**Hard Times & Hope, episode 16: BYNA ELLIOTT**

JULE KUCERA, 0:07,

Hi, I'm Jule. And this is Hard Times & Hope, a place for real conversations with regular people about a real hard time. We talk about what it was, how they got through it, and something good that came from it.

My guest today is Byna Elliot. Byna is the head of Advancing Black Pathways at JPMorgan Chase. In that capacity, she is responsible for executing the firm's commitment to advance racial equity and strengthen the economic foundation of black communities.

The advancing black pathways strategy is focused on empowering black communities through business growth and entrepreneurship, financial health and wealth creation, career and skills. and community development. I knew of Byna when we both worked for the same company. But I didn't get to know her until a corporate restructuring put us on the same leadership team. But that's misleading, because Byna's job was much bigger than mine—billions of dollars bigger.

Byna is unique. She is grounded and lifted, humble and assertive, kind and persistent. She is a mentor to many, and she's my friend. I didn't know what Byna would talk about, but I knew I wanted to learn from her. Let's go.

Byna, thank you so much for being here and taking the time to be here today.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 1:34,

Absolutely. My pleasure.

JULE KUCERA, 1:36,

As you know, this is Hard Times and Hope. So that's where we start. What's the hard time you'll be talking about today?

BYNA ELLIOTT, 1:42,

Thanks, Jule. The reality is, is that we all have experienced hard times. And so there's a bunch of stories that come to mind. But one I think might be really relevant for your audience that I think really talks about the need to use your voice to lean in, and to create an opportunity for yourself even when other people don't think you deserve an opportunity.

So I'll talk about the one time that I had, and I'd been in the workforce probably about 10 or 15 years, so I wasn't an entry level employee, I would probably put myself as a middle manager at that point. And I was working in a region in Detroit. And I work directly as a part of the leadership team in that region. And over the years, I've had a career and understood what it took--what I believe it took--to be on the team, be involved, being engaged, and be a value. And I understood what my value proposition was, and that I was a hard worker, always contributed, I put my head down, stayed focused and Got the job done, right, you can relate to that, right?

JULE KUCERA, 2:47,

Sounds like you, yeah.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 2:50,

And so over those years, I've really understood that for me to show up at work, I try to show it without carrying all my mommy baggage and being a working mother with me into the workplace. But at this point in my career, I was pretty overwhelmed. I was a mother of two. One was in preschool kindergarten age, and one was in early elementary. And my husband was a full-time teacher and a football coach, which means that the bulk of the responsibility for rearing in our kids fell on me. And I was at my wit's end. And we were preparing for a big operations meeting with our senior leaders from the corporation coming to our market, to walk through the strategy that we had planned for growing revenue and opportunities in the market.

JULE KUCERA, 3:45,

Big meeting,

BYNA ELLIOTT, 3:46,

Big meeting, needless to say, a big meeting Jule., We were working late hours, early mornings, and to do that required my mom and my sister to help me out a lot. And those are the times you have in your career as a working mother where you go, is it worth it? Is this the right choice that I need to be making in my life at this time? Because in order for me to stay in the workplace, it's requiring everybody in my family to be part of my village.

JULE KUCERA, 4:14,

Wow.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 4:15,

And they were supportive, no complaints. But it becomes that time where you have to decide. And most of us decide to get off of the treadmill around working. Like that's where you start to say, maybe it's better if I'm a stay-at-home mom, maybe I can do more if I decide not to put my career first.

JULE KUCERA, 4:35,

Yeah.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 4:35,

And I didn't think I put my career first, but it was certainly a high priority along with being a mother.

JULE KUCERA, 4:41,

Sure.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 4:41,

And so we were working late one night and then they said let's get this done. Let's get together early in the morning. And they're early in the morning was 6:30. And I thought 6:30, straight face, didn't say anything. And I thought this is gonna take a lot. It's gonna take me taking my kids to my mother's at four o'clock in the morning, her getting my kids ready for school. And me running into this office and being here by 6:30 ready to work. I just, I breathed, I said, I can do it. So I did it that morning

I got in, was the first person in the room for the meeting. They sauntered in round 6:30-6:35, 6:40, they talk sports for about 15 to 20 minutes, and then they're ready to work. And you could have seen the steam come out of my ear.

