

The Uniqueness Factor with Nikki Reineck

Welcome to the Frederick Factor! My name is Sandy Dubay, and I'm the Season One host. Everyone who has lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick, Maryland, knows that there's just something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible, diverse community that continues to grow. Here in this podcast, we bring Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight to share their stories with you and find out, what's their Frederick Factor? Here we're going to kick off the final episode of Season One of the Frederick Factor! I cannot tell you how excited I was to be joined today by Nikki Reineck, one of the co-owners of Sisters in Style, a clothing boutique here in Frederick, Maryland.

Sandy: For those of you listening to the podcast, Nikki is deaf, so we're joined by Rachel, our interpreter from iYellow Interpreting. So, Nikki, thank you for being here.

Nikki: Yes! Hi, thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

Sandy: Awesome, I'm so excited to have you. I will confess because I'm kind of a full disclosure kind of a gal. I don't know. I just kind of put it out there. This is 'take two' of our podcast, so we did this one other time. We had some technical issues. Not going to get into it, but I'm really excited to see you again. Nikki, thank you. And thank Rachael with iYellow interpreting for joining us today. Nikki, what brought you to Frederick, Maryland?

Nikki: So, I grew up in Frederick, I went to the Maryland school for the deaf, I graduated there in 2005. It's a great school for deaf education, and really that's what brought me here to Frederick, and I went on to go to Gallaudet University and worked in D.C. after that. And then I have children, and having deaf children brought us back up to Frederick, Maryland, and then we decided to have a storefront, brick and mortar storefront there for clothes. We thought that would be a good spot to have a business.

Sandy: OK, well, one of the things that we learned the first time you and I spoke was that you don't just have the store here in Frederick. Tell us about your second location or your warehouse.

Nikki: Yes. So we do have a second location in Indianapolis. And it's the warehouse where we have all the orders sent through when people order online or through our app. There's not a storefront there to shop, but there are just employees and we kind of run the operations out of there. And, you know, we keep the inventory that we receive and ship it from there, and also the clothes that we send down to Frederick to the storefront to be sold actually in the store. So yes, there are the two locations: Frederick, Maryland, and then the Indianapolis location as well for the warehouse.

Sandy: So, I'd like to back up a little bit and talk about why you decided to open, or the kind of, the history behind opening up a clothing boutique. Tell me about that.

Nikki: Sure. So, you know, I was a mother. I had two kids. And coming next month, they're going to be nine and eight. But about five years ago, you know, I thought, you know, I was just at home, bored, what am I going to do? Stay at home mom? I wanted to do some more things to earn extra income. And at that time, my sister Amelia, you know, we kind of thought, "*Hey, why don't we try to make a business? Let's try to sell something, keep us busy, earn some extra income.*" And we saw a friend who was actually selling clothing through direct sales. We saw, you know, her doing that, and we thought, "*Wow, that's why couldn't we do something like that?*" And also, just to add, you know, growing up, I never thought I'd become a business owner. You know, other people in my family, we do have business owners, but I just never thought that that would be something I would do. But then fast forward to where we are now, and we just kind of went for it. We realized that there is a demand for online shopping for clothing, and we kind of opened a basement boutique in our house. People would come in and shop around and then leave, but it kept growing and growing, and we would do kind of pop-up sort of things with the business, and we're just going really well. And then, you know, my son, who is deaf and autistic, you know, we wanted to make sure that there was a school that had a program that could accommodate his needs. And so, you know, looking around the U.S. trying to find a program for not only being deaf but being autistic at about that age, about two years old, we wanted to make sure we had a good program for some early intervention for him and that was in Indianapolis. They have a good program and good therapists that sign. And it was just really going to be a good move for us. So we picked up from Frederick and moved up here, closed that basement shop at that time, but we continued to sell through our new house. And at that time, actually, it was just online. So we were just operating out of our house. And then in 2019, around July, we decided, you know, let's not do this direct sales business anymore. Let's do our own independent business. We can make our own decisions. We can pick the clothes we want to sell. You know, our business is growing. Let's do it. So we kind of made that transition. And, you know, the following March, you know, with COVID hitting and the pandemic, you know, everything online just grew the orders and people wanting to shop online, you know, it was really just helping us do great at that time. So we decided to, you know, find, you know, a small warehouse or something that we could kind of operate out of. And, you know, as at the time that the business was just really booming and starting to grow. So we thought, why not Frederick, Maryland? Let's see what the pricing looks like there for storefronts. And we just found out on Shab Row, the place that we ended up being, that, you know, we went and talked about prices. It's not something that's going to be affordable that we could do. And, you know, our customer base, they were like, "*Come on, we really miss your services and the experience we had working, you know, shopping with you guys,*" you know, those who remembered us from the basement shop that we did. So, my sister and I decided to go for it. She manages the business there on Shab Row. And yeah, I mean, there was no real plan about it. We just kind of made a spur-of-the-moment, maybe crazy decision to just go for it and get our brick-and-mortar shop. And my

