

Models and Bottles

What Happens Next - 12.17.22

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, politics, and the arts. I give the speaker just six minutes to make their opening argument.

Today's topic is models and bottles.

Our first speaker on this program will be Nina Scalera who is a fellow podcaster with her own show *She Werks Hard for the Money* about her life as a 20-something working as a bartender at the trendy midtown restaurant Avra. Nina will give us a glimpse into the NY dating scene from her vantage point behind the bar.

I am also raiding the What Happens Next archive and I have selected excerpts from a conversation with Ashley Mears who is a sociologist at Boston University, and the author of the book *Very Important People: Status and Beauty in the Global Party Circuit*. I wanted to contrast the bar scene at a cool bar with bottle service at a hip club.

Buckle up.

I make this podcast to learn, and I offer this program free of charge to anyone that is interested. Please tell your friends about it and have them sign-up to receive our weekly emails about upcoming shows. If you enjoy today's podcast, please subscribe so that you can continue to enjoy this content.

Ok, let's start with Nina's opening six-minute remarks.

Nina Scalera:

My name is Nina Scalera. I am a career bartender, currently working at a well-known Greek restaurant on the Upper East side of Manhattan. I've been working as a bartender in the city for almost five years, but my journey into the food and beverage industry started long before that. I was born and raised right outside of Atlantic City, New Jersey by two hardworking casino workers: my mother a cocktail waitress, and my father a dealer. I spent most of my childhood in casinos and quickly realized the fast paced, high-energy environment was for me. I saw how my mother's charm and vivacious personality brought in the big tips and how my father's kindhearted character brought customers back time and time again. As a teenager and young adult, I worked in all different hospitality settings: nightclubs, mom and pop restaurants, casinos, and we can't forget about Hooters, although my father likes to forget that one.

It didn't matter where I worked or who I served. People just loved to be around my positive and energetic personality. It became almost like a performance for me. Each table I waited on, I could be a different character, an elevated version of myself. I fell in love with entertaining my guests, and the 20% tip that followed was the bonus. A desk job wasn't for me and to take my career to the next level I had to dominate the bar. Using my industry connections and a few extra pumps of perfume, I convinced some poor schmuck to hire me as a bartender. Being behind a bar and serving multiple people gave me a whole new perspective on what it meant to multitask.

It was like learning a dance routine with complicated steps. But the more I practiced, the better I got. I decided to embrace the chaotic dance of bartending, and I've been dancing ever since. My approach to bartending is very similar to how I live my life. Don't take stuff too personally. Have fun, laugh, and enjoy the ride. Connecting with people doesn't feel like work at all.

I embrace my femininity behind the bar. It's my secret weapon, and it's what works for me. If batting my eyelashes and referring to a group of men as boys gets me some extra cash, well, honey, I'll do it with a smile on and I'll walk all the way to the bank.

At the end of the day, I'm in the business of fun in one of the greatest cities in the world. I am so lucky to find joy in how I make a living. I am proud to say that I'm a bartender, which is why I started my podcast, *She Werks Hard for the Money*. I host a fun, energetic show about what it's like to be a female behind the bar. A lot of millennials fall into the hospitality industry not knowing what they're doing, but I'm there to be their confidant.

Sometimes you feel a little insecure about admitting you're a bartender, but my space for podcasting is to help everyone understand that it's a way to make a living. I started my podcast during COVID, and it's become a passion project of mine.

Larry Bernstein:

I loved your comment that as a bartender that you are in the theater and performing arts business.

Nina Scalera:

Growing up, I wasn't the best student. I turned to the arts. I grew up dancing, doing theater, and it was a space for me to be my wacky outgoing self. As I was getting older, I needed a job. I decided to embrace those two worlds, and that I could put on a show.

It takes a certain kind of person to evaluate who they're waiting on and turn on a different personality or charm for someone. And I've combined those worlds of theater and dance and acting and what you learn by improv and reading people and you're just looking for a show. And that background, it's given me the upper hand.

Larry Bernstein:

Why were you embarrassed admitting that you were a bartender?

Nina Scalera:

I have two parents who worked in hospitality. My mother was a cocktail server for 25 years in the casino. My father started off as a dealer, became a pit boss. They always wanted my brother and I to get an education, to go to school, so we wouldn't end up like them. That's what they always said. We wouldn't have to work in this business and work so hard. And what did I do? Completely rebelled against everything that they said and ended up as a bartender. It was embarrassing to admit because it's not a steady job. You don't have a steady income.

There's not really any growth. When your friends are working in sales jobs or desk jobs where they can grow to be a manager. As a bartender, you see a flat line. You're going to work in the evenings, and you're not living a normal life, going to a nine to five.

I used to think my job doesn't have any meaning. I'm not a nurse. I'm not curing cancer, but I've become very settled in what I do.

