# Episode 01- Homecoming

**Taysha Williams, Managing Director of the Innovation Hub:** Hi Raphael. How are you doing today?

**Raphael Akinsipe, TTU Accelerator Graduate:** I'm good, I'm good. It's good to be back in Lubbock. Good to be here at the Hub.

**Taysha:** Thanks for coming. It's been a while. So you were in our very first Accelerator cohort back in 2017. You graduated out of the program. What have you been doing since then?

**Raphael:** It's been a really awesome ride since that time. So yeah, we had ResuMakers that was a part of the Accelerator Program here at the Hub. We were kind of scaling that startup, which was an AI software for your resume. So had a ton of fun growing ResuMakers. We hit a lot of good milestones, but we had to eventually sunset that business. Since then, spent time working at Google and then did some consulting for Southwest Airlines, Chick-Fil-a, Marvel.

Eventually went on to join a company called Case Tabs, which was a software company in the health tech space. Really helping surgeons book time at surgery centers. So we had a lot of success with that and we eventually sold that company to Bain Capital at the end of 2020.

In that exit, our leadership team stayed on board to help run the business post exit, and we've had a lot of growth on that and now, most recently, I moved on to a new venture called Social Crowd, which is an employee motivation platform. We just got that kicked off this year and we're excited to get the ball rolling.

**Taysha:** Wow, that's amazing. You've been doing a lot since you've left Lubbock. We're glad to have you back. I know you're here right now for two days. So you just wrapped up 1 Million Cups this morning and then you did a Lunch and Learn session on how to pitch. We had a really good crowd there. So let's go back to when you started the Accelerator Program. How did that impact your life?

The Accelerator Program was one: fantastic for myself and for my team. We had just recently graduated from Tech when we were starting the Accelerator Program. Having the backing of Texas Tech in particular the Hub on what we

were building was incredibly impactful because we were kind of young, dumb college students trying to figure it out.

It was fantastic to have support in terms of what I would call our startup education . I think that programs like the Accelerator, that it's almost kind of a startup school , where it gives you some of the structure that school gives you in terms of a process and a path.

But then still the autonomy to build your business in the way that makes sense for your business. Also having the financial support to get our startup going was great because not only does it give you a sense that someone believes in you but it also helps you to have the money to be able to cover the cost of getting your business going.

**Taysha:** Yeah. So you had a team of mentors from diverse backgrounds. What was the most impactful thing from your mentor team?

**Raphael:** You know, one of the things I always talk about with startups is that you're gonna have lots of things that you think you're gonna work out. And then, you know, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. I feel like in many ways that's how it is when you're building a startup.

You have a plan and then the real world sets in whether problems with your product or trying to get customers or trying to raise money. And the mentors were fantastic because it was an opportunity for us to be able to get guidance from mentors who had been through it before. And I think, one of the things that's also just great from the mentors is that it's almost like a founder therapy session. They're just walking you off the ledge of feeling like it's not working and they're able to help us put a lot of context to what we were doing.

**Taysha:** That's great. So how did you go from majoring in civil engineering to being a VP of marketing and strategy?

**Raphael:** Yeah, so the engineering program at Tech is first of all say fantastic. I came into it because I believe that engineering would give me a framework for thinking. That's one of the things I think is a really important understanding around college, is that it's not necessarily just about like what's all the content you can gain from it, but more so what is the way that you'll think differently coming out of it.

Engineering gave me a really good framework for thinking, but while I was a student at Tech, I was working on my first startup and we had a line of shirts

that would light up to the sound of your voice. So I was really interested already in entrepreneurship while I was a student.

And then over the course of that experience with that first startup, my second startup ResuMakers, I just knew more and more that being a entrepreneur was really where I wanted to focus. That kind of catapulted my career into the tech industry, whether that was as a product manager at Google or building my own businesses.

That took me on a really, really exciting path. And then that eventually brought me to the point where, I was really focused on marketing and strategy in terms of improving our business.

Taysha: Great. So, you had the two companies before you had a successful one that finally took off. Talk to everybody about failing and how did you recover from that?

