

Rachel: Hello, in today's episode we're going to be speaking with Dr. Susan O'Malley. She is a woman who loves to talk about how it's never too late and you're never too old. Right now she is a 63 year old woman. She is amazing and really fulfilled with what she does. She just put out a book and she has so many things going on. It's really a far cry from where she was many years ago.

When she was 18 years old, she went to college. She dropped out because she didn't know how she was going to pay back her school. She was directionless for like a decade after that. Around age 30 she decided to go to school and to become a late student. She went to school. She went to medical school.

When she started a medical school at age 35, she actually was six months pregnant. She really was in a tough position, but she decided she was just going to go live her dreams. She was an emergency room doctor for a while and then she ended up at age 50 starting again.

She created a new business, even though she had never been an entrepreneur before. Now, here she is, as I said, at age 63 creating a book and all kinds of other things.

We talked in this show about mindset and about how to keep on track, even when everything is screaming at you not to, how Doctor Susan felt aligned and on purpose after she hadn't for such a long time.

This is a really inspirational show on banishing self-doubt and making your dreams happen.

Rachel: So Dr. Susan, thank you for being here.

Dr. Susan: Thank you, Rachel. It's my pleasure.

Rachel: Awesome. So, the intention behind the show A Better Life is to show people that if they have a choice they can choose a better life, which is something that I know you've proven several times. Before we go into that can you just take a few minutes and just kind of brag about some of the things that you have going on in your life, some of the things that you're really proud of right now?

Dr. Susan: Some of the things I'm really proud of, I'm really proud of two things in particular. The first one is my son. I was a single mom. My son was born my first year in medical school, two days before Christmas vacation. And as a single mom all through medical school, all through internship, residency, my years in the emergency room, I used to refer to

my son as that I was raising him by telephone. And he is now 28 years old and he is a good person with a good heart and a nice sense of humor and a smart young man who's going to places and I'm so proud of him. I'm so proud of us together because it wasn't easy for him. He was left with babysitters or my parents a lot of times when I was working around the clock. So I'm really proud of that. And I'm also really proud of my book.

My new book just came out, "[Tough Cookies Don't Crumble: Turn Set-Backs into Success](#)," where I outlined the strategies that I used to transform myself from a college drop-out and a secretary into an emergency room doctor and an entrepreneur. So I'm really getting wonderful feedback and it has just lifted me up. So those are the two things that I'm really proud of that I like to brag about.

Rachel: Awesome. Well those are wonderful things to share and I'd love to just jump right into the first story that you were talking about with your son. So you started medical school while you were pregnant. What gave you the push to go and do that? Because a lot of people would just say, "Now that I'm pregnant I have to concentrate on that alone," let alone go to school.

Dr. Susan: Well, I was what's called a returning student, which is a nice way of saying that I couldn't get my act together for many years. And I was a secretary. I actually dropped out of college. My first year, I dropped out of college at 18 years old. I didn't have any goal or direction and I was paying for it myself. I mean in 1969, college was \$3,000, which is laughable by today's standards but it was really very frightening to me at 18 years old and not having a way to pay it back. So I dropped out of college at 18 and I became a secretary. A secretary is a noble profession but it just was never for me. And I was a secretary for 11 years and even though that was my job, my goal was really something else because was to find a man to marry me, because I really didn't think that I had the brains or whatever else it was going to take to really move me forward and make me successful.

So at 29 years old, when I found myself after yet another failed relationship, with everything I owned in a U-Haul trailer parked in my parent's driveway, I'm sleeping back in the bed I grew up in as a child, I realized that I had to make some choice. It was really time to get myself together. So I started college at age 30 and I was initially going to be a nutritionist. Again, noble profession but within three months of study I just realized that it wasn't for me. And through a series of different events and conversations with people, I set myself, my sights higher and decided I wanted to be a doctor. And so off I went to college, and lo and

behold, I go through all the college and I finish and I graduate and I didn't get accepted into medical school. I was actually rejected the first year by every medical school in this country. And I was devastated and I had a choice to make and I really wanted it.

