

“They had these jobs, and they became breadwinners of their families.”

A Conversation with Kathryn Lucatelli, Co-Founder

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you start by introducing yourself and telling me how you got involved with DDD [Digital Divide Data]?

Kathryn Lucatelli: My name is Kathryn Lucatelli, and my involvement started in 2000. I was traveling to Boston to explore the possibility of going into a career in mediation. I was looking to work with somebody in the realm of mediation, and somebody said, You've got to connect with Jeremy Hockenstein. He doesn't do anything with mediation, but he's doing interesting work.

I showed up to meet Jeremy, who had just been to Cambodia. He was really jazzed by the people he had met, and he showed me pictures of him playing volleyball with people and having ice cream. I left with a backpack of his history—from savings bonds from his bar mitzvah to all of his passwords—so I could be his personal assistant. I felt a bit like, What just happened? I was moving back to Michigan, and I had all this stuff, so I told Jeremy it would have been sweet to work with him and to explore this path, but I was going back to Michigan. He said, Let's continue over email.

So we did, and when I was back in Michigan, he asked me if I wanted to go to Cambodia and meet the king; I said yes. He connected me with his friends Sean and Vernon. I met them in Toronto, and we flew over to Cambodia together. By the time we arrived in Cambodia, Sean, Vernon, and I were the best of friends. It was a time of true exploration. Jeremy, Sean, Vernon, Jason, and I were in Cambodia talking with people, thinking about what we could do, what endeavor would be helpful in Cambodia. It was very wide-ranging. It started with this idea of, follow your dream, which made no sense to Cambodians. We'd ask, what is your dream? They would reply with things like, Why do you want to know what I dreamed about last night?

It was pure idea generation. We noticed there were people giving massages at this fancy hotel, and the hotel was charging this much, but they were only getting paid that much. What if they gave massages? Then we had a meeting with the king.

The first interpreter that Jeremy found was the son of the Cambodian ambassador to India, and he had connections with the king. He was able to get us a meeting with the king after we made a very large donation of Cambodian scarves, frames, rice, and instant noodle packages. That was the practice. You make a large donation, then the king goes to the rural areas and passes it out. King Norodom Sihanouk was known as the father of the poor. Jeremy and Jason were consultants at the time, and they had the funds to make this donation.

Rollo Romig: What was the king like?

Kathryn Lucatelli: It was very formal. We were a scrappy bunch of young people who didn't know what to do in a palace. The king was sitting at the front of this very ornate room, and then there was all of us. Jeremy said something like, Jason is going to talk about this, and Sean will talk about that, and I thought, Great, they've planned it out. Until Jeremy said, now Kathryn's going to tell you about what we've been up to so far. I remember wondering, What am I supposed to say? It was not planned out. I talked about the ways we had been thinking about supporting the people who did massage, and feared that I was being culturally inappropriate. There were many funny moments.

The king was so gracious. He gave us a whole tour. There was a picture display, hard copy photos on big boards, and a display of all of the works that he had done. I was so embarrassed because I feared that I'd totally messed up. Jeremy was trying to focus his attention during the display and was grappling for questions. At one point he asked, What did your father do? King Sihanouk said, My father was the king. We were like, oh, right.

It was a very exciting time. It felt like we could do anything. We had ideas, and we were meeting with these distinguished people. The internet had just come to Cambodia, so we thought, let's go get a satellite. We've got a picture of Jeremy posing with the first satellite that we got for the place we were renting. It was a fun time, full of possibility.

Rollo Romig: When you met King Sihanouk, you were still brainstorming what you were going to do?

Kathryn Lucatelli: Yes.

Rollo Romig: How did you end up zeroing in on the work DDD eventually did?

Kathryn Lucatelli: I was captivated by simply landing in Cambodia and seeing the exquisite architecture, experiencing the culture, and meeting the people. I was the one in the group who felt like I could imagine living here. I wanted to know how to learn the language, how to become friends with people. I was the one asking, Does this make sense for the people that we're involving? My lens was always there. Meanwhile, this team of entrepreneur tech geeks was working things out in the background.

Our idea wasn't fully formulated; it evolved over time. There was a connection in India. There was the idea of doing data with double entry. Fast-forward a little, and Jeremy and Jason suggested that I stay here and run the company.

Rollo Romig: When you say doing data with double entry, do you mean the approach where it's two passes, so that it doesn't matter if they know English or not?

Kathryn Lucatelli: Yes. That had come about, and then we got connected with someone in India who taught us the business. They had minds for figuring that out. Jeremy can talk to anybody and create connections with anybody, so he ended up getting that first job from the Harvard Crimson. It was an evolution. It was constantly being refined.

