

Vernice Armour BigSpeak Podcast Interview

- Speaker 1: You're listening to the BigSpeak Podcast, a program populated by the voices of thought leaders, successful CEOs, and renowned entrepreneurs. We'll hear their exclusive tips, behind the scenes insights, and off the record stories. Pieces of knowledge only available from BigSpeak's unique slate of keynote speakers and business leaders. During these episodes, we'll meet just a few of the best speakers in the business, learn their unique skills sets that enabled them to inspire audiences on the biggest stages in the world. Inspiration begins now.
- Mark Sylvester: Hey, everybody. Welcome to the show. I'm Mark Sylvester and today I am thrilled to be talking with Vernice FlyGirl Armour, who is America's first African American, female combat pilot. FlyGirl, how you doing today?
- Vernice FlyGirl: I am flytastic, Mark. Great to be here with you.
- Mark Sylvester: [inaudible 00:01:03] there is going to be a bunch of fly stuff you guys.
- Vernice FlyGirl: Right, maybe, maybe.
- Mark Sylvester: You are famous as a combat pilot. You've done so much work. I believe you were a cop. You have served the country. You've been in some really amazing situations, but what I want to talk about is what it's like stepping onto the stage in front of a thousand or 5,000, or 500 people, and when did you know that you wanted to be a speaker in front of people? Is it in your DNA or something you learned?
- Vernice FlyGirl: Gotcha, so first you said you want to know how it feels to step on the stage in front of 500 folks or 10,000 folks. Before I go out, I always say, I don't know about anybody's religion or spirituality or anything like that, but for me, I always say, "God give me the words that they need to hear. Not what I want to say." Right? Because I hesitate to even call myself a speaker. Now, we have SEO and all that stuff for the internet, right?
- Mark Sylvester: Of course.
- Vernice FlyGirl: I'm really a messenger. When a client or a meeting planner looks at bringing someone in, it's not the person per se, unless it's the celebrity hall of fame, NFL, or something like that, but when they're looking at someone who is going to inspire, and I do use the word inspire verse motivate, their audience, they're looking at a message. For me, it's really about delivering the needed, necessary message that is desired.
- Mark Sylvester: Tell me about your very first time someone said we want you to come and speak to this group of people. Did you dread it or did you look forward to it? What was that? Tell me about that experience.

Vernice FlyGirl: That's right, you did ask me how I wanted to be a speaker, so I'll roll it up and both answers in this. The very first time, oh gosh, I don't even know if I remember the very first time someone asked me to come and speak. When I was a cop I did career day.

Mark Sylvester: Oh.

Vernice FlyGirl: When I was in [elementary 00:03:09], I'd go back to my junior high and not necessarily speeches or anything, but I was just never ... I was a Chatty Kathy. My teacher couldn't move me anywhere in a class and I'm not going to talk and make friends. You couldn't move me anywhere because everybody was my friend or would be after I finished talking to them, but I think when folks really started to ask me to speak is when I became a pilot in the Marine Corp and I was the Marine Corps first black female combat pilot. Actually, not even combat. The Marine Corp's first black female pilot, period, combat or otherwise. There had never been a black woman pilot in the Marine Corp.

For black history month and women's history month, a couple units, Marine Corp units, asked me to come speak. I spoke at a couple schools and a scholarship luncheon and I enjoyed it because when I was a kid and I wanted to be a cop downtown, I always wanted to give back to my community. When I became a Marine and a combat pilot, I was able to share a different message of accomplishment. Again, it was still sharing inspiration in the community. Where things changed for me is I was a diversity officer liaison to the Pentagon after doing my two tours and I saw people speaking on ... Because I was a diversity officer going around to all these conferences, and I'm seeing general session speakers and I'm like, wait a minute. You mean people get paid for this? The [dream 00:04:39] was born.

Mark Sylvester: There you go.

Vernice FlyGirl: The first time someone actually came, asked me to speak in that capacity, I remember I was still in the Marine Corp, it was Booz Allen, one of the VPs, he came up to me and he said, "Hey look, we can't pay you, but we can fly you down [inaudible 00:04:57] and put you up in the Ritz." That's it. I came down, they flew me down. It was amazing. I remember sitting in that first-class seat for the very first time and that experience. It was Super Bowl weekend. He took me to a little networking event. Seven people at the house. Not big at all. Very intimate and personal. It was a friend of his. A woman came up, she was an executive with Bank of America, and she said, "Hey, [John 00:05:19] just told me that they're bringing you in to speak. I think we'd like to have you speak at Bank of America. How much do you charge?" I said, "Uh." Now, hopefully I had on my poker face and that just happened on the inside, ...

