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Unlocked Episode 88 Sheron Scurlock of Scurlock Farms - formatted transcript.

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In this episode Matt talks about finding your niche and your balance with Sheron of Scurlock Farms. Sheron mixes a working farm, famous art, pet friendliness and a friendly family to create the ultimate limited edition vacation rental business.

Links and resources mentioned in this episode:

[Scurlock Farms](#)

[FarmstayUSA](#)

[Touchstay](#)

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Matt Landau I'm Matt Landau and this is Unlocked Season Six: Magic Zones. This episode is brought to you by Point Central, the leaders in smart home automation and Breezeway, a best in class property care and operations platform. Today we're talking with Sheron Scurlock, who's the owner of Scurlock Farms vacation rental collection in Georgetown, Texas. And almost everything Sheron has learned about running a profitable vacation rental business she learned on a farm. Over the years, Sheron has found her magic zone with a brilliant marketing niche for direct bookings. But she's also built a small business that contributes to the local economy and community in meaningful ways. Today we talk about her philosophy about reviews, the purpose of tools in her life and her business, and her dream to make a human size corn maze. Sheron's chosen to be rich by making her wants few and supplying them herself. Let's get into it.

Matt Landau First of all, I'd like to say that the chair you're sitting on sounds incredibly quiet.

Sheron Scurlock Good, because the other one is not.

Matt Landau And this is this the first podcast interview you've done from that office there?

Sheron Scurlock It is the very first from anywhere.

Matt Landau From anywhere?

Sheron Scurlock Anywhere. Aren't you lucky?

Matt Landau I'm kind of honored. I'm completely lucky. Sheron, I'd first like to address the elephant in the room. And that is that we've known each other for how long now?

Sheron Scurlock Oh goodness, however long you've had Inner Circle.

Matt Landau So maybe like five years, six years.

Sheron Scurlock Okay.

Matt Landau That includes a weekly digest every week, many of the weeks mentioning you. That includes videos on the blog, that includes countless phone calls. We've never actually met in person. But only today after all those years do you tell me that I've been pronouncing your name wrong the whole time? It's Sheron, not Sherone.

Sheron Scurlock After well see, it didn't make any difference when it was just one time. But then after you featured this me on the weekly newsletter, my brother in law called and said, Hey, I want to speak to this, Sheron.

Matt Landau Why don't you Why don't you ever tell me over all these years?

Sheron Scurlock It wasn't that important.

Matt Landau All right. Well, I'm glad you told me now. But your name is spelled s-h-e-r-o-n, right?

Sheron Scurlock That's correct.

Matt Landau And that's different from s-h-a-r-o-n. Is there any inspiration there from your mother?

Sheron Scurlock Oh, yes. She was reading a Russian novel when she was pregnant with me. And one of the main characters was s-h-e-r-r-on. So she named me Sherron. When they tapped at the birth certificate. They got it wrong. They got one r but the handwritten one shows two R's. So I just go by s-h-e-r.

Matt Landau I am feeling enlightened today because that just blew my mind. I was like, wait a minute. There's no Sheron. Well, with that said that out of the way. I wanted to officially welcome you my dear to Unlocked it has been so long in the making this conversation. I have followed your amazing work that we're going to go through today.

Share for all of our listeners from beyond the Inner Circle...I think you were one of the earlier subscribers to VRMB. Right?

Sheron Scurlock Yes, yes.

Matt Landau And half the time we talk about vacation rental stuff and half the time we talk about food.

Sheron Scurlock Right.

Matt Landau Right. So I'd like to kick this off by asking what is your best Southern dish to cook?

Sheron Scurlock Ooh, mine tell you my favorite meal. My cat peas that have grown in the garden Southern cornbread naturally coleslaw, okay? baked potatoes, baked sweet potatoes. I love hashbrown casserole, candied apples. There's just so many turnip greens, mustard greens.

Matt Landau Like a true southerner. I asked you your one favorite dish, and you have now gone into like 20 and what about the best vegetable to pickle?

Sheron Scurlock Ooh, different squashes? They make excellent pickles.

Matt Landau Like, like zucchini and yellow squash?

Sheron Scurlock Zucchini and yellow squash mixed with carrots and onions, oh.

Matt Landau Interesting do you like, do a little boil first or do you just put them in raw?

Sheron Scurlock You put them in raw.

Matt Landau Oh, how about that? Okay, so we could turn this into a food podcast very quickly. But that's not what our listeners are here for. They're here to learn about your vacation rental wisdom. And I can say that confidently. I think you Sheron are one of the wisest vacation rental professionals I have ever met. And I realized that when I sat down to begin doing my research for this interview And I realized that you have just volumes of stories and lessons and successes and failures that you have shared with me. And it's actually really hard to get all of this down into one conversation. But we're going to try, this is definitely more research than I've done for any other guests in the history of the show. But it's because your experience and your lessons span so many areas of life. The centerpiece here, of course, is vacation rentals. But you grew up on a farm, you have actively run a farm with your husband. So I want to just start with the real basics. And then I want to get into some of these bigger lessons that you've learned over the years that I think people could really benefit from, if that's okay with you. Sure. The original outline for this interview that I sent you was the same outline that we've been

using for most of our interviews, but then I realized like, wait a minute, she is not like most people. This is a very unusual success story. So let's start off with for those who don't know it, what is Scurlock farms? What is the vacation rental business and how many properties are included?

