



**KAREN CAPLAN'S SPEECH AT WOMEN IN PRODUCE
UNITED FRESH CONFERENCE
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Thank you Tonya. One of the most exciting parts of today, is that the 4 most important women in my life are here with me. I'd like to introduce both my daughters: Alex Jackson, which most of you know because she works with me. And my younger daughter Sophia Jackson, who just graduated from college last week (and she did it in three years!). My sister, business partner and best friend, Jackie Caplan Wiggins and of course my amazing mother, Frieda Caplan.

It was a complete and total surprise when Tom Stenzel called me last month to say that I had been chosen to be this year's featured speaker. You see, when I conceived of the idea of a reception to honor and acknowledge women in our industry 22 years ago, I thought it would be terrific to have women whose story was unknown to have a chance to share it and to inspire others. And of course to have a way to create awareness for the contributions of women in our industry. So, when Tom and I hung up, I said to myself, what should I talk about? Will anyone want to hear of my ups and downs, my challenges?

And then I realized for my entire career I have told the story of my mother and our company, not about my journey. And during the last two weeks, it seemed that every time I was trying to figure out what to say I would get an email from a previous honoree to reassure me. So thank you Heather, Dan'l and Tonya.

Most of you know me as Frieda Caplan's daughter. But I am also the daughter of Al Caplan. Labor Negotiator. He's the man who represented most of the California Grape Growers in the 1970s and negotiated the first contract on their behalf with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. My parents were married for 46 years and my dad passed about 17 years ago, and he was a huge influence on me. He was tough.

When I decided I wanted to get my own car, after I got my driver's license at age 16, my dad said I would have to pay for it. He asked me how much money I had saved up (working for my mom) – and I told him \$1500. The car I wanted cost \$4500, so he told me he would match whatever I had saved, but I had to pay him the balance of \$1500. We got the car, but unfortunately a few months later I did something that made my dad mad. I still to this day have no idea what that was, but I remember the consequences. He gave me an ultimatum. I had until the end of the summer to pay him the balance of \$1500 I owed him or he would take back the car. I was horrified. So I got a second job at the local library filing books and I saved every



penny. But I came up short at the end of the summer. I knew there was no negotiating with my dad. So thank goodness for my sister – Jackie lent me the money I needed to write my dad a check on September 1.

Each summer while I was in college, I came home to stay with my parents and work at my mom's company in the produce market. After my junior year in college, my dad decided to teach me financial responsibility. He told me if I wanted to live at home during the summer, then I would have to pay rent to him.

\$50 a week may not seem like a lot to you, but it was back then. And no, he did not save all my rent payments and give them back to me as a graduation present. I guess he was just preparing me for all those tough produce buyers I would have to work with during the rest of my career.

I started working in the produce business in the summer after 9th grade. I was 14. I couldn't drive myself, so I rode in with my mother at 2am and would come home with her at 5pm. I did sales on the street, back in the day when the produce buyers would walk the market each morning. In the afternoons, I would work in accounting, doing filing, and I usually fell asleep on the couch waiting for my mom to be ready to leave to go home.

During the school year, I didn't work, but I did cook. As you can imagine, my mom was too tired to cook dinner, so by default I became the family cook. As I think about it now, I used to get annoyed with my mom that she never had time (or energy) to take me clothes shopping and when she did, she would fall asleep while I tried on things. I was always so embarrassed, but as a kid I never thought about the fact that she worked 16 hour days and was probably exhausted. After high school, I went straight to college and was accepted at the University of California at Davis. I know now that it is one of the top AG schools in the country, but actually the only reason I applied there was because my guidance counselor went there. But when I got to Davis, I didn't like it. It was hard. And it was big. I had a friend who was attending Mills College in the Bay Area and I went to visit her. It was the only woman's college on the west coast and I loved the intimacy of the small size and having all women seemed so much more comfortable and less judgmental. So, without telling my parents, I applied to Mills and was accepted. I'm sure they were a bit shocked as the tuition was about \$9000 a year, as compared to the \$212.50 per quarter at Davis. But off I went. And I loved it. I often say that I found myself during that year at Mills. I developed self-confidence and a small group of great friends.

But in April of my sophomore year, one of my mom's most trusted employees, Richard Hernandez came up north and invited me to dinner. He said that he had noticed how well I did while working summers for my mom. And he wanted me to know that he planned to retire in a



few years and thought my mom would be looking for someone to take over the business. And he suggested I think about it.

My major had gone from “undeclared” my freshman year to “Administrative and Law Processes” my sophomore year. But I still had no idea what I wanted to do.

A few weeks later, I literally sat up in bed in the middle of the night and realized I LOVED working for my mom’s business and actually I could make it my career.

I had to work fast to be able to transfer back to Davis, as the school year was almost over. And needless to say, my dad was thrilled at the prospect of my tuition going down.

