



## Making Magic on Main Street

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**Guest:** Jenny Doan

**Shelley:** You're listening to the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. I'm your host, Shelley Hunter, and this is where we talk to people who have seen the hand of God in their lives and particularly in their careers.

Welcome to Episode 43 of the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. Today I'm talking to Jenny Doan. She's the founder of the Missouri Star Quilt Company.

When I ask Jenny what she does for a career, she gives a very modest answer, but this business has literally transformed a town, the entire quilting industry, and countless lives. Think of Hamilton, Missouri, where her company was founded, like the silos in Waco, Texas run by Chip and Joanna Gaines, but bigger, if that's even possible.

Now if you're listening to this and you're thinking, how did she get so lucky? You should know that the Doan family struggled financially for years, and I mean throughout their entire lives, raising seven kids, scraping by, surviving with hard work and resourcefulness, and prayerfully seeking God's will for the family.

If you partner with God, you can expect him to guide and provide for you all along the way, even if it takes longer than planned or comes about in an unexpected way.

Now if the previous 42 episodes haven't proven that to you, this one surely will. I start off by asking Jenny Doan what it is she does for a career.

**Jenny:** I actually teach people how to quilt for a living. I do it on YouTube, and that's pretty much what I do, I'm a teacher.

**Shelley:** That's so interesting that people who are on YouTube often say that, even though you've built this massive business. Tell me how it started and why you consider yourself a teacher.

**Jenny:** For me, it started in 2008, the market crashed, and we lost our retirement. My husband is a machinist, and he works anywhere there's a factory, he can get a job. He's actually only had three jobs, we're super stable, like we don't move around.

We lost our retirement and the kids started worrying about what was happening to us or going to happen when we retire. Now I live in the present. I don't look back because I'm not going that way, and I'm not there, I'm just happy in my little present bubble, and so I'm like, "I'm not worried about it. You guys, we'll be fine. I'll get a job at Walmart, whatever, we'll be fine."

The kids are just really worried about it, they're like, "Mom, this is like 30 years that you have to live and take care of yourselves." I think basically they didn't want us living in their basement. I said to them, "Well, you guys figure out my future. I'm going to go pick up a quilt." They said, "What quilt is it?" I said, "I don't even remember." They're like, "Why don't you remember? You're not that old," and I'm like, "No, I don't remember because she's had it a year." He said, "Why would she have it so long?" I said, "Because she's very backed up, she has a lot of work." Alan, you could just see the light bulb go off, and he's like, "Is this something you could do?" I said, "I can sew, so maybe I could do it."

They made a decision, he and Sarah, to buy me a quilt machine. It came to our house and it was too big for our house, so we had to buy a building. Now, when we moved here in '95, Hamilton was a thriving community. We had a factory, we had a lot of stores, we had a lot of stuff going on. The factory closed, and by 2008, it was a ghost town. We had a couple of hair salons, one grocery store, mostly nothing left. The building actually cost less than the machine did. We painted the building, we set it up, and we thought, "If this woman over here, if all the local Longarmers are backed up, then we can use another local Longarmer.

If I can do a couple of quilts a week, that we'll build my nest egg. We were well on that track. If you had children at the same time I had children, at least one of them was born with that computer gene, and we spent his entire childhood saying, "Get off that computer and do something."

I've apologized to him many times, and now we work for him. He went looking online to see what was happening with quilting online. He had bought this quilting machine and he wanted to know what was happening with quilting online. He said to me, "Mom, quilting has not made the jump online yet. Do you want to teach tutorials?" I was like, "Sure, honey, what's a tutorial?" "I want you to teach people how to quilt online."

I said to him, "Well, where will this go?" He said, "Well, they'll go on YouTube." YouTube was only one year old when we started. I said to him, "Alan, you do not want your mother where all the crazy teenagers are." He's like, "Mom, I promise you, this is going to be our center for learning." Well, I just couldn't see it, but I was willing to give it a shot and do it. He was filming me and I started teaching. Every industry has its own language, and so I would say, "Today we're going to make a four-patch." Alan would be like, "Whoa, whoa, I don't even know what you're talking about."