Sheron Scurlock Well, my mother was one of President Johnson's favorite artists, and Scarlet farms. The original 112 acres was a property that mama daddy bought the pallet pad, which is our first rental was her art studio that daddy totally built by himself. Then they built their dream home across the ravine, and we call it rocky overlook. When mama passed away in 2010, I inherited the two homes in the six lakes that are surrounded by Dan and I own the rest of the home. We were gonna make them long term rentals, but I thought we had had rentals in the past. And you know, every time someone moves out, you have to go in and totally redo. We had stayed in vacation rental homes for 20 years on our family vacations, and I thought, you know, I'm gonna make this a vacation rental. Or both of them. I did. And we have loved it. And so that that's how we got started.

Matt Landau So when you officially decided to get into the vacation rental business, this was with your partner in crime, Mr. Dan? That's right. What's his role in this business?

Sheron Scurlock The naysayer, Dan just thinks that a vacation rental should be just a place with the bed, something clean that people can sleep in. He did not understand why I wanted to decorate and make them really, really nice and add all the little extra touches. And he just thought I was going way overboard. And I told a guest that one time that we met while walking on the drive, and she said Oh no. She said, I told my husband. Oh, she even has two picks. She said it's all those little touches. Like it's so special I took and I said, see, people do appreciate it.

Matt Landau And when he started seeing the bookings coming in, did he become a believer?

Sheron Scurlock Yes. And the first year when we first got started, I said, You know what, I bet we made \$60,000 this year, and he said, Oh, Sheron, don't be ridiculous. Well, we did way over 60. So he's always surprised, but he's not. So he just kind of turns me loose. And that's, that's the Reynolds or my baby. I turned him loose with the farm part of it. And he makes his decisions on equipment, and I make my decisions on the vacation rentals, it works very, very well.

Matt Landau So I want to talk about the farm in a little bit. And I also want to talk about tools that are used in your respective domains. Okay. But you shared with me a great, a great mantra that sometimes, Dan says to you, and I'm curious if you can explain what this means to other partners in our industry? What does it mean to get off the football field?

Sheron Scurlock I knew this what you're gonna say, when I was six years old, we had faith at school, and my class were dressed up like a little goldfish. And Mama told me that she said, Sheron, when they start, you stay in place and you let the teacher take care of everything. Well,

she said, we got out on the football field and I'm running up and down the line pushing everyone into place where they should be. So that's me, making sure everyone's doing what they need to do.

Matt Landau And so who's yeah, who's shouting get off the football field at who?

Sheron Scurlock Dan is shouting it at me.

Matt Landau So this kind of partnership that you guys have both in life and in business in a way you It requires its divisions and its responsibilities. But you have really just soared with the vacation rental side of things. We were kind of tracking your direct bookings and your niche marketing, which is something I'd like to get into in just a moment. But explain real quickly, the phases post COVID from kind of the peak COVID, maybe up until now, how has the business responded?

Sheron Scurlock It's done very well, we're lucky that we're in the feast category, we chose to shut down on March 1, and refunded in full, every one that had booked. And I had repeat guests that begged if I could stay, but I said, you know, we're just so worried for your safety. And for ours, we thought it was best to close. So we reopened September 1, and we have been booked, it's been a blessing. People are loving, and they comment, you know, we're so happy to be able to get out. And, you know, in the country where we can feel safe, we're not staying in a hotel. But just get out and breathe fresh air and be able to do something and feel safe with it.

Matt Landau Mm hmm. And I remember your phrase. What do you use? When dirt is gold? Yes, was your phrase. And I think my application here is that in this new travel landscape, the simplest thing that you've got is your vacation rental properties, all of a sudden, in a new spotlight, it's newly appreciated in some way. And it sounds like you guys are benefiting from that.

Sheron Scurlock Yes, absolutely.

Matt Landau Explain to us how this kind of adversity. This is a hard time compared with maybe some other hard times that you've experienced, whether it's with the farmer or life in general, how do you sort of handle the hard moments?

Sheron Scurlock We used it to our advantage? One thing was, I've always felt like you were a mentor to me. You said one time in a conversation in early genes. I want you to write a book. And so I did. I had always wanted to write a book, but I never knew you know about what or how to or whatever. So I did it for about two months, and had a blast doing it. And it was a fantastic trip down. trip down memory lane. It brought back a lot of memories. We decided to plant more gardens and grow more food. So we did, we planted a garden so that when our we hit planted one pre COVID for our guests, and it did very, very well. But they weren't here to pick the produce. So we picked what kind of produce you wanted: tomatoes , cucumbers, squash, zucchini, all kinds of herbs. And I'm not a very frugal, I'm not gonna let anything go to waste. So

we can't and preserved everything well then we realized we can't eat it all before the spring garden. So we evolved into a farm stay this fall. And luckily, the first guests back in September got the last of the Italian zucchini, so they were able to enjoy it a little bit. So we did stuff on the, you know, around the farm. Did little repairs on the houses. One of the septic tanks went out. It was a perfect time because it took a couple of weeks to get that totally replaced and handled and we were lucky we didn't have guests at the time. So we just we just enjoyed the time Dan loved it because I couldn't volunteer anymore. You know, we were staying on the farm. He loves it when I'm here so COVID is not hurt at all in that respect. He's enjoyed the time together.

Matt Landau And so that means that you're back up to full speed right now?

Sheron Scurlock Full speed on the stuff on the farm. We still are staying, you know, doing curbside pickup for groceries and have not been in a restaurant since February. We do take outings, go to church virtually, do board meetings virtually. So we're still staying safe. And we're doing the same thing with our guests. Some of them don't, you know mask as they say, Oh, come on in, you know when I take them off and stay on but we say no, no, we'll keep each other safe.

Matt Landau And have you guys made any adjustments to processes or protocol with regards to safety and or cleanliness? Post COVID?