I have friends that hate their jobs, and they have a very nice title, and they have a secure cushy office, but they really are miserable. Through my podcast, I help give people confidence that being a bartender, being a server is not something to look down upon. It's a very hard job that many people can't do, and you should be very proud of the work.

Larry Bernstein:

Vittorio Assaf who is the co-founder of the Serafina Restaurant chain spoke on this podcast What Happens Next in March of 2020, and he told us that because of the NYC restaurant closure policies for COVID, he had to let a thousand workers go. He knew that he would be unable to put the team back together because the staff would disperse. Vittorio was able to recreate Serafina, but it is different.

Nina Scalera:

COVID obviously hit the hospitality industry like a ton of bricks. It was crazy, everything stopped. At the time, I was bartending in midtown Manhattan. And when we got laid off. It was like, "what do we do now?" This is all we know, and you're telling us that people aren't gonna be allowed to go out to eat and drink. And quite honestly, we all lost track of each other.

It just made you realize, especially in a city like New York, that hospitality is what we need. It's the culture. It's the glue that ties this city together. People work so hard, they wanna relax, they wanna go out, they wanna dine, and they don't have that anymore. It was depressing <laugh>, and we just wanted to go out and get a burger and hang with our friends.

I was unemployed for a very long time until things started reopening. People found other jobs. I was offered a job to sell liquor for a big supplier. And they took bartenders who had that natural ability to sell, but to do it in a more refined way outside of the restaurant. It's a fresh start.

Larry Bernstein:

When is the big bar night at your bar Avra on 60th and Madison?

Nina Scalera:

Manhattan it's truly the city that never sleeps. Weeknights are really where it's at. I like to call it the weekend amateur hour. That's when you get your tourists who think that they can be big shots. But during the week people are spending \$800. I'd say Thursday night is the most popular night. It's that after work dinner crowd. They're ready to throw mocktails down on their company card and let loose.

Larry Bernstein:

I am 56, and when I was single 25 years ago, my friends would go to a bar to pick up girls. But I hear that has all changed with dating apps. What do you see going on at your bar?

Nina Scalera:

Yes, it's definitely changed because of the dating apps. However, nothing beats an organic connection at the bar. I see everything as a bartender. So many people have their heads in their phones. This is ridiculous. If you just look up, there's a handsome gentleman to your right or a good-looking woman to your left, just be in the moment. My bar cultivates that vibe of wanting to meet people. It's very sexy, and people go there because they know that eligible people are going to be around drinking and letting loose. The dating apps definitely changed the game, but people are still out there wanting to meet in person.

Larry Bernstein:

Does your bar cater to the divorcee?

Nina Scalera:

I consider this bar a divorce welcoming bar, separation, whatever mojo you're on, come on in. Divorce night happens pretty much every night, but during the week is popular because the weekend you get a lot younger. I'm sorry to say this, but desperate women that stroll into that bar. They go out with the intention of just having a few drinks, but then it turns into something else.

A lot of women have no problem marching right up to a man and saying, "Hey, can you buy me a drink? I can't afford a glass of wine right now." Like no game, no introducing themselves. Just like, "can you buy me dinner?" Nothing really shocks me anymore. They got no time to waste. We wasted two years not going out to restaurants. They're ready to go. <laugh>.

Larry Bernstein:

What about the role of working women in these high-class bars? I've heard that the Four Seasons Hotel bar was the scene, but that place closed since COVID.

Nina Scalera:

I embrace these women. Everyone's gotta make their dollar and who am I to put them down? And it's really funny because you can always tell when a woman walks through the door what her agenda is. When she sits down at the bar she's looking over her shoulder to her right, her left. She's a little timid to put up her credit card to hold because she's waiting for someone to buy her a drink. It's very clear.

As a woman who loves to go out and dine and sit at a bar herself, I get a little insecure. What do people think about me? But you just have to embrace who you are and what you're doing, and they certainly embrace who they are.

Every time someone orders a drink, you have to ask them, "Hey, can I hold a card for a tab?" Because you don't want them to walk out on their check. But when these women come in and you ask them for a card, they get so taken aback. I try to like let them know, I don't need to charge the card, someone else can pay for your drink. I just need to hold it. Like, don't worry, you'll find a suitor who's gonna take care of you. Besides that, it's quite entertaining, especially when they sink their teeth into some poor victim <laugh>.

Larry Bernstein:

My wife hosted a party during the Miami Art Basel show at our house last week. We hired a bartender and some servers. Julie asked the staff to move their cars away from the house but one of the bartenders refused, and then complained before the party started that the event was not being professionally run. I asked him to leave because I felt that he was negative energy that could spread like a cancer and he needed to be cut out. He would be the face of the party and would interact with all of our guests. Better to fire him and work around it.