I had to wind it way back and say, "Today we're going to take four pieces of fabric, two are going to be light, two are going to be dark. They're all the same size. We're going to sew a light to a dark, a dark to a light, and it makes a block we call the four patch." I had to teach very beginner stuff. We started teaching online and most

fascinating thing happened was I started to get letters, which first of all, I was so shocked, but the letters came from people who had never been able to take a class. They were all these people, women with MS, they couldn't sit for longer than 15 minutes and they could watch me and pause and go back. They were so grateful that there were these classes they could take on YouTube.

I discovered that YouTube is kind of a great equalizer. You can learn and fail in the privacy of your own home, and you don't have to come out until you feel confident. Once you're confident, you will go to a quilt shop or you'll join a class. The fact that they could learn and fail online was huge for people. It's always interesting to me. We have quite a few followers and there are a lot of children in that group because, first of all, there are not quilt classes available for children, and parents don't want to pay for their children to do that, but they'll sit them in front of the computer.

There's a lot of men, for whatever stigma is attached to that; there shouldn't be any. When I do a trunk show or something, there'll be half a dozen guys and they'll be like, "Are there more like us?" "Yes, there are." We have quite a few men quilters who are now teaching online as well. Lots of people in different circumstances, especially across the world, they'll be like, "We don't have anything like this in our town, but it so fills me up." Well, I really thought I was teaching people how to sew quilts, but what was happening was people were getting through things using the creative process, which is such an interesting part of the story because creativity is healing.

Probably 80% of people who come to quilting or go looking for something to create come because of some kind of a loss. They've lost a house or spouse or a job or their health or a child, something, and they're looking to fill that void and they come and all of a sudden they're feeling better. They're going out again. Their anxiety isn't so high. They're able to converse with people and they want to tell me how much their life has changed just because of this. It's so fascinating to me because that is not at all what I thought. I thought I was just going to be teaching people to sew. That's kind of it in a nutshell.

**Shelley:** Okay. I love it, but there's still more because now you've revitalized this town. Tell me first of all, the fact that it was dwindling to a ghost town, what did that feel like?

**Jenny:** For us, it was really sad. When we came, there was a stationary store, there was a pharmacy, there were two grocery stores. It was just this bustling little town and it was so charming. We had a festival called JC Penney Days and they brought in a big carnival and they closed down the streets. It was this huge thing. By 2008, the festival had not been happening for several years. Once we started online, we outgrew our first building.

We moved to Main Street and we thought, well, we'll just be the one open store on Main Street. We had these old, I call them eyelash awnings and we painted it blue and white. We just thought we'd make the cutest little store. Well, it wasn't too long before we grew out of that store. We had too much fabric, and Sarah said to me one day, "What fabric do we have the most of?" I said, "Probably civil war." Because that

was my favorite. We were choosing the fabric then. She said, "I'm going to buy one of these old shops and fix it up and just put that fabric in there." People now were starting to come. They knew us online and they wanted to come to our quilt shop.

Well, we just had the one shop. Then Sarah, she fixed the shop. These buildings, understand they were built in the 1800s and they're brick. All the brick has to be re-tuck-pointed. We had a guy tuck-point all the bricks on one of the buildings. We had this wall, but it was really ugly and had grout all over it. Sarah was like, "We're going to have to paint that wall now." We had a guy who lived in the next town over who did murals, and hired him to come and paint a mural on that wall. Well, all of a sudden the town was bright again and it was just so organic how it happened because people would start coming and they'd say, "Well, where can we eat?" We'd say, "There's Subway and the gas station."

Then we're like, "We need some food places," and people were like, "Where's their stay?" "Oh my gosh, we need to build a retreat center so people can stay." Little by little, we started buying up these buildings and refinishing them. Every fabric now has its own shop. Batiks have its own shop and florals and mercantile and solids and Christmas. Every type of fabric has its own shop. We have three restaurants. We don't run them. We just open buildings and somebody else comes in and runs them. Then we also have two other people who have opened.

