

**Ep #358: Madam C.J. Walker
with Brig Johnson, Anita Miller, and Monica Sherese**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Brooke Castillo

Ep #358: Madam C.J. Walker with Brig Johnson, Anita Miller, and Monica Sherese

You are listening to *The Life Coach School Podcast* with Brooke Castillo, episode number 358.

Welcome to *The Life Coach School Podcast*, where it's all about real clients, real problems and real coaching. And now your host, Master Coach Instructor, Brooke Castillo.

Brooke: Hello, my friends. Welcome to Black History Month. We are celebrating today especially because I have three amazing Black women who are on the podcast with me today and we are going to talk about Madam C.J. Walker, which I just learned just now – which is a shame – that she was the first self-made millionaire woman in our country.

And my mind – I called Erika, who is my CEO immediately upon finding this because my head was exploding, because her parents were slaves. And then she decided to become an entrepreneur and create a business and become a millionaire and become an amazing example and inspiration to so many people. So, I'm so excited to talk about her today.

So, I invited three of my amazing colleagues to join me to have this conversation; Brig Johnson, who has been on the podcast before. And if you want to see us all, you can go to the website, thelifecoachschool.com/358. We're recording this on video so you can see how cute we all are. Brig Johnson's been on the podcast before. Do you want to just do a short intro to you and tell us a little bit about you, Brig?

Brig: Sure. I'm Brig Johnson and I'm a life coach and mindset coach for high-achieving Black women. And I help my clients uncover, manage, and do epic shit.

Brooke: Amazing. And then I also have Anita Miller, who's been on the podcast before as well. And she's joining me to have this amazing

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conversation. Do you want to introduce yourself a little bit and tell us amazing things about you?

Anita: Absolutely. I am Anita Miller. I am a confidence and career coach for Black women as well. I help them build strong relationships and navigate Corporate America with confidence. And I am excited to be here.

Brooke: Yay. And then my third colleague that I have on today is Monica Sherese. You have to go to the video to see what she's wearing and what she's got going on today. Hi, Monica. Will you introduce yourself a little bit?

Monica: Hi, Brooke. Hi, ladies. Yes, I am Monica Sherese. I am a self-image coach and personal stylist for women over 35, to help them navigate the midlife awakening and transform their relationship with self, such that they're able to affect any other relationship in their life and their relationship to their circumstances, take the gems of their life that they've gained up into middle-age and design the life of their dreams in the back half of life.

Brooke: That's what I'm doing. That's what's going on.

Monica: Yes.

Brooke: Okay, so here's what happened for me. And I haven't prepped you guys or told you any of these questions that I'm going to ask, so I just want you to speak from the heart. But one of the things I was talking about with Trudi, who is my coach, is how I think it's pathetic, actually, in some ways that we have to have a Black History Month. Because the way that she described it to me is that the rest of the history is white history years, instead of being able to have our combined American history be representative of all of our experiences. So, I'd love to hear you all talk a little bit about what it was like to just go through school and study history and how you felt about the representation and what you were taught and that sort of thing. Let's start with you, Brig.

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Brig: Sure. I think going through school, for me, it was always we would learn history and then come home and talk about it. And then our – my parents would at least tell me, “Oh well you know, the person behind it was a Black person.” Like the person who did all the experiments for Thomas Edison was a Black person who did them, but Edison gets all the credit for it. Or like the person who did the street light that we have or the red light. It’s just the history that wasn’t put in. And for me it’s like, “Well how come we don’t learn about that?”

Brooke: Yeah, and when I think about history too, I think about the lack of woman representation too and Black women especially underrepresented, and learning this, and how come I didn’t know about Madam C.J. Walker? How come I was never taught about her in school. I, as an entrepreneur, am so intrigued and inspired by her and yet we weren’t offered her as an example, as an inspiration for us to look up to.

Brig: Right.

Brooke: What about you, Monica?

Monica: So, I think my experience was that I came from a family that was – my grandparents especially – were heavily involved in the civil rights movement. I grew up in Upstate New York. My grandfather was pastor of a prominent church in my community. And so, being in and around Black history was a regular thing, although it was very apparent that the treatment of Black people in this country was very different and that there was a necessity to really be grounded in who we are as Black people. But then still had a lot the messaging around having to be twice as good and having to work super-duper hard and almost having an expectation that you may not reach the levels and the heights of white people in America just because of the systemic racism in this country.