sister manages it and it's doing really well, you know, already past the year mark and we were actually voted Frederick's Best Boutique Store! So, that was really an honor, you know, it shows how our business has grown. And it's just really amazing to see, you know, if you just go and take a risk like that and see what can happen. So yeah, we operate, you know, kind of the two locations and my sister no longer is in the Frederick store because she had her third baby. So she helps out and still works with us when we need, you know, she's still part of the business, but she's not running this store anymore, so she's actually up here in Indianapolis. And but yeah, that's... that's how the storefront came to be in Frederick.

Sandy: It's a fun story that illustrates how you really can live anywhere and run even a retail shop, particularly during this pandemic. Why not?

Nikki: Right, anything's possible.

Sandy: So, I love and respect that you and your sister work together. I could not do that. I could not work with my sister.

Nikki: Oh, really? Yeah. I mean, I think it helps because I mean, you know, we each know what our strengths and weaknesses are, and we can kind of pick up where each other, you know, needs assistance. We're able to, you know, *'OK, I'm weak with this and that's her strong suit'* and vice versa. So, you know, we know where we want to go, and we're able to admit our weaknesses and let somebody else take over in that realm when needed. And you know, her strengths coincide with my...or her weaknesses coincide with my strengths. And, you know, I talk about clothes and, you know, that's in our business and our husbands are always like, *'OK, guys, enough of that,'* they're pretty sick of it. But sorry, that's just where we're at and we always talk about our business and shopping for clothes! Yeah.

Sandy: That's awesome. Oh, my gosh. You know, starting a business... so I guess you didn't really start it during the pandemic, you had been running this already. But what was it like expanding, particularly opening up that retail store during the pandemic? What was that like?

Nikki: I mean, it can be very scary. You know, we were kind of nervous, *"How's it going to go? Will people still come into the shop with the pandemic?"* But we just had a strong instinct, you know, a strong gut feeling that it was going to be OK, we should just go for it. We knew that we had the clientele base that would support us, and that really, you know, helped us a lot. If we were starting from scratch, just really first time putting in a store and hoping people would come, you know, that would even be more risky. But because we did have the clientele base, who were familiar with shopping with us previously, then, you know, going in and putting it in the storefront. You know, that was an extra bonus for them as well.

Sandy: I love it. Yes. Tell me, tell our listeners a little bit about some of your goals of supporting other deaf-owned businesses and the suppliers that you have.

Nikki: So, we do have some suppliers that are deaf. There's someone named Mara and she makes the "I Love You" clothing, and there's someone who makes candles and like earrings, different kinds of jewelry. So, we do pull their products and sell them in our store. But we are always looking for ways to source other, you know, deaf businesses and sell their stuff in our stores. And it just kind of a way to help each other out. You know, we're helping them, they're helping us. It's a good trade there. So when we're buying, you know, when people buy products from us, they can support, you know, two deaf businesses because not only is the Sisters in Style, also, you know, the places that we've sourced from, and it's nice for hearing people who come into our store if they, you know, want to learn, sign language or maybe people who have deaf children want to come into the store, you know, they're hearing, but they have deaf kids and they want to come in and shop. So it's a good place for that too.

Sandy: It sounds like a great place for that. One of my goals is to learn sign language. I took it a little bit when I was much, much, much younger, but I did not retain it. My sister actually took it as her foreign language in high school, and her daughter is taking it now as her...I think it does count as her foreign language credit in high school, and so which is pretty cool.

Nikki: Yeah, that's true. And Frederick Community College, FCC, they also have a good program there for ASL studies and where you can learn about sign language and deaf culture. And you know, there's different apps and Facebook, Instagram, different ways for people to access classes and learn sign language that way. You know, you can follow people and learn, you know, signs from different deaf people all over the world. Pretty cool.

Sandy: Just going to keep watching this video over and over again. And that will be my first, my first attempt. Thank you. So I'm curious. I want to get back a little bit to the, why Frederick? You know, the idea of starting a business and being able to locate that business anywhere, you were in Indianapolis, your sister at the time was here. What was it about the Frederick community? Was it just simply a large deaf population, or was there more than that?

