guys in a garage. The owner happened to be an engineer and figured out how to be able to inject the water in the mud and make the product the way that I was looking for. Now, it's a multi-hundred person factory, pretty much just makes Lokai's.

**[00:24:12] LW:** You flew to China to personally investigate this factory and meet these guys. How are you financing the operation in these early days?

**[00:24:20] SI:** I had a little bit of money. I had a company in high school, the pen company. I also had a bar mitzvah, so I had some money saved up. Then I had a loan from a family friend.

**[00:24:33] LW:** Beautiful. So you spent your own money. Did you go by yourself?

**[00:24:36] SI:** I did. I had a family friend that I barely knew that was in Hong Kong, and he came with me to the factory and helped be the translator. But, yes, I flew there by myself.

**[00:24:52] LW:** Were you concerned when you only saw four guys in this warehouse? Or were you kind of thinking, “Okay, this is cool. We can start from the ground up and consume all of the resources they have here.”?

**[00:25:02] SI:** To their credit, they made me a sample before I went. So I knew they could make the product. So I didn't care what the operation looked like. They were the only ones that could make it. So that's who we went with, and it's amazing we still use them today.

**[00:25:20] LW:** Did you have a business plan at this point?

**[00:25:22] SI:** Not really. I started just going door to door in New York City, walking around door to door, saying, “Hey. Is the owner or manager here? Can I speak to them? This is my story.”

**[00:25:34] LW:** Was this before you graduated Cornell? Or is this while you were at Cornell?

**[00:25:37] SI:** So I launched the business in June of 2013, so right when I graduated.

**[00:25:50] LW:** You got the idea freshman year. You developed it over those three years. So you'd already sourced the water and the mud, and you have the manufacturer in China. Then you get your little display case together, and you graduate, and you're in Manhattan, and you start going door to door. So what was your initial pitch, the one that you got rejected from 99% of the time, and how did it evolve from rejection to rejection?

**[00:26:17] SI:** Might not be the answer you want to hear, but I didn't change. The story has always been the story. I think we're a very authentic and true and honest company. That's who I am as an individual. I think it was more of just my ability to get comfortable with hearing no and continuing on and on and on until I got a yes and then another yes and then another yes. Throughout that process of going into retailers, I learned whether people took the product or not, that they always seemed to organically share their stories of highs and lows, right?

Like even you mentioned your grandmother and having Alzheimer's, and I assumed that was a very low point in your life. I figured that out, and so I said, “Okay. Well, how do I reach millions of people with this message, not just the one person I'm talking to at the counter?” It was about the

time where Instagram was starting to blow up, and I said, “Okay, there's these people with millions of followers. What are their stories of highs and lows?” Then I started researching them.

Back in the day, people used to have their own emails right in their bios, people with millions of followers. No one knew what was going on. I emailed and I said, “Hey, I know you experienced this in your life. This is my product, Lokai. Can I send you some?” People would post about Lokai when they got the product, tell their own story, and it just became a ripple effect. Everyone started to then – that following that person bought them, posting, telling their story. Word of mouth marketing, it just went.

**[00:28:01] LW:** Did you have the story on your initial? Like let's say I'm a retailer, and I decide to carry Lokai bracelets. Would there be like a story on the display where the bracelets were being sold or on the back of the bracelets or?

**[00:28:15] SI:** Yes, there was. We used to have like a fishbowl display with tags on the bracelets. That was really small. So over the years, we've gotten much better at merchandising and telling that story on our fixtures and our packaging. But it was originally there.

**[00:28:32] LW:** Talk about the first time you saw somebody wearing a bracelet that you didn't know. What was that like?

**[00:28:39] SI:** Yes. That was cool. That was really cool. I don't remember the first person I saw it in person. But I remember seeing Arian Foster. The running back from the Texans was the first person I saw wearing it on TV. I was just watching the game, and he was on the sidelines rocking it. That was really cool.

**[00:29:01] LW:** You had no idea how he got one?

**[00:29:03] SI:** No.

**[00:29:04] LW:** Did you hire like a PR person to send it out to celebrities or put it in an Oscar package or any of that kind of stuff?

