Women In Product Podcast Episode 2 — From Post Production to Product

Elizabeth Ames: I'm Elizabeth Ames and this is the Women In Product Podcast, where we share the stories of women product leaders — the careers they've built, the challenges they've overcome and why they love building tech products.

My guest today is the head of product at Movies Anywhere, a part of the Walt Disney Company. Movies Anywhere is a video on demand streaming platform that enables consumers to aggregate their movie library across multiple retailers like Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Google and others for free. Kasha leads a product team that has launched features like Screen Pass, Watch Together, and App Store Review that have driven significant growth for the service. Kasha has spoken at major product management conferences, including as a keynote at Women In Product in 2020. Kasha, welcome!

Elizabeth Ames:
I thought we would start by talking about how you got started in product. Tell me a little bit about your first role, how you got there. I'll let you take it from there.

Kasha Stewart:
Thank you so much for taking a stab at it. I appreciate it. I am at Disney via Movies Anywhere, which is a VOD movie streaming platform. So, if you think of the movie collectors and people that have purchased movie titles, that's where we come in, and we help aggregate their movie library across multiple retailers all in one place, for free for the consumer.

Elizabeth Ames:
Pretty cool, I must say.

Kasha Stewart:
If I don't say so.

Elizabeth Ames:
Exactly. So, I thought we would start by talking about how you got started in product. Tell me a little bit about your first role, how you got there. I'll let you take it from there.

Kasha Stewart:
Sure, yes. I will say I fell into product. I had no idea that this world existed, but I'm very thankful that I made my way here. I have a post-production background. I went to film school, I was a fine art major. I was in video, and loved film noir, you name it, colors, patterns, everything. I was on a fellowship at Chapman University after school. I finished and I found myself in the post-production world, editing, chroma keying, backgrounds, and then the recession of 2009, I'm dating myself, hit, and all of the wonderful freelance jobs that I had that I had coveted fell apart. And I started to think, where can I find stability and a job to help me pay off my student loans? I saw a posting for ABC.com on Craigslist, of all places. I had no idea what the job entailed, it was content distribution at that time, a producer.

I got into the role and started to excel and understand the landscape, and this is when you had the networks were competing now with Hulu and Netflix that had pivoted their business proposition model and started their own streaming platform from physical goods. I just started to get so fascinated. I fell

down a rabbit hole, but I also was fascinated with how cumbersome and awkward the tools that I had to use to do my job were.

I do remember a manager telling me, "Since you like to ask questions so much, you should go into product." And I didn't even know what that meant, and I don't know if it was the friendliest kind of comment, if you know what I mean. I found myself applying, kind of getting what is product, and I actually got an internal promotion. I started talking to HR and they also thought I was great for product, although when I looked at the job description it had a lot of data analytics, and I just thought, "But I'm this creative person. Why does everyone think that I'm left brain? I want to think about the audience." And then they were like, "No, this will be good for you." And that's how I got into product.

I became a product specialist, is what it was called at the time at ABC Family, and I focused on web experiences for our consumer, which was the tween market at that time. ABC Family is now Freeform.

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah. It's such a great story that you have, in that you came into this out of film, because really I've looked at the data recently, and 93% of people come into product out of some other completely different field, right? So, it's so great to hear these stories of how people come into the field. I think yours is one that is quite common actually, right? So, you got in. How did you learn what to do? They said, "Great, you're a product specialist. Here, have at it."

Kasha Stewart:
I think I got a total of eight hours of training, and that was considered a privilege. There were two senior PMs on that team. They walked me through this analytic report. They were able to breeze through this report in four hours. The report took me about eight hours. I learned the hard way, as they say, and I started asking questions again.

I fell into a team of analytics people that probably weren't happy to see me. This is when we could meet in person, and I kept knocking on their door to understand what does all this mean year over year, month over month. How do you deduct this reasoning? Then from there, I actually realized this report wasn't valid anymore. That was one of the things when I realized that when I have an assumption, you got to voice your opinion, even if it's the unpopular opinion. I think that's probably one of the roles of a product manager.