So I declared a major in Agricultural Economics and Business Management and started to do really well in school. At the beginning of the winter quarter of my Junior Year, my mom invited me to attend the United Produce Convention in San Francisco. It would require me to miss a couple of days of school. I realized that I had a midterm scheduled in my Business Management Class. So, I went to my professor and asked him if I could take the midterm at a different time. But he made a different suggestion. He said, you can skip the midterm, and I want you to write a paper about attending the convention instead. What a creative suggestion on his part, and a life changing experience for me. So instead of attending the convention as a regular attendee, I got a behind the scenes look at all the boards, the meetings and the exposition. I interviewed everyone on the staff. That single experience made a huge difference in my career.

During my senior year, my mom did two fantastic things for me to prepare me for joining the business.

First of all, she made a copy of every single piece of correspondence that she wrote or we received and each week mailed me a big package of letters to read, so I would have a feel for what was going on at the company. Remember, there was no internet or email back then and getting mail was a highlight for college students.

The second thing she did was she invited me to take a buying trip with her to New Zealand. It was over my spring break, but since it was a two week trip I would also have to miss the first week of my final quarter. I went to all my professors and got their permission to miss that first week of class and had an experience of a lifetime traveling through the Kiwi Orchards of New Zealand, the Ginger fields of Fiji and visiting the produce market in Brisbane, Australia. But unfortunately (and I have never told my kids this), I also ended up failing one of my classes.



There was only 1 computer class at Davis and it was in engineering and missing that much class was just too much for me.

I never told anyone in my family, but when I walked for graduation in June, I was three units short of getting my degree.

So in the fall, I contacted the professor I had been a Teaching Assistant in Business for and asked him if he would sponsor me for a 3 unit independent study class so I could graduate. And lucky for me he did. I ended up being a guest lecturer for his Marketing Class and got to talk about what I was doing at Frieda's.

My first job when I joined the company after college was doing a little bit of street sales. But the Director of National Sales my mom had hired thought we needed to educate consumers about all these weird produce items we were trying to sell. So my job turned into one of Public and Consumer Relations. My assignment was to get to know every food editor and writer in America personally.

I wrote press releases, over saw photo shoots, spoke at conferences, and did Television and radio shows talking about our specialty produce and our company slowly started to become a household word. One of the most exciting accomplishments was when mom and I got our photo and a story in PEOPLE Magazine in 1982 (Tom Selleck was on the cover).

But when our director of Sales left the company and my best friend quit (she was also in sales), I was thrust into National Sales. I had never really done phone sales before and I remember being very nervous to pick up the phone and call the buyer at Dominick's in Chicago. But it ended up coming naturally to me and I loved it.

And as our business grew, we had to hire more sales people. I'm not sure exactly why, but I was always on the lookout for other women to join our company. I think it was because of my time at Mills. One of the first was the daughter of a very successful grape grower. She wanted to get into the produce business and lived in LA. Everyone told her to call us. Because no one else hired women in sales.

And thank goodness Tonya called, and although she only worked for us for a year, as you can tell, we became lifelong friends.

For the longest time, not only were we the ONLY woman owned wholesale produce company in the US, but our entire sales staff was women. As a matter of fact, I recall Dick Spezzano who



was then at VONS, calling me before coming over for a meeting. “Karen, do you have a men’s room over there, or do I need to stop on my way over?” “Yes, Dick, we have a men’s room.”

And, yes, we eventually and to this day have both men and women on our sales and marketing teams.

After being at the company for 9 years, in 1986 I went to my mom and said to her that I felt I was actually running the company and doing all the duties of President but I still had the title of Vice President. Would she promote me to President?

A few weeks later my mom came to me and she said she and dad agreed to make me president and she figured the following April 1987 would be a perfect time as it would be our company’s 25th anniversary. I said “great.....I was thinking Tuesday”. Tuesday was July 1, 1986 because deep inside I wanted to be promoted to President when I was 30. Thankfully, she agreed.

And the reason I wanted to be president when I was 30 was because I had heard about this organization called YPO (Young Presidents Organization) and you could join when you were 30. So I immediately contacted them to apply and was referred to the local chapter in West Los Angeles. I was invited for an interview and as I sat at that huge conference room table surrounded by 3 or 4 men, I will never forget the first question they asked me: “What does your husband think of you applying for YPO?” I was a bit shocked. But I think they were more shocked by my reply. “Do you ask your male candidates what their wives think about them applying?”

Needless to say I was NOT invited to join.

But shortly thereafter, I was introduced to a different organization. The National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO). I went to my first event and found a huge community of like-minded women who owned businesses. Two years after I joined I ended up being elected President of the Los Angeles Chapter and started to learn about leading outside my company. And I learned a lot about the power of networking.

And that was when I got an idea. Why not take the concept of a network of women and introduce it to the produce business?

So I gathered a few of my women produce friends (by that time in the summer of 1993 there were a lot more of us) and told them of my idea. They asked, how would we fund it?



So I called all those male clients who were so supportive of our company and asked them to give us some seed money.

I called the trade press and asked them all to run ads at no charge to promote the event. And when I was 3 months pregnant with my second daughter Sophia, we had our first Women in Produce Reception at the PMA Convention in Washington DC. And it has been held every year since then at the United Convention.

I didn't do this for any other reason than to give the growing number of women in our industry a place to get inspired and to gather.

