

Talks at GS
Christiane Pendarvis,
Co-President and Chief Merchant, Savage X Fenty
Margaret Anadu, Moderator
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Christiane Pendarvis: We at Savage are very focused on showcasing, celebrating, building a broad umbrella around who gets recognized, who gets celebrated, who gets acknowledged within this framework of this industry.

Margaret Anadu: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Talks at GS. I am so excited to be joined today by Christiane Pendarvis, Savage x Fenty's co-president and chief merchandising and design officer.

As you all know, Savage x Fenty is a leading intimate apparel brand founded in 2018 by Rihanna and has grown enormously over the last three years. Today, we are going to talk to Christiane about her extraordinary career, her ability to build inclusive and differentiated products that have solidified Savage as a leader in intimate apparel, and finally her views on diversity and inclusivity as a business philosophy. Christiane, thank you so much for joining us today.

Christiane Pendarvis: Thank you so much for having me.

I couldn't be more pleased to be here.

Margaret Anadu: In person. So you are now co-president of one of the world's most visible and inclusive brands and are a key player on the team of one of the country's few Black female billionaires. So that's how it's going, as we like to say. Wow. Okay. But let's talk about how it all started. Can you tell us about your childhood and what sparked this incredible drive that's made you so successful?

Christiane Pendarvis: I grew up in a very traditional middle-class family. I was really surrounded by professionals, right? So the history of my family, to give you guys some context, very deep roots in South Carolina. We can trace our lineage back on both sides of my family -- my mother's side and my father's side -- seven, eight generations, back to our enslaved ancestors in South Carolina. So very, very, very deep roots within the community.

One thing that is interesting, on my father's side of the family, also very well educated. My great-grandfather went to college. So I'm fourth generation college graduate on my father's side of the family, which is unheard of given the kind of circumstances in the South. And I grew up with a community of educators. The community I lived in was all

Black. Teachers, principals, school administrators, doctors, lawyers, I saw Black professionals. And so part of my legacy and my heritage from growing up in that environment was this maniacal focus on education. Was also this focus on achievement, right? And self-worth and self-value. Because I saw so many Black professionals that were successful, that were engaged, that were involved in the community, that were involved in supporting the children that were growing up in the community.

So very strong foundation. The flip side of that coin of growing up in --

Margaret Anadu: I was waiting for the -- [speakers talking over each other] -- sounds amazing.

Christiane Pendarvis: -- flip side of this, right? Sounds great. And that was great. The flip side of that coin is Greenville, South Carolina, desegregated schools in February of 1970, two months before I was born. And this is part of the story that doesn't get told about desegregation. Is that those communities lost some of their stature, right? So the state in Greenville, South Carolina, 60% of the Black kids moved to new schools during desegregation. 10% of the white students were moved to

new schools.

If you were the principal at the Black high school, maybe you became the principal at the middle school or maybe you were a teacher during desegregation.

Margaret Anadu: There was a complete releveling.

Christiane Pendarvis: There was a complete releveling.

And my family grew up in a community where, because things were segregated, when they were in mixed company, there was this standard that you had to uphold, right?

There was this persona that you put on. There was the “don't give someone a reason to do anything to you,” right? And so I was instilled with that. I was instilled with this cautious fear and skepticism of mixed communities, right?

And when you think about, you know, I was born in 1970. Five years later then I'm going to school. I'm being taught by teachers that have been in segregated schools, right? I don't have the perspective as a five year old knowing that.

Margaret Anadu: And are still fighting.

Christiane Pendarvis: And are probably still angry, upset, disappointed about what's happened. So that was sort of

the flip side of the coin and the backdrop in where I grew up. That, as much as my community and my family instilled a great sense of pride in who I was and what I could accomplish and a support network, there was the reality of the environment in which I grew up.

And as a child, you learn and you hear, “Be careful how you show up in these environments. Don't showcase all of yourself.” So it's hard when you're a child to sort of conceptualize that because I don't have the context of all of this history.