Nina Scalera:

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Well, the right thing you could have done was hire me cuz I certainly would've never spoken to your wife that way. <laugh>. A bad attitude is cancer. I cannot stand people with a bad attitude in bartending. In hospitality, in food and bev, the answer is always yes. If someone doesn't like their drink and they say, "can you make it less sweet?" Yes, I can. "My food doesn't taste good. Can I get something new?" The answer is yes.

The customer is always right and that's the attitude that you need to have. Whether you think they're wrong, you think that it's belittling that you have to say yes to this person, it does not matter. At the end of the day, you are doing a job.

There's gonna be people that have bad energy, people that aren't team players. But when it's behind the bar, when it's customer facing, it's really hard to hide.

When a restaurant hires someone like that, I think it's very important to nip it in the bud right away because negative energy is very contagious and that can spread into the back of the house, into the kitchen. And once it starts like it's a fire, it cannot be stopped. You did the right thing because at the end of the day, that person is supposed to be the face of the party. If that was the interaction right from the jump, like it was only gonna go downhill. So you definitely did yourself a favor. <laugh>.

Larry Bernstein:

A few years ago, I heard Danny Meyers speak. He is the restaurateur who started Shake Shack and Gramercy Tavern. He said that over 10% of the meals at his top Gramercy Tavern restaurant are not prepared properly, and that he desperately wants these meals to be right and for the customer to send them back, because an unhappy customer won't come back and will tell their friends. The biggest cost in the business is customer acquisition. What do you think about sending back food?

Nina Scalera:

I one hundred percent agree with Danny. Once you drop someone's food, you're supposed to do that second touch to make sure that they are enjoying what they ordered. It's very important that customers let you know truly how they're feeling, because we can fix it. If you wanted your steak to be medium and it's well done, I want you to enjoy that steak. You're paying \$60 for a steak at my restaurant. I want you to enjoy every bite of it because it's gonna effect the next time that you come back. A lot of the times we find that people will say something at the end of their meal when they're finished, they're like, "well, you know, I didn't really enjoy this." You should've let me know, then I would've replaced it.

I would've gotten you something that you truly enjoyed. And they get a little nervous to tell you because they don't wanna complain. People shouldn't be afraid to send back their food and get it fixed. What they should be afraid about is finishing it and then asking to have it free from on their check because most managers will say, no, it's in your belly. You ate it, you're paying for it.

Larry Bernstein:

Some people don't want to make a scene or do anything to rock the boat. What is the right way to interact with the waitstaff?

Nina Scalera:

We all grew up with that weird uncle who every time we went out to dinner we were like, oh God, here's Uncle Rob, he's gonna send back his burger. It's so embarrassing. I never wanna be

that person to send back my food. Especially with a big group of people or maybe I'm on a first date. You should feel comfortable in paying for what you want. And there's always a way to go about it. It's like everything in life. It's not what you say, it's how you say it.

Larry Bernstein:

Unruly customers. You are an attractive young woman and guys must be hitting on you all the time. What happens when you don't want to reciprocate? Also, your customers get drunk, and you have to cut them off. Men will get mad at you, now what?

Nina Scalera:

This is my expertise. I have a very thick skin and I am very easygoing. So anything anyone says to me doesn't really bother me unless they're like coming for my family. I'm Italian-American, very loyal. That's really the only thing that can bug me.

I've been in all different settings. I've worked in a nightclub, I worked in the casino, I worked in fine dining, dive bars. I've seen every type of character there is. I've dealt with so many personalities that I really can handle anything. I am a young woman; of course I get hit on all the time. I really embrace it. I take it as a compliment where other people find it to be obnoxious and annoying.

And if I can use it to my advantage to make a better tip, I'm certainly going to do that. I have no problem just being my spunky self. A lot of people don't have that approach bartending. I know feminists around the world are freaking out, but I love to use the fact that I'm a young woman. I'm not gonna be this young forever. I can really relate to a lot of people, a lot of women too. It's refreshing and it's fun to tap into a different space because when I leave and I am walking down the street, I'm not this elevated version of myself. When I'm behind the bar, I'm a bit more cheeky, because it's just a fun environment where I know I can get people going and I can get this energy out of them that they don't have at the office. They're at the bar, they're ready to relax, and there's this hanging with their girl who's ready to make them a drink and make them laugh along the way.

Larry Bernstein:

We did an episode in early November called Food Porn about the life of the Chicago Restaurateur Charlie Trotter who is famous for being demanding excellence of his staff. What do you think is appropriate?

Nina Scalera:

I admire him. I've always approached work if I'm not trying my best at every single shift that I show up to, I might as well leave. I work in this amazing country, I better give it my all. A lot of

people let things slip through the cracks. They let one thing go and next thing you know, everyone's lazy and everyone has no respect.