Whomever he was talking with, Jeremy would ask, What do you think about this? What do you think if we tried to do that? It was both play and work together. It was very iterative, and it was always being developed. It was fun. We all joked so much. It felt like a snowball. Every person we met became a part of that snowball, and part of what we were doing.

Rollo Romig: I get the impression from talking to others that there is a high tolerance for trying things out at DDD and not worrying too much about whether everything succeeds.

Kathryn Lucatelli: Yes, that's exactly what it was like. Let's try this. Let's try that. There was a delight and a feeling of, I can't believe we're doing this, and a wonder that people were taking us seriously, that we'd come so far.

Rollo Romig: What's an example of something that you tried out early on that either surprised you because it worked, or because it didn't work, but that you learned from, regardless?

Kathryn Lucatelli: Getting a \$25,000 grant from the venture capitalist firm that Michael Chertok was working with. I was the people person, so it was very much a case of being told, Kathryn, this donor is coming, and you're on to befriend Michael Chertok, who gave us all this money.

We ended up becoming good friends and going on this adventure of seeing Sihanoukville with every single employee. Everyone was off the rails excited to be together in that way because young people didn't have any outlet to travel.

In terms of the business stuff that we tried, in the early days, when we didn't have systems in place to know the workflow, it got complex quickly. We often worried we didn't have enough jobs to keep everybody going. Then we would realize we had so much work that we weren't sure we were going to be able to finish it by the deadline. It was a lot of wild estimates that kept fluctuating. It was a crisis one way or the other, of either not enough or too much. It took time for systems to be built in the background to smooth all of that out.

Rollo Romig: Did that help you get a bird's eye view of the bigger picture of what was coming in?

Kathryn Lucatelli: Yes.

Rollo Romig: Can you share more about what you did that evolved over time? How long did that work take?

Kathryn Lucatelli: We all went for the initial approach of, let's explore what's possible here. Then there was the official launch, which I wasn't present for because I was back in the States.

There was an article published about the launch that presented it as Harvard taking advantage of a cheap Cambodian labor force. I want to say it was in the *Washington Post*. Either way, it was in a very high-profile newspaper, and it was very negative. It was a panic moment. There was this famous \$400 call to Cambodia to work out the details of what to do on this end.

Funnily enough, it ended up getting us so much more work because we had to investigate it, which led us to realize that we had a double bottom line of creating opportunities for young people. We learned that there's really no such thing as bad press because it lets people know what we are doing. But we definitely panicked early on.

Rollo Romig: Was Harvard spooked by it?

Kathryn Lucatelli: I don't remember what their take on it was. Early on, I was the person who was connecting with the employees. I was the bridge person. I made friends with the employees, and I would sit during lunch and hear how people's families were doing.

I remember being really concerned about how people's hands were doing because all of a sudden, everyone was typing for six hours a day. What could we do ergonomic-wise? Were there stretches that could help? Was the pay enough? Were their families seeing them grow? Did they have pride in working at DDD? I was that person. Whenever I would hear that something was a little bit off, I would communicate with both the Cambodian management and the North American counterparts. It was a very informal connective tissue that I was maintaining.

Rollo Romig: That's such an important role, especially when you need to bridge these cultures and priorities. Did you end up learning Khmer?

Kathryn Lucatelli: I did. I learned enough to get by in the market and catch some very basic jokes. Everybody wants to practice their English with you, so you have to make a concerted effort to study.

I lived there for four years, then I was back in the States, and then I had another job that led me back to Cambodia on and off for many years. That job wrapped up around 2009.

Rollo Romig: Over the years, from its inception through 2009, how did you see DDD evolve?

Kathryn Lucatelli: The staff grew. It was about 20 when I got there, then it grew to 60 to 100 to 200 people. The whole time I was there, we were in the same original building. I haven't seen the new offices in Cambodia.

Rollo Romig: Are there any stories about how the program had a particular impact on an individual or their family, especially a Cambodian who participated in the program?

Kathryn Lucatelli: I remember how sacrificial and generous these individuals were. They had these jobs, and they became the breadwinners of their families. I talked to people who were getting by with so little for themselves because they were supporting their siblings or their parents. It was such a sacrificial attitude that these young people had.

People were proud to be a part of DDD, and they were proud of their accomplishments. There was a feeling of this being a group of friends who were a part of something special. There was one woman, Nalek, who has a disfigurement in her hands. She has three fingers on each hand, yet she was one of the fastest typists. She ended up coming to the States.

It was sweet to develop these relationships over time. When language is a barrier between you and someone else, there's a limit to how well you can get to know them. As my Cambodian would improve and their English would improve, it would be a revealing of gems inside that person. It's those little things, almost like watching a part of someone grow up. These were young people who came to work at DDD, and they felt proud that they could earn money that benefited their family and continue their education. I saw many people grow up with that pride.

Rollo Romig: That's great. Thank you so much.

Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*