We have a Mexican restaurant and a cafe down at the other end of the street, and we have two big retreat centers. One sleeps 100 and one sleeps 40. It's just like snowballed. We have the world's largest spool of thread is here in Hamilton. Guinness approved it. [laughs] We have a wonderful family who's come in and they opened up the first museum in Missouri, the first quilt museum, and it is phenomenal. It is amazing. Probably my favorite museum I've ever been in. They did it in an old school. Just feels like an extension of the town. It's just so darling. We get buses every day now and lots of people come to Hamilton and it really has revived the town.

We have over 400 employees now. In our county, it's one of the poorest counties in Missouri and there are 11 towns. Most of the towns have 26 people, 67 people, 112 people. Hamilton is by far the largest with 1,500 people. It's a very poor county and so for the first time, we have revenue. Our people who live here can work here. While the farmers weren't happy about it at first, we hired their children and then they got real happy about it [laughs]. It's been amazing to watch it. I have to say, because I live in the present, I'm not a risk taker and I don't see out there. At one time, Alan and I had a conversation and I said to him, "Alan, I just don't think this is going to work."

He said to me, "Mom, you're trying to make this the same old shop you've been going to your whole life." He said, "You've got to give me a chance. Give me three years." All right. Then I just cross my fingers and dive in, but I can't see it. I can't see ahead how they're going. When it gets done, I'm just like, "This is amazing." [laughs]. I'm just like right here in my present little bubble.

**Shelley:** Well, we've all got to be somewhere. I like that you lean into the part you're good at it and let him just do the rest.

**Jenny:** He and Sarah are both way-forward thinkers. Sarah is over the town, a design team. She makes the decisions on how the stores are set up, what's going to be in each store, how they're going to look, what the signage is, everything she does all that. Alan is over everything online, but they work very closely together with all the town staff. The town's interesting because probably 90% of our business is online. If we didn't have the town, we'd be fine, but the town, it's like sprinkles on a cupcake. It just feels so cool that we have this thriving little town.

For instance, we have a chiropractor and she said, "When I went away to school, my mom was like, "Just go and don't come back here because there's nothing for you here." She said, "Because of you guys, I can work in my town." People are loving that it's fixed up.

**Shelley:** You have other kids or just the two that work with you?

**Jenny:** I have seven children and five of them work for the company in some capacity or another. My oldest one is still in California. He never came out here with us. He's a city planner out there. Then comes the three girls, so that's Natalie, Sarah, and Hillary. Natalie is the editor of *BLOCK Magazine*. We have our own magazine, and she also designs with me and she has her own YouTube show. Then comes Sarah. Sarah and Alan are the owners. We work for Sarah and Alan and there's a third partner, Dave Mifsud, who is Alan's buddy. Then Hilary is the youngest girl. She's a novelist, so she writes for *BLOCK Magazine*, we have a reoccurring story that happens in there, a Jenny sleuth mystery if you will. [laughter].

She also writes her own set of novels. Then come the boys, Alan is the oldest of the boys, and then Jake is next. Jake did the filming for years. He stepped back, but his wife, Misty, she has her own show called *At Home with Misty* and she designs as well with us here. Then the youngest boy is Josh. He doesn't work for the company, he has his own thing. They're all right here though, except for my oldest son. It's the most wonderful thing ever to work with your family and it's also the most horrible thing ever to work with your family.

The one thing I remind everybody of all the time is that nothing that happens out there matters as much as what is happening right here. None of this is worth your relationship. It's a little hard sometimes because there are perks for owners when a company gets bigger like this. It's not quite fair across the board and mothers like everything fair. It's one of those things that we work through and it's fine. We have to pay attention to those relationships because I want my family. I don't want them to have hard feelings toward each other.

**Shelley:** What I hear you saying is, is if this takes down the family, none of it's worth it.

**Jenny:** None of it's worth it, 100%.

**Shelley:** Yes. It sounds like they did get their education. They didn't just start working for a mom or this business; they all had something.