Sheron Scurlock Yes, I'm paying my housekeeper an extra \$10 for each cleaning because she's taking extra time she always cleaned and disinfected, but now we're sanitizing also. So she cleans from top to bottom. And so many guests comment on cleanliness, in fact, Christmas. I did one of those things I learned on the Inner Circle from one of your members and I can't remember who it was. I printed out reviews.

Matt Landau Oh Todd Doyle, Todd Doyle in Orcas Island.

Sheron Scurlock Okay, and every every time cleanliness was mentioned in review, I highlighted it. Then if an adjective was used, like very or exceptionally, a holiday And then I paperclips \$5 for every clean, and another ten if there was an exceptional or you know, a descriptor in it. And so she got \$385. And they really needed it, she said, she called back in tears and she said, My husband and I were both crying, he was sitting on the sofa, and I was reading them to him and we turn the page and they'd be more money, click to his site, praise God, they really, really needed it, and it made a difference in their lives. So things like that, that is so so happy.

Matt Landau That really is also an investment in the employee. Because the employee is happier and feels more fulfilled and feels more like I have more purpose because they're actually seeing the result of their good work. And oftentimes, housekeeping and maintenance doesn't ever get to see that kind of thing. In the long run that's helping retain those employees that's helping you avoid having to hire new employees having to train new employees. So that's like, almost like an investment now.

Sheron Scurlock Exactly. And I tell Connie all the time, we couldn't do it without you. And luckily, she's never been sick. I don't know what we'll do. If something happens to her, she has other customers. But when she takes new clients, she tells them the farm comes first. You know, I never know when I'm gonna have to be there. But I'll do it when I can. But you have to understand that the farm comes first. And she's always a good team. She's great.

Matt Landau Folks, something Sheron just said deserves a call out. One way to find your magic zone is by asking hypotheticals, what happens if my best listing site, or my All Star employee or my best property were to disappear tomorrow, this process forces you to think through the worst case scenarios and to create something of a backup plan. And more often than not, that backup plan strengthens your position when any market shift or industry change or accident or emergency or global pandemic arises. So let's get into your niche itself because you have as cornered a market as I have ever seen. And how would you describe this? Is it? Is it farm slash ranch Vacation Rentals? How do you describe it to folks?

Sheron Scurlock Well, one of your posts on the Inner Circle newsletter one week was a way to get extra income was to find niche hosts. So I thought, well, let's see. I'm a farm. So I looked up farm stays Well, there's a website farmstay USA. So I signed up with them...

Matt Landau Like a listing site, almost?

Sheron Scurlock A listing site. Scotty Jones began it and she does a super job with it. And in fact, she emailed me yesterday, Matt, she said, Sheron, I was just looking at my VRMB newsletter, and I saw your name. And so I called Kate and said, hey, look at this. And then she said she saw the blog post that we had done so she was thrilled. Yes, yes. So give credit where credit's due you credit the Inner Circle and Scotty for doing a super job with her website. But over half of all of my rentals come via that website, they find me there. And then they go to my website and book directly, but they're actually looking for a farmstay, you know, the kids want to gather eggs, they want to interact with animals. The farm experience, they get to ride tractors. So the way it's changed since COVID. kids can't ride in the tractor with the guys because of you know, being right up there sitting in their lap or right next to them. So we give hayride tours, we put a tractor in the front yard and let the kids climb all over it and play in it and take pictures with it. So we've adjusted so that they still can enjoy those things just not right, you know, face to face.

Matt Landau And before you are aware of farmstay. Like what's the advice here to somebody who maybe has a property or a handful of properties that are in a particular niche? Because prior to this, you didn't really know anything other than VRBO.

Sheron Scurlock Right. Right, the Vrbo and Airbnb.

Matt Landau So what was the advice there?

Sheron Scurlock See what you have, that could be a niche, make it one, and I was lucky that I hit farmstay right away, because that was something to apply to me. It could be foodies. It could be pet friendly.

Matt Landau It could be some kind of outdoor activity friendly. There's all these subsets.

Sheron Scurlock Yes, popping up pet friendly. Probably 75. At least 75% of our guests bring their dogs and I'm different than most pet friendly things. I don't require them to be created. They can be on the furniture. I just asked them to keep baskets with covers for all the furniture I said if they want to be on it, please cover it because we can watch that. They're not required to be on a leash. So I said they have to be non aggressive to people and other people. Because other people are gonna be humor therapists. And people tell me they love is the best they've ever had with their pet. Because most of them are pet friendly they have so many restrictions. They're really not.

Matt Landau Right. And when we say, see what your niche can be. I love the theory of limited edition. And I would love for you to explain what the origins of limited edition means to you when it comes to oranges with your pops. When it comes to oranges? Yes, limited edition oranges, don't you remember?

Sheron Scurlock Remind me.

Matt Landau This is a chapter in your book that I spent some time reading. Back in the day oranges were reserved for your father, if I'm not mistaken.

Sheron Scurlock Yes, yes.

Matt Landau Was it your father, or your grandfather?

Sheron Scurlock My father, when I grew up when we grew up...

Matt Landau Would you like me to tell the story? Just kidding. I don't remember all the details.

Sheron Scurlock When I grew up, I was the oldest of six kids. So there was not a lot of money. Daddy worked really hard. And this was before mama got famous painting and made a lot of money. And so oranges were for daddy's lunch. The only time we got oranges as kids was at Christmas and our stockings. So, you know, I really, really appreciated the fruit. So anything that's unique or unusual special to you, you can make it, especially a limited edition. And that's why I still love oranges.

