



Turning a Family Struggle into a Family Business

Guest: Michele Portlock

Shelley Hunter: You're listening to the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. I'm your host, Shelley Hunter. This is a place where we talk to people who recognize the Lord's hand in their lives, and specifically in their careers.

Thank you for joining me on episode 15 of the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast.

Today, I'm interviewing Michele Portlock. Michele is a mother of four children, two of which have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Dealing with this parenting challenge drove Michele to return to school to get a master's degree in behavior therapy. Though she started the program to help her own family, she quickly realized she needed to do more.

Michele now helps parents navigate the spectrum via private coaching, free resources on her website and via her podcast called *Navigating the Spectrum*. If you need help, she can provide both a listening ear as well as personal guidance. That website is MichelePortlock.com, M-I-C-H-E-L-E, Portlock.com. Michele with one L.

Speaking of free resources, Michele and I recently collaborated on a workbook to help people on the spectrum get their first job. We'll talk more about that in this episode. Let's first go back to the beginning. I asked Michele to take us on the journey, what she does now and how she got there.

Michele Portlock: I work with families and I work with the parents. I work with the children. Typically, I tend to be more focused on helping parents create effective and safe environments in their home, so that they can raise their children on the autism spectrum to be the best version of who they can be.

Shelley: I love that. Tell me about the journey. Why are you even doing this?

Michele: Oh, boy. That's a loaded question. It started from a space of just my life, my own personal life as a mother. I have four children and two of my children have

been officially diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. I have a third, who is in the process of being tested. As I've been raising my kids over these years, I've felt on multiple occasions, why can't there be the nanny where she comes into the home and she says, "Here's what you need."

I thought why can't there be something like that for autism? Because I'm struggling and I need someone to say, "Oh, I see it now and here's what we can do." I essentially thought, I wanted to do that for parents, but I knew I needed more education.

Shelley: I do want to talk about how you went back to school. Let me clarify something first. There are resources for just pure parenting?

Michele: Yes.

Shelley: Your point is, when you have a child on the spectrum, things can be a little different.

Michele: They can be very different. Our children go to their various therapies, and those therapies are necessary, and they're helpful, then our kids come home. We need to learn how to integrate that into our homes. Some therapies will help teach parents how to do that. There are so many moving parts with autism.

It includes the environment that your child is growing up in, and what your home looks like, and what your child can access and cannot access, how to keep that safe, how to minimize tantrums in the home. There're so many pieces. I feel like sometimes we just need someone to come in and look at the bigger picture and help break it down for us.

Shelley: I'm going to make the assumption here that what you have learned thus far has benefited your children. I want to talk about you. You are a mother of four children. What was it like going back to school?

Michele: It was so challenging. I have to say I believed very strongly that it was what I needed to do. Fortunately, for me, my husband was completely onboard with me. We sat down with our kids and talked to them about it. It wasn't like it was great, perfect timing. I put my youngest child into an early preschool program. That was hard for me because I thought it would be hard for her, but she loved it so much. I actually loved having her there because I had 10 hours, 12 hours a week where I could focus on just school.

What I learned is that, I had to be very organized. I had to get up. I had to make sure my schedule was in place. I was focused on school while I had those hours. As soon as I picked up my kids, I was full time mom again. Then, when they went to bed, I was back at it.

My husband and I had to sacrifice some of our time together. My kids had to sacrifice, knowing that they could call me from school and say, "I forgot a book". My

response was, "Well, darn it." [laughs] "Really sad for you." The way it worked was we all had to be more organized together.

Shelley: Was this an online program or were you physically going to the classroom?

Michele: This was an online program through Arizona State University. I was at home, which actually was trickier for me because I had to be at home looking at my dirty kitchen and saying that's going to wait till later. [chuckles]

Shelley: What advice would you give to another mom who is considering going back to school right now?

Michele: Believe in what you're doing enough that the sacrifice doesn't feel like such a sacrifice. I knew that it was what I was supposed to do. Otherwise, the time I was giving up and the energy and the commitment and quite honestly, the brainpower that I was putting into it. I even questioned it along the process because it was challenging. I questioned it saying, "Oh, my word. This is so hard."

I knew that it's where I was supposed to be and where I wanted to be and where I needed to be because there was an end goal in mind. That helped.

Shelley: In my experience, sometimes that end goal is what we need to take that first step. Once you're brave enough to move forward, the new paths do open up. I know it's early for this business, but I'm wondering if anything has already shifted for you.

Michele: I've actually been doing consulting with the parents on most therapy because their children are getting various very specific therapies like speech therapy and behavior therapy and occupational therapy. Their children are learning skills at their own pace. The parents are back there saying, "I need help learning how to manage this in my home." It starts with themselves. I kind of didn't expect that, but that's where it's going.

It's really rewarding for me to watch as the parents are saying, "Oh, my goodness. Okay, I get that." It's helping them create much more successful, but calmer home environments, which those of you that are raising children on the autism spectrum know that throwing the word calm in there, isn't always applicable. It's kind of exciting.