**[00:29:10] SI:** No. I didn't realize it then. But now, as a more experienced entrepreneur, I've realized there's never been an easier time to start a business. There's lots of entrepreneurs starting businesses, getting tons of funding, and then spending that money pushing marketing and pushing revenue through spend.

One of the most powerful things that I think it takes for a company to be successful is the product itself has to speak for itself. People need to buy it without being forced upon buying it, and word of mouth. It needs to be word of mouth where people want to tell others about it. I think people have lost sight of that a lot in today's entrepreneurial worlds, where I think a lot of products and companies are forced into existence.

**[00:30:08] LW:** I feel like there's a movement happening where kids are being encouraged to skip college and go right to becoming an entrepreneur, into starting businesses. People like Patrick Bet-David and Andrew Tate and these guys were saying you don't need to go to college. I'm wondering, if you hadn't gone to Cornell, were there learnings that you were exposed to in your entrepreneurial classes that would have changed things if you have potentially missed out on those when you started your company?

**[00:30:37] SI:** I don't think there's a right or wrong answer to your question about is college a way, should people go to college. Everyone has their own situation, right? I was lucky enough that my parents paid for my college, so I didn't accumulate a bunch of debt being in school. I had a blast at college. In business, your network and who you know is very important. It's just as important as what you know, sometimes. I wouldn't say in college I was networking, but I was meeting tons of people.

I've now done business with multiple people from college that I went to school with, right? The founder and CEO of our Amazon agency was a fraternity brother of mine. One of my fraternity brothers is high up at a retailer that we are now carried in. So I wasn't networking with them at school, but they have helped with the success of where the company is just through the people I've met.

**[00:31:45] LW:** If someone's listening to this and let's say they have something that they've developed, a product that they've developed, and it has a story, a very heartfelt purpose-driven

story behind it, and they want to get it into stores, what suggestions or considerations would you give them when going into a store in terms of like – I'm talking very specific things like you want to definitely go on a weekday. You want to definitely – don't talk to the salesperson. Ask for the manager. Or did you work out a little system when you were going around from store to store to be as efficient as possible?

**[00:32:20] SI:** Not really. I think it's a volume game. You're going to get turned out most of the time. Understanding that it's not personal I think is really important. Being able to separate business wins and losses from personal wins and losses when you're starting the business, it feels like everything is so personal. But as you get told no over and over again, and you learn what gets a yes, you keep doing that. I think by playing the volume game, like I didn't know what types of retailers ended up working. We ended up having a great business in surf shops. So now, we go after a lot more surf shops, right? But I didn't know that back then.

So I think it's just never give up. Keep going. But make sure you have a product that works, that – like we got turned down a lot, but then I got some yeses. But then once we got yeses, our product sold. Once they took it in the store, it sold through. I think that's a very important thing is I think some retailers, I just said, take it. You don't even have to pay for it. If it sells, you pay me. If it doesn't, I'll take it back. Knowing if your product actually sells to consumers, this is very important.

**[00:33:40] LW:** That was kind of my next question is what were some of the reasons why people rejected the product?

**[00:33:46] SI:** Didn't fit their assortment. Wasn't right for us. Oh, it's silicone jewelry. Like that's too cheap for us. I don't like it. I don't know. Everyone has their own thing. We have no more dollars to buy for the store. We have nowhere to put the product. Our customers wouldn't want this. It's amazing how many excuses people can come up with.

**[00:34:10] LW:** Were you ever tempted to go back and redesign based on any of the feedback you heard from the retailers?



**[00:34:14] SI:** Packaging. Not at first but over the years, we've made our product on the cards impeccable. So now, it can fit onto retailer shelves more easily, so more in the merchandising. Merchandising is a really important aspect of getting velocity.

**[00:34:45] LW:** In the early days, you were obviously doing most of the jobs yourself, right? You were the sales person, the creator, the designer. Were you designing stuff on Photoshop and Illustrator? Or did you hire a small little team of people to do some things for you?

**[00:34:58] SI:** At first, I did everything; customer service, sales, marketing, finance, product, everything. So that is what a true entrepreneur is.