Matt Landau You still associate them with scarcity, scarcity, yes. So something that's not in good supply makes it more valuable. And I think the earlier a vacation rental professional is in their journey, the earlier they are getting started and crafting that niche, the better because at some point, it becomes hard to rethink things. So maybe it's a new property that you're considering taking on as a management contract. Maybe you're thinking about buying something, the more limited edition, the more personality the more scarcity built into the supply. The more leverage you have as the purveyor, right?

Sheron Scurlock Exactly. Yes. People have commented that the houses have a lot. The rental houses have a lot of Mama's artwork in them and mine. I had one small bluebonnet painting in the Johnson White House, President Johnson and I, it was only because of mama but I can still climb it. People have said it's like living, you know, staying in a living museum. We've had guests come that did not realize it was you know, CP Montague's home until they got there and saw the paintings and then you know, like, a family spent a week and she worked at a&m University and she said, I'm in the auditing to the accounting department. And we've got so many of your mom's paintings in our department. So that's special. It means something to them. So you know, I put that in my website in the description, but a lot of people I guess don't read everything and don't realize it. And

Matt Landau I like how you just casually throw in there that you have a painting you had a painting inside the White House and that your mother became a famous painting. I don't want to get too sidetracked. But what was this, what kind of painting and what was the relationship between your mother and the president?

Sheron Scurlock Mama painted landscapes. When she was discovered she was painting still lifes but they wanted her to paint landscapes. And she became one of the top landscape artists in Texas and the Southwest. And President Johnson was president at the time and he commissioned 50 is called the tech Santa collection 15 paintings around Austin because they aren't the TV station ktb C or K LBJ sorry, Kelby J. And back in the day in the 70s and late 60s, they just had commercial breaks that were blind so he thought we'll do paintings that mama does like of the Capitol, the French legation, tree Oaks, the Texas tower, different things around town and show those in the station breaks and it'll be like advertising for tourism for Austin. And then he Oh, they bought I don't know how many paintings she had a special showing in his hangar, and he bought everything that he had taken. She painted for a month solid every day, between Christmas and New Year's or January. And so I just kind of got in on her coattails. She taught me to paint in a lot of my paintings around the houses also.

Matt Landau And so is it fair to say that you like learning new stuff? You strike me as somebody who's constantly looking for some new skill.

Sheron Scurlock Constantly. In fact, one year our accountant took the taxes in and he said, Well, what do you think you are doing this year? He was talking about money making because I'm always Trying to find a new way to make money. So we've done a lot of different things.

Matt Landau And would you say that learning new things is kind of important in a vacation rental success?

Sheron Scurlock Oh, yes, man. In fact, if it weren't for your Inner Circle, man, I wouldn't be anywhere near where I am today, I have learned so much. And it's you know, people think that you have to do big things you don't, it's the little things that can make such a difference in the overall scheme of things and in the bottom line.

Matt Landau So I keep going back to I listen to these words through the lens of the farm that you grew up on, and the farm that you learned life on. I'd like to get into like tools in your vacation rental business in just a moment. But explain to us kind of the role of tools on a farm because I think it's very applicable to the actual software that you're using today.

Sheron Scurlock Oh, man. Well, tools are we got we had a 500 year floods in 2010. And David rented a skid steer to pick up all the debris that the flood had left in the pecan orchard. And we had a like a 15 acre, heavily wooded area. And I told Dan, I said we literally could try to clear this all day, every day, the rest of our lives. We couldn't so we hired bulldozers to clear it. But we realized what that skid steer how much easier it made work and how much quicker. So we bought one.

Matt Landau How much does that cost?

Sheron Scurlock 50,000.

Matt Landau Wow.

Sheron Scurlock But see the vacation rental business has been great. Because I got into it not needing the income really. I mean, it's been fantastic. But we have used it for the farm. Pay for our grandkids college education. In fact, we've got two in college coming up in September, once graduated in the last two will be in college at the same time. Yeah. But anyway, the skid steer has been a huge, huge help makes life easier. So yesterday, the boys were using it to load dirt out of my garden from last year. And they're rebuilding. And so they use the forklift to lift the pallets of cinder blocks off the trailer, the trailers another thing that we use all the time, because we have to haul brush, you're always clearing something on 172 acres, it's never the works never done. So we'll never run out of something to do no matter how old we get.

Matt Landau And tell me something like that the application here, you in the farm life you're switching from manual to tool that does things much more efficiently. Give us an example or two of a manual process that you now either automate or use a tool for with your vacation rental business.

Sheron Scurlock Okay, two of them. Touchstay I found on your website VRMB.

Matt Landau Shouts out to Andy, Andy McNulty.

Sheron Scurlock Yes, the welcome book is fantastic. Guests comment on it, guests use it, and signing up with the owner is again recommended through Inner Circle members. And that has made life so much easier because I had different calendars. And so making sure all my calendars are synced. It sends out you know, it took a little initial time setting up the letters I want to go out and telling them when like the welcome letter, the payments, you know different things. So that has really saved a lot of time.

Matt Landau And that's a property management software. For anybody who doesn't know the name. And a property management software really aims to do the heavy lifting of man of all the manual tasks that would be either boring, or inefficient if they were to be done manually, like sending out the exact same email to every guest prior to arrival. And the guest book would be a streamlined version of a manual guest book being printed out and handed over to guests and having coffee spilled on it. Is that the idea?

Sheron Scurlock Yeah, it's everything. I just don't print the copies, they can put it on their telephone. And then it has restaurants, grocery stores, golf courts, you know, things to do on the farm. Things to do if they get here early. And you know, can't chicken yet. It's just got all kinds of information driving directions, you know, how to use appliances in the house. Just have anything that I think they might need while they're here that can find in that guest book that welcome book.