Raphael: I think failure is a necessary part of it. It's not just the failure, but it's the learning that you get from it, right? You never truly fail because you're learning. And for us as founders and as a startup, we were just learning a ton of things about different business models, selling to different types of customers, whether you're selling B to C or B to B and sometimes B to B to C.

It was a process of real life education that you wouldn't get otherwise. Somehow the failures in one space give you a certain amount of confidence because now you've done those things and you have a real sense of what it takes, and you can pinpoint areas where you made mistakes. I can't guarantee you won't have any more failures, but you might not necessarily do the same thing wrong twice.

Taysha: You've been in front of a lot of investors. What's the harshest feedback and some of the best advice that you've ever received?

Raphael: In terms of where I've had some tough feedback, when we were building our resume startup there were investors that we were pitching and we really believed that we had something that could scale.

I had some investors candidly tell me, "Why would I pay for software to build my resume when I can go on Microsoft Word and do it for free?" And when you're investing all of your time, your energy, you're spending every waking hour trying to build a business and someone tells you, "Like, this innovation that you've created is kind of unnecessary in the world."

That can feel like a pretty crushing blow. At the same time, it gives you a sense of what are those barriers that you would have to overcome? Because if an investor thinks that way, doesn't mean every investor thinks that way, but it means that someone thinks that way, and that may be a perspective that a customer might have. So it forces you to kind of look inwardly on what are the things you'll need to do to overcome that.

Your other question was what some of the best advice that I've received. Probably one that stands really true and a lot of investors will say. It's from Paul Graham, who's a famous investor and founder, "Make things that people want." And that sounds super basic and it seems really simple, but there's a certain amount of foundational value and understanding that when you're measuring yourself or your success or what you're working on, it's easy to get caught up and distracted in lots of features and lots of extra things that you think are valuable for the world.

But when you measure yourself on "Are we making things that people want?", it forces you to go ask someone, "What is it exactly that they want or is what you're making something that they want?" Customers aren't gonna give you all the answers. But it's great when someone uses your product and tells you, "This is solving a real problem for me."

And many times when you're solving a real problem for someone, guess what? They will give you money for that. I think that's some of the best advice and it translates to any startup.

Taysha: That's great. So you're still a Red Raider and you're giving back. Can you talk about the endowed scholarship that you've created?

Raphael: I realized that, my success wouldn't be true if it wasn't for all the people who invested in me throughout my life. My parents immigrated here and they had a lot of things that they had to overcome to put myself, my sisters, in a position to even have the success in our careers that we've had.

I always think about that and for myself and for my fiance, we've always said that as we get to a position where we can give back and help out others, we want to do that. So what we did is we created the Akinsipe Family Endowed Scholarship. We did it in partnership with the College of Engineering here at Texas Tech.

It was one of those things where we wanted to build an endowment versus kind of a general youth scholarship. So that years from now when I'm not here

anymore, that that endowment is still there and it's still funding the academic career of students who are in need and students from underrepresented backgrounds have a path to being able to get educated and have a successful career. That's a part of our life mission is to be able to give back in that way.

Taysha: Yeah. That's amazing. You've got a lot of aspiring entrepreneurs listening. What's some advice for them to just go about their journey.

Raphael: Yeah, that is another good question. The thing that I would probably tell a lot of entrepreneurs, is one, I'd say it's gonna be hard. You probably watch a movie like, the Social Network and you see this sexy story of building Facebook. But there's also a lot of hard moments where you will feel like you're the only person in the world that's dealing with this.

It's important to feel like the problem is something that you can overcome, that you will solve, and that it's supposed to be hard. A lot of times remembering that it's supposed to be hard helps me to overcome those tough moments.

Then the last thing I'll say on that is that there's a famous quote that says that if you're not embarrassed by the first version of your product, then you probably released it too late. Just get it out there. Start getting feedback and you'd be surprised how much you'll learn and how much better your product will be.

Taysha: That's great advice. Raphael, thank you so much. You're amazing. You have an amazing story, and the fact that you're willing to give back and mentor others is a true blessing.

Raphael: Thank you. I'm always happy to have a chance to come back and I'm a huge fan of everything that's been happening here at the Hub and at Texas Tech. So thank you for having me.