And it's really a downfall to a lot of people's restaurants. I'm reading Anthony Bourdain's book *Kitchen Confidential*. I admire him for always wanting perfection, because you're not always gonna get it, but it's gonna trickle down and give the people that are working underneath of you that energy to keep pushing, keep going.

But if that person doesn't show up with pride in their job, they're never going to grow into anything else. So, it goes back to what I was saying before about how when I was younger, I used to be embarrassed to say that I was a bartender. Once you start having pride in what you do and you look to achieve excellence, you will always be good at something.

It sounds like a pretty intense environment that he used to run, but I would love to work there. I love someone who pushes me to be better, to be a bit more professional, and that's why he was so successful.

Larry Bernstein:

Your restaurant Avra is gigantic and has two floors. The previous restaurant in the space called Rouge Tomate failed there, but your restaurant is killing it. It is packed for lunch and dinner, late night. What is Avra doing so right?

Nina Scalera:

One of the managers was talking about how we should all be so thankful and lucky to be working at this restaurant. People are lying to get through the door and say they have a reservation or they know the owner. And that is where I work.

You get good quality people in the door. Plus the food and the consistency of the staff brings people back. In the day of social media, it's all about who is coming to dine at your restaurant, who is posting their food and who is posting their iconic seat at the bar. It's a very classy looking joint. The decor and the environment, you feel like someone in there. You're surrounded by beautiful people, beautiful dishes, beautiful cocktails. You feel like you're something special.

Larry Bernstein:

I eat out for lunch at the other restaurants within a block or two of you: Amaranth, Serafina, Bilboquet, and Quality Meats. But each restaurant seemingly has a different clientele. How would you differentiate who goes to Avra?

Nina Scalera:

We have a different clientele during the day. During the week, it's a lot of business casual. You have the men like yourself coming in during your long lunch breaks. I used to bartend in

Midtown and I used to say, “wow, one day when I grow up, I wanna just be able to take a three hour lunch in the middle of a Tuesday.” So, during lunch, you have that clientele, little light suits, some kitten heels, and they're just enjoying it, maybe having a glass of wine on the company card.

Then, around the early evening, we have the early bird special. They are diners that come in from the Upper East Side. They put on their best fur jacket, they come in right at five o'clock, they're my grandmother's age and they're ready to get in, get out, have a nice meal, and go home to bed by 8:00 PM. Around 8:00 PM you get more of the fun younger crowd that is coming in from a happy hour. In the evening, that's when we have our feisty friends come out that are looking to maybe make a few matches, but it's also people that like to dine out late.

Larry Bernstein:

As part of my due diligence for this program, I went to Avra on a Thursday night at 9 pm to check out the bar scene. The place was totally packed. I had real trouble getting anywhere close to the bar. But when we saw each other, I yelled out, “Nina, congratulations you’re on the podcast!” And an entire section of the bar exploded, “Nina’s on the show, buy this man a drink.” I didn’t even realize anyone was listening. How did you get such an enormous fan club?

Nina Scalera:

<laugh> You would think that I had like some magical glow about me that I could just spit an answer out. Like you got me taken aback. When the bar is busy like that and it's like six people deep, that is truly when I come alive, that is when I'm my best self. When you're super busy and totally in the weeds, you have tickets flying around, you have drinks to make, you have food coming out that needs to be served. I thrive in the weeds.

This is gonna sound a bit silly to say, but people forget how important eye contact is. When someone comes right up to me, I might be busy doing a million things. I can easily just ignore someone by keeping my head down, acting like I don't see them. I'm making a drink; I'm putting something in the computer. I find it very important to lock eyes with someone and say, “Hey, just gimme a minute. I'll be right with you.” So they know that I'm connected, I see them, and even though I'm busy, I will get to them in a second. People will say, “oh, that girl's got me.” I have a bunch of regulars that I've taken with me from my previous job. When I got hired at Avra, I sent out a mass text, “Hey, I'm gonna be working here, this is my schedule. Come in and see me.” And I'm very lucky that I kept in touch with those people, especially during the pandemic. I even worked a couple private gigs. It's my charisma that keeps people engaged who will wanna sit and eat dinner with me instead of go sit at a table even though the dining room is really where it's happening, it's where everyone can be seen. So it's my slick tongue that keeps people up there. I work really, really hard to make money.

Larry Bernstein:

Tipping is the next topic. We had University of Chicago professor John List on the podcast who was chief economist at both Uber and at Lyft, and he implemented the tipping strategies for Uber. The former CEO of UBER did not want to mandate tipping so that it was viewed as a tax. He wanted it to be optional where 10% would do it. And he tried to separate the UBER ride from the tip decision. In the restaurants nearly everyone tips because the interaction is so personal and there is societal pressure to pay. What strategies do you use to maximize tipping?