Margaret Anadu: It's incredible context even if I think about the rest of your journey. Which, if you look at it from the outside, it's been this incredible, almost steep ladder climbing from significant role at a significant company from the next to the next, with a Harvard degree in there to boot. How have you felt bringing your authentic self in those moments and those roles as a Black woman, especially with that foundation?

Christiane Pendarvis: Right. And transparently, I didn't always, right? Because I brought this baggage of you can't be fully exposed. There was this “here's your work self; here's your whole self.” And you only showcase a very little

part of your whole self in a professional environment. And what I now, looking back on it, realize that hinders you tremendously because you're holding back part of your essence and who you are. You're holding back your freedom. You're holding back your talent. You're holding back your treasure. It takes energy to have a separate persona that you can then can't dedicate to whatever is the project that you're working on in your work environment.

And so for me, long period of my career was isolated. I was very much I think typical -- you'll probably relate to this, as I'm sure many of you guys will in the audience as well -- put my head down, do my work, that is going to speak enough for me. I don't have time to network or politic or build relationships, right? And I can't honestly relate to some of the things that, you know, people are doing that would help you build those relationships and that camaraderie.

And so that's how I approached work. I was a very typical, plow through, "no, I'm not going to happy hour after work," "no, I'm not going to this party with you," no. And it hindered me. So as much as I think you can look back on it now and say it looks like this, it didn't really look like that early on.

And this is where representation matters. It took me working with and for someone, African American woman, who did the exact opposite, who was her full and complete self at work. And so it took me a while to let go of a lot of that heritage of having to protect myself and to guard off myself. And I notice a real dramatic difference as I slowly shed some of that, that I felt more engaged. I felt more seen. I felt more valued I was able to bring more of my energy to the work that I was really doing and less of it about “let me be scared and uptight and cautious around what I'm doing.”

So it was a real transformational point for me that was a journey for me to really get there. And I continue even to this day to have to remind myself of that. To this day. So I think that heritage, that foundation of what happens to you when you're a child, it doesn't ever fully go away. You have to be cognizant and aware of it. But you constantly have to reinforce to yourself, “yes, I understand that. Let me put that thought to the back of my mind and sort of move forward.”

Margaret Anadu: I think, personally and I'm sure for many others, your journey is incredibly inspirational,

especially I think for women of color. What would you say to that 23, that 24 year old who's getting started? Just some words of advice.

Christiane Pendarvis: Yeah. Be your own advocate. Be your own advocate. Be your own advocate.

It is so incredibly, incredibly important. And I think, again, as women and particularly women of color, we have these blinders on around my work product should speak for myself. And let's be clear, there is a foundation of you have to perform and you have to deliver, right? That's table stakes. But that's not enough. You have to also balance being your own advocate.

When you think about your career, you're trying to balance performance with advocacy. Self-advocacy. You can't over index on self-advocacy if you don't have the performance to back it up. You can't solely rely on performance without self-advocacy. And so I think I would tell you be bold. Be bolder than you think you're capable of. Step into your own agency and your own power sooner than you realize you can.

It took me a long time to get here, quite frankly. And I'm

also very clear where I am in my career gives me power and agency that I didn't have when I was 23. But at the same token, I've been very surprised at even today where I'm, like, am I going a little bit too far? Am I pushing this too far? Nope. Haven't found that point yet. You keep pushing. Keep being bold. You will have your doubts. Everybody has their doubts. You'll have your moment of impostor syndrome. Am I really capable? Acknowledge. Accept. Yep, it was there. Push it out of your mind.

Margaret Anadu: Move through it.

Christiane Pendarvis: So that you can really move through it and move forward.

Margaret Anadu: How has COVID changed your business plans?