Shelley: You found your calling.

Michele: I think I did.

Shelley: Yes. Michele, you're the second guest I've had on the show who went back to school to get a Master's degree after being a stay-at-home mom for several years. Only after talking to Cami Bruscke in episode one did I realize that, doing so is not as simple as just signing up for a program. You have to fill out an application that demonstrates your professional experience. You have to write essays to sell yourself

and you have to provide letters of recommendation as well. How did you go about applying for this given the gap on your resume?

Michele: What I did was, my former Bishop wrote me one of my letters of recommendation because we had worked in so many capacities together. I had created this interface night of music and he let me run with it. He saw my skill set in that. Then, I had taught some cooking classes at a cooking school. That was my other letter of recommendation.

Shelley: You just have to think more broadly about what you've been doing?

Michele: One of the things I was able to put on my resume or my application for college, I created a curriculum, a music program, and I taught it in my home for years. I did it to help my kids and to socialize them more. I also did it because I needed something extra in my life. I didn't really think that I put that on an application later. It was just a life experience.

Shelley: I love that. I think as people work towards finding their calling, you almost always have that moment when you realize that something's been in the works for a long time.

Michele: I actually got the chills just from hearing you say that because that was part of my-- I don't know what to call it. Kind of a come to Jesus moment, I guess, when I started filling out that application because I thought, "You know what? All this time"-- I mean I helped organize and run steak girls camp. At the time I was thinking, I just wanted to be present for my daughter because I knew she might need me.

I actually knew she would need me there. That was the hardest assignment I've ever had working in the church. I was able to say, "I organized, prepared and cooked food for 200 plus people for a week long camp."

Shelley: I'll just keep saying this for anyone out there who feels the call to do something. If it's the right time for you, then it will work out just like it did for Michele. Speaking of that, we have been collaborating on a workbook. That's part of what I want to share with you today. Michele had been working with a client who had a very specific need. I'm going to let you tell the story.

Michele: It was one particular client, but it kind of was an accumulation of clients who have adult children who have been diagnosed on the autism spectrum and they are trying to figure out how to help these children launch. What I mean by that is they're coming to me and saying, "Look my child needs to get a job." Mostly because their child wants a job and they believe that they're capable of getting a job. They are saying, "But I don't know how to get them ready. What steps do I take? How do they create a resume?" They have some extra needs that might not be common and that's really scary.

Shelley: As I recall the advice you gave this woman is that her son's resume should be very skills-based and the things that they're good at. I said, "That is what everybody needs." Everybody needs a resume that points to their accomplishments

and the things that they can contribute to an employer. What we've done is we've created a workbook that is really geared towards your audience, utilizing those things that I know about getting a job. The workbook is free. It's on both of our websites and I will link to that in the show notes as well. Let's give some specific advice. Somebody who's on this spectrum, what types of jobs should they be looking for?

Michele: There's a lot actually that goes into answering that question because the spectrum is so broad. It depends really on what skill set your adult child has. They may not need as many supports for what they would like to do. This is still an effective resume experience and workbook for them. Then you have people on the spectrum who quite honestly maybe working with large groups of people is not going to work for them. They might be really great at coding and they can code on their own. They might report to a superior and that can be okay. It would be important for their superior to know what their limitations and what their strengths maybe so that they can learn to work with you.

Shelley: I will say again everybody has that same issue. If I want to be successful, then I need to know what environments work for me. I might be somebody who is super social and I need to be part of a team. I might be somebody who prefers to work from home on just projects and I can't handle a lot of interaction. Neither is wrong.

Michele: That's right. You need to communicate that. Fortunately, there has been a lot of advocating over the years. If you take a look at Google and Microsoft, for example, they have actually created programs specifically for people on the autism spectrum. You would still need to provide a resume to get into those programs.

Shelley: The exercise is important regardless of the outcome.

Michele: Let me give you some personal examples. Two of my children who have been diagnosed with autism, they have very different skill sets. My oldest is remarkable with research and memory recall. She wants to go to law school and she will. My son, that would never work for him. What he is really good at is patterns and numbers and coding. His skill set is very different, but he's extremely gifted in those areas.

Shelley: We know there's a range everywhere from really high functioning like your children to those who are better suited for a more basic job. The goal of this workbook is to help you do the assessment and then prepare your child for wherever they are. We mentioned these top tech companies but there are many businesses that have inclusivity initiatives.

Michele: Yes, exactly. There's a library in Park City, Utah. They have a little café in there and they hire special needs individuals to work in the café. I think those experiences, those opportunities that exist. There are people there to help guide and to help train and your child can gain more independence and more self-esteem, and fill all those things that we all want to fill regardless of whether or not we're on the autism spectrum.