JULE KUCERA, 5:36,

Yeah,

BYNA ELLIOTT, 5:36,

Because I was struggling. And I, and this was a challenging day for me, and a challenging work life balance that I was struggling with. And so I was so furious that they didn't value my time. And when I looked around the room, I was probably the only female on the leadership team at that time. And so they, I just don't think they had the same perspective.

And what I prided myself on for all my years of working was never letting them see me sweat. Was never showing my vulnerability as a wife or a mother. But making them think that my experience to get to that table resembled theirs when it was far from the truth. So I wasn't living my truth. Nobody knew what it took for me to, come to work every day and put it all in.

JULE KUCERA, 6:26,

Yeah.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 6:27,

And so as we progress through the meeting, we got through a lot of things. They said, Great, the meetings over how about we do this again, tomorrow morning. And I couldn't do it. I just couldn't contain myself. So I leaned over to my boss for the first time ever, and said, I'm the wife. And I didn't have a... I didn't have an eloquent way of saying it. I didn't have a prepared speech. All I could speak was from my pain and my challenges. And I said, I'm the wife. And my boss looked at me got a confused, blind look on his face. So I repeated it. I said, I'm the wife, the same things you expect from your wife are the same things that my husband expects from me. This coming in here at 6:30 in the morning, doesn't work for me.

And what he did was he looked at me He nodded. And he said, Hey, team, how about we start a little later. And he looked at me, he said, I know what time works. And I said, 7:00, 7:30 is better, for me. At least latchkey was open. And he said, Let's meet at 7:30.

And I will never forget and really owe him my ability to stay in the game and have a career. Because had he not been supportive of me had he embarrassed me and not been accommodating, I probably would have folded it up and said this is not gonna work for me because I just didn't have the right balance. And I couldn't figure it out any other way.

JULE KUCERA, 7:56,

Yeah.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 7:56,

And that experience reminded me that I had probably sucked it up far too long. And not shown or been vulnerable around what it took for me to be in the workplace. And they took it for granted. And they thought I was one of the fellas even though I didn't go golfing with them go to the bar with them because I had to pick up kids and go home. I just never showed my vulnerability in a way that allowed them or let them understand that we need a different set of accommodations and not feel like I was a failure for it.

And from then on, I decided to always use my voice. And to always express my challenges and at least even voice other people's challenges. And what I found that a couple of my co workers came up to me afterwards and said, I'm glad you said something, because I was just as challenged to get here so early.

And it also allowed me to continue to grow and develop and understand that being my whole self at work with my vulnerabilities was okay. And then I can still progress, I can still ask for opportunities, I could walk through what the difference is between me and my male counterpart. But acknowledge that I still could contribute substantially more and be just as effective or even more effective. And that as a leader, I have a lot more empathy and understanding for what it takes for women and men in the workplace. And that I'm a better people leader than some of my peers who don't have that perspective or that lived experience that I had.

JULE KUCERA, 9:33,

Yeah, that's an incredible experience. And I'm so glad you spoke up because the price you were paying to be there at 6:30 in the morning getting up at four…

BYNA ELLIOTT, 9:42,

Not sustainable.

JULE KUCERA, 9:44,

It's not sustainable, even if you love your job.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 9:47,

And so how many of us have that story but it doesn't have a happy ending. And so I really share that story because I hopefully it inspires somebody to use their voice and helps us be honest and authentic where you walk in the door. Place from day one. And that five or 10 years in our career, where we decide Enough is enough. And that it's important to understand that even though our path to the workplace is different, they're still valid. And the fact that I'm a working mother doesn't take away from what I can contribute, and how I can be a value to my organization. But my experience, and my opportunities are different in how they show up, and how I show with my talent, and that they don't negate or show a place of weakness, but a strength.

And I email my boss all the time for Boss’s Day and tell him Thank you. Because without his consideration, and kindness and support, I would have had to make a different decision. And I don't take that for granted. And I've heard the horror stories from others around how accommodating their leaders are, to their lifestyle changes when they become parents and when they are working mothers, or when they have health challenges.