**[00:35:11] LW:** You said you started micromanaging when you had a small little team. You were micromanaging your team. Were you micromanaging them because you didn't trust them or because they needed to be micromanaged because they weren't the best people?

**[00:35:24] SI:** I think probably a mix. I was so young, and it was the first time I had ever worked. I've never worked for anyone in my whole life. So I never knew what it was like to be a boss or have a boss or have co-workers. At like 22, 23, I didn't really know how to hire, what questions to ask in interviews, anything. So I think I probably didn't always hire the right people.

Then definitely my inexperience. I'm such a perfectionist and want everything exactly my way and wanted it to be this way. I didn't learn until a long time later that you really need to hire great people and trust them to do their jobs better than you could do it, and they will. So I think that just takes time, experience, maturity.

**[00:36:14] LW:** So talk about your vetting process. How do you determine whether or not someone was a great person to work with?

**[00:36:20] SI:** I mean, I can speak to now how I do it. I'm much more thoughtful about what is the reason they want to come and work for Lokai. Do they have a connection with our mission and our message? Are they someone who wants to build a career with us? Or are they just here for a year or two and then want to bounce elsewhere? Are they self-starters? Are they going to

be a positive influence on the culture and work well with the other team members? Or are they kind of, “I’m going to do it myself, and I know better than everyone else.”?

I think cultural fit is probably the most underrated quality of what you look for in a candidate. Someone who is not a cultural fit can be a disaster to the rest of the organization.

**[00:37:09] LW:** You don't really find that out, though, until they start working there, right? I mean, how do you vet for cultural fit before you hire someone? Or can you?

**[00:37:17] SI:** I think you can just emotionally feel people out and whether they're good working with others. You can do checks and call past team members of theirs that they've worked with. You can get a relatively good sense. But then, no, you can't always. Unfortunately, I never like to do it, but let people go fast. When you know it's not the right fit, it's best for everyone to do it as quickly as possible.

**[00:37:44] LW:** You said it took five years, around five years, for you guys to really start to grow. Did something specific happen in those five years? For instance, did a celebrity – was a celebrity photographed and posted it on Instagram, and then it went viral? Or was it really just an accumulation of a thousand different moments, where people were just talking about it on social media and blah, blah, blah?

**[00:38:08] SI:** Yes. So the five years was made up of those three years while I was in college and then two years after. It was that marketing idea to start reaching out to celebrities, athletes, influencers on Instagram and have them start to push it. That was really the catalyst for us which grew us pretty quick.

**[00:38:30] LW:** Just walk me through that. You DM or email someone because their email was in the bio and say, “Hey, I started this thing.” You tell them the story. “Let me send you a free bracelet,” and then just hope for the best. Hope they photograph it and post it.

**[00:38:44] SI:** Yes. Back then, there was no influencer market. The word influencer didn't exist. So people didn't understand the power or the value of their audience. I think if it was sunglasses, like a normal product – I don't want to say normal. It's still a – Lokai is a bracelet but

a product without such a deep personal story. I still don't think it would have worked as well. I think sometimes you got to get a bit lucky.

We had a perfect product that had a personal touch, and it allowed each person to tell their own story through social. That was really the catalyst. Then our direct-to-consumer sales started to skyrocket. Then because of the success there, retailers started to call us and want to carry the product. So that was really the match.

**[00:39:39] LW:** Looking back, do you think it would have still been successful had you not used water from Everest and mud from the Dead Sea? If you just said, "Okay, the white bead is symbolic of your high, and the black bead is symbolic of your low." But it's really about just the bracelet and community and the story.

**[00:39:54] SI:** It's a great question. I guess we'll never know.

**[00:40:00] LW:** That's like the Kanye.

**[00:40:01] SI:** Yes. Maybe.

**[00:40:03] LW:** Grammy's. I mean, you're a sales guy now. I mean, you've seen, you've sold a lot of things. You had 3,000 Skewes at one point. So you know you can sell something if you needed to sell it, right? You know the power of a story. What you did initially was so ambitious.

**[00:40:17] SI:** I think the water and the mud added a bit of a wow factor, and that helped a lot. Now that the brand is much larger, we still do it. Do I think it would matter as much? Probably not, but those early days definitely had the shock factor for people.