But I think I had my own personal awakening when I went to college and I had a professor, dear Professor Ballard my freshman year of college in

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African American Studies 101, that really just blew the lid off Black history and taught many of the more obscure aspects that were not the Martin Luther Kings and Malcom X and the major figures that you hear about. But I have to say that I was very much enlightened by reading into Madam C.J. Walker over the last several days. There was so much that I didn't know about her. And also, I'm very intrigued to continue to learn more about her.

Brooke: Yeah. So, do you remember when you were in college, something that you learned that kind of blew your mind?

Monica: I remember learning that racism wasn't a thing until it had to be created to justify enslavement, so that people of European descent and African descent did trading, did exchange of information, learned a lot from each other for hundreds and thousands of years, until there was this idea for the European slave trade. And it was only then that there had to be some justification for treating people in such a dehumanizing way. Because that wasn't normal for anybody.

And so, a lot of the caricatures that were created, a lot of the narratives that were created around Black people and African people needing to be civilized and that they were savages. That was all completely untrue and created to justify why Europeans enslaved Africans. And I didn't know that. I thought there was just this inferiority thing from the dawn of time. But that wasn't true. African people were actually highly esteemed by Europeans and others that they came in contact with until this system of enslavement came. And from there is where the origins of racism came.

Brooke: So, how did that – or did it – affect you in your life to learn that?

Monica: It definitely affected me in my life to learn that because I think it was in the context of that conversation that so much information about the achievements and the accomplishments of African people came up. You know, the ingenuity, the innovation, the creativity, and going long before the history of Black people in this country. That it's something – the royalty in

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our blood was something that was definitely reinforced in me, especially going from that class in college.

Brooke: I love that. What about you, Anita?

Anita: I think for me, my take on history has been – I'll call it all over the place. So, for me, colorism comes in for history. So, as a dark-skinned African American, my earlier years we would talk about Black history and the month and typically what our teachers would have us do is pick a person, right? And for whatever reason, I would always get another dark-skinned Black female, whether it be Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman, or just someone else because I'm dark-skinned, they're dark-skinned, so I must have to play this character.

In seventh grade though, I had a teacher, a social studies teacher, a history teacher that really went further in terms of teaching us history. And even past Black History Month. We also – I went to school in Northern Virginia. I think that Virginia, at least for me, doesn't shy away from it as much as I see here in North Carolina or in South Carolina where I finished my earlier schooling. And Virginia, because you are right in the DC Virginia area where there's so much history, from James Town to the presidents and things like that, it's just a part of what you do. So, you go to slave plantations as a part of field trips. You do a lot of those things.

But I will say, similar to Monica, there is, within our community, a rich culture of speaking about people like Banneker, who designed the way the sea is laid out in maps. So, there's a lot that we did learn. But it was definitely, what we call whitewashed in terms of history. And just anecdotal pieces, it's kind of like the way we're taught to remember scripts from the bible, right? It's like, "Hey, who created the cotton gin? Eli Whitney. It's kind of these pieces of information along the way, but you don't get that whole totality of what Black people have created or their recognition for the things that they've created throughout US history.

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Brooke: So, when you say whitewashed, can you just explain what that means?

Anita: So, I mean that, for example, even as I was reading around Madam C.J. Walker, when I grew up, she did create the press pressing comb. Like, that's what we were taught in history, that she did create the hot comb or pressing comb, depending on which way you do it. Well, today's history says that she didn't, right? And so, it's things like that where propaganda or the narrative can be dictated just as Monica was saying as well. Because we were not the writers of our own history. We were told our history. Because those things weren't documented. It's hard to document things when you're not allowed to read.

Brooke: So, did you read – I found that a little bit fascinating when I was reading about this, is there was some controversy on whether she did create the hot iron because of this whole idea that that would somehow make it mean that Black hair as it was naturally was not okay. And so, I read that there was some controversy about whether she invented it or not because, if she did, then it somehow meant that she wasn't honoring Black hair as it was. Did you read about that? Or was that the part you were talking about?