Mark Sylvester: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Vernice FlyGirl: ... but I looked at her and I said, "\$2,500." She just looked [then 00:05:35] she said, "Okay. Let's talk." They probably negotiated me down to like \$1,900 or \$2,100 or something like that. I think no matter what you charge, people try to negotiate, but they brought me in and that was the very first time I charged for a keynote.

Mark Sylvester: When you stepped off the stage, what surprised you about how much you liked it because obviously, you liked it a lot?

Vernice FlyGirl: I don't think anything necessarily surprised me and for that first event with Booz, there was no stage. It was just a conference room with maybe 20 people sitting around in a U shape setup and a PowerPoint slide or a projection screen and I got my inspiration from a general that I had seen speaking. He was the administrator for NASA, Charlie Bolden, who is an amazing speaker himself and he didn't have any words on any of his slides. He just had a bunch of pictures, eye candy, and we were so enraptured with his stories and his visual. I said, "I am making my talks like that." That's what I've done to this day and people still remember the visuals. I don't kill them with PowerPoint. I actually use it for what it was created, to make a powerful point.

Mark Sylvester: Well, I could unpack that for an hour and talk to you about inspiration for the speaking, but you nailed it right there. It's having a beautiful visual that supports what you're talking about. I've seen a couple of your talks and they're very, very story focused.

Vernice FlyGirl: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mark Sylvester: How much of what you, when you're working with that event planner and crafting what you're going to deliver, how much of it is story and how much of it is content?

Vernice FlyGirl: If I were to break down my keynote, I would break it down in several ways. It's 70% outline, I know what I'm going to say, 30% customized, and it's not a plug and play, insert customer name here, right, or client name here. When we do the pre-conference call, what are their challenges, yes, and what's the definitely of success with my keynote and the event? When we were Marines taking the hill, we knew what we were going to do.

Mark Sylvester: Yep.

Vernice FlyGirl: I'm looking if we're in a sales meeting and our new rev goal is 1.3 billion, I'm going to get up there and I'm like, "Hey, look folks. We need to be decisive in the midst of combat. Our rev goal is 1.3. We just got 1.1 last year and I know it feels like we're stretching, but we have some work to do and this is how we're going to do it." Now, I will share stories about overcoming the challenges and obstacles. Our obstacles are opportunity, but then I drive it home with why [we're 00:08:27] that relevant for them?

Most of the time, and I call that the connective tissue, because when I leave that event the biggest compliment to me is when someone says, did you use to work for us? Are you one of our contractor? How did you know so much about who we are and it just felt like you were a part of the team because you said we all the time? Most speakers come in and they just, they point their finger and say you are doing this and you Oracle, or you Walmart, and you said we like you're on our team. I said, "But, I am on your team. One mission, one goal, one team. We're in it together. Right?" That's what makes me feel amazing when I walk off. When the client, the decision maker comes up and says, "How did you remember all that crap? You nailed it. You nailed it."

Mark Sylvester: I've got to believe that your military background, specifically the discipline, gives you a unique competitive advantage in delivering these messages. We've talked to sports ... I think sports also, you're going to get something that's about being part of the team and it's not just you, it's you and the team. It's the we and all of that. Just talk to me a little bit about that. Do you agree with that?

Vernice FlyGirl: Yes. As a Army I was part of a team, [ohthree 00:09:54] brothers, you know, I was part of a team. The Marine Corp, absolutely part of a team. Police officer, part of a team. I had my partner, it was like CHiPs, we were both on our little motorcycles and I knew he had my back. Even as a combat pilot, there were two pilots in that aircraft, but our team, our crew, somebody put that fuel in the aircraft, somebody loaded up that armament, somebody torqued the screws and made sure all the bolts were tight. I mean, we had an entire crew that was a part of mission accomplishment.

When we came back and we showed the video to everyone so they would know what we did out there on the battlefield. We, we, together, a collective, not just the two pilots that came back and we get all the glory. No. Again, one mission, one goal, one team. We're in it together. So, did that play, all of my experiences play into my world view, my vision of what teamwork looks like? What depending on each other looks like? Yes. Absolutely, absolutely. Without a doubt.

Mark Sylvester: I think that as civilians we, and those who have not served in the military, they look at that and they just think of those heroic pursuits, but it's the block and tackling, how you get things done. It's strategy, it's tactic, it's how you approach the mission, it's all of that. Tell me what the core idea is if we could get all of that into one idea that you bring to your messages. [inaudible 00:11:23] ...