**[00:40:38] LW:** I would agree. I think you need a bit of a wow factor. I mean, Elon talks about that a lot. He says if you're going to create something in an existing market, it needs to be far and above what exists currently, at least from a storytelling perspective as well. But like you say, we'll never know. So talk about the importance of community in creating this brand and having people be able to show each – show their friends, and talk about the story with their friends and their own highs and lows and how that helped to spread the word.

**[00:41:06] SI:** Yes. I think we're an emotional company, an emotional product, and have an emotional community. I think we have 50 to 100 people with Lokai tattoos. It has a deep impact on people and their own personal stories. One of the things that we did early on is because it was very organic, we donate 10% of our profits to charity, okay? So why don't we start partnering with some of the charities that we give back to? So we were able to tap into the individual communities of each cause as well and bring those people into our audience.

Every bracelet has the white bead with the water and the black bead with the mud. But instead of the rest of the beads being clear, they're pink for breast cancer, purple for Alzheimer's, neon for Make-A-Wish Foundation. So that was our ability to also reach new customers and new communities of people, and tell them about Lokai.

**[00:42:04] LW:** How is the water actually infused in the bracelet? Is it literally like if you pop up the bead, water will come out? Or is it just infused in the manufacturing process?

**[00:42:13] SI:** No. So the white and the black beads are hollow, and they're hand-injected into everyone with like a needle and a syringe.

**[00:42:22] LW:** Wow. So these Sherpas, they go to the top of Everest or just get it from some place on the mountain?

**[00:42:27] SI:** Camp 2. Base Camp 2.

**[00:42:29] LW:** Okay, all right. Then they package it up in some special way, and they ship it to Shenzhu, and they have a –

**[00:42:36] SI:** Shenzhen.

**[00:42:37] LW:** Shenzhen. They have containers of this Everest water in the warehouse somewhere.

**[00:42:42] SI:** Yes, that's right.

**[00:42:43] LW:** I love it. Is that an expensive part of the bracelet, just out of curiosity?

**[00:42:48] SI:** It's a part of it. It's a silicone bracelet which like Livestrong bracelets sold for a dollar. Ours are \$18, under \$20. So it definitely adds some cost. But relative to other types of products, no, it's still an affordable item to make and sell.

**[00:43:09] LW:** That was intentional. You wanted to keep it affordable for most people.

**[00:43:13] SI:** Yes. We wanted to keep it under \$20.

**[00:43:17] LW:** Is there like a Facebook group for Lokai's? Or what's the biggest how people access – let's say you have a bracelet. You want to be a part of the community. How would you connect with other? What do you call them, Lokai?

**[00:43:30] SI:** Just the Lokai community. We have three ways. I mean, our Instagram audience and community. We have a couple hundred thousand people in our Facebook group. Then we have a membership actually with a few thousand people now. They get special perks and a Lokai every month.

**[00:43:57] LW:** So you got married pretty young by today's standards. If you don't mind me asking, how did you know that she was the one, and how did you feel that marriage has impacted your commitment to your business?

**[00:44:13] SI:** Great question. I don't think I've ever really gotten this on a podcast. I met my wife the summer between sophomore and junior college in New York City. We met at a bar, totally random, which is awesome. She was there. She was there walking with me store to store after college, trying to start Lokai. We got married this – actually, in two weeks will be our fifth anniversary. So five years ago, we got married. We have two little boys, a four-year-old and a two-year-old.

I would say I don't know if marriage really changed anything. At the end of the day, it's the same relationship. It's just kind of paperwork, whether you're married or not married. Kids have definitely changed a lot. So kids way more than the marriage or girlfriend.

**[00:45:08] LW:** You budget in time to spend with your family. Can you talk a little bit about that? For the young entrepreneurial fathers out there, what have you done that works for you in terms of finding balance and spending quality time with your family?