Anita: Yeah, I did read about that. But I think I'm trying to put people in a box, right? I think, as an African American woman, our hair has evolved over time and it goes in cycles just like any other trend, from it being natural before the hot comb to it being straight after the hot comb and in the 20s, to going back natural in the 60s and 70s, then we're back at natural here today, right? So, we get to decide what we want to look like today. I think, if you watch the video, you'll see that all of our hair is completely different, right? And it's indicative of who we want to be as women. And I don't think anybody gets to tell us who we want to be as woman.

Brooke: Agreed, completely. Okay, so I'll let you – whoever wants to talk about this, I'm happy to do it too, but I'd love for y'all to do it if you want, is

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let's give a brief overview of her life why she's so badass, why we love talking about her, she's so interesting, maybe just kind of a general overview and timeline of what she did. One of y'all want to do that.

Monica: Yeah, I was so intrigued because, like Anita was saying, I can remember learning snippets about Madam C.J. Walker. I remember hearing the self-made millionaire, but somehow it slipped past me that she was the first self-made millionaire woman, period. I thought it was Black woman, the first Black woman millionaire. So, that was significant. And I think it's so fascinating that she was born in Louisiana on a plantation; the first in her family to be born after emancipation, but still her parents remained on the plantation as share croppers. But to go from hatching a plan at the age of 14 to get married to get away from her sister – and her brother-in-law apparently was very abusive. But to then go and work in kitchens and being a laundress, and then to figuring out how to support Annie Malone, who sold the Poro products, to developing something for herself.

What was great was that I was watching a documentary that her great granddaughter had done and she said that she became rich by solving her own problem. She solved her own problem and basically became a millionaire. And she never intended to go into business. She was having this issue with scales and dandruff and scalp disease, and created this product – there's story behind the product. But she created this product to solve her own issues. And then basically used herself as an example, which was revolutionary because, at the time, so many ads geared towards Black people in this country were people, fair-skinned women. Her main competitor at the time used fair-skinned women.

And so, it was an act of revolution almost for her to put herself, as a dark-skinned Black woman, on her products and to say that, you know, "You are beautiful and my products are going to help to enhance your beauty. Not that you need my products to be beautiful, but you are beautiful already, and let me help enhance that beauty." So, that was one of the things that I

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just found that was fascinating. And how much she was able to achieve in such a short period of time.

She was like 51, 52 when she passed, but she didn't even go into business until she was like in her late 30s, when she started creating that first product. So, the compression of time and how much she was able to do through one of the first direct sales businesses, where she had, like, legions of women that she trained and employed and they went all over the country and into Central America and into the Caribbean selling products to the Black women and Black people. I just marveled at learning all the detail about her life. But other people go because I could go on. There's so much that I learned about her that was just fascinating.

Brooke: So good. What about you, Brig? Jump in.

Brig: I think, for me, the thing that really stood out for me was her courage. Because the time that she did this, I just was thinking about, there had to be a target on her for making that much money. I coach women right now who have a problem with shining as a Black American. I can't even imagine my parents were slaves, what that capacity, what she was told as far as, like, "Do not take the spotlight. How dare you take the spotlight. How dare you dream." And she literally, lie, "I have a dream. I'm going to do this. And I'm going to take a whole bunch of people with me."

And just that, knowing that she – what she had to do on a daily basis to – because we were taught, especially her I'm sure, we're taught to, like, put your head down, stay in your lane, don't bring attention to yourself. When we shined, we got in trouble. Yeah, so I think, for me, that was the biggest thing that I was like, "Wow, amazing"

Brooke: Yeah, I 100% agree. 1867, she was born on the plantation where her parents were slaves. They had six children. She was the sixth. The only one born free – the first one born free, right? And for her to be like, "Huh, I think I'll go start my own business. And not only will I start my own

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business...” there was no online courses, my friends, to learn how to set up her funnel. Think about that. She created the product, figured out how to sell the product, and used other women to sell the product and build them up and her customers. And then, once she became successful, she made a million dollars, which is so mind-boggling for 1867. And then, proceeded to give so much of it away, but also build herself a nice great house and live in it and own that success. I’m in love with her.