But a few months later, I got a call from Tom Stenzel, the new President of United Fresh. He invited me to participate in a Thought Leaders panel at the upcoming convention. Thankfully it was in San Diego so I could drive there, as I was by then 8 months pregnant.

I was told that the panel participants should each share their thoughts on the future of the produce industry. We did not share notes. So when I was called on to speak, I think my comments took everyone by surprise.

The first thing I said was: Bagged Salads Stink. Literally. Not only did I receive a surprise standing ovation, I don't think many of the early producers of bagged salads realized how important flavor and smell were to consumers. I'd like to think that my honest comment made a difference in the future of the bagged salad business.

The following week, I received a call from an industry colleague. He wanted to take me to lunch. When I got to lunch, he leaned across the table and said, "I heard you speak last week on that panel and you should know that many people were offended by your comments on salads. Sometimes it's better not to speak so honestly when you are in public."

I was fairly shocked by his comments. I didn't really know what to say. But I knew I spoke the truth, and sometimes the truth hurts.

But I don't think I offended everyone, as shortly thereafter I was invited to join the United Board. And in 2003, I was selected to become the first Woman Chairman of United in their 99 year history. And on the advice of another woman who served with me on the board, Rosemary Talley, I made sure that although I was the first, I was not the only and have been personally



thrilled and proud to have some amazing women leaders take the reins of United in the ensuing years.

Before I finish, I wanted to share one of my favorite stories of asking for what you want, even if it seems utterly impossible.

I was attending a NAWBO national convention in Denver and met a woman from Nashville and I overheard her saying that she was a director of the Federal Reserve Bank. You can probably figure out, I am a bit competitive, so in my head I was thinking, “If she can be a Director of the Fed, then I can, too.”

So I asked her how she became a Director and she told me to send her a packet with my CV and information about my company and she would “pass it along”.

I mailed it the moment I got back to my office and never heard back from her. But a few months later I received a call from the Los Angeles Office of the Federal Reserve Bank. The Manager wanted to take me to lunch. <I was so excited, and nervous> so what do you think the first thing I did?

Like any red-blooded woman, I went out and bought a black St. John Knit Suit! (I have a friend who is the President of a bank and that’s what she always wore).

He came and took me to lunch and a few months later I was selected for a three year term. My biggest worry was, while they were doing my FBI background check and top secret clearance, would that class I failed at Davis be a problem?! <Obviously they did not look at my transcript> I got to meet Chairman Alan Greenspan, and ask him some questions.

I met several times with now Chairwoman Janet Yellen. I sat at the monthly and annual meetings with the most powerful bankers and business owners in the country. And what I learned, is they are just like all of us.

They have challenges in their personal lives. They ask for help and admit when they don’t know the answer. But they do have egos. And they aren’t afraid to disagree in public.

So being a Director of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, Los Angeles branch has definitely been a professional highlight. Actually, when I meet a super successful business



person who seems to have a bit of an ego, one of my favorite things to say is, “When I was a Director of the Federal Reserve Bank....” That always stops them in their tracks.

As I close I would like to share some thoughts, most especially for those in the room who are in the early stages of your career, but it applies to everyone:

About that “work/life” balance thing. It is up to you. Think of each day as a “pie”. You wake up each day and get to decide how to divide the pie. Will the pie today be evenly divided between work and family? Or will it be primarily work, or primarily family or just a “you day”? It was explained to me this way by a female executive at Walmart and to me it makes the most sense. I will tell you that I am pretty sure I missed the first day of school every year for both my girls. It always seemed to fall during a scheduled business trip. But I was there for their 3rd day of school. And I missed many birthdays – but we made lots of other memories. And as you can see – they turned out just fine.

For those that know me, you know I have not been so lucky in the “marriage department”. We live in a wonderful time when it is not automatic that you be married. As a matter of fact, many millennials do not list marriage in their “must do” category. Don’t judge yourself by others’ standards. It’s okay to do what is most comfortable for you. Don’t be afraid to ask questions when you don’t know. I guarantee you won’t look dumb – to the contrary. You will be admired for having the guts to ask the questions everyone else wishes they had asked.

Ask for what you want and set high goals for yourself. And be prepared to get feedback on what you have to do to get there.

One of my competitive advantages is that have been a lifelong learner. In my more than 30 years in the business, every year I have attended workshops, seminars, webinars, and read books to keep current and learn about new things.

I read everything that comes into my company...even if it takes me weeks and months to get to it (thank goodness for long plane flights), because I always learn something new and feel ahead of the curve.

And finally – something I learned from my mother (and she learned from her mother), always take the high road. It’s tempting to badmouth your competition, or your coworker or your boss. But, really its better you don’t. Offering honest criticism is one thing, but like the saying goes, if



you don't have something good to say, don't say anything at all. We will all be in this industry for many more years, and you never know who you will be working for or who will be your boss. I've found it the best practice to be positive whenever possible.

Thank you all for this fantastic honor of sharing my story with you. I hope that I have said at least one thing that resonates with you and that you walk away this evening feeling positive and happy to be in this amazing industry.

I feel lucky to have so many of you not just as business colleagues, but also as my friends. It is fantastic when your life's passion and your life's work are completely aligned.