**[00:45:20] SI:** Yes. So I've always chased financial success. That being said, I know deep down that if I'm not a great father and a great husband and a great friend, no amount of financial wealth will make me a successful person. So I always prioritize my family and my friends above anything else. So for me, I use my calendar religiously. I literally block out times when I'm with them. For me, that allows me to be fully present when I am with them because I know there's nothing else on my calendar that someone needs me or can put a meeting on my calendar. Or I can just put my phone away. So from 7 to 8am, I'm with the boys. Then from 5 to 7pm, I'm with them at night.

Then even date nights are scheduled. Some people might say, "Oh, that's not romantic. Like you have to schedule your date nights." But something else will always fill that spot if I don't block out the time. To me, what's on my calendar is what I do. So I know I'm going to get that time with my wife multiple times a week and with my kids. Being a great father and husband makes me a better leader in the company. So I prioritize those things, and working out.

**[00:46:46] LW:** Your company is fully remote since the pandemic. So are you working from home? Do you have a special space in your house? Do you go to WeWork? Or how does that work?

**[00:46:56] SI:** I work from home. I have an office in the house.

**[00:46:59] LW:** So you tell the kids, "Don't come in here until five o'clock, and that's going to be our time together."?

**[00:47:02] SI:** Yes. I mean, they bust in all the time but –

**[00:47:07] LW:** Yes. Because you used to sit in your dad's office. I mean, naturally, you want them to see what you're doing as long as they're not disturbing you too much, right?

**[00:47:11] SI:** For sure. No, for sure. They definitely see it. They like to come in here and pretend to work, and that's part of it. Sometimes, they bust in on podcasts.

**[00:47:25] LW:** Let's talk a little bit about Elements of Balance. What was the impetus behind that? Why did you feel the need to branch off into something, another vertical?

**[00:47:37] SI:** We incubated Elements of Balance out of Lokai. Elements of Balance is a adaptogen functional beverage brand. Three years ago, we said we're Lokai. We're a brand about inspiring people to find balance in their life. What other products can we make that deliver on that same message? We learned that adaptogens literally balance your cortisol levels which are your stress hormones in the right dose.

So we started to develop the products and quickly realized that selling beverages and selling bracelets are two totally different industries and require different teams, different supply chains, different everything, obviously. I separated the two. So they're separate companies. But they're sister companies, right? Shared mission, shared message. I have been building that brand for three years now and really enjoyed the challenge of a new industry as well.

**[00:48:36] LW:** Did you do the 10% to charity thing as well with Elements?

**[00:48:40] SI:** We did not.

**[00:48:41] LW:** Why not?

**[00:48:42] SI:** I think authenticity is really important. I think a lot of people slap a, "Oh, we do this. We give to charity," because they think that that message is going to drive sales versus doing it for a real purpose or a reason. There hasn't been something that deeply connected with the beverages that we felt was important to give the 10%.

I would also just add transparency and honesty is also really important. Beverage brands lose money for most of their life cycle until they're bought or scale and get profitable. To say we give 10% of profits to charity but make no profits and then give no money to charity wouldn't be very honest either.

**[00:49:39] LW:** Yes. So that kind of answers my next question because I was going to say, hypothetically, if I have a business idea, would you recommend automatically – if it's my first idea and I have a story, budgeting in some sort of philanthropic component to it or see what the bottom line looks like. If you're going to be in the red for a little while, then maybe you can address that later. Do you have a way of thinking about that?

**[00:50:03] SI:** Yes. I don't think the latter of what you just said is right. I think if the idea has cause and purpose and charity integrated into why you do what you do, then, of course, it should be part of the company. But if you're just thinking about it as a line item in the budget because you think it's going to make people want to buy your product more, it's not.

I think the purpose of Lokai was so deeply connected to people's stories of highs and lows, and those lows causes my grandfather's Alzheimer's that it's authentic to what we do and why we do it. But I don't recommend to anyone, “Oh, yes. Just add giving to your company, and you'll be more successful.” So it kind of has to be part of the DNA of the company.

**[00:50:57] LW:** Have you found that your mental state has kind of been stable throughout this whole process? Or did you have some dips of your own when you're sleeping in the office and dealing with all the pressures that come with just running a business?

**[00:51:10] SI:** I've gone through lots of highs and lows as an entrepreneur. I would say some of the hardest times have been the last two years. Running two businesses at the same time is a grind, and I'm not Elon Musk. I've found my limit of where my plate is too full. But the only way to learn is to figure it out, and now I know.