Monica: She was unapologetic. Yes.

Brig: I love that.

Brooke: What do you want to add, Anita?

Anita: I think for me, it was a combination of all of what you guys have said, but mostly the women empowerment, both from a style beauty perspective, but also from an economic perspective, letting other women know that you can also make money and going away from the perception that we have to do it alone, and that we can’t do it together. Because those are two different things in our community; I have to do it by myself, I can’t ask for help and include anyone, and I can’t go, and me and Brig can’t collaborate, because that’s against the rules.

There’s a narrative that we don’t interact with each other, we don’t get along, and we can’t do it together. So, I think especially for that time, that is profound. It’s something for us, as we, you know, continue to grow our own businesses, to remember as African American women or Black women, and how we can be collaborative and all still succeed and have economic empowerment, as well as coach our women on it as well, like Brig said.

My clients are the same way, where they have a problem with the fear factor, “I’m just going to sit here. I’m going to play it safe because there’s fear in taking that next move.” Especially in Corporate America, in the workplace, and we don’t want to cause any trouble, for sure. And I’ll just end with, on the courage, Brooke, thinking about the fact that she moved

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freely. That in itself takes so much courage, that she moved freely throughout this country in that time. And if we think about where we are today and the thoughts around moving freely even today, it takes a lot of courage to have moved as free as she did, to create her business.

Brooke: Yes, I want to read some quotes from her that we can kind of discuss, because I just think they're so amazing. So, one of them is, "I'm a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there, I was promoted to the washtub. From there, I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there, I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations. I have built my own factory on my own ground."

And there was a book that her granddaughter wrote about her called *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*. And I feel like this quote is as inspiring to me in this moment right now as it probably has been to many other women from the time she did this. It's almost like she's like, "Listen, I promoted myself. I took care of this myself. I didn't wait around." She was married three times. She didn't wait for her husband to do it for her. She didn't ask permission to do it. She put herself out there.

And there was a documentary that was made on her life called *Self-Made*. It has some controversy based on what you were just talking about, Anita. I think that there are some questions about how they took the actual story and fictionalized it to make it entertaining. And one of the things that they did is they created this conflict between her and her competitor. And there was some, like, pushback against what that represented to Black women. But to your point, seeing how she empowered all of her employees and all of her customers in such a strong way, I think to me is exactly what I want to do with my life. And I sometimes think that's a hard thing to do. But when I look at what she went through at that time she went through, I can't even complain for one second, is kind of how I feel about it. Anyone want to add to that?

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Brig: Yeah, I do. I think when you understand what was going on in history too, is all of the things about Black men and how what she was doing, as elevating her and Black females, was totally, in that time, it was so seen as taboo to not elevate men but to elevate Black women. Because the answer to Black America was the Black man. And all of the leaders were like, “No, we have to elevate the Black man.” And she was going, “No, it’s the Black women and I’m going to do my part for Black women.”

And you saw that tension in the Self-Made, but I’m sure a lot of that was fictionalized. But at the same time, she didn’t say, like, it’s us or our. It was her business. That was a big thing.

Brooke: Yeah. And you think about, she was divorced three times. She was married and divorced and dealing with different men in her life and different issues. Not only the tension at the time for being Black at that time, the tension and all of the – I can’t even imagine the self-identity crisis continually happening as a Black person, let alone as a Black woman entrepreneur with a husband that you’re more successful than. That’s hard to do as women, some of us, now let alone back then. So, that’s such an amazing point. Did you want to say something, Monica?

Monica: Yeah, I was going to say the thought work, although obviously she probably had no idea...

Brooke: She didn’t have the Model...

Monica: Back then. One of the things I took a note of was the incredible self-transformation that she made, continually evolving herself over time, from someone who is the daughter of share croppers, who I’m sure had seen the horrors of enslavement, who moved to the north following brothers that has been chased out of the south by the Klan, to then working in the kitchen and being a laundrywoman and then a regal poised woman who was very steeped in her history, very proud. She was self-taught, basically, and self-made. She didn’t have a lot of formal education.