Matt Landau And how do you like there's a lot of software and technology on the market. There's so many tools right now, the disposal? How do you manage all of that because you can't possibly be trying out all of them, like what's the prism that you look through in order to decide if you're going to use the software and or like actually begin demoing it.

Sheron Scurlock I listened to people that have commented on the Inner Circle who have tried different things. And I read, you know, they had problems with this or it was too tech, you know, too technical, and I'm not technical. So I knew that that wouldn't be for me if it had a steep learning curve. I'll let other people do the test driving and listen to their advice. And I've been very, very happy with both choices. I guess those are the only things that I have on the tech side that I have signed up for and used.

Matt Landau Okay, well, we're gonna get into some of the more non tech, the more human hospitality gestures in just a moment. But let's talk real quickly about how these kinds of tools affect your reviews, which are not necessarily profit, but they are directly correlated with profit. Sometimes you get it, sometimes you get a gut. That's a Sheron phrase. What's the principle behind the review philosophy?

Sheron Scurlock The reviews, I love people when they're here, and I'm giving you a tour, or when I'm taking them offends you at some point, I'll be talking with them. And so I tell them, you

know, as owners, we live and die by reviews. So please, when you leave, would you please leave us a review, and 90% of them do through listing sites, Airbnb, and VRBO. I can request it now learned on verbo, don't leave them a review until they've left you one. Because once you leave it, they've got two weeks to leave it in the next set. But if I wait, then I can request a review from them later on. So that's something I learned the hard way.

Matt Landau And how are you choosing which platform to ask for the review on? Is it the same platform on which they bought it to you directly?

Sheron Scurlock The platform, they booked on. I've got a new website. And he's copied and pasted. And we're gonna put those reviews on my website so that when people go to the website, it will tell homeaway, or Airbnb or whoever. But the reviews can all be there. But I'll request it wherever they book.

Matt Landau And Sheron, when I hear the website thing to us, on the professional side here it is quite common for any small business like a vacation rental business to have their own website. But speak to the difference between like, what was the what was the process of building that website, and what was the impact on the business like tangible or otherwise?

Sheron Scurlock Very, very tangible. And I love what we've come up with.

Matt Landau And now a word from our sponsors. This episode is brought to you by Point Central, the leaders in smart home automation. And instead of me telling you how great I think they are, or reading off of some kind of script that Andy or Shawn sent me, here's one of the industry's most influential technology experts, Terry Whyte, when I asked him why Point Central is such a game changer.

Terry Whyte I use them. So I know the product pretty well, I would say their customer service is outstanding. But what they provide is, you know, remote locks, thermostats, door and window sensors, light control, leak detection, you know, it's pretty hard to beat. But when I was looking, and I was demoing all these products, because I was looking for the solution for myself, I had access to someone who used to work at Point Central. And he was probably very highly rated in the industry and had a great reputation. And so I had access to him. So I approached him, I said, I'm getting all these companies doing all this stuff. He says you can demo every company that you want, he says but I'm telling you right now, you're going to end up at Point Central. And that's exactly what happened to outstanding companies for sure.

Matt Landau I could not have said that any better myself. If you'd like to learn more about Point Central head over to pointcentral.com/vrmb they're now accepting property managers with less than five properties which gives everybody the excuse to get a little bit more connected. And Breezeway, a property care and automation platform that solves the challenges of ensuring clean, safe and high quality properties in the wake of

the pandemic. Instead of hyping breezeway myself, here's Christina Thorenson, of Chattanooga Vacation Rentals when I asked her, what's the single technology shift that she considers most important to her business?

Christina Thorenson I think there are some folks on the property care housekeeping side that are doing some really cool stuff with confirming sanitizing and disinfecting of properties. That I think we're gonna see technology with every housekeeper has a cell phone, and they're checking into their system and checking out when they're done. They're taking pictures of the chemicals they're using and the spaces they've cleaned. And I think that is a technology shift that something that the guests might be able to access directly moving forward.

Matt Landau I like that. Give it let's give a shout out who you talking about right now?

Christina Thorenson Well, I see. Jeremy Gall, Jeremiah Gall and Breezeway do some really cool stuff with that, you know, they're trying to do some things where they're incorporating that tech that's already available in the smartphone, to help increase the guests level of comfort, which I think is good.

Matt Landau I couldn't have said that any better myself. Head over to breezeway.io/vrmb, where you can do a free demo. and secure free implementation, if you decide to sign on that's roughly a \$1,000 value. That's breezeway.io/vrmb. Now, let's get back to the show.

Matt Landau You, Sheron, to me, is the ultimate limited edition vacation rental professional. Because you have really focused on that niche, you've really put a lot of effort into making just your personality running throughout this business from the moment somebody comes across your website to the moment they interact with somebody for an inquiry. My guess is that that's you. Yes, that reservations course coordinator is yet to the moment they arrive at the property and probably meet you or Dan at some point in passing, to the moment they depart. And sort of keeping your business in the front of their radar. This is all very, very powerful stuff. But I want to talk a little bit about the role of all of that in your greater community, because this is an area for me in which you just take things to the next level. So let's start off with just your general philosophy on the role of a vacation rental business in any given community.

Sheron Scurlock Well, I think that we need to be good citizens of our community. Give back I feel very, very, very, very blessed. And at this stage of my life, I want to give back and I have since I retired. I've done a lot of volunteering. And I've used that in my vacation rental home. I've helped the community through furnishing our vacation rental homes. I have volunteered for 15 plus years at a caring place, which is like a local Goodwill thrift store. Except it's so much more we provide all kinds of services for neighbors in need. But for pennies on the dollar, beautifully furnished from the floor up to the curtains on the windows, both of the rentals. And we have some very expensive neighborhoods in Georgetown. So, you know, it took about six

months to furnish each one. But they are beautifully furnished and people cannot believe that everything in those homes came from a thrift store. So every dollar I spent furnishing the homes, goes back into feeding someone or clothing or giving medical help to someone in my community. The last four years I've been on the board of directors and it has been a great honor, I have totally totally enjoyed that process. I tell all my guests about it. So they know. And they'll say that rug came from the caring place or whatever I said from everything in this house except Mama's paintings, and my paintings came from the caring place. So they shop there. They love it. They feel like they're getting great values, they are also helping my community.