Oh, I wanted it so badly and I knew that I had to do it again. So I was now graduated from college and I had that year and I was back, if you could believe it, working as a secretary while I applied again. And I met someone and it was an unplanned pregnancy, a big surprise, but I had a decision to make again and I just knew that it was something I had to do. And at that point I hadn't been accepted to medical school yet because I didn't get accepted to medical school the second time around until three weeks before. And I was accepted off the waiting list and I got accepted three weeks before medical school. At that point I didn't know how I was going to do it. All I knew was everything I wanted in life came at the same time and I wasn't going to give anything up.

Rachel: Wow.

Dr. Susan: Yeah.

Rachel: Wow. So you went through and then can you give me a little bit more of the insight on how you knew the direction that you wanted to go into? Because going from directionless to exactly . . . like you know exactly this is what you want, you know you're giving . . . you're not giving it up. How are you so sure?

Dr. Susan: So, again, a funny kind of a story. When I found myself with everything I owned in a U-Haul trailer I thought, "Okay. No man is coming along to marry me so I've got to figure something out." And so I had heard if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life. And I thought, "Well this is some great advice. But what do I really love?" Because I didn't have passion about anything. And I realized I really love food so I thought I would be a chef. Now you have to remember that this is 19, I don't know what it was, 1979 or 1980 or whatever. There were no chef shows on television. There were no Kitchen Wars or whatever it is. It wasn't a glorified profession. And I realized shortly into it that what I really loved about food was eating it and having someone serve it to me, but I really wasn't into cooking it for strangers night after night. So that's when I thought, "Okay, I'll take my love of food and I'll get a degree in nutrition."

And so I went to college and I was on this course to get a degree in nutrition because I figured I'll have a college education and I'll still be working with food, something I love. And within three months I just realized that it wasn't the profession for me. And around the same time,

my sister who is actually nine years younger than I am, was studying . . . was doing her undergraduate in California. I was in New York at the time. And she was studying to be a doctor. She wanted to be a doctor. She was doing her undergraduate work. She had always wanted to be a doctor. And so I started looking at her courses and I started looking at my courses, and I thought, "Gee, her courses sound much more interesting than mine." And she said to me, "Why don't you move to California? You'll be a doctor, too." I said to her, "Are you crazy? Who decides at 30 years old they want to be a doctor? That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard."

But, Rachel, for the first time in my life, a seed of passion was planted and I couldn't get it out of my mind. And I wrestled with this for weeks because I thought, "Okay, this is great. I'm going to do it." It was really an intellectual decision at the beginning, I'm going to do it, and then as quickly as I'd talk myself into it was as quickly as I was talking myself right out of it because that's when all the self-doubt crept in. What if I can't do the work? What if I'm not smart enough? I'm too old. What if . . . Who does this at 30 years old? People are going to think I'm crazy. I mean, it went on and on and on and on. And I kept coming back to I'm too old. I'm too old. People start medical school when they're 23 years old. I will be 33 by the time I'm finished with college. That's too old. And my mother listened, my poor mother. I went on and on and on for weeks on end.

Finally, my mother looked at me one day and she said, "Susan, one day you'll be 50 years old. You'll either be a doctor or you won't but you'll still be 50. That's your choice," and I'm telling you, just like that, all the clutter fell away and I just I knew it was something I had to do.

Rachel: Wow. Do you think if your mom hadn't said that you'd still be wrestling?

Dr. Susan: Now, I think I might very well be. Because those three sentences provided clarity that . . . it was like someone lifted a curtain away and I could see the outdoors.

Rachel: Wow. And so, when you were a secretary, you are worried about even the \$3000 and paying it back. So were you worried about the money or did you figure when you became a doctor you'd be able to pay it back?

Dr. Susan: I wasn't worried about the money at all because once you are a medical student people are throwing money at you. There is student loans and believe me, I was mortgaged like a small house but once you get out you really can start making the money. So I really wasn't worried

about the money. Once I got out, I mean, I think at that time I owed over \$100,000, which by today's standards I think people get out of medical school now and owe over \$200,000, maybe even closer to \$300,000.