Christiane Pendarvis: Business plan? Go ahead and throw that out the window when COVID hits, right? That's what happens with COVID. It really has heightened the importance of what I call crisis leadership. We were faced with new and different dynamics every day as COVID hit. We, like everybody else, middle of March, COVID hit, we shut down our offices. So you're facing this challenge

really on two fronts. There's the business challenge of what's actually going to happen to the business? And then there's the organizational and cultural challenge of how do you continue to operate businesses and keep people sane and healthy and find new ways of working?

And so it just heightened this need for crisis leadership, of real-time, thoughtful decision making with new variables coming in every day. And that's how we sort of evolved. I think from a business perspective, it was sort of the perfect wonderful storm for us for Savage, right? I'm a direct-to-consumer brand. Physical retail has shut down. So people are migrating to ecommerce to shop. I'm an intimate apparel and loungewear. Everybody's stuck at home, so they're like, "How many bralettes and leggings can I possibly buy now that I'm stuck at home?" So there was heightened demand for the categories of business that we're in.

Margaret Anadu: What are you excited about? What are the disruptive trends in retail DTC and beyond that you think folks are not focusing on enough that are pretty exciting to you?

Christiane Pendarvis: Yeah, I think we are going to see an

amazing transformation in retail over the next call it three to four years. There is so much that's happening from a technology perspective. And I think there's some really interesting work of people thinking how do I really bring technology and what's happening digitally to bear in the physical retail store? And how do I bring what happens in the physical retail store to some form digitally? And I'm talking about things like live streaming commerce, which is not very big here. Huge in Asia.

I think there are stats that say upwards of a third of ecommerce volume in China now happens via livestream. So imagine a world where an associate in a store is creating video content that automatically goes to your digital channels, to your website, to your app. They're really able to showcase product, how it fits, talk about features and functions in a way that you just don't get from still photography. You've got this dedicated base of experts in your store that you can leverage to create content, and so you've really expanded the possibility of what your sales associate can do.

Think about a world where you do all of your checkout physically in store leveraging your phone. We have a tremendous amount of content digitally. We have user-

generated content that show people wearing product. We have product knowledge and information. You can't put that on a tag in a physical store. You're not going to put that on a sign in a physical store. It's just too much information.

Imagine you come in. There's a QR code on your product. You scan it. You can see all the imagery from online. You can get all the product knowledge and information that's available online. You can bring the value of what you have digitally into a physical store. There's a lot of interesting things that are happening, particularly in the apparel space, around fit. One of the big sort of speed bumps around buying clothes ecommerce is I don't know how it's going to fit.

There are virtual try-on tools. You can upload a picture of yourself, and then I can superimpose the appropriate size on your image. It's like how is this actually going to look on me? These are some of the things that are happening I think from a technology perspective that are really going to fundamentally alter how we shop.

Margaret Anadu: Let's talk a little bit about Savage's philosophy, which I think we all agree this is a different

kind of company than we've seen before. So tell us a little bit about what's Savage's north star? What's the mission? What's the vision?

Christiane Pendarvis: We want to be best in this category globally. That's what we talk about. That's what we strive for. And we want to do it in a way that celebrates everyone, and that really increases the visibility and recognition of people who have not been celebrated by this industry.

I love the fashion industry. I've been in it for a very long time. I recognize it has not always loved people who look like me, right? Like our money but have not celebrated us. Have not showcased us. Have not oftentimes acknowledged that the trends that drive this industry come a lot from Black culture, from Black people. And we've not always been able to take advantage of the economic fruits of that.

And so I think we at Savage are very focused on showcasing, celebrating, building a broad umbrella around who gets recognized, who gets celebrated, who gets acknowledged within this framework of this industry. We're capitalists, right? I want to sell product. I want to generate revenue and generate profit. But I believe,

fundamentally, in our approach to doing it, by being inclusive is part of the reason why, quite frankly, we've been able to win and we've been able to grow as fast as we have. We have people who have just not been recognized and seen and heard. And when you do that, you unlock a tremendous amount of loyalty. And with that then comes revenue. And with that comes profit.

