

Jess Dang: Hi there, you're listening to episode number 18 of the Cook Smarts Podcast. I'm Jess Dang, the Founder of Cook Smarts, and I'm here to help you become a more confident, and organized cook in the kitchen. So 15 episodes ago, in episode number three, we introduced you to Jess Smith, who is our Meal Plan and Recipe Developer. If you are a Cook Smarts fan and haven't listened to that episode, I highly recommend digging it up in your feed. It gives you a behind the scenes look into our business, and if you love that sort of thing, you will love today's episode as well. Because, I've invited another team member, Sarah Byun, to chat with me today.

Jess Dang: Sarah's official title is Kitchen Happiness Cheerleader, and she is the boss of our customer service inbox. She makes sure that all of our meal plan members get their questions answered, concerns addressed, she fulfills fundraising requests. But, she doesn't just keep our members happy, I feel like she keeps our entire team happy. Her cheery, positive, and, "I can get anything done," attitude totally stood out to me when we were interviewing for this position over four years ago. Even though hiring is one of the scariest things an entrepreneur does, this was a hiring decision that I never had any doubts about.

Jess Dang: I honestly do not know how she does it, because Sarah works for Cook Smarts about 20 hours a week, while home schooling her two kids in Washington DC. Her family has come along on several Cook Smarts trips, so I've gotten to know them over the last few years, and I would be so lucky if my kids turned out like hers. They are sweet, curious, and so polite. And, because Sarah can do her job from anywhere and teach her kids from anywhere in the world, they were actually all in London when we taped this episode. One day off a transatlantic flight, and she was willing to jump on the phone with me to chat about her Cook Smarts story, despite being jet lagged. That's just the kind of lady she is, and I feel really lucky to call her both a co-worker, and a friend. Let's go ahead and meet Sarah.

Jess Dang: Sarah, I'm so happy that I get to introduce you to the rest of the Cook Smarts community today, even though many people have already interacted with you through all the emails as our wonderfully patient and helpful Kitchen Happiness Cheerleader. But, today we're going to get to learn so much more about the woman who keeps our members happy. Sarah, you joined Cook Smarts the spring of 2015, so it's been over four years since you've been a part of the team. Can you even remember what life was like before Cook Smarts?

Sarah Byun: Barely, yes. Barely.

Jess Dang: But in all seriousness, tell us about your life before joining the Cook Smarts team.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, I have a kind of typical Washington DC story. I moved to DC for grad school, and I worked on Capitol Hill for several years. Then, after that I switched to government relations for a big medical association, so I did that for a while. Then, when we had our first baby in 2010, my husband and I had this brilliant idea that I would go back to work, and he would be the stay at home dad. That's what we did, and it worked great for like 12 hours. Then we were like, "What were we thinking? This is not fun for any of us." I

was having a hard time, the baby was having a hard time, my husband was having a hard time. So, then we just switched back.

Sarah Byun: Never in a million years did I think that I would be a stay at home mom, but that's the way things ended up. I loved it, I still love it. So then, I was basically a stay at home mom until I joined Cook Smarts as a customer, which led to joining the team.

Jess Dang: Yeah. You really, you didn't really have an intention of working at any point, right? You were happy being a stay at home mom, like you just said. Do you remember how you found out about the job and decided that maybe it would be kind of an interesting addition to your life?

Sarah Byun: Yeah, well so because I loved being a stay at home mom so much anyway, and I never could have wrapped my mind around being able to work and then also being able to stay at home, the idea of working wasn't even on my radar. But, I was a Cook Smarts customer at the time, and there was a Facebook post about it, that you were looking for somebody just to help, there were a whole lot of different kind of random tasks that you needed help with.

Jess Dang: Yes, yes.

Sarah Byun: I looked at Juman, my husband I was like, "I kind of do all of this stuff already." It was like because I was already on the Facebook page, and I was already reading reviews, and writing reviews, and kind of interacting that way. And, it felt like it was something that I could do, that would fit into how I was already using Cook Smarts every day. That's how I found out about it. I saw it on a Facebook post and I said to Juman, "This might be crazy, but I'd kind of like to apply. I think it'd be really fun." And, the rest is history.

Jess Dang: Yes it is. I'm so happy that you saw that post and decided to apply.

Sarah Byun: Me too.

Jess Dang: Do you remember what originally led you to finding a meal plans service? How old were your kids, what kind of state was dinner in at the time?

Sarah Byun: Yeah, I remember really clearly. I've always enjoyed cooking, but then of course with two kids, it just gets harder to make that time to cook in a way that's fun. But, really what led me to Cook Smarts is I was having some health issues, so I had some knee injuries, and some pretty serious knee problems. When I went, I started seeing a chiropractor and the very first thing that he told me was that I needed to cut all grains out of my diet. Which, when he said that I'm like, "Okay, sure. No big deal." Then, you realize that grains are literally in everything. It's not just cutting out gluten, but cutting out all grains.

Sarah Byun: I started kind of searching for paleo recipes, because that seemed to be the easiest way to be able to continue cooking, but cut out grains. But, paleo recipes, everything that I found was crazy complicated, and it involved all of these steps, and first you have to

make your own homemade bread using coconut flour. I just, I don't have time for that. I was going crazy because I felt like I couldn't find things to eat that were satisfying, and interesting, and like basically sustainable. I posted on Facebook asking if anybody had suggestions for meal plan services, because some that I had looked at, they just, they weren't appealing. It was the kind where you pay them to give you a recipe, and you dump stuff in a Crock-Pot, and you're supposed to call it dinner, which wasn't working.

Sarah Byun: I posted to Facebook asking for suggestions, and two friends, a friend from high school, and a friend from college recommended Cook Smarts. I just joined, I didn't even do the free trial.

Jess Dang: Really? Two friends? Two separate friends? Oh, wow.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, two separate friends. Yeah. Yeah, had recommended Cook Smarts. I think they're both still members, so hi to Jara and Lorian if you guys are listening. And, thank you. I joined, and it was perfect because I was eating grain free, paleo-ish. Then, I could still get dinner on the table in less than an hour, so it was a game changer.

Jess Dang: Do you still eat grain free, or how does your family kind of adjust to all of that limited dieting?

Sarah Byun: Yes. When we first started, they really didn't even notice because I think as long as you're giving people food that's good, they don't care if it's grain free or whatever. I don't follow a grain free diet as strictly now as I did, but when I do, or even just partially it makes it so much easier that I never have to think ... because, I like to cook, but I hate thinking about what to cook, and that's why Cook Smarts was perfect for me.

Jess Dang: Well, I'm so glad that, that it all worked out, that we got two wins from Facebook-

Sarah Byun: It all worked out.

Jess Dang: ... From getting the recommendation for you to join Cook Smarts, and then for applying for the job.

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: You, like Jess Smith, who is our Meal Planner, our official Recipe