Nikki: So, Frederick, you know, I would say is home to, you know, from what I have read about three thousand deaf people that live there who know and use sign language and are deaf. And then there's also the Maryland Community Center that's in Frederick, Maryland, as well, and that they have different programs and events that they host for the deaf and hearing too, of course, you know, people who are curious and want to come and learn more about sign language and deaf culture. And then, you know, just a little bit south is Gallaudet and, you know, Washington, D.C. that has a lot of deaf people working and living there as well. So it's just kind of the mecca for it. So that's kind of, you know, the deaf people and just a big signing community and it's just a great place that we thought to start our store.

Sandy: What is it like going to shows and sourcing from the hearing community to come and sell their products in your store? What's that process like?

Nikki: So, yeah, we'll go out to different shows, different trade shows. We've been to California – that's where a lot of the clothing is manufactured. You go there, negotiate the fabrics, what will be used, and all that sort of thing. And you know, we going to these hearing shows, we need to get sign language interpreters. And so that helps us really not feel like there are any barriers. You know, it depends where we're going. Different cities, you know, it might be harder for us to get the access, but we still want to go because we are familiar with the terminology and who we're going to be talking with or they already we work with them and they're familiar with us because we have that working relationship already. But you know, some places it is kind of a fight still to get the interpreters, you know, to make sure that deaf business owners have the same access that hearing business owners have when going to these trade shows.

Sandy: Now, as a customer, as a hearing customer, not deaf speaking customer, I don't know, ASL and I come into your store. I found it very welcoming, and you've got a like a dry erase board that is used if you need to communicate. Can you tell our listeners what they, or tell our viewers today, what they can expect if they were to come into your shop?

Nikki: Sure. So, when you come in, you would just expect a greeting from a deaf employee who works there. All of the employees in Indianapolis and Frederick are all deaf, so that's something we're proud of as well. In Frederick, the manager, is deaf and you know, everybody who works in the store, like I said, so you'll get your friendly greeting and you can feel free to ask any questions if you need help. Just take a look around the store. I mean, really just the same type of feel that you would have when you went into any other, you know, boutique and you know, the goal is to just feel the same way. And you know, the reason we picked Sisters in Style because, you know, it's all deaf and I think we're unique to others and it just kind of made this, you know, relationship. And also, you know, you'll see, you know, the deaf suppliers that we use and we have sizes from Small to XXXL and we have, casual clothing, boho style or more formal like work attire, you know? And we have Judy Blue Jeans, that's a popular line, everybody loves those, you know, even though we're a small store, people are always really impressed that we carry it that way because that's a well-known one.

Hi, I'm Ellen Buchanan from Platinum PR, and we are the sponsor of this season's Frederick Factor. Our team provides place-based marketing and communications for communities and destinations across the country. We reimagine places. Find us at www.platinumpr.com. Our contact information is in the show notes. Happy listening!

Sandy: The several times I've been in there, I've been impressed with the variety. Actually, you have, as you said, everything from accessories, earrings, you know, handbags, things, to sweaters and dresses and pants and casual and workwear. I have enjoyed the variety.

Nikki: Yeah, and I like that we have plus size clothes as well, because I am plus size, and so I feel like, you know, I understand the pains that people can go through when they try to go into regular stores and you're like, *'OK, there's only small to large, you know, where's XL or XXL or*

XXXL?' So I think, you know, I share that experience. And so, you know, whenever you go shopping and, you know, I'll go with a friend sometimes and she can find those because she fits into that standard clothing size. But then, you know, I feel left out. So it's nice that we can ... that anybody can come into the stores and shop with each other and yeah, fits everybody.

Sandy: In a previous episode of The Frederick Factor, I had a guest, Janece Lee, and she created a company called HEISIS, named after her sister, basically, "Hey, sis!" Was how the company came to me, and because her sister is Plus-Size and she wanted her sister to have a place that she could go to buy clothes that fit. She's very, very focused on the plus-size, teen plus, you know, so like, (you know, thirteen to like twenty-five-ish age bracket that demographic) and creating those fun clothes that they feel comfortable wearing and that, can feel trendy and fun, and they can be proud of their body and everything. So, it's it's actually a really sweet story. I'd love for you to, you know, read the transcript of that podcast episode. She's a beautiful human. Yeah, and you should follow each other on Instagram. There's my plug.

Nikki: Oh, yeah, I will, definitely.