So that's really what we're trying to do. Broaden this umbrella around who's included in this industry.

Margaret Anadu: And you very explicitly, I've seen, really - and I felt this -- celebrated women of all colors, sizes, shapes. And I think even in the last two years you've seen other brands clearly take notice. What do you think really differentiates you from the competitors?

Christiane Pendarvis: I think it is so authentic for us. We couldn't be any other way. And I think people say, "Wow, I just recently saw you have a little person as an influencer." Nobody's done that, period, in any part of fashion, let alone intimate apparel. We're showcasing people who have a prosthetic leg, who have vitiligo, insert anything that sort of makes them look different from what the standard has been. And it's just so incredibly authentic to who we are.

And it's not just marketing. And I think that's part of what is such a huge differentiator for us.

Margaret Anadu: Of course I cannot let you out of here without asking what is it like to work for Rihanna?

Christiane Pendarvis: Yeah, of course. Everybody's like -- I get a lot of, "So can you introduce?" No. I cannot introduce you to Rihanna. No, I cannot get her to do an interview with you. No, I cannot get you passes to whatever. I can't. I cannot do it. Don't even ask.

No, it's amazing working with Rihanna. I mean, absolutely amazing. You know, she's not the first celebrity that's gotten into business, and I think people have seen models where it's a licensing deal, right? The celebrity puts their name on there. They get a share of the royalty, but it's not really their brand.

That is the exact opposite of what we do at Savage and how we approach things with Rihanna. You know, she is our CEO and creative director. And she is our creative director. Every piece of product that's part of our line, she has had her hands in all aspects of the design. So my team, the design team, we present concepts to her that are sketches.

She picks which items she thinks we should develop.

We showcase product, once we're working on our prototype samples, on fit models. And she'll say, "You know what? This is hitting in a weird place. I need you to drop the rise. Or the wing on this doesn't look right." When I say she is so incredibly actively involved in the vision behind this brand and the product and what we're delivering, and she has really the most amazing instincts.

I think people associate Rihanna with her viewpoint from a fashion standpoint, right? He's clearly a fashion icon. Has amazing instincts when it comes to the fashion piece. She is very consumer-centric. We'll be looking at a design and she'll say, "How much does that detail cost? Is that worth putting this detail on the product because we're going to have charge more to the consumer?" Right? She is that thoughtful in terms of what we're doing with product.

And then very involved the same way on the marketing side. She challenges us. She constantly is challenging us to be better, to think differently, to be innovative, to outdo what we've done, to make sure we're not doing things that look like what everybody else has done. So it's really, it's a pleasure. I've learned a lot working with her. Her instinct

is really amazing.

Margaret Anadu: Well, it's great to witness one of the key principles of One Million Black Women, which is the racial equity initiative that Goldman Sachs announced earlier this year, is this idea that diversity is simply good business. And that's something that Rihanna seems to hold dear. That's certainly in your leadership we've seen.

So how would you, in kind of the crispest way, explain why you think diversity is good business?

Christiane Pendarvis: I mean, really, business is all about consumers and meeting consumer need. And if there's a segment of consumer that has not been addressed, that is white space opportunity in the market, right? I feel almost bad saying this because if anybody from any of our competitors are listening, like, I'm giving away a little bit of our secret.

We just address people who have not been seen and heard. And we do it in an authentic way and product that really fits them. Our motto is like the three S's. We're covering all sizes, all shapes, all shades. And so it fundamentally I think has helped generate the kind of customer loyalty that

we've been able to garner. That means that we're getting sales, right? We're getting sales from these customers.

And because people know it's so authentic to who we are, it's not just about the marketing. We deliver it on the product. We deliver it on the external projection of our brand. We just overall value all types of customers. And that's part of our model and part of our success.

Margaret Anadu: Christiane, this was absolutely fantastic. Thank you so much for spending time with us. We are rooting for you. We are rooting for Savage. And thank you so much for your insights.

Christiane Pendarvis: Thank you.

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