Nina Scalera:

Tipping is second nature to people that live in America. You go to dinner, you go out to lunch to tip. Now it's getting a bit aggressive. If I go get a cup of coffee, a little iPad tells me that I should tip the barista. If I go down to my local market and I'm buying groceries, they're asking me if I wanna tip them. I bagged my own groceries, why do I gotta tip you? But when it comes to Uber drivers, bartenders, servers, it really shouldn't be a question.

Surprisingly, I worked a shift last night and I got stiffed three times. It happens.

At other venues it would happen all the time, especially when I worked in the casino. But tipping is something you earn. Especially if you wanna get a bit over a 20% tip, you gotta earn it.

If you put a little extra flare, open up on who you are. You're interested in why they're dining here. Are they on a client dinner? How can I impress the person that they're trying to impress so I can make their meeting go a little bit better? These are things you pick up on when you're in the industry for a while. My restaurant has a lot of client dinners. I know that my presence can be only beneficial to the person that's taking the person out. They're the one paying on the company card. Most time company cards you can only tip 20%, you can't tip over. But to get that extra tip out of their pocket is really what I work for and that's just something that you learn throughout the years.

Larry Bernstein:

I hosted a party the other night and the guests kept asking for tequila and we ran out. Why has tequila become such a popular spirit?

Nina Scalera:

Tequila is hot right now. Everyone always drank tequila, but during COVID people really enjoyed tequila. It's probably the most popular spirit. Definitely vodka would be next then going on with the bourbon and gin. Poor gin is always at the bottom. Celebrity tequila is really hot.

The Rock has Termana, P Diddy has Deleon, Michael Jordan has Cincoro. 1942 you couldn't get it during COVID.

I talk about in my podcast that you should drink what you enjoy. I know that some men are a little insecure if they like to drink a cosmo because it's pink and it's in a martini glass. Or some people don't wanna be adventurous because they never tried gin before. But if you like to drink an Amstel Light, drink an Amstel Light. If you like to drink a Cosmo, put it in a rocks glass and ask them to use a little less cranberry if you're a little insecure of the color pink. Tequila is a great spirit. It's super versatile. I encourage people to try sipping it neat with just like a little lime or a little orange and you can really enjoy that flavor. You're gonna get a little burn, but you'll enjoy the burn after a while.

Larry Bernstein:

We are going to hear in a minute from Ashley about the bottle service world. What are your impressions of the clubs' use of bottle girls?

Nina Scalera:

Yeah, the bottle service world is something that will always amaze me. You're paying for the table and not for the bottle. You're paying for a space to stand in the club so you don't have to go back and forth to the bar and have a little area that you can say, "Hey, look at me. I spent over two grand to just be having my feet planted right here. Plus, I get a pretty, little bottle server that is all mine who can make me drinks all night."

But if you think about it, you're really getting basic boring drinks. You're buying one bottle, let's just say it's a bottle of Tito. In the store cost \$34 and you're usually paying \$500 for a silly bottle of Tito's and you're getting only three mixers with it: Club soda, cranberry and pineapple. You're drinking vodka pineapple for almost \$500 plus the 18% tip that's guaranteed for the bottle server. Plus, you're always gonna throw her more because she's in heels and she's working hard cuz you feel bad for her and you're really just paying all that money to stand there. It's honestly the most brilliant scam that we've ever pulled off. <laugh>. Put a pretty girl and pour out some crappy drinks with a couple of ice cubes and you're good to go.

Larry Bernstein:

I loved that TV show Cheers that highlights the critical role of the regular at the bar. Is that still true?

Nina Scalera:

When I first started working at Avra, I didn't think that regulars would exist there. It's such a high-end restaurant. Who wants to get fancy every single night just to pay for an overpriced glass of wine? But I see the same faces every night, it's like they never even left the bar stool. That suit looks the same. Did you even shower? It's like anything that you do in life, once you get comfortable somewhere, you love to go back. The food is consistent, the service is good, the people are good looking, why would you not wanna come back?

Larry Bernstein:

Nina why do you do your podcast and why has it become your passion project?

Nina Scalera:

She Werks Hard for the Money is my baby. I am a huge disco fan. Donna Summer is my queen. She works hard for the money has always been like a favorite song of mine. During COVID when I was out of a job, I was living back with my parents. I was 27 years-old and I was just having a meltdown. What am I doing with my life? Like how did I end up here? Maybe my parents were right, maybe I should have gotten an education and a real job. I obviously have the gift of gab. I love to talk; I love podcasts and I feel like I've always had a different outlook on the food and beverage industry. I found it to be so inspiring in so many ways because it's brought me outta my shell.

I decided to blend the two worlds together and say, "Hey, why don't I start a podcast?" Now is the time. I'm unemployed. And we are craving this energy of being out at restaurants. I can build a community of people to talk to about what it's like being a bartender. I'd like to consider myself the voice of young millennials who work in this industry who just wanna drink with me, hang out, and talk about the funny interactions that we deal with at work.