Sandy: So I'm curious of, I don't know, your biggest challenges as a business owner. What would you describe as some of your biggest challenges?

Nikki: So, of course, we do face some challenges, but I always do look at challenges as learning experiences, ways to change and shift and accommodate. Of course, you know, the ups and downs with the pandemic and what that brought, you know, trying to predict what things are going to look like, what is it going to be good in a few months from now? What kind of stuff do we need to keep stocking-wise? So from like September to December, when we just, you know, had been opening the store, we didn't have any clothing in there, and we were just doing online at the time. You know, people would order out, through the Indianapolis warehouse and, you know, I think that was a challenge because people were afraid to go into the source. We didn't have a lot of traffic coming in. And so just trying to... *'How do we accommodate that with the pandemic?'* And, you know, we were able to just change our system. We had, you know, a web-based system that kind of integrated with the storefront. So, we had the storefront and then, you know, the warehouse and then the online shopping side that kind of operated out of Indianapolis. And you know how to figure out which stores are going to be coming. You know, inside our internal system, we had to figure out which clothes are going to be coming out from the store. People are going to be coming in and picking it up or is it going to be, you know, is it going to be shipped to them? And just really balancing that, I would say it was a challenge for us, but we got through that. We've been doing pretty good now and just really trying to meet our clientele base where they're at. And, you know, I would say definitely so far, the biggest challenge has been COVID-19. And then, you know, of course, some discrimination about being deaf, but we always just find a way to work around it. And, you know, we don't just give up on that. That's not going to work, you know, just forget it and move on to something else. No, we just, you

know, keep pursuing things and just never give up on it and never give up on yourself and just you'll make it through so. And we have a lot of allies as well within the community, a lot of our customers who are hearing and maybe they're interpreters, or they just know sign language, you know, that frequent our store and are very supportive and you know, always '*How you guys doing? Do you need any help? Want us to come help out?*' And you know, it's great to see that support from the community.

Sandy: As we talk through this, there are so many similarities that you mention to any business owner, you know, I have interviewed, like I said, a dozen underrepresented business owners and whether you are Black or Hispanic or, you know, female or whatever, however you are underrepresented. It is always this attitude, at least with the humans that I've been connecting with. That is, "*I can succeed. I can still do it. And I'm not going to let whatever it is, fill in the blank, define me, or hold me back.*" So, it's great to hear that in the same capacity.

Nikki: Yes, it's very true. You know, it really hit me back when I was doing the direct sales and that there were just so many people that wanted to sell clothes. And, you know, they are essentially, you know, normal hearing people speaking English and, they're not minority groups or whatever, and they just you normal average people, but they struggle too with the similar type of things. They had problems, you know, moving up in the, you know, in the direct sales. And we became, you know, Top 30 of that, you know, even though we were deaf. So it's just kind of fascinating to see like, '*OK, it doesn't actually matter, are you deaf or underrepresented.*' You know, as long as you just know what to do and know your ways and you can figure things out and find workarounds and what works and what doesn't work and just break through the barriers. Where there's your average person that, they also experience the same sort of problems and issues as well running businesses, it's not just minority underrepresented businesses.

Sandy: Yeah, you're right, you're right, and there is that privilege in, however we define it, that can be seen as an advantage and can sometimes be seen as a challenge to others. So it's interesting. I feel like as women we-

Nikki: Yes. Yeah, we call it the deaf gain in the deaf community, to refer to it as deaf gain because, you know, we kind of use that as a way to say, yeah, we're deaf, but you know, what is the positives of our deafness? You know, the strong community that we're a part of and you know, we're able to have a lot of support from them. And, you know, if we host events, you know, line out the door with deaf people and you know, they get in and vote for us for, you know, the different awards and whatnot, and they just really rally behind us. So that's something really cool. And we like to in the deaf community, say deaf gain.

Sandy: Gain, It's funny in the transcripts, it came off as deaf game g-a-m-e, game.

Nikki: Gain!

Sandy: Deaf gain. I love it! Well, and when you were talking.... so I own a marketing and PR firm, so we work with getting people, you know, helping people to share their stories. Just like this podcast. And I think that there would be such a fun media angle to tell your story and the story of you and your sister and this business and this community that you have embraced, and that ultimately has embraced you here locally. So what, Nikki, what would you like our listeners, viewers, readers, of this podcast, of this interview to know about your business?