Matt Landau The more I hear about community giving, the more the less esoteric. It becomes and the more immediately related to a vacation rental business's bottom line, if a business and I've kind of come to this conclusion that a business can fall into one of two cycles, or loops. The first one is the positive one, the virtuous cycle in which you're doing a good job contributing to the local community whether it's volunteering, or making donations. Like you said earlier, you donated your what was your pickled vegetables, or was it non pickled, non pickled, fresh, non pickled, whether it's donating or simply like your Apple stand for the local pickup crew, right? Either you're doing those things, and your community is, in turn, receiving your guests more warmly. Or, and this is the trap that I think is easy to fall into, especially if you don't live in the same property or city as your vacation rental properties. You don't do those things, the neighbors begin to get bothered by irresponsible guests and noise and it starts making real negative impacts in your streets. And then the exact opposite thing happens, your destination becomes less appealing to a desk to a traveler over time. And that's a vicious cycle. So to me, hearing, the efforts that you're putting forth are way less just nice ideas that can come at the end of a vacation rental career and more things that should be baked into a model from the very start. If somebody was getting started today, would you encourage them to bake something in?

Sheron Scurlock Oh, absolutely. Guests appreciate it. They know that you're giving back and like staying with someone like that. And you mentioned something, I think by living on the farm people meet me. They meet the family. And in going over those reviews for Connie with cleanliness. I was amazed at how many the vast majority of people mentioned meeting the family, how nice the family was, that means so much in today's society, I think so I'm very, very fortunate that I can do that. And I realize a lot of people can't. Anyone that can give back to their community in any way. I think it is great. Add another way I give back every year the caring place has until COVID we had a big fundraiser or big annual fundraiser, and I would donate a weekend at one of the homes so easy. Yes. So easy. And yet it raised a lot of money for them.

Matt Landau Not to mention the exposure of your brand in the community.

Sheron Scurlock True. Yeah. Yeah. So I also donate weekends, as I figured out, I donate about 10-10% of the weekends to different charities, school, Girl Scouts, church ladies group that I attend a big conference in every year, this time of the year, except this year, we won't

because of COVID. And so it's you know, it's helped a lot of a lot of different organizations. But I really, really liked doing it local, more than, you know, long distance.

Matt Landau Yeah, in my neighborhood there of Casco Viejo and Panama, which was a very emerging community where everybody's contributions really mattered, really made a direct impact. I found myself one time looking at all the businesses in town that seemed to be succeeding, versus all the businesses that were really struggling with a season of terrible tourism. And all of the ones that were succeeding still had owners, or at least very committed managers who are on site on the ground, there to smile. there to give you advice in person, and I'm now transporting myself to today. It could be bill in person, maybe it doesn't have to be super close, keep a couple feet social distance, but it still seems to me like a big differentiator and oppositely if you don't have any presence, any interaction on a human level from the moment the guest arrives to the moment that guest departs you're kind of missing out on the biggest limited edition virtue. No?

Sheron Scurlock Yes, exactly. And Dino, I can honestly say, in the 11 years now that I have been operating. I have never yet had a bad experience. I've never had noise. I did have one. A guy from a family came from North Carolina. Their son had just gotten off of a submarine. And we went down to take muffins and he was sitting on the back patio, playing an electric guitar that was plugged in. And it was rock. That's it. I'm so sorry. But I said we have guests next door. And I said he can't be playing that outside. And she said, Well, we finally sent him outside because he was driving us crazy. He relaxed and I said well, I'm so sorry. But he's gonna have to come back inside. So that was the only time that I've had noise. And luckily I discovered it before it became a problem.

Matt Landau John, John Odin another Inner Circle member who he visited there in Nashville with his wife, Ellen. I think they call it the cushion, which is the goodwill that you earn in case something might go wrong. If you are present, if you are there and have put forth a little bit of effort into the arrival, little bit of effort into being accessible in case they have questions. If something does go wrong, which we know of vacation rentals, it will have that cushion and save that, you know, five star review, let's say it has a direct impact on the bottom line.

Sheron Scurlock Absolutely. I had one that had not been there and had not been as they said, the nicest person ever. I'm sure I would have gotten a bad review. They came for their son's wedding and asked if I could have the rehearsal dinner. And I said, Sure, it wasn't going to be too large. But I said that, you know, the weather could be bad. So you'll have to make other arrangements. Well, they were supposed to have 35 people end up with 75 in the house, because it was like it thought it was going to rain. And she was unhappy because the space wasn't accommodating for 75 people. And so because that was nice. She did not leave a review, luckily. And Dan said, okay, no more weddings, no more rehearsal dinners. Because you can't control you know, they said it'd be 35 outside, but it was 75 inside.

Matt Landau Let's talk about some of the negative things that happen. Some of the challenges because it's not been completely straightforward for you, you're an optimistic person, you're very positive all the time. But there are times when you kind of have to make difficult decisions. How do you guide other vacation rental colleagues? How do they make that call? Like, what's the best way to avoid getting even deeper into a ditch?