I, at times, felt a little lost being a bartender. How am I gonna grow in this role?

How am I gonna date someone who goes to work during the day and I go to work during the evening? And when I started my podcast, it really gave me a sense of meaning.

Larry Bernstein:

Nina, I end each episode on a note of optimism, what are you optimistic about?

Nina Scalera:

I'm optimistic about bartending. The connections, just even meeting you and introducing myself, learning about you and your show and listening to your episodes. I mean, you are just amazing, and the people that you have on are people I never thought I'd ever interact with in my life. I'm super optimistic about meeting someone who's gonna help me with my career, help me with my podcast, or just be a good friend. If you put yourself out there and you are true to yourself, you're going to find someone that you connect with, even if they are so different. Me and you couldn't be more different. And look at us, we're having a fabulous conversation.

Larry Bernstein:

Our next guest is Ashley Mears. The topic will be Models and Bottles. Ashley is a professor at Boston University she is the author of the book *Very Important People: Status and Beauty in the Global Party Circuit*.

Ashley Mears:

I'm a sociology professor and I followed an unusual path into academia. Like a lot of young girls, modeling was my teenage dream, much like boy's dream of becoming professional athletes. When I was in Atlanta, where I grew up, I started modeling as a teenager, which meant shooting catalogs for the local department store. I noticed even then how hard it was to fit into extremely narrow standards of beauty. Most of the models were white, all of them were very thin and quite young. I noticed there was a very high turnover because of the quest for novelty. Fashion is, by definition, change and models have short careers, especially women, because their perceived value on the market is tied to youth. So much so that when I turned 19, my agency advised me to actually lie about my age when I went to New York, to claim in auditions that I was 18. That's when I thought maybe this isn't a good career path in the long-term.

I went to graduate school to study sociology in New York because I wanted to understand the market dynamics of the fashion world. In my first year of graduate study, I got scouted to join another model agency. This time I signed up with the goal of being an analyst, to keep track of how the money worked. I interviewed models, agents and clients, just to understand the market from their perspective. I also was sent out on modeling assignments. From day one, the agents advised me to lie about my age. By now I was 23, and they told me to say that I was 18.

In sociological terms, people that study labor would see modeling as a bad job. It's structurally unstable, there's high turnover, there's high risk, but indeed, there's also high rewards. The cultural imagery of fashion models is that they're very successful, that it's very glamorous, that they're very well paid, but what I found in my first book, *Pricing Beauty*, is that models are pretty poorly compensated, but they do get a lot of perks, such as the treatment of being a VIP in bottle-service nightclubs.

This brings me to my second book, *Very Important People*. When I was researching the modeling industry back in New York around 2006, I met several men that work in nightclub called promoters. They get paid by nightclubs anywhere between \$200 to \$1,000 dollars a night to bring the right crowd. Now, for the highest end of nightlife in New York, these kinds of clubs offer what's called bottle service. Bottle service is when expensive bottles are brought to someone's table, at prices that are starting at a markup of a thousand percent on up.

Promoters are expected to bring the right crowd, and in bottle service nightclubs, the right crowd of very important people: It's men with money who are paying for the expensive bottles of

alcohol and it's the women who are, or look like, fashion models. They are ubiquitously called girls, regardless of their age.

I followed promoters beginning in 2011 for 18 months, I interviewed 44 of them. What I found is that while promoters can make a pretty good living and the clubs make a quite a big profit in the nightlife industry, a huge multi-billion-dollar industry, I found the girls don't get paid. They add huge value to a space.

This raises a very interesting question. Why do people work for free? There are four different reasons to explain why the girls would participate in this structurally unfair arrangement.

First, it's the free meal, because as I had learned earlier, most models don't get paid very much so being able to go out and afford an expensive meal in a luxury restaurant is something most of them can't access.

Two, they have strong relationships with the promoters who spend a lot of time cultivating relationships with girls and building friendships.

Three, promoters open up access to this exclusive world, which is also connected to a fourth, ego stroke of belonging to the elite. By definition these are very exclusive spaces, and so even though promoters are gaining financially, and the girls are not, promoters are opening up an opportunity for them to afford a lifestyle that they otherwise can't.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do beautiful young women want to be on display?

Ashley Mears:

I think that there traditionally has been a split along gender of the importance of beauty and capturing attention that women have been encouraged to do. Even at a young age, girls have the princess fantasy and that involves a very certain body, a very certain kind of decorative role. Whereas boys are socialized early on to be more active, to be the agents, to be the ones that are looking and not the ones that are looked at. The male heterosexual gaze, in which men are the ones that look, and women are the ones who decorate themselves to be looked at.