**Jenny:** Yes. They're all very talented in their own right. We just kind of came together. Because as it started growing we still didn't have money to pay ourselves, we needed each other. Alan, he'd be like, "Natalie, can you just come in, bring your kids?" We had a room where the kids played and Sarah brought her kids and played because once it started rolling-- I remember when we made that first hire, it was for somebody to help us clean. I said to Alan, "I can stay later. I will get up earlier. You don't have to hire, I'm a mom. I have been cleaning up after you my whole life." He looked at me, and because he's a businessman and he said, "Mom, you are worth more to me creating than you are cleaning."

That was a huge wake-up moment for me because if I'm over here and I come out with a new project and we put it online and we sell this, it's worth way more than if the bathrooms are clean. We actually hired somebody to come in and clean the bathrooms and do those things so that we could keep doing what we were good at.

What that taught us was to find people's magic. Everybody's happy if they're doing their magic. I had a friend who owned Dairy Queens and I'd say, "How do you hire? How do you do that?" She said, "Well, the people who can do this with a really big smile all day long, those people are at my drive-through.

The people who don't love people, you don't want them public-facing anyway, they have other magic. There are other things they can do. They can work customer service, they can ship, but they're not going to love a job that's public-facing and you're not going to love them in there, so let them do their magic." We try really hard to do that, and I get so many compliments on our people here in town because they're just those happy people.

**Shelley:** I love it. If somebody's listening to this and they're thinking, "I have a talent," or just anything around the realm of what you guys have accomplished, what advice would you give them?

**Jenny:** My advice would be, especially if you have something you love to do, do what you love. You can do everything for a little bit, but once you get to a certain size, and that happens very quickly and it's actually a pretty small size, you can no longer do everything. I'm still a mom, my girls were still moms, those things were still important. Focus on what you love and if you don't love doing social media, hire a teenager to do your social media. If you do what you love, you're going to be successful at it and you're not going to feel like you're working. For me, it's the sewing part. I love to sew. It's what I've always loved to do.

When I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm anxious, when I-- You know how some people clean when they're mad? Oh, girl, I've got a whole new outfit. [laughter] I love to sew. Sewing is my thing. Say you loved doing the quilting thing, but the piecing part wasn't what you loved. Maybe you loved the designing, maybe you love the color, but you can have somebody else sew your pieces together. Whatever works for you, figure out what your magic is and then bring in other people to help you. We

had several friends that just came in and said, "Just give me some fabric and I'll run the cash register." We were like, "Okay," and we did some of that.

I think people like seeing people be successful and so they will help. The thing you have to remember is that the water's going to rise, all the boats are going to float, you just got to be in a boat. [laughter]

I figured if I taught people how to quilt and I didn't charge them, which was unheard of, and gave away my directions and gave away the information, I figured they would make a quilt, they would send it to me and I would quilt it and that's how I would make money. Very quickly somebody called and said, "You know that green fabric you were using, I would like to buy some of that." I said, "Well, that's my fabric. I'm not selling fabric, I'm selling machine quilting." They're like, "No, I want that fabric."

Then we got to have fabric, we got to sell fabric. It just kind of organically rolled around, you'll see your needs as they come along. Pay more attention to them when people say, "Well, what about this?" Really take that into consideration because that is who you're serving, that consumer.

**Shelley:** Yes. The market will tell you what they want, but you are never going to find out if you don't start the YouTube channel.

**Jenny:** Yes. You've got to have that open heart and that open mind to say, for instance, red is your favorite color and you only make red quilts. Not everybody's going to love red. You have to look at what the consumer wants. You have to use your creative ability for what the consumer wants. Otherwise, you're going to have a lot of stuff that you like may or may not work.

**Shelley:** Right. Jenny, can you tell me about a leap of faith you had to take to get where you are now?

**Jenny:** I feel like almost every day of my life was a leap of faith, to be honest. The fact that my children were going to buy a quilt machine and I was supposed to learn how to do it, I felt like I was probably too old to learn a new skill. I was 50, what if I failed? It was very fearful for me. I talked to the man who sold the machine. He goes, "Oh my gosh, people way older than you are doing this. You're going to be fine." Well, one thing I learned is that we're all on a journey and everything we learn is a skill. It's a practiced skill. If I practice an hour today, tomorrow, I'm an hour better. I learned that as I went along because every day it got easier and easier and I got better and better.