Sheron Scurlock Cut your losses. Be nice. I had one lady that stayed. And she told me that she had to sleep sitting up in the recliner because I can't read with his breathing problems or bad back. But then the day she left she wrote me and said well, you know she had found something on the spot on the bed. But she had a dog And the cabin wasn't clean. And she would be happy to come and clean for me if she could have a free weekend. So she left me a five star review. I did not leave her review until after she left hers. And she's on my do not rent list. She was just someone that was working too. She would love it. You know, another free weekend in the cabin was spotlessly clean, you could eat off the floors when Connie gets through. And she'd already told me she didn't sleep on the bed. She said the bed was not comfortable. But she had already told me she couldn't sleep on the bed because of her back. She had to sleep in a recliner, just be nice and cut it off. Don't keep going back and forth. Explain your situation. And I probably am more generous. I think from the guests point of view, a lot of times I know that I refund sometimes that other people would not. But I try to put myself in their shoes. And we get booked so frequently, that I know that if I let that we can go and let them rebook later, it probably will fill up so I don't being the one that people talk to. It's not like I have hard and fast rules that if you book after this time, or cancel after this time, you get no refund. I make a lot of exceptions, which drives me crazy. And I said, Well, that's the great thing about being the owner and being the one in charge and talking to people. I can make those decisions. One thing I have found is that I love to talk to people on the telephone. It's amazing to me on some of these different websites that for vacation rentals, how people will not talk on the phone, they want everything written on record and I thought you are missing the boat. People tell me so many times as soon as I get that phone number, I call and welcome them and they'll say, thank you so much for calling. I never expected that, you know, no one's ever called him before. So things like that tend to head off like you said, if some little something does happen to go wrong. It's not that big a deal because they know you. You have become and will become a friend during that short stay with them. So have that personal contact. Something else I'm doing that I learned on your site is writing. handwritten thank you notes. So Daniel, one of my older sons, is a photographer. He lives on the farm and he took some great photos for me. And I had cards made. I have a sister that owns a print shop so I can get them made really, really inexpensively in Sawsan and so it's just a reminder, thank you for choosing to stay with us. You know, I know they had a lot of different choices.

Matt Landau And we have a thread going all about the most profitable Double or green activities, a vacation rental professional can focus their time and energy on. And you just nailed them. I mean, reservations, taking that extra step to call somebody at making the time to write that handwritten note. Those are the little things that have just exponentially greater returns, and ultimately get you the repeat bookings, get you the referrals, get you the direct bookings. And I think it's dangerous to get complacent or to get lazy. I know

towards the end of my vacation rental management career, I wasn't as excited to jump up and call somebody. Do you think it's fair to say that the moment that you lose that excitement or passion or motivation, you either need to hire somebody, or you need to think about whether the business is doing it for you?

Sheron Scurlock Yes, as long as it's fun, and I felt like I'm engaged. And in it, it's going to be successful.

Matt Landau I want you to really pay attention to what Sheron is saying here, your magic zone is your dream, lifestyle, business. And so long as it's fun, you get to continue operating, you can take a page out of Sheron's book, when you feel it starts to not be fun, you can add a new bucket list style project to your mix. Using your small business almost like a vehicle almost like a Trojan horse, for your lifestyle fulfillment. That is a pretty beautiful thing.

Sheron Scurlock But it's like anything else. It's like you don't keep a house up. And just little things start to fall apart and make a difference. So that's one reason I like doing different things. We started the farm stand in October. And it's been hugely successful. It's been so much fun. We have met so many of our neighbors. We have two gated communities now on either side of us, and great neighbors who found out that several of them sit on their back patios a quarter mile away and watch us through binoculars.

Matt Landau That's creepy. Why are they doing that?

Sheron Scurlock Just to see what's going on over there. They're loving it. And so they keep up with the gardens. And, and as you know, it does sound creepy, but they admit it. One of them even stayed with us. She booked it for her Christmas birthday. And she told him Do not look at the credit card. We're gonna go somewhere special for your birthday, get in the car. And she said, I'm driving. And he said, Well, how long is it gonna take? And she said, you'll see. It was faster directly across from the houses.

Matt Landau Oh my gosh, how cool.

Sheron Scurlock They had a ball. He said, you know, and she was one we watch with binoculars. We've always been fascinated with watching how they're over there, all the different equipment in the, you know, machinery and one of the ladies said she had named our horses blazing glory. And she loved watching the goats and they got wrapped up on her fence line. So they were close to her. So you know, the gardens planning those kitchen gardens for the people. And we rebuilt them this year, the boys built new ones last year. So having the kids here and they meet the guests, when they're out walking, they visit with them. Everyone is personable. People love it. They feel like they're part of the family the time they leave, especially if they stay more than two nights where they're, you know, out and about on the farm.

Matt Landau And so I want to move into the last question. We've talked about how to fundamentally start and grow a diversified marketing portfolio. One of the biggest pieces of it that surprises a lot of folks is that you do have to do the listing site independence stuff, like build a website and have a logo and build your own brand. But a huge piece of the repeat and referral booking marketing strategy is being a fantastic host. I mean, if you really wow, somebody when they stay with you, that becomes the single best investment you can make in your direct booking strategy. We've talked about doing stuff in your local community, you're someone who I like to say does all the little things that are necessary in order to achieve what you define as success. Tell us how all of that manifests in what's arguably the most complicated realm to measure that is PR and being featured in the press like I feel like you have to do all those things. In order to get the press right.