Nikki: Well, what I would want them to know is that you know, we sell a variety of clothes, casual clothes, you know, for work, casual, whatever you need. We've got our storefront out on Shab Row. We're open Wednesday through Sunday. We're closed Mondays and Tuesdays. If you want to have a chance to learn more about deaf people or sign language, deaf culture, you see the different products we have from deaf, other deaf businesses, you know. Come in and take that chance to learn. We're very friendly. We've... like we said, we have ways to communicate. If you don't know sign language, we have the whiteboard. So, yeah, come on out and see us.

Sandy: What would you like to see in Frederick County that could boost the growth of your business?

Nikki: I mean, Frederick has already been great supporting us in what we need, you know, making sure we have the tools and the resources. You know, we have a Frederick Downtown Partnership. And, you know, Frederick County's just I mean, they're just great. It's awesome, I can't say enough about that. You know, they have great resources for us and hoping to see that maybe in Indianapolis, but you know, it's just Frederick, such a tight-knit community, they host events and, you know, I'd love to see, you know, more deaf-friendly activities or events, you know, happening. But yeah, we're happy to partner with them. It's not exactly the same type of feel out here in Indianapolis as it is in Frederick with that tight-knit community. Indianapolis is just such a big city compared to sweet little Frederick, you know? Love it. Love the feel here.

Sandy: I am on the Board of Directors for the Downtown Frederick Partnership as a volunteer. So, we thank you for being here. But, Nikki, is there anything else that you'd like to add that you have not mentioned during this call today that you'd like for our audience to know?

Nikki: Well, I feel like I covered all the bases there. Yeah.

Sandy: So I'm going to ask you our final question that I ask every guest: what is your Frederick factor?

Nikki: Alright. My Frederick factor is, you know, the big, strong deaf community, and if you want to come and see a unique, you know, store, you can come in and have a signing and you know, it's friendly. It's a cool place to be. Yeah, we're very unique because, like I mentioned. On the MARC train, there's a Frederick statue. Right on the MARC train out there, that really says a

lot about the community and the signing community, and other towns don't have that. So that really, I think, makes the city very unique. It's just a unique city, a unique corner of the world.

Sandy: And Nikki, you're talking about the bike rack that is spelled out Frederick in ASL.

Nikki: Yes, yeah. I mean, I would say that, you know, just as just a couple of blocks from where the store is, so it's a sweet little nod to the sign language.

Sandy: Yeah, it is a beautiful piece of functional art. I usually wrap up my interviews with that Frederick factor question, but I'm actually curious about, you know, this idea of deaf-friendly events and activities, and I'm curious what could we be doing? What should we be doing? What opportunity exists there?

Nikki: You know, well, I've seen, you know, when events are hosted, you know, different like tours or like, for example, like the Ghost Tour or something that should have sign language interpreters offered so it can be accessible to the deaf community or book readings or different events that take place. Just always make sure that interpreters are there, because then when deaf, you know, or even have like a deaf guest, come and do some sort of speaking event or, you know, I'd always say just, you know, have have sign language interpreters and then when you're advertising the event, make sure that's known because you know, you just sometimes deaf people might just assume, "*Oh, you know, they're not going to have an interpreter or I don't want to have to go through the hoops of requesting an interpreter.*" And so they might not attend. But if, you know, kind of puts the burden on the community, on the deaf community, you'd have to ask and make sure. But if it's just always provided and it's included in the advertising for it, so people know that it's there, I think that it just makes it a more open and friendly environment. And I'm sure, you know, deaf people will want to go to more and more events if they know that they don't have to. There's no hassle, and they'll have interpreters provided.

Sandy: I think in the show notes will include a link to iYellow interpreting, and maybe we'll find another resource, I don't know. But at least that one... you're right. We'll kind of try to break down some of those barriers and make it more accessible and a little bit more inclusive for all of our activities and events. Thank you. Nikki, is there anything else that you'd like to add today?

Nikki: No, I think that's it. I think we got it all just ready for the new year and look forward to what's to come and what's going to, you know, it's maybe going to be an interesting year. We'll see how things go, just looking forward to it.

Sandy: You're right. I thank you so much. I hope that 2022 is amazing. And if you are in Frederick visiting the shop, please shoot me a message. I would love to hook up.

Nikki: Oh, yeah, sure. Of course.

Sandy: Awesome. Cool. Well, thank you, thank you to our listeners. I hope that you all are inspired to learn ASL. Go visit Sisters in Style boutique out in Shab Row in Downtown Frederick or visit them online. We will include all of those details in the show notes. My name is Sandy Dubai; thank you so much for joining.

You've been listening to the Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community and what makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at frederickfactor.com. You can also find us on Instagram and Facebook. Til next time.