Larry Bernstein:

Terry Williams, a sociology professor at the New School, spoke on this podcast about his book, *Le Boogie Woogie*, an after-hours cocaine club where men and women go to do drugs. There was a lot of sexual energy and hooking up at that club. What surprised me about your book on bottle services was that drug was discouraged by the promoters, and that sex was uncommon between the beautiful women who entertained these elite men. What's going on? Why is the *Le Boogie Woogie* different from the bottle service clubs?

Ashley Mears:

Nightlife has all kinds of different niches and specific clubs, specific crowds, on specific nights as well. Promoters are so successful is because they're sober and they take this very seriously as a business. It's not to say that drugs aren't in the clubs. I mean, certainly, it's a club. There's lots of loud music and, people are taking MDMA and cocaine, but it's not the main point.

The hookups. Yes, of course it's a nightclub, there's a sexual aspect to it and that kind of energy is arguably one of the reasons that nightlife exists, the possibility of sexual chance and flirtation and innuendo, and all of that is very much there. People hook up, they kiss, they dance close, they touch. There's a lot of touching actually, the people who don't know each other very well.

The question about is there a lot of hooking up and people going home, particularly in this match between beautiful women and the rich men who are ostensibly paying for the company of beautiful women. Not directly, they pay for it with the price-inflated bottles of champagne that they're buying. They're buying the experience of a luxurious setting and they're also buying the feeling of being high status.

Clubs are using beautiful women's bodies to stroke a man's ego so he can say he partied in the company of a Victoria Secrets model. Whether or not he goes home with them, it's enough that they're present. That's one of the underlying purposes of this VIP space.

Larry Bernstein:

In your models and bottles book you say that the girls are compared to beautiful furniture. Why is that?

Ashley Mears:

I'm laughing at furniture women. When I interviewed this person who books the fashion shows for Prada, he was explaining to me how he chooses the models, because he sees hundreds of them, and he has to choose 10 for the show. And he was explaining it, "How can one account for taste?" He said, "How did I choose this sofa that we're sitting on? I don't know. For me, it ticks the box. It's just taste." And I remember thinking like, "Oh, he just compared women to the sofa." But in that context, these are ways that people are speaking about young women as commodities, as objects.

I don't think that it's the sex that girls are offering. It's sexiness. It's the visual feeling: here's a lot of really beautiful women.

Larry Bernstein:

You write in the book that businessmen barely talk with the beautiful girls at the club that girls break the ice and help everyone get comfortable in the male world of business. What is going on here?

Ashley Mears:

When I interviewed the wealthy men who are paying in these clubs, I asked them if the women that they met out in clubs, these girls that were so valuable, I asked if this was the pool of romantic partners, if they were looking for a girlfriend or a future wife among these women. And their answer was very stern, no. They would say. Models are great decoration, like furniture, but this is not the pool of future marriage material.

Larry Bernstein:

You explain that some women use their modeling experience to elevate their social class position. You reference French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that there are traditional social classes and that beautiful women can sometimes jump to a higher social class because of their beauty. I know that high status men feel pressure not to bring younger women into their social circles. They will face stiff resistance from their friend's wives for sure. What is going on?

Ashley Mears:

Pierre Bourdieu observed that one way that elites and the upper classes maintain power amongst themselves is by carefully controlling marriage... People who are upper-class tend to partner with similarly high-status partners. So rich men will marry women who come from rich families or the same kind of educational credentials. The anomaly is Melania and Donald Trump, and they met at a party that was organized by somebody who hangs out in this club world.

Larry Bernstein:

So much for Cinderella. What makes a good promoter?

Ashley Mears:

They're really good at making girls feel comfortable, feel valuable and want to come out and work for free.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you describe a promoter who hangs out at the corner of Grand and West Broadway in his car. And he sees an attractive girl walking down the street. He jumps out, leaves his car running and chats her up, gets her number and encourages her to join him at the bottle service party. Are the promoters constantly on the lookout for beautiful women?

Ashley Mears:

So, there're different strategies to do that, but that's the key thing about their job. One of them told me, there can be no night without the day. So, what they're doing during the day is

identifying girls, recruiting them, building a relationship with them, and then trying to mobilize them to come out. So, street scouting, this scene that you just described, that's one way to do it.

Larry Bernstein:

I am in the business world, but I don't know anyone who is doing any business in these clubs. Who are these people?

Ashley Mears:

The men are quite a mix. They come from a range of backgrounds. Some of them are occasional participants in this scene. They drop in once a year or twice a year. If some of them are regulars, they're not spending huge sums, they might go out with a couple of friends and share the bill.

People who are affluent from Wall Street, from tech. The elite: They're hypermobile, they're global. Old money, new money, different industries.

One thing that most of these rich men had in common is relative youth. They're not as young as the girls, but it would be men who are not typically much older than their 50s, but not 60s. You can certainly see a silver fox in the crowd, and that wouldn't be unusual. It would be to see a 60-year-old woman in this space, would be very unusual.