When we moved from our little building over to Main Street, that was a huge leap of faith for me. Then when Al decided to redesign the entire store is completely out of my comfort zone, what our shops had done for quilters is that it has moved them from the 1800s into this century, into a modern century because he's made them light, and airy and you check in with an iPad and I'm like, "People my age are never going to do this. They're not going to do this." He was like, "Just let me try, Mom, just let me try." What it has done, it has honored them moving forward.

It has made them feel worthy of doing this now, which is so fascinating to me. All those things were leaps of faith. Even when I order food at a restaurant, I want to hear what everybody else has because I might miss out on something. I feel that way here. It's like, "Am I going to make the right decision? Am I going to do the right thing? How's this going to work? Are people going to like it?" A lot of those things you have to give up because this company is rolling along and I feel like I've been just running after it.

**Shelley:** That's interesting because you said that you live in the moment and you're a little reticent, I guess, to plan ahead but with quilting, you have to be looking forward, don't you, to have to figure out your pieces and how they fit together?

**Jenny:** No, so I am a complete risk taker when I'm quilting, which is really interesting to me. My first class I took was a log cabin class. I didn't know whole books had been written about this. I was taking a class from a teacher and she was teaching us how to make the block and how to put it together. I got my blocks home and I was like, "I wonder what happens if I turn these blocks?" A whole new pattern appeared and I literally thought I had discovered gold. I didn't know these had all been done. I was so excited about the what-if factor.

When I make a quilt, my brain is all over the place. I'll look at a block and I'll think, "Well, what happens if I cut it up?" Nobody was cutting up blocks. I'm like, "Well, if you cut out the little triangles and sew them together, that works but if I take two squares and sew around it and cut it twice, I get four." My magic is shortcuts. My magic is seeing what's going to happen if I do it differently. I remember I was sewing with this group of women. I would go every Wednesday and they'd say, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm going to make half-square triangles." Well, here's how you do that. I'm like, "Well this is how I do it, and is it okay?" They'd look and they'd go, "Well that isn't the way it's always been done but it does work."

It was interesting because I do not have the gift of color. I'm not great at putting colors together, so that's why I latched onto precut so fast just because when I use a precut, a designer is working for me. They put that line together, that fabric together and it just made my quilts come alive. That's been very fun for me. I really am out of the box with those things because I didn't know there were rules. Honestly, when I teach things, I think that's one of the things people like is that I'm just me. I'm just real. If I make a mistake, we do it over. I don't make it look perfect because none of us are, and we're all on a journey. That was just my brain.

**Shelley:** What's an unexpected blessing, something you just couldn't see for yourself in doing all of this?

**Jenny:** The unexpected blessing was the healing that happened with all the people. When I do a trunk show or something like that, everybody wants to wait in line to tell me their story. It is probably the most emotional thing I've ever endured. Like this man who stood in line, his wife had Alzheimer's and he said, "She shuffles cards all day long. She doesn't know who I am. She shuffles cards, she just sits and does that all day long." He said, "We didn't play cards, so I don't know why the card thing." He said, "But I found you have a deck of cards."



He said, "Do you know you're the joker?" I said, "Yes, I do." My kids put me on the joker because I am a joker." He said, "I gave her this deck of quilting cards and you're the joker." He said, "She's shuffling through these cards and she slows down because she sees the quilting patterns." He said, "She was a quilter and she loved you." He said, "She slows down and she gets to the joker and she looks at it," and he said, "She looked up at me," and he is full-on sobbing at this point and said, "It's Jenny."