Sheron Scurlock I have been really really fortunate. I think Scotty Jones with farmstay USA, probably recommended me to South magazine. I think she probably recommended a lot of people and then saw there was another one she Last week did a fantastic blog post on the farm and they did a really, really good job. She had asked me to send her information about the farm, and how we got started and all of that and some photos. And then they had a rider that took it and really dressed it up. And it was, I thought it was outstanding. I loved it. So knowing people in the business that kind of put your name out there. frommers was another one. I think Scotty may have mentioned her. I don't know from which founders. But we were one of six farmstays that were listed in an article on frommers. Which blew me away. Think that we were one of six again, farms that were featured for farmstays in the south magazine. And then just little things like the newspaper guy came out and took photos when they were doing the trash pickup. We had apples that we knew they were going to be picking up trash, so we had apples to give them and they had stopped investing and he mentioned Scurlock farms in the front page of the newspaper in the article. We had a deer that we were attacked by. So I called the new How did that happen? It was walking along it was the Friday before Thanksgiving, we were taking a tote of stuff into the pallet pan. And this dude was walking around a rock ledge and I told Dan I said she doesn't see us. When he came right for us while I had this empty tote in my hand and I told Dan I said get in the truck and I'll hold him off. Well he attacked tore it up. You get in the truck. They wrestled. It was a fight to the deer. The deer was trying to glory. And luckily he had grabbed his antlers right in his head. And as long as he tried to keep his head down, he couldn't get to him for almost 10 minutes. And finally I took hours to get in the house. So he took drugs in the house. And he was bleeding. As I call David sons, his police officer anyway, David ended up shooting him. So I called the newspaper but then David had a fit, and that's what people need to know. And the game warden said this is running season and you just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Well, a TV producer for the news in Austin site so they came out and did a live newscast The next night and did it well. David being a police officer did not want to be on TV, but he was as soon as it was over. He ran down and I said well, how did it go? And he said, Well, you look good. But he said Mom You sounded kinda Hickey

Matt Landau Did they ask you to recreate the attack?

Sheron Scurlock On TV? Yeah, we did. So I showed him how they wrestled.

Matt Landau Yeah, the only thing that's more impressive than Dan fending off a deer is the fact that you told him to get in the car that you were gonna handle it.

Sheron Scurlock I thought that tub was gonna protect us.

Matt Landau Look for yourself in a spouse and what Sheron offers Dan in a situation like that. Yeah. And off from wild beasts. Last question, my dear because we're nearing in one hour. Do you have any big goals for Scurlock farms moving into the next few years?

Sheron Scurlock Actually, I do. I've got the door closed. So Dan won't hear me. I would love to have a maze, a corn maze. I've done them before. And I was reading a thing on Oh, it's on farmstays that do things like this, the big things, but I would love and this may not happen in my lifetime, but we've got plenty of space. I think it's something the boys might enjoy doing. But I would love to see a farm you know, a corn maze for guests to come in. Enjoy.

Matt Landau So that's just something that you've always wanted to do and your vacation rental is kind of like the vehicle or excuse to actually do it.

Sheron Scurlock Yeah, the kids had thought about putting in like little cabins back in the woods. But we you know, electricity and water would be a main real problem in Dan said two rentals are on earth. He said that the boys can do that later if they want to. So I don't think we'll try to add any more to the farm. I did have the third, third home that was a vacation rental and it was booked all the time. We called it Indian bluff. But when Daniel decided to move back to the farm, he couldn't wait to leave. He was an act teen started his own business in Dallas, and came back to the farm. You know, once or twice a year. He realized how much he missed it. So they sold their business and moved back to the farm two and a half years ago. And he bought that house. So now we only have the two. So Dan says two is enough.

Matt Landau When we will also give Daniel your son credit because he's also the technical advisor for this interview. Right?

Sheron Scurlock Yeah, right. Yes, exactly.

Matt Landau I just wanted to say thank you for not only today's conversation and sharing all your wonderful wisdom with our listeners, but all these years, every time I see an email from you, it starts with a pleasant tree, something funny or interesting that's happening around your farm or your life. It gets into something meaningful, a lesson, something you achieved, a question that you have always ends with something equally fun. And you to me just embody the dream vacation rental colleague. And I know you don't necessarily see yourself as one. But to me, you really are one of the absolute leaders of this new movement. So thank you for coming on today. And I didn't get to half

of the sayings that I wanted to include, including, excuse me, lady, I think you have the wrong hand.

Sheron Scurlock That was the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to me in my life.

Matt Landau Okay, well tell people what it is because I can't just leave on a cliffhanger. And then we'll end.

Sheron Scurlock I'm a racehorse and Dan, supply a horse. That's how we describe ourselves. So he's pulling me back and I'm pulling him forward. So I'm always walking two or three steps ahead of him. We were in Acapulco at a resort, and we're going to breakfast. And this long line is beside us waiting to get into the buffet. And I realize I'm ahead of him again. So I reach back and grab his hand. And we walk a couple of steps. And this man says, excuse me, lady, I think you have the wrong hand. And I almost asked, why is his hands so sweaty? And I looked back and the man's wife was with Dan, I had reached back and grabbed a total stranger's hand.

Matt Landau You're trying to do things too fast.

Sheron Scurlock Yes. me like I was as red as a tomato.

Matt Landau Well, that's why we love you. And I would like to use that to conclude. Thank you once again today was great.

Sheron Scurlock Thank you. I'd appreciate the comments met, and I couldn't have done it without you. That's for sure.

Matt Landau Thanks for listening to today's interview. If you'd like to download a full transcript of this conversation, along with links to resources that we mentioned, and perhaps collaborate with our guests, each of whom are members of VRMB communities, head over to community.vrmb.com and click register. Our community is for folks who don't want to do it the hard way or alone. They want to use the path of least resistance, not reinventing the wheel here just copying the best practices to vacation rental growth that are out there. We'd like to think that we have the most creative vacation rental professionals in the world. all under one virtual roof. That's community.vrmb.com/register.

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