Shelley: I love that. I know of some businesses in my area that higher as well. If you're listening to this and you know of companies that you can recommend, would you do us a favor? Leave a comment on the podcast, or my website, Michele's website, or our social media accounts. Again, all of these things are in the show notes, but leave a comment so that Michelle can grow this resource. How great would it be for parents to have one place to look for all of the opportunities that exist for kids on the spectrum?

Michelle, thanks for talking to me about this workbook. Before I let you go, I have to ask you the questions that really inspire me. Can you tell me about a leap of faith that you had to take to get where you are now?

Michele: Yes, absolutely. Starting my master's program, even applying for the master's program was a huge leap of faith because I knew it would all be online. That was really scary for me because technology isn't my strong suit. I decided to just be brave enough to move forward with that and try to put trust in myself that I could do it and trust in the Lord that he would help me make sure that that happened.

I'll be honest, when I started, I had a few little meltdowns because it was overwhelming. What I learned is, first of all, I can do it. I had to work a little bit longer and a little bit harder in the beginning to learn how to do some of these things I had never done before. I continually turned to Heavenly Father and continued to say, "I know you're here. Please help me. Please open my mind and help me to stretch and to grow." He was there all along that journey.

Shelley: What could you not see for yourself in taking this leap?

Michele: One of the things that really surprised me is that my children have dual diagnosis. Most people who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum have dual diagnosis. Not just autism. There's our mental health-related. What I didn't expect was to have a class where we went in-depth on mental health and medications and what that can look like and who to go to. What I didn't expect for me it was a beautiful blessing to absorb that information and turn around and take it with me when we went to see their psychiatrist and to be able to say, "I was reading about this medication tell me what you think."

It worked for my child and it was a beautiful experience. We've been working for seven years to find a medication that would work for my daughter in particular. It was such a special tender blessing. I thought, "Thank you Heavenly Father for allowing to become educated and to throw in little surprises and blessings along the way." What I felt like he was doing is saying, "You're doing the right thing, and here's how I'm going to remind you."

Shelley: That's just a long time though. If he had told you seven years prior, you wouldn't have struggled and gone on to this journey. That's going to end up helping so many more people.

Michele: It's so true. This is a little emotional for me. Even just this last week with my daughter getting ready to go back to college after this winter break. She had an experience that was hurtful and I thought to myself, "Heavenly Father, when does this end?" "When does she stop hurting?" "Therefore when can I relax a little bit and stop hurting for these same experiences that continue to occur in her life?" What I realized was and we know this as parents, but I was in the moment. That's not how life works. It doesn't work like that. Oftentimes, we have to have those very personal very tender experiences.

I have to be okay saying, "This is what my daughter has to experience to learn and grow within herself." It's what I have to allow her to experience in order to learn and grow from myself. It creates strength for her and also for me, but just in very different ways. It is also what continues to keep me turning back to Heavenly Father for help and for guidance and for the lifting that I need on a regular basis. I continually turn to him because really I have to. Those needs are there all the time. If that is what it takes for me to maintain a very personal very intimate relationship with my Heavenly Father throughout my life, then so be it.

Shelley: My last question for you, Michele, is how have you seen the hand of God in your career?

Michele: I've seen the hand of God from beginning to the middle to-- I'm not at the end. I'm still really in the middle. Maybe even in the beginning. I don't know but the hand of God how I feel like I've seen him is in the patience and the faith that I have been given to trust in the process. That I still don't know truly from what I just said. The beginning from the end and that's okay. It's little whisperings. You're heading in the right direction, and that's all I need for now. You're heading in the right direction. Keep going.

Shelley: We all need those little nudges.

I want to thank Michele for joining me today on this podcast and for sharing her time and talents with those in need of her help. In hearing her story, there's several things that resonated with me, but two that stand out. I've talked to a few moms recently who made the decision to stay home with their kids with every intention of maintaining that lifestyle throughout the child-rearing years, but circumstances changed. In each case, the moms expressed heartache over putting their last child in daycare. Something they never would have done with their older children, but each were subsequently surprised to find that the kids love their new schedules. Now I'm not advocating for any particular arrangement. I'm simply saying that if you feel inspired to change course, and know the nudge is coming from a loving heavenly father, then you have to know that he's mindful of everyone in your family.

He knows what's best for all of you, even if it's not what you had originally planned. Secondly, don't, you just love the moment when Michelle realizes that years of seemingly simple activities gave her the experience she needed to get accepted to a master's program. She had no idea that all the years of creating programs and volunteering and organizations just to be with her kids and to answer the call to serve would one day prove to be the line items she needed for a college application.

If you're staring at the gap on your resume and wondering how to fill it, try looking at your past through the lens of a person being uniquely prepared for a new adventure. I've seen it over and over again.

Once again. Thank you for listening to the *Faithful Career Moves* podcast. It's my hope that listening to this episode will inspire you to think more broadly about how your career and your spiritual journey intersect. If you like that idea and want others to have a similar epiphany, then please share this podcast on social media, leave a review on Apple podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts or leave a comment on the website. Doing so will help others find this content as well.