**[00:51:36] LW:** How are you thinking about success these days?



**[00:51:38] SI:** Time I'm present. Time I'm with my family, helping to educate and grow the next generation of entrepreneurs and employees within my company, and help them succeed in their career. All of which are really not as much financially driven.

**[00:51:57] LW:** If you could go back to young Steven at the very beginning of all of this, would you give many suggestions about doing things differently or what's to come or anything like that?

**[00:52:08] SI:** I don't think I'd take my own advice, so.

**[00:52:13] LW:** That's fine. What would the advice be, even though you know you probably wouldn't take it?

**[00:52:18] SI:** Enjoy the journey a bit more. It's hard. I also have friends who like have built and exited their companies. A lot of times, entrepreneurs think that they're starting the company to grow it to sell it. But usually, the exit is underwhelming, not that exciting, more of a low point in people's mental stories of their journey. So I don't think I fully took in the experience as much as I should have. I was always chasing the future.

**[00:52:58] LW:** Did having a family and kids make you more aware of that? Or does something else happened that made you more aware of, "Hey, I just – it's better to be more present."?

**[00:53:05] SI:** Maturity but definitely kids. They grow so fast. With kids, like they just want to throw the ball with you. They're not thinking about anything super complex. So the days are long but the years go by fast.

**[00:53:21] LW:** Beautiful, man. Well, I think that's a good place to wrap it up. Thank you very much for sharing your story so openly and transparently. It's inspiring for me to know that people like you are out in the world who are – I think there's a – we have a tendency, especially in the wellness community, to belittle money or the importance of money. But it's energy. If it's being used to help make people's lives and families fulfilled, and to help people share stories and spread positive messages, then it's as good as anything else that does that.

You're, I think, a great role model for what's possible when someone has a heartfelt message and attaches that to something that could help people be reminded of how important it is to celebrate the highs. You're also going to experience the lows as well in life. So thank you very much for the work that you do, and I look forward to, hopefully, crossing paths with you in person at some point in the future.

**[00:54:22] SI:** Thank you.

[OUTRO]

**[00:54:25] LW:** Thank you so much for listening to my interview with Steven Izen. For more inspiration, make sure to follow Steven's work on the socials. His personal Instagram is @stevenizen, S-T-E-V-E-N-I-Z-E-N. Then Lokai's is @livelokai. That's L-I-V-E-L-O-K-A-I. Of course, I'll drop everything that Steven and I discussed in the show notes on my website at [lightwatkins.com/show](http://lightwatkins.com/show).

If this is your first time listening to The Light Watkins Show, we've got an incredible archive of over 150 past interviews to date with other luminaries who share how they found their path and their purpose. You can search interviews by subject matter, in case you only want to hear stories about people who've overcome health challenges or who've navigated financial struggles or have taken leaps of faith. You can get a list of all of those episodes at [lightwatkins.com/show](http://lightwatkins.com/show).

You can also watch these interviews on my YouTube channel. If you want to put a face to a story, just go to YouTube and search Light Watkins Podcast, and you'll get the whole playlist. If you don't already know, I post the raw unedited version of every podcast in my Happiness Insiders online community. So if you like hearing all the false starts and the mistakes and the chitchat at the beginning of the episode, you can listen to all of that by joining the [happinessinsiders.com](http://happinessinsiders.com). You'll also get access to my 108-day meditation challenge, along with other challenges and master classes for becoming the best version of you.

Finally, to help me continue to bring you the best guests possible, it would go a long way if you could take 10 seconds to rate the podcast. Just look down at your screen. Click on the name of the show. Scroll down past the previous seven episodes. You'll see a space with five blank

stars. Just tap the star all the way on the right, and you've left a rating. If you want to go the extra mile, just leave a review with one line saying what you love about the podcast.

Thank you very much for that, and I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with another story about someone just like me, just like you, taking a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose. Until then, keep trusting your intuition. Keep following your heart. Keep taking your leaps of faith. If no one's told you recently that they believe in you, I believe in you. Thank you and have a great day.

[END]