Then I started to really start to carve out, looking through the commentary, and the results, and what people were saying online in the comments, and why they kept coming back to the platform, or why they were leaving the platform. And I kind of stitching kind of like a playbook together. I also reached out to engineers, because they said that my what was called PRDs at the time were horrible, and I wanted to know why they thought that way and how could I make them better and what they were really looking for in a product requirements document.

Elizabeth Ames:
I think about you talking about asking for their feedback on how to make it better, and I think that what I have seen is so many women want something to be perfect and they're kind of crushed if it's not, and then they sort of go away. So, where did you get that ability of oh, no, no, tell me how to make it better.

Kasha Stewart:
Well, I grew up, I come from a family of four. I have three older brothers, and you got to have some tough skin, because you don't get to pick your television show if someone tells you no on the first time. So, you got to keep going back, and I'm like I learned how to barter probably at an early age just so I could watch whatever cartoon I thought was pretty cool at the time. But in all fairness, I was struggling to ... Did I belong here? Because I have this fine arts background, I do think differently, and at that time, early in my career, people told me to my face I wasn't a product manager. I wasn't a good fit, or why do I keep asking so many questions? I think in that, I have to find strength that no, I'm here, my voice is valid. I'm going to prove to myself that I can do this. I looked around to the left to me and the right of me and there wasn't anyone that looked like me, and I didn't want that to deter my efforts. But sometimes if you're going to be the lone wolf, you got to go for it. Even when it's hard, and even if you're not being received warmly or welcomed, I am persistent, and I wanted to prove that I could really, really do this job and understand it, and start to grow, and really learn the landscape.

Then I started to really build relationships. So, it was a challenge for me, not only for the skillset, but also how do I build relationships with A type personalities, or developers are known to be developers, and how do I convince them, or how do I get their trust? It's not something that happened overnight, I'll say that.

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah. So, with all of those challenges right off the bat, it sort of begs the question of, why just stay? What was it about it that you went like, "Ooh, this is for me. This is my thing"?

Kasha Stewart:
Well, I felt like I'm a builder. I'm building this. It is an amazing feeling, to this day I get so giddy, that we had this concept in a meeting in thin air, and then now we're launching it. I just thought like wow, I am part of the world. I am in tech. I'm on the entertainment side, so sometimes I get a raised eyebrow when I tell people I'm in tech, because I'm not part of FANG, but I was like I'm really doing something, and people are using this. It's touching, and me being a previous filmmaker, an artist, to me it's still storytelling. It's on a digital platform and it allows people to fall in love with a piece of content, just the way that I conceptualize whether I'm telling this story or now I'm delivering the story.

So, that's what kept me resignated in there. Then also I felt like I was being the voice of people that don't often get heard. Whether it's from an underrepresented community, whether it's people that aren't the early adapters to tech. I would always put myself in what would my mom do, or what would my brothers. Would they understand this? And if they're not the demographic, okay, but what if they are? Would it work for them?

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah, yeah. So, you lead a team or a bunch of teams now. So, how do those early experiences that you had shaped the way you lead teams today? Are there things that came out of that that you are aware of with the teams when you're bringing people together, or when you see people going down the wrong path or any of that?

Kasha Stewart:
Yeah. In my skillset, get in early. A lot of times I'm coming into situations that haven't had leadership or have gotten off track, and I have to build trust brick by brick. Some of the things that I do may seem

old-school, but hey, let's sit down and have a coffee talk. Tell me the good, bad and ugly. Tell me what you think of product. I mean, devs love to do that. They'll tell you all the time, "Oh, product. We don't need you guys." Or, "Oh, but you did do these requirements." Or, "Hey, someone did help me with this drink service." Or, "You made that interesting comment about the APIs, but really it should've been architected this way." So, you got to get people, you got to meet people where they are.

I like to connect with leadership, but I also like to connect with some of the new fresh faces on the team, and let them know that I'm here as a resource. That even if they don't report into me, that if they have questions, if there is ever concerns. I like to be the voice of reason and clarity and give that message, and that's true to my brand, no matter what company that I work for. Then when there are tough situations, I think a lot of times as women we want to shy away from it.