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And so, despite all that – and not only struggling with the identity of being Black in America, being a Black woman in America, being a Black woman who makes more than a husband. I can just only imagine all of the continual evolution and continual following of vision and remaining steadfast that, “No matter what, I am here to do this on this earth and I will let nothing deter me.” That kind of iron-clad will and determination, if I could just get like a smidgen of that, I’ll live an amazing life.

Brooke: Yeah, I mean she was doing the hustle door to door, selling her product, when she wasn’t having examples of that. She doesn’t have anyone inspiring her to do that. That was coming from within her. It’s just so admirable, I think, to witness what she actually did.

Let me read another couple quotes from her and then I’ll go to you, Anita. To New York Magazine in 1917 she said, “I got my start by giving myself a start.” She says, “Now, my object in life is not simply to make money for myself or to spend it on myself and dressing or running around in an automobile. But I’d love to use part of what I make to help others.” So good. “I had to make my own living and my own opportunity, but I made it. That is why I want to say, to every Negro woman present, don’t sit down and wait for the opportunities to come. You have to get up and make them for yourselves.” And that was at the National Negro Business League Convention. Alright, Anita, what have you got?

Anita: No, I think that those are really good. I think that they are ones that we can take hold of today. So for me, her heart for giving back, especially to women, is something that I love the most about all the things that I read. And even for me, in my own personal kind of mission or what I’m here to do, one of the reasons why I picked careers is because it’s a place to impact Black women from an economic perspective, both in the wage gap, but too, the willingness again to take the leap.

I think we’ve talked about before, the three of us, the ones that take the leap from Corporate America or our careers, which most would say are

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wonderful careers, to being our own businesswomen and being able to visualize what that might look like past the fear or having the self-confidence to do it anyway in those moments. And so, for me, it's the economic empowerment and what that offers. Because the more that you have that, the more rooms you go into, the greater opportunities that you have.

So, even if it's not, in that moment, about the money, the more I can spend time with you, spend time with these ladies, spend time in rooms, the more knowledge I gather, the more I can empower others with that knowledge as well.

Brooke: Yes, absolutely agreed. The last quote I'll read from her, and this was from the Indianapolis Recorder on March 15th 1919, she says, and I love this, "There is no royal flower-strewn road to success. And if there is, I haven't found it. for whatever success I've obtained is the result of many sleepless nights and real hard work."

What I love about that quote is you just sense how proud she is of herself. And that is something I think she demonstrates so beautifully. It's like, "I'm going to go and get this for myself and then I'm going to share it with others and then I'm going to acknowledge that yes, I did that." And I think the more we can take from that inspiration, that example, that possibility for what she was able to do – like, we're trying to make a million dollars now. That's insane. She made a million dollars then. Like, what?

Some of us think it's impossible now. But it can't be if she did it then. The way that she did it and building it up and setting up other women so they were having their own success based on their own success. So, the better they did, the better they were able to do in her corporation because of the way that she set it up. I just found that so extraordinary. Alright, you want to add anything else, Monica?

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Monica: I'm very, very intrigued by her life. And just as you were saying, one of the things, the numbers that I heard as far as how many women were impacted by her business was in the neighborhood of 20,000. And she was referred to as an engine of generational wealth development among Black people. These Black women that worked for her, I love either Walker Agent or Beauty Culturalist. I'm like, okay, I want to be a Beauty Culturalist.

So, she said that many of them earned more in a day than they had earned in a month cleaning houses or doing laundry for families and things like that. And so, they talked about her women writing in about the impact that she's had in their lives. That they were able to buy homes for their families. They were able to buy investment properties. So, I love that she lived her life, as we talked about, not only to do well for herself but she was adamant about being in an example of what was possible and constantly told these women that, "You can do exactly what I've done and let me help you."

And, you know, she did so much to help and educate other women. Like, I heard one story about how she would host women on the weekends and they would read the newspaper together because she remembered how pivotal women in the church were when she came to Saint Louis in teaching her how to read and teaching her things that she didn't know. And so, she gave that back. So, not only in monetary assistance, but she would host women in her home and they would read the newspaper at the table together. And when they came across a word that they didn't know, they would look it up together and learn. And I just think that was such an amazing aspect of her, that she was like – and Villa Lewaro, the house that she built, the estate that she built down the street from John Rockefeller in Upstate New York was there to be an example to Black people of what was possible.