Vernice FlyGirl: Gotcha and I loved your blocking and tackling because I played women's professional football for a little while, just so you know. My dad [inaudible 00:11:30] Baltimore. I was right there with you, Mark. Boom, blocking and tackling. I love it. I was a fullback. The concept that I bring to the client if I were to distill it down is engagement and gutsy. Permission to engage. Before we could release any missiles or whatever, over the battlefield, we had to get permission from the ground controller. He would actually say you have permission to engage, cleared hot.

Well, here at home there are no ground controllers in life. You are your ground controller. If you don't give yourself permission, who will? Corporate America Associations eat that up. Why? Because they want their people to be self-starter and I have however many experiences and anecdotes to back that up and why we have to be self-starter. Actually, the new book I'm working on is Get Gutsy, Lead Gutsy, and where does gutsy come in? Well, I look at my past and what am I qualified to speak on? What do I have expertise in because I'm only going to speak to my power and my expertise. If you want me to come in and talk about customer service, I'm going to refer you to Willie Jolley or somebody else because that's not my thing.

My thing is engagement and gutsy leadership with courage, power, and grit. What does gutsy look like? In your gut, you know it's right. It takes guts to do it, but you've got to take action. That is huge for our environment right now, especially with technology and STEM, which I'm a huge advocate. Blockbuster had the opportunity to buy out Netflix however many times. Yahoo, AOL, we all started out with AOL Email, right, you've got mail. I mean, those companies didn't have the vision and didn't make the gutsy move. Kodak, you know, I mean everywhere you went, the Kodak moment, the Kodak smile, we don't say that anymore and they developed the technology for digital cameras. When they saw what their folks had developed, they said, "Yeah, but we're a film company." They weren't a film company, they were a memories' company.

Mark Sylvester: Exactly.

Vernice FlyGirl: Would it have been a gutsy move? Yeah, that was bleeding edge technology. They would have had to educate the environment and society because it was brand new. Right? If the world was flat, they had just built on new land. They didn't re-till the soil. They had just created new land. Right? Especially now in technology, when it comes to vision, engagement, because engagement is a choice, whether you engage or not and how you engage, and we're trying to get our client to engage with us every day when we're closing a sale, opening a door, increasing a budget, whatever it is we're asking people to engage and continuing to work on the business, as well as, in the business. On the business is gutsy leadership making gutsy moves. Not haphazard moves, but absolutely making moves that are going to increase our market share and help us keep the market share that we have.

Mark Sylvester: It feels like that is a wonderfully universal message. It's not geared towards a specific kind of audience. I mean, I can't think of an audience that wouldn't benefit from those words.

Vernice FlyGirl: Right.

Mark Sylvester: That being said, do you feel like there's a type of audience that resonates with that message better than others?

Vernice FlyGirl: I do. The audience that really resonate with this message are organizations that are in the middle of change, whether it's a merger, acquisition, they're overcoming some obstacles, they are dealing with a tremendous amount of change and the pace of change, people are uncomfortable, they might even be fearful. I thought, how do you transform your fear to fuel because we have a mission to accomplish and people's lives are depending on what we do. You might not be shooting missiles over the desert or shooting as a cop running down the street, so how do I get people to identify with my experience because I make it their experience. They're in middle of combat.

Ask anybody out here in corporate America. They are in the middle of combat, too. The process of accomplishing the goal in midst of combat is the same. We have to create our flight plan. We have to pre-flight. We need to mitigate our risk. We absolutely have to take off, take action. We execute when we're out there navigating the minefields, the obstacles. Right? That obstacle probably is an opportunity we're not seeing. Then, review, recharge, re-attack. Review our successes and our failures. Why did we fail, yes, and our successes because that's where we get our best practices? Recharge and re-attack? There are only two ways to succeed, period, end of story, Mark. First time or again, secret's in the re-attack.

Mark Sylvester: I have a question.

Vernice FlyGirl: Yes.

Mark Sylvester: This wisdom is just flowing off your tongue. I mean, it's just boom, just liquid gold and I'm curious how much time do you spend writing material and working on ... You said you were working on a new book, so do these, you know, when you get that lovely alliterative line, it lands. How much time do you spend practicing those and rehearsing them and how much do you lay new on an audience and [inaudible 00:17:04] you see how it flowed?

Vernice FlyGirl: You know, I don't lay a bunch of new on an audience at one time because I know my ... when I do have a punchline or I drop something, or a nugget, it's tried, it's true, but I'm also in the flow and I'm having a conversation with that audience. I'm listening to them. I'm watching them nod their heads, I'm watching them track. Or, if I can say, you know what? Maybe I've been on that a little too long. Let me move to something else that I think might resonate because say they're engineers or accountants versus truck drivers or administrative professionals. Each audience has its own personality, especially depending on what industry they're in.