Rachel: That's crazy.

Dr. Susan: It is crazy.

Rachel: So you're going through medical school, you're going to have \$100,000 weighing on you at the end, and you're pregnant. What are you saying to yourself on a day-to-day basis to get through this?

Dr. Susan: I got through it one day at a time. I couldn't look to the future. I couldn't make plans. People would make plans, "Oh, let's do this next week and let's do that next week." I couldn't. All I could do was look at today because if I looked at the whole picture it would have been too overwhelming and I would have never been able to do it. There were times, I am not kidding, where I got through one hour at a time. I remember one day I sat down in the classroom next to some girl, I hardly even knew her. I was so exhausted, the baby was up all night, I'm going through lecture after lecture. I looked at her and I said, "I can't wait until tomorrow." She got so excited, "Oh, what's tomorrow?" she said. I said, "It won't be today because I have just about had enough of today." That's how I did it, one hour at a time, one day at a time.

Rachel: Wow. And so, you said that your son had lots of babysitters and it was lot of you were doing work and he was with all these different people. And I'm also curious how you are able to manage any guilt around that. Were you guilty? Did you feel guilty?

Dr. Susan: Oh yes. I was so guilty. When you're with the baby, you're worried that, oh my goodness, please, baby, please go to sleep because I have so much studying to do. When I was at medical school I would feel guilty that I wasn't with the baby. And it went on like that. It was no matter where I was I always felt torn that I should be in another place.

Rachel: Wow, so how did you . . . Did you just accept it or was there anything you could tell yourself to make yourself feel better?

Dr. Susan: I did accept it, only because at the second year mark, he was two years old and I was still overwhelmed with school and everything and I really gave thought to walking away. And I'll tell you, if it wasn't for that baby, I could have walked away. But I looked in the face of that beautiful baby and I realized that this baby has signed up for life with me. And if I leave now, I'm trained to do nothing. I had two years under medical school, four years of undergraduate work, and I was trained to do things that I wouldn't want to do. I could either teach science or I



could work in a laboratory, neither of which had any appeal to me. And so if I was going to make a life for this baby, then I had to keep on going.

Rachel: Yeah. I think that's great and I bet it really taught your son a lot about going after you dreams.

Dr. Susan: It really did. And I think he learned a lot about persevering and he learned a lot about a work ethic. And because, when you're a mom, you always think you can be doing something better and you hope you're doing the best. I have a girlfriend who once told her children, "Save your money. You're going to need therapy when you grow up. I don't know what I'm doing." So you worry all the time, but he turned out great.

Rachel: That's great. So then you were a doctor for a while and then you went and created something completely new, right?

Dr Susan: Yes. So, I worked in the emergency room for years and then somewhere around age 49, I was . . . It's really tiring work. You're working around the clock, literally. You're working some shifts that start at midnight, some shifts that start at 8:00 in the morning, some that start at 4:00 in the afternoon. And at age 49, 50 it really starts to take a toll on you. So I knew that it was time to go and I took a job in a clinic treating work-related injuries for a year. And it was kind of a transition year. My father was very sick and so it enabled me to really focus on my father because the work in the clinic really, because of my emergency medicine background, the work in the clinic was really very easy for me. So and then after the dust settled with my father, I looked around and I realized that I am not fulfilled and I don't know what it is that I want, but I didn't want this. And I felt like I had educated myself into a corner.

And it's one thing to be in the corner if you have no options. It's a whole other thing to be in the corner after you spent \$100,000 to educate yourself and many, many years of sacrifice to get to where you are. Because I felt like, at that point, I didn't have options. I could be an emergency room doctor, I could work in the clinic, but what else was I going to do? And I gave great thought and I spoke to anybody who would stop long enough and talk to me about ideas. And I decided that I wanted to open a med spa to . . . And a lot of it, the beginning stages of it was because I was turning 50 myself, I had just turned 50 and I was starting to notice changes that I didn't like. And so I was starting to have off the cuff conversations with plastic surgeons and when I heard what the options were, it was appalling to me. And I thought, "Well, there has to be a better way than this." So I left mainstream Madison to open a business that I knew nothing about.