I mean, going back to that point about being perfect, that ugh, this person is not talking to me, and we do have to try harder. This is sometimes you are, I'm in spaces that weren't intended for me, but I'll be dammed if it's going to stay that way, and I really have to champion myself, or put my big girl panties on and go out there and say, "Okay, I want to have a conversation. I've seen this happening with the team. How can we resolve it?" And sometimes it's more work on my part, but it yields a greater result in the long run, and then I want to be known for that person that unplugs, that unblocks people from coming to problems.

I have an extrovert personality, so I know this doesn't work for everyone, but one thing that I can tell you is that if you are seeing a pattern, you're identifying it, find the language that is most comfortable for you. Conversations go better, now over Zoom, I would say in person before. If it's not going the right way, there's misunderstandings and slack. We're all human, but know how to pivot, and also kind of course correct within that. Then don't take any ownership of a mistake. I mean, unless it's something that you ultimately, but I know that I can only control so much of this process, but I can put out the best practices, and be honest, and take that feedback. Oh my team, oh, you wish it had gone this way. Okay, next time let me come to the retro, I'm going to make it happen. I feel like showing up and listening buys me currency and trust within the organization for teams that I don't have a technical background that I typically have to deal with.

Elizabeth Ames:
Something that you said really resonates with me, which is this underlying sense of really building trust with people. Not waiting until you need the trust, but extending yourself early on. Getting to know people, getting to understand their perspective so that when things do get difficult, there's already a bond there. You don't have to worry about oh, now I got to talk to this person, they don't know me, they don't care about me. Yeah, so.

Kasha Stewart:
And there's this funny saying, or I guess it's an anecdote, I think it's from The First 90 Days, and it says you don't want to meet your neighbors when your house is on fire. I think about that. It's hard to ask someone, "Hey, can you help me?" If they have no context and no relationship to you. Sometimes I'm just like, "Hey, what do you think of this? What's been done in the past? Give me some feedback. My team's been interacting with your team. How do you think that's going?" Sometimes some people are just like, "Fine." And I'm like, "Okay. Well, so did you like the last initiative release? Did you think that that went well? I know we had to kind of scale back on some of the things that we wanted to do." And

then sometimes you have to put in, plant those seeds, and then it's a 15 minute Zoom talk for me, and I'm like, "Okay, well, I'll circle back in a couple weeks. Feel free, my door is open."

Elizabeth Ames:
Right. It's planting those seeds.

Kasha Stewart:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elizabeth Ames:
I always love it when somebody gives you a one word answer. It's like [crosstalk].

Kasha Stewart:
I know. Fine.

Elizabeth Ames:
Can't really go anywhere with that.

Kasha Stewart:
Yeah, and now my brain is thinking like, "When is the last time we talked to backend services?" As we have this conversation.

Elizabeth Ames:
Right, exactly. So, you're in this job. You're in the tech industry, but you're in a very specific part of the tech industry. You talked about this a little earlier, media, but media is exploding these days. It's amazing some of the cool things that are going on. So, how does that change feel? Has that been a big switch there or does it still feel like the same kind of thing?

Kasha Stewart:
No, it definitely feels good. I definitely feel more street credibility these days, especially with the launch of Disney+ and getting past 100 million subscribers in such a short amount of time, and then not just duplicating what the other SVODs are doing, but also kind of changing and adding. I mean, content is still king, I'll say that, but and thinking about it from a different lens. I think there's room for competition, as we can see, as more and more SVODs. I think though the market in some ways from a consumer standpoint is saturated, because sometimes I don't even know what to watch, and I'm like, "Okay, Disney+, Movies Anywhere. Is it on my Netflix? Where is it?" So, I think we'll see the emergence of some company, or I know there's already companies that are kind of providing that aggregation based off your viewing appetite, based off of your consumer history. Recommender engines are blowing up. We have a great data scientist at Movies Anywhere that's helped us.