And so the fact that I could be that transparent and honest and be that raw, and he didn't hold it against me, and that from that point on, he always checked with me and said will that work. And he didn't have to, but he understood my experience to the workplace was different. And he didn't want to derail me, but wanted to support me. And he showed that every time with that small act of kindness of looking at me, whether I was sitting next to him across the table and saying, will that work.

And that will that work made the difference to me, it showed that somebody here and about me that they have my best interests at heart, and was willing to understand that my path there was going to be a little different, but it wasn't going to negate my contribution or my value. And I wouldn't be here without him doing that.

JULE KUCERA, 11:53,

You said you send a card every Boss’s Day, you're saying not just to your current boss, but this boss back then you send a card.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 12:00,

He was a difference maker. I'm telling you, I was done. I had had it, I could not figure out how to balance this thing. And be present and available at work and present and available for my family. And, you know, being a jack of all trades, and being a master at none doesn't feel good. And I felt like it was at that point in my career where I had two little ones that need that a lot of attention. I loved what I did, but I couldn't figure out that balance.

JULE KUCERA, 12:32,

Yeah.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 12:33,

And you will, usually when you get to that point, you say Uncle, I give up. I'm gonna pick something. Both feed my spirit and both fed my soul, but I couldn't figure out how to let one live with the other.

JULE KUCERA, 12:48,

That's powerful. Both feed your soul, both feed your spirit. Byna when you're... you are one of the most grounded people I know. What is it that makes you so grounded, sure? Where does that come from?

BYNA ELLIOTT, 13:03,

Well, I appreciate that perspective, Jule. And I trust that our relationship over the years gave you that perspective about me. And yesterday, I don't know when you're going to produce this podcast, but Sunday, Easter Sunday was Resurrection Sunday. And I was in my virtual church because that's where we're at today. And I was thinking about that. And I thought how grateful and appreciative I am of my grandmother. And that I had a praying grandmother who kept me grounded and proximate to Christ and our faith. And that faith and my grandmother's example, living example, of what it means to be a caring, empathetic adult, to care for your neighbor, to care for those that have less than you has been my shining example of what I want to be when I grow up.

And what I try to practice every day, and if I show up at the end of it all, half the woman my grandmother was, I will have accomplished a lot. She was a person that while we grew up poor by all definitions, we were poor. I never saw her turn somebody away in need. I never saw her not support her fellow neighbor, be able to give what little we had to others, and always speak a kind word. And for me, her living example is what I strive to be every day and I'm going to fall short because I just don't know anybody as good as my grandmother. But if I fall short, but I come close, that'll be enough.

And I can remember telling us stories about her picking cotton and having to quit school, to help our family by picking cotton to help them you know, make ends meet. And so even though she had an eighth grade education, she could read that Bible from cover to cover. And she owned her own property. That was a two family flat that could house her entire nine children that she raised as a single mother.

JULE KUCERA, 15:02,

Wow.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 15:04,

That's whose shoulders I'm standing on.

JULE KUCERA, 15:06,

Those are some mighty shoulders. So let's take the employee who's struggling with that work life balance and feeling like we're having meetings at times, I just can't make this work, I'm ready to leave. What advice would you give to that employee?

BYNA ELLIOTT, 15:21,

I say, give your manager a chance to help you. Take my example. And try to have that same conversation with your leader. And make sure that you articulate what the challenges are, that you're still a strong contributor, but you need a different structure to excel in. And then if that doesn't work, think about the overall organization, is there another place in that organization that your talents can be best used, and you could be supported. And that there may be is a different work structure in that department that might be more conducive to your contribution.

And then lastly, if neither one of those work, love yourself enough to say that in order for you to be your best self, you might have to change organizations. And that's not admitting failure. That's admitting that your time or your season's up in an organization. And it's time for you to move on. And that both you and the organization got something out of that time you spent there. You've grown, you developed, and it's time to move on, and be okay with that. Because everything has a season or a time. And you can be your best self somewhere. And you can create the right opportunity and the right balance in the right environment.