And I found a place with . . . the guy said he would rent it to me for a year if I would renovate it myself. I got up on a ladder and I painted it. I did everything myself. And I sat at the reception desk and I put a \$75 ad in the newspaper and I waited for the phone to ring. People thought I was crazy but I just figured . . . and I don't know why I had such blind optimism. I thought, "Well, this will be easy. It'll be okay." I wasn't an entrepreneur. I didn't own a business. No one in my family owned a business. I didn't even have a lemonade stand when I was a child. This was truly blind optimism on my part.

Rachel: So what happened? Did the phone ring?

Dr. Susan: So the phone, it took a long time because I had . . . and to show you how naive I was, I had every penny that I had allocated. I was making spreadsheets and I had everything down to the penny, what the rent would cost, what this and bah, bah, bah, all of it. Except that I never factored in advertising because advertising wasn't even on my radar screen. I came from the emergency room. You didn't advertise in the emergency room. You didn't even lock the door in the emergency room. A good day was when no one showed up. So advertising was something that I didn't even realize and I had picked a spot two doors down from the hair salon and I really thought that I was going to have a constant stream of business because women were going to pass my place because they were two doors down from the hair salon and the angels were singing in my head. Oh boy, was I ever in for a big surprise because within three months, I was running out of money and I really had to start getting creative.

Because it turns out that it doesn't matter where you pick your location, you have to build a business. And I realized I had to start sending out newsletters. I didn't even know what that was. I had to learn about marketing. I didn't even know the difference between marketing and advertising. It was quite a journey.

Rachel: Geez. Okay, so two things. First, can you just explain what your business does for people? And then tell us how you started learning about advertising and what you started doing, marketing?

Dr. Susan: Sure thing. So, my business is [Sonas Med Spa](#). Sonas is the Gaelic word for happiness and a med spa is a place where mostly women, but some men, come to look younger. And some facilities offer surgical procedures as well as non-surgical. I specialize in non-surgical procedures only. So I relax wrinkles and I fill in volume and I have laser treatments and radio frequency treatments and great skin care. It's a beautiful, beautiful spa that I've made and so that's basically what I do. So, and then, how I learned about marketing. I learned about marketing,

and I was marketing and I didn't even realize that that was what it was called, but I realized that I had to get creative because at the three month mark I was running out of money. And I was so driven by fear, at that point, because I didn't want to go back to the emergency room. And to give you an even bigger example of how naive I was, I thought, "You know what? I'm going to go to the bank and I'm going to see what's involved to get a loan."

And so I went to the bank and I told them I have this new business and what would it be involved to get a loan? He said to me, "Well, I would need to see your P&L." Rachel, I said to him, "What's that?" He looked at me and he said, "Profit and loss." I said, "Oh, okay." I had no idea what I was doing, no idea. But I started giving talks and a few people came and I started, little by little, getting people on a list that I had in a Word document and I would send out a hard copy newsletter. This was now, I don't know, where were we, 19, no 2002, 2003. I didn't even have a computer at the office. So I was sending out, I was typing up things on a Word document and stuffing envelopes and sending them out to people. Little by little, inch by inch really, I built it up and then I moved locations. Because another big blunder that I made was when I first opened the name of my business wasn't Sonas Med Spa.

The name of my business was The Aesthetic Care Center and Medical Spa. And I picked that name because I love the word aesthetic. I thought it was such a beautiful word. The problem was that every time somebody would come in, they would ask me the same question, "How do you spell aesthetic?" when they wanted to write a check. I used to think to myself, "What is wrong with these women? How could you not know how to spell this beautiful word?" But my ladies were telling me I made a mistake but I wasn't listening. I didn't want to hear it. Not only that, but people would open the front door and they would, with big lettering above medical spa, and they would open the door and they would ask, "What's a medical spa?" Now, it was 2002 and 2003 and medical spas were just coming up in New York and Los Angeles and I thought, "Well, this is great because I'm going to bring medical spa to Connecticut," and I did.