Also, because entertainment has become a currency, what I'm seeing now is the entertainment companies taking more risk and also putting more equity back into the tech side of the house, and not just on the content and the production. So, I'm seeing that shift, and I think you can see that within Disney in focusing on Disney+.

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah. So, I want to switch gears a little bit here. You lead an organization. I know that you're really involved with the community in a number of ways. You're not alone in being a woman of color that is leading an organization, but nonetheless, could you talk a little bit about the challenges that you think you have faced because of that that are specific to that. I think all of our listeners would benefit from kind of getting that full sense of where those challenges are.

Kasha Stewart:
Yeah. I mean, definitely. That's something is a lived experience for me. A lot of times earlier in my career was like oh, I'm coming into a space and I'm the only woman. So, I was more reserved, or studying the room, and now I'm coming into this space and I just have to definitely push harder to earn credibility, where the leader of my VP is a man, and he can chime in with a one-liner. It doesn't matter that he said, maybe not word for word, but a similar sentiment and then it's heads down people taking note, and there I'm having to razzle and dazzle. It is hard. It's hard still to be questioned, and it creates self-doubt. So, I think that is translatable for all women or people that are just different than what the majority of leadership is. With being a black woman in tech, there's an intersection of not only race and gender, it's a double whammy.

So, I am very sensitive to who I bring on to the team. I'm probably more protective of giving that type of feedback, because I didn't always have the greatest experiences in my career. So, I go even harder for new people that I bring in, and especially bringing in underrepresented talent that may not even got a chance to have their résumé looked at, or an internship. But one thing that I notice is that until we deal with what is happening in society, wherever we work is just going to mirror that same culture. So, there's no silver bullet, and as much diversity and equity and inclusion teams that you have, if the sentiment is not there, it has to be more than good intentions. It has to be more than that and it has to he held in accountability and transparency, and really actionable goals. I can only fight one battle as one woman. I do see change happening, so that is reassuring for me. I have a young intern on my team, and he's from an HBCU and I think to myself, he will have so much more privilege to be his self at work than I did coming into my career.

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah, which is a good thing, for sure.

Kasha Stewart:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elizabeth Ames:
I think that one of the things that I have seen in terms of the things changing is that it's an ongoing dialogue.

Kasha Stewart:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elizabeth Ames:
Sometimes the dialogue is exhausting, sometimes I'm exhausted by that. I can imagine how people of color feel, because they must really feel exhausted by it, but I do feel like that in that dialogue we can all

understand that we're all learning to some level here. So, if we take that learning mindset, that may help us to move forward.

So, one question that I have for you around that is also about sort of progressing in your career. Do you think about opportunities at other organizations, or when you think about those do you think like, "Oh, I'm going to have to go all through that whole process again of getting comfortable with everybody, establishing my credibility." I mean, that seems like a big tax to pay.

Kasha Stewart:
Well, and I won't say it's daily, but I think when you ... Whether I jump to another organization or not, I'm still always in some level of a fight, and I can't change my skin tone or my cultural background, nor would I want to, but it comes in waves. Sometimes I'll get feedback. I'm like, "Oh, I didn't hear this." And then it will be like, "Well, people don't feel comfortable talking to you." And I'm like, "Why? I'm the most ... I talk to everybody. I talk to our girl, Friday woman that comes in and helps us, and just like I talk to our GM."

So, I think there's ... I don't know, as a woman of color, that there's ever, at least in my experience, this 100% feeling comfortable. I like to base it off the facts and experiences, but I am human, I see things. I see oh gosh, I was left off this meeting. Does this mean I was left off because of this? Does it mean I was left off because I was a woman? And that's the part that is ambiguous, but I have to still shine on. I'm going to power on. If they didn't want my input, fine. What's the next thing that I can contribute? There's always something to focus in on product. There's never a dull moment. If it's a toxic environment, I would tell anyone listening to pick your battles and to possibly move on if the culture isn't something that you see changing or progressing, and if you don't have that support from your leadership or from the head of your organization, things like that I notice don't get better. It's when you jump to something new, yes, it's always a challenge to have to prove, but aren't we here in product to reinvent things? Aren't we here to make things better?