Brooke: That's so audacious. It delights me so much. I love it so much. Alright, what about you, Brig, do you have any final words?

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Brig: Yeah, I think she was the example – I always love saying, “Be comfortable with other people’s discomfort.” She was the example of that. Like, people were uncomfortable about her; her image, what she wanted to do, who she represented. She wasn’t light-skinned. She didn’t have the look. And she was just willing to be comfortable with everybody’s discomfort of what she was, what she shouldn’t – all of the shoulds and shouldn’ts that we all coach our clients on right now.

It’s funny, it’s the same thing. It really is being comfortable with other people’s discomfort. She was just a master at it. Like, “Yeah, you have some opinions on me.” It’s like literally saying, “You have some thoughts about me. That goes on my C-line.”

Brooke: So good. What you’re referring to too, which I find so fascinating, is all of the products for African American women at that time were advertised, like I think it was Anita brought up earlier – by lighter-skinned black women. And that was kind of the underlying, like, “This is how we do it.” And she just decided, “No, that’s not how we do it. This is how we do it.” And tried it a different way. She didn’t look around to see how everyone else was doing it in order to inform – she wasn’t looking around and going, “Okay, what do Black women do? I’ll do the same thing.”

She was like, “What can I do as a dark-skinned Black woman?” and putting her face on the actual advertisements, I think, is the ultimate declaration that she made, “This is me. This is us. And I will succeed beyond anyone else that has done this before.” And that is the message of our lifetime right now too; don’t look around to see what everyone else has done. What are you going to do? I love it. Alright, what about you? What do you want to end on, Anita?

Anita: I will end on your past doesn’t dictate your future. So, a lot of times, we get wrapped up in where we started, right? And so, I think this is a good example of the slave plantation, a place that’s the start. I don’t think any of us have that story. And so, I mean, if you can start there and still be a

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millionaire, then that means, again, imagine what's possible for the rest of us. So, that's what it is for me; a reminder of our past only exists in our brain and it's done with, and looking forward to tomorrow and what I want to be going forward and how I want to show up going forward is the example that I took away as well.

Brooke: Yes, absolutely. Thank you guys so much for coming on. This was, like, such an amazing project for me. I want to encourage all of my podcast listeners to check out – I think that there's two documentaries and the Self-Made – that's a fictionalized account of her life – on Netflix. There's also the book *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*. I also want to encourage you to even just go to the History Channel site and read through what is being offered there for Black History Month. I found it very informative, very interesting, and also a little it astounding at how I have such a gap in my own knowledge, and I had what I thought was a thorough education and I'm realizing it wasn't at all.

And so, it's been a really eye-opening experience for me as a white woman, to be able to go in and learn more about people and Americans that have made such a huge contribution to our country that I was never taught about. So, I want to encourage each and every one of you to go there as well.

Before we end, will you please tell us how people can get in touch with you if they want more of what you have to offer? Maybe they want to get a little style coaching from you, Monica, where can they find you?

Monica: You can find me on Instagram @Monicasherese and monicasherese.com to book a call for coaching.

Brooke: Okay, let's go, what about you, Brig? How can people find more about you?

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Brig: I'm brigjohnson.com and on Instagram I'm @johnsonbrig and on Facebook I am Brig Johnson Coaching, and I have a podcast; Breakthrough with Brig.

Brooke: Breakthrough with Brig. Let's go. I love it. What about you, Anita?

Anita: Listen, you can find me everywhere. I have taken my name and tried to get it every place that I can. So, you can find me @sisyouareworthy at any social media. It's the name of my website and the name of my podcast. So, Sis You Are Worthy, and you will find me just about everywhere.

Brooke: Yes, please check these women out. They are doing amazing work in this world. I am so honored to be on this podcast with each of you. I appreciate you taking your time to celebrate Madam C.J. Walker's life. And I hope you all enjoyed this and we'll talk to you next week. Thanks again, everyone. Bye.

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