Because I think I was probably the first one, except that nobody knew what it was. So it didn't matter that I was the first one in Connecticut because nobody . . . because there was no brand awareness. So I moved three years later about 45 minutes away and, because I still couldn't let go of that word, I contorted the name of my new business around a word that I knew wasn't working in the first place. And because I had now moved to a shoreline location I changed the name of the business to Shoreline Aesthetic Care. But I knew enough as well I got to



get rid of this medical spa because nobody knows what that is. So for seven years, Rachel, ladies asked me, "How do you spell aesthetic?" And I tell this story in my talks because no matter what your blunder is, no matter what you think that you can't get past, I got past the wrong name for seven years and I still am able to have a successful business.

Rachel: That's awesome. So when you . . . after you moved locations was it doing better then? Was the business doing better?

Dr. Susan: After I moved locations it was like starting all over and I've actually moved locations . . . I'm in the third location. I now tell people that I've moved more times than people in the Witness Protection Program and that I'll never move again. And that I will Botox from the back of the car, but I will never move my office again. I finally got into the town that I'm in now, where I really have always wanted to be. And once I got in . . . because this, the town where I'm in now, which is Madison, Connecticut, the women in Madison are very loyal to local businesses. And as a business owner, that is a home run for you. So my business has really taken off since I moved to Madison. I also got more help from my front desk, someone who really knew business because this is a trap that I fell into and I think that a lot of people fall into this trap when you first start a business. It's that you think you should be able to do everything.

When money is really tight and I would think, "Well, why do I have to pay a cleaning lady? I know how to mop the floor. I don't have the money to pay a cleaning lady so I'll just mop myself. I know how to add and subtract. I don't need an accountant to do all of this. I can do. . ." So what happened was I had worked myself up into such a frenetic pace because I was doing everything, even after I had finally hired somebody to do front desk work, the whole business was still running through me. I used to refer to myself as living in the blender because I would wake up at 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning wondering, "Oh, did the girl at the front desk do this? Oh, did the girl at the front desk do that?" And it wasn't until I found someone who really knew business that I could just let go of those reins and work smarter and not harder.

Rachel: Yeah. That totally makes sense. I'm a huge proponent of outsourcing.

Dr. Susan: Yeah.

Rachel: Actually, one thing I wanted to dig into real quick before I ask you my next question is, so you started your business. A couple months after you were realizing how you were going to run out of money. Did you have a, like a, "Okay, if this doesn't work by X I'm done," or did you

have blind faith that it would work out? I'm curious about what your mindset was in that period. Here you are, like when you started the medical school you were thinking, "I'm too old for this." Now you're two decades older. What's going on in your mind?

Dr. Susan: I knew I didn't want to go back to emergency room so I knew it had to work. I had to do it. I didn't know how was I going to do it, but I had to do it. Actually, one of the first things I did, because I started medical school at 35 and I really didn't get out into the workforce until I was, I don't even know, 40 whatever it was. But my point is that I was 10, 15 years behind other people with regard to saving money, putting money away for retirement. I missed all that so I didn't have a cushion. So when I started running out of money, I went to my mother and I went to my then boyfriend at the time, who I have since married, and I secured loans from them so that I could give myself some breathing room because I was operating from a position of fear and that's never a good place to be because you don't make good decisions when you operate from a position of fear.

So I secured loans so that I knew that my house would run and that all I had to do was concentrate on the business. And if I could break even on the business and it wasn't a drain on my house, then I was doing okay. So that's how I did it, because failure was not an option because, at this point, I was too tired to go back to the emergency room. And also, once you're out of that six months, at six months you could still go back. At a year you could still go back. You go out past a year and cutting edge treatments have changed and if you haven't been part of that, it would be very difficult to go back.

Rachel: Yeah. That all makes sense and I really love this failure isn't an option outlook.

Dr. Susan: Yeah.

Rachel: It reminds me of . . . hearing your story reminds me of Sara Blakely from Spanx. Have you ever read her story?