He said, "To know for one minute that she's still in there just for one second. I was just so stunned." There was a man who works every day to stop human trafficking and he said, "The fact that I can come home and turn on a video and make something beautiful," he said, "it just makes my world right again." A woman in Iraq who doesn't have fabric stores or things like that but wants to do this for the people in her town and finishes her letter by saying, "You have filled my war-torn life with color."

These are things I never expected. When people meet me, it doesn't matter where. I was in TJ Maxx yesterday and a woman just stopped me, held onto me, and said, "What you have done for this industry, what you have done, we're just so grateful," because I made it easy. I made it something they're not afraid to try. Quilting is a hard thing for a long time. I've been like, "No, if you can sew straight from here to here, you can make this." That has been such a surprise to me.

All the people, all the stories and they're all healing. They're all working through. "My mom died," "I lost my job," "I lost a son," "I lost my health." There was a girl who stood in line to tell me, she says, "I never believed I could do anything like this." She said, "But you told me I could." She reached into her bag and pulled out a block and she had no hands. No hands. She said, "Look what I did." I just stood there looking at her little wrists and I was just like, oh my goodness. I did this because you believed in me. I'm like, "How the computer can transfer those feelings, I just don't know." That's been a huge gift for me because every day I get reinforced that I'm on this path that's a plan. It's a great plan.

It's not my plan but I'm walking the plan and I'm walking the path and I get to be that inspiration for somebody else and it's just the sweetest thing I've ever been in my life. I don't know how I got this life, but I'm grateful every single day.

**Shelley:** Well, that takes me to my last question of how have you seen the hand of God in your career?

**Jenny:** I've seen the hand of God every day. Every day from the people who come and paint our buildings to the people who come to visit our shops. In our employees, we have found some diamonds, just some people who are diamonds. We're able to elevate their lives, we're able to give them a job and not start them at minimum wage, offer them insurance to take care of their families. We had the college coming down so that if they wanted to get a degree they could take night classes. With COVID, we never had to lay a person off.

We closed down our town because we have Amish and Mennonite communities and their medical thing is a whole different thing. One person could come in and wipe out that community. We closed down the town, all those people went out to the warehouse, we never had to lay a single person off and we never stopped hiring. The hand of God is in our lives every single day and it's just made all the difference.

**Shelley:** Thank you for taking the time to be with me today. I really appreciate it.

**Jenny:** Oh, I've loved it. Thank you for having me.

**Shelley:** What a fun lady and what a great story. Here's a couple of lessons that I learned from this interview. One, when Jenny said 90% of their business is online, I was really struck by the notion that maybe they didn't need to revitalize the town. The Doans could have gotten what they needed financially without doing all of that, but think about the impact that would've been lost, the number of families, the people working there, the people coming to visit, God always has more in mind for us than we can see for ourselves and He has a bigger purpose as well.

Secondly, the magic. If you're thinking, I don't have any magic, just remember, not all of us need to be YouTube famous. Some of us need to be the workers in the town. Some of us need to be volunteers in our communities. Some of us have a magic touch for smiling even when things are rough or cooking or doing art or just being a good listener. In my workbook, I have a bunch of questions to help you identify your superpowers. That's what I call it. Jenny calls it magic.

Either way, I promise there's a skill or several that are unique to you. Spend a minute thinking about what it is and then ask God how he wants you to use it. It might take a moment to reflect back just like Jenny did. She realized when she was taking that quilting class that she'd always been looking for shortcuts in her life, and taking shortcuts in quilting allowed her to break the rules she didn't even know existed, which in turn gave her a way to make quilting easier and more accessible for millions of people who needed help and healing from a woman on YouTube.

Leaning into her magic is what made that possible. Figure out what your magic is and find a way to use it as well. I promise you, both you and the people you serve will be blessed.

Another thank you to Jenny for sharing her story and thank you for listening.

Thank you for spending time with me on the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. I hope you will discover one story at a time that God cares deeply about the details of our lives, especially something as important as using our talents and abilities to support our families, serve others, and build up his kingdom on this earth. If you are a stay-at-home mom who feels inspired to stretch yourself professionally, visit [faithfulcareermoves.com](http://faithfulcareermoves.com) to learn more.