JULE KUCERA, 16:37,

I really like the way you said that your season with that organization. I haven't heard it described as a season before, but that makes a lot of sense. What about to the manager who's... hasn't been thinking about this, but just been going along the way that things have been going and having meetings at 6:30 in the morning? What would you say to the manager?

BYNA ELLIOTT, 16:54,

Accept the feedback. Accept the feedback for exactly what it is a gift. And understand that you have an opportunity to lean in to create a work environment that can let all of your employees flourish, grow and develop and that team member when you understand their perspective, and accommodate it, could be your best team member.

So you get the chance to help elevate and support the talent on your team. You talk about career development and growth. That's exactly what my manager did for me. And you have the opportunity as a leader to do the same. And even more now that COVID exists. And we all saw the workplaces that we used to thrive in, transform and change.

And one of the things that I pride myself in is that I leaned into that. I walked through with all of my team members, whether they were caring for a family member themselves, or even children, and said, I want to understand what it's going to take for you to be present when I need you to be present and accommodate your work life as part of this. Because people work like it's changed, right? So you think about the fact that we now had families having to homeschool their children, and become their primary teachers of their young children. Which means you cannot be a work from eight to 12. Because that might be the time you're online with them, helping them actively stay learning.

And so what does that mean for you and your work life? And how do we accommodate that change? And how do you shift from hours to focusing on productivity and outcomes? And I tried to do that to say, I understand that everybody has a different perspective on how to get their work done, and have to have a different schedule to accommodate this new work life balance that none of us anticipated. And so I made sure that if you had to work from six to eight in the morning to log off from eight to two, I was okay with that. And if you logged on from four to eight and finished your workday, that's what you had to do. And how do we accommodate that.

If nothing else worked, take advantage of Family Leave Act or whatever resources we had available from a company perspective, to get adjusted to your new normal, because that's what it takes for all of us collectively to be our best selves at work, to have that flexibility and support to create the normal that will make our employees be able to give their best selves. And not have that, where were you at that? The workday’s from eight to five? No, the new work day is whatever we make it to accommodate our employees so they can be their best selves and have the most productive outcomes for the organization and measure outcomes versus hours and measure activities versus face time is a new way we need to look at the work environment.

I was talking to a friend who runs his own company, and he said I needed to talk to you a year ago. He said because I was a monster to my team members and I laughed and I said you shouldn't have been. You should have really recognized that this was a moment for you to show your humanity and to be flexible, and to show your team that they are more than the face and hours that they show up in your workplace. And that if you do this, during this time, you will have employees for a life. And you will find that they will run through the walls, those brick walls that sometimes come up in corporate America, and have some extremely loyal team members that will not leave you, for money, or when another employer comes knocking on your door, because believe it or not, there's a war on talent in this environment.

And so that accommodation and that humanity is so important for you as a leader, it will help you grow, you will see your employees differently, and they will see you differently. So embrace the opportunity to show up differently for your employees that need you.

JULE KUCERA, 20:53,

Yeah, absolutely. With the benefit of what you know, now, if you were to say something to that young mother who's trying to balance, what would you say to her?

BYNA ELLIOTT, 21:05,

I would say, give yourself grace. Forgive yourself often. And use your voice far earlier than I did to really structure a work environment that's conducive to your family so that it doesn't get to the point that you're super frustrated, and can't even get the real words out. And make sure that you give your boss the space to help you help yourself.

JULE KUCERA, 21:32,

Byna, is there anything else you'd like to say?

BYNA ELLIOTT, 21:35,

No, but thanks a lot, Jule, for creating this inspiring podcast. And hopefully, I gave you my challenge but also gave people hope.

JULE KUCERA, 21:46,

You did. You did indeed. And also, you, by your example, showed us what an empathic leader is like so thank you.

BYNA ELLIOTT, 21:54,

Thank you.

JULE KUCERA, 21:58,

Thank you for listening. That was Byna Elliot. If you'd like to know more about Advancing Black Pathways at JPMorgan Chase, there's a link in the show notes. I'm JULE KUCERA. Host of Hard Times & Hope. If you think this episode would be helpful to someone, please feel free to share it. My website is julekucera.com. That's J-U-L-E-K-U-C-E-R-A.com.

Take care.

Take heart.

See you next time.