Your question specifically about new material and do I practice, I video. Well, now the audience is so big I just get the professional recording from the production crew, but I watch those videos. I analyze those videos. Could I have made another facial expression there to resonate, to give it more energy? Am I making good eye contact? How did that story flow? To answer your question about writing, I don't write a keynote. I don't write out a story. I will tell a story

on video. Then, I'll go back, critique it, get it transcribed, take out material that really didn't drive to the point of the story, but I'm a speaker so I am going to share that. I'm going to relive the experience, not tell a story. I think that is a big part of keeping the energy and keeping it alive for the audience because everybody can tell when something's speech [fear 00:18:42]. Like, eh, they've told this a million times.

I mean, I could share something with you right now and it would feel like I am in a conversation with you even though I've said it a million times because I am in the conversation with you. When I made those accomplishments and was the first and I came back and people were asking me again and again and again, you know, Vernice how did you create the breakthrough? I figured out everybody wanted to create a breakthrough, they just didn't know how. Right? Now, that, I've said it a million times, but ...

Mark Sylvester: But, that felt like you just came up with that. That's why you're a great speaker. Right? It's that understanding of the audience and it's that understanding that there's two people in this thing, not just you. Right?

Vernice FlyGirl: I would say as far as the great speaker comment goes, I appreciate it. Dr. King said, "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve," and as long as I keep service in the forefront, and that's my whole life, right? Military, cop, combat pilot. Now, I'm just serving on a different battlefield. I'm flying the mike.

Mark Sylvester: I want to drop the mike right there. That was perfect, I'm flying the mike. I love that. So, FlyGirl, tell me ... I want to talk a little bit about BigSpeak because we're doing this show with them and talking to ... Trying to help people get to know you a little bit better. More than they can just on the bio and videos and I love your live stuff that you've been doing. That's very ... It's been inspirational to me. When did you first get involved with BigSpeak and how did they find you or did you find them? What was that like?

Vernice FlyGirl: You know, it's been several years that we've been involved. For a while, I think they might have proposed me a little bit, but not much. Once they proposed me and we closed the deal together, I think I delivered for the client, they got some great feedback, probably got some spinoff. I mean, I want to be the speaker that gets more spinoff than anybody else. Right? That's just the ultimate compliment. When you know you're doing a good job and they say, oh, wait a minute. Those people in the audience go back and they tell their leadership, hey, we need to bring this speaker in, that is when you know you're delivering. It's not the standing ovation, it's the we need you for our workforce. How much do you charge?

I think a lot of folks sometimes don't know how to sell me, because I am a product. I am a service. I am a talent. I am a thing, right? Folks many times will put me in Black History month or Women's History month or Women's Leadership Conference, and that's cool, but I don't bill myself as a diversity speaker. Can I speak to diverse audiences? Absolutely, but what the message I

bring about engagement and gutsy leadership, that is a message that is for 12 months out of the year. With being the first black, female pilot, when people say sexism, discrimination and all that stuff, and I'm like well yeah. Even the average white guy has obstacles, right? How do we overcome them? With the whole sexism, discrimination, and all that stuff, it's really about staying focused on the mission, accomplishing the goal, and moving forward. Period, end of story.

Mark Sylvester: Vernice FlyGirl Armour, this has been a treat for me. I really appreciate it and I know your audiences probably fall in love with you. You can't even get out of the room for an hour afterwards. Right?

Vernice FlyGirl: You know, I miss them after I leave actually. Some ...

Mark Sylvester: Right.

Vernice FlyGirl: ... [crosstalk 00:22:19] just so like family. It's like, do I really have to go?

Mark Sylvester: Right.

Vernice FlyGirl: [crosstalk 00:22:23] in contact and I do. I do, actually.

Mark Sylvester: I love it. It is so great to meet you and I enjoyed. Good luck the next stage you walk onto.

Vernice FlyGirl: I appreciate you. Thanks, Mark, for the interview and as long as they don't just put me in Black History month, you know, I can talk to those sales teams, too, and the regular leadership folks, too, because it's all about connecting ...

Mark Sylvester: I love it.

Vernice FlyGirl: ... and that's what I do.

Mark Sylvester: I love it, I feel like we [crosstalk 00:22:49] connected. Thank you so much. Bye, bye.

Vernice FlyGirl: Thanks, Mark. Cleared hot.

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