Dr. Susan: Oh, yes. Yeah.

Rachel: Where it's like same thing. It's like forget it. She's not going to take no as an option. It's just she's going to succeed. You have so much of that. And the other thing I'm curious about is just . . . so what you do now with your business, you said you do Botox and different kinds of procedures and stuff. So I guess who are the types of women that come and work with you? I guess and what I'm . . . on a context of this is I know there's so much negative stuff around Botox and things like that but it's not about just looking better for you, right?

Dr. Susan: No. I can help ladies look like a more relaxed, less tired version of themselves. That's what I say. More than that I can't do. It's not only about . . . I don't want anyone to look plastic or fake. That's not the kind of work I do. But when you look better you feel better, you do a better job. And so it's about actually being beautiful from the inside out.

Rachel: Yeah. Totally. That's great.

Dr. Susan: Yeah.

Rachel: And so do you find that . . . I guess your intention is to do that for people so they can feel good, right? I loved what you said about how you were waiting for a man and then you ended up just deciding to do things yourself.

Dr. Susan: Yeah. So I used to say that in the emergency room I used to save lives. Now I save self-esteem. Because that's what I feel like I do with these treatments. That I help ladies look . . . When I have a lady who can look in the mirror and well up with tears because that's how she used to look and now she just feels so much better about herself, that is just so fulfilling to me.

Rachel: I bet, yeah. That sound really great.

Dr. Susan: Yeah.

Rachel: And can you tell me about your book?

Dr. Susan: Oh, my book. Thank you for asking. So my book, the title of my book is "[Tough Cookies Don't Crumble: Turn Set-Backs into Success](#)." And in the book, I outline the strategies that I used to transform myself from a college dropout and a secretary into an emergency room doctor and an entrepreneur. So the book has a lot of my experience woven throughout but the book is not my story because we all have a story. The book is how I did it and the real down and dirty of just . . . when I was . . . stories that . . . My mind is going 100 miles a minute, here. Here's why. Here's part of the reason why I wrote the book. I have been on the receiving end of confusion many times in my life, having listened to someone who attained success. Having listened to how they did it and feeling inadequate, like why can't I do this? This woman did it. She made it sound so easy. It's not easy. It's worth it but it's not easy. And so I wanted to lay out everything in the book. Stories about hard, embarrassing stories, hard stories, fun stories so that you can apply the strategies to you and move your life forward as well.

Rachel: Awesome. And I checked it out on Amazon. I know Amazon. I'd love to hear where else people can buy it, but just even on Amazon you have some great reviews.

Dr. Susan: Oh, thank you very much. So it's on Amazon. I believe it's on Barnes and Noble. I think it's also on Nook. I sell it at my spa if anybody is local. It's at a couple of bookstores locally in the area. But I think Amazon is probably the best place to get it. And you can also visit my website. It's [susanomalley.md.com](http://susanomalley.md.com) because you can download the first chapter for free or you can link right to Amazon right from my website and purchase it there.

Rachel: Beautiful. And actually, that was going to be my next question is where people could go to find out more about you but you mentioned your website. Is there anywhere else where people can go and learn more about you?

Dr. Susan: So I have two websites because there's my Sonas Med Spa website, which is [sonasmedspa.com](http://sonasmedspa.com), and then there's my author website, which is [susanomalley.md.com](http://susanomalley.md.com).

Rachel: Beautiful. Well thank you. I think this has been great because you're just really showing people that no matter what the circumstances, age or if you're pregnant, whatever it is, you can really start over and reinvent as desired and go from directionless to leading a fulfilling life that makes you feel awesome. So thank you so much for your wisdom and for taking the time to be here today.

Dr. Susan: Thank you so much and I like to tell ladies or anyone that will listen that you're never too old and it's never too late.

Rachel: Beautiful.

Dr. Susan: Thank you, Rachel.

Rachel: Thank you again.

Dr. Susan: Okay. Bye-bye.

Rachel: Bye.

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I really appreciate you.

With love,  
Rachel Rofé

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