So it's more young money, or men who are starting out and making a lot of money; the working rich, people who didn't inherit.

Even within a nightclub, it's not all men who have lots of money. If you think about how big a nightclub is, 500-person capacity. They have to get filled somehow. The doorperson will make these distinctions of people who have money and have evidence that they're going to lay down their credit card and pay for renting a table. And then women who are beautiful, and they get in for free. But then there's lots of other people that are valuable to the club because they keep the place from looking empty. And these are people that are sometimes called fillers. They might not have thousands of dollars to spend on a night, but they could pay for \$50 for their drinks at the bar. And they'll fill the space. And they look well-dressed enough that the club values those people as well.

Larry Bernstein:

You describe some women as good civilians. What does that mean and how do they help the club?

Ashley Mears:

So, good civilian was my role in this space. A good civilian is somebody who is not a model, because the fashion modeling industry has very exacting and very narrow standards of beauty, of height, and thinness, and youth. But a good civilian is somebody who is maybe off a little bit in

one or more of those categories, but when the lights are low, she will still look close enough to a model. So pretty enough but not quite a model.

When I was doing the field work, I was already 31, which is way past retirement age for fashion models. But the reason that they tolerated me was because I was a good civilian. If I was a little bit shorter, or a little bit older, like I am now, or a bit heavier, I would not have been able to get that access that I did.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book *Pricing Beauty*, you explain that the desired fashion look changes constantly, and that even booking agents are surprised at what is hot. What has changed recently that has surprised you about model preferences?

Ashley Mears:

So that distinction between the editorial market and the commercial market, I think you see this in a lot of arts fields, where the editorial fashion doesn't appeal to a mass market. It's really communicating taste to a rarefied audience that has been trained, so other fashion insiders or photographers and designers can see beauty in something that your average consumer in middle America ... I'm just going to use my mom as an example ... that my mom just wouldn't get because she's not in high fashion. She doesn't read the magazines; she doesn't look at all of the Instagrams. And I'm always fascinated assessing the value of any cultural good, a work of art or beauty and so on.

I will say your question was about the content of the look and how are those looks at the editorial end changing. I think that they've opened up enormously, and that's because the visibility of people and the assertion of people to proclaim loudly and in public, and to be heard that they have a right to be visible in the beauty industry, that has been transformed with social media. There've been very large women who wear a size 20 who have become top models because the platform of Instagram has allowed them to contest these hegemonic standards of the fashion modeling industry.

Larry Bernstein:

I see a lot more black models in magazines and TV advertising, what is going on?

Ashley Mears:

The distinction between editorial and commercial modeling is important here. So, in the commercial end of the market, where catalogs are being marketed to everyday middle American consumers, those kinds of bodies tend to be much more ethnically racially diverse. You'll see just a lot more black bodies in the commercial end of the market. Also, you'll see more "full-figured", large sized, plus size bodies in commercial catalogs than you would see on a high-end catwalk.

So, a commercial catalog that I worked for, for instance, they were conscientious that they needed to have a black woman, an Asian woman, a red head, and a blonde.

They needed to have everybody that will look at their ad and say, "This appeals to me." It's still aspirational. At the editorial end of the market, because editorial fashion production is insiders speaking the language of high-end fashion to one another, they're not beholden to what their consumers want, necessarily. They're just beholden to their own sense of taste and what they think is fashionable. And in my interviews, I found in interviewing people that are booking the shows for the catwalks and so on, their default aesthetic was a thin, young, white woman, and everything else outside of that was noticeably different.

And in the editorial end of the market, when they're casting the shows for a fashion show, they would take pains to try to get at least one black model that could be on the catwalks, because they want to avoid the accusation of a racist vision of beauty. "We have to get one, but there's only one that's really good this season. Everybody's getting that one good black model."

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Nina Scalera and Ashley Mears for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. Our topic was the lack of a red wave in the midterm US congressional house elections. Our speaker was Henry Olsen who is the author of *The Working-Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of the Blue-Collar Conservatism*. Henry explained why there was no red wave in an election despite the Republicans winning the national popular vote by a substantial margin of 3% or 3.2 million votes. Republicans improved their voting share in very blue urban districts and very red rural districts which didn't help Republicans win additional seats.

I also want to give you a heads up about next week's podcast.

We will have two speakers: Claudia Gould is the Director of the Jewish Museum, and I've asked her to talk about the Jewish Museum's current show that I loved about art in NYC from 1962 to 1964. We will also hear from art advisor Wendy Cromwell who will tell us what she observed at the recent Miami Basel show.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please encourage your friends to join the What Happens Next community by signing up for our free weekly updates about upcoming podcasts.

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I would like to thank our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues,
good-bye.