I've made sacrifices in my career that have paid off, and if I have to be awkward and uncomfortable, it's worth the fight for me to go further than I ever had imagined. I took a job that I thought I was going to do for a couple of months until my next editing gig came up, and 10 years later I don't regret coming into this field, and now being the face and inspiring a bunch of women that maybe would've never seen anyone like them say, "Oh yeah, you can do this, and you could probably do it better than me."

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah, it's great. I mean, you definitely are that role model for a lot of people, and I know that you have put it to good use.

Kasha Stewart:
Yeah.

Elizabeth Ames:
So, that is really a wonderful thing. I kind of wonder, along those lines, like are there other women that are role models for you in the field? Either people that you look up to and say like, "Oh yeah, that."

Kasha Stewart:
I mean, I always girl fan over Bozoma, the CMO of Netflix. I'm like oh my god, how could she do that? Also Michele Obama. I mean, there are so many I think women that have paved the way that it's a

disservice to say I'm the only one or this. I'm like no, you got to pull back the layers. Maybe you got to clean your glasses off to find us, but we are there, we're making marks. I see these huge accomplishments and I think oh my gosh, when will I get to that point? And how can I make it happen? And how do they keep this up? And they're always evolving. One of the women that I look up to, she was part of how we can have GIPHYs. Lisa, I can't pronounce her last name, forgive me, but she now leads a diversity algorithm or software platform that comes in to help with this racial bias. I'm just like wow, that's cutting edge, that's making a mark, that's social currency in the bank right there. Those are the kind of things that excite me.

I mean, I don't know where I'm going to end up or land, but I know that I'll probably always keep moving and tinkering around with stuff, just like that manager I had many years ago told me you sure like to ask a lot of questions.

Elizabeth Ames:
It's good. It's got you pretty far, hasn't it?

Kasha Stewart:
Yeah.

Elizabeth Ames:
So, first of all, thank you for taking the time, but before we go, I want you to just think about those young Kasha Stewarts out there. What one piece of advice would you give them?

Kasha Stewart:
Oh gosh. My brain is fluttered with ideas right now. I would say don't be scared. I was a person that was afraid. As much as I asked the questions, I was afraid to give my opinion. Because I was scared, I was like, "Oh, I'm not a computer scientist person, and people are telling me I'm crazy for asking this question, so let me not say anything." I'd say use your voice. Don't be scared, use your voice, it's okay. No one's going to drive your career like you will drive your career. I was also under this very delusional impression, keep working hard and one day I'll get promoted, and they'll just see all my contributions. I still have to write them down to this day. Things become blurred, people forget, and only you will remember them in the same way and the impact that you made. So, don't be scared to get out there, don't be scared if you fall. Don't be scared to use your voice, and don't be scared to contribute to this valuable world and this industry that we live in.

Elizabeth Ames:
Yeah. I would totally echo you on that and say not only don't be scared, but we need you.

Kasha Stewart:
Yes, we do.

Elizabeth Ames:
We need your voice.

Kasha Stewart:
Yeah.

Elizabeth Ames:
Right? And also I really feel like there is an important point about community here, because when you feel scared, or when you feel like you don't know, having a community that you can go to and they can say, "You're okay, go ahead. Go forward, it'll be all right. Here's what you need to know." Can make such a huge difference.

Kasha Stewart:
That's why I love Women In Product. I was on the Facebook group last night, just trying to help, and look at some of the comments, and keep myself fresh too. I'm like okay, what are people talking about? What are the things that are impacting their lives? I never know where I'll get inspired from or get a golden nugget, and kind of keep it in, file it away. So, I think it's great that there's so much opportunity versus when I came in my career and I thought I was the only one.

Elizabeth Ames:
Well, I'm happy to say you are not the only one, but you are special, so.

Kasha Stewart:
Well, thank you.

Elizabeth Ames:
Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. It's been great. I know a lot of people out there will be looking forward to hearing from you.

Kasha Stewart:
Oh, thank you for having me.

Elizabeth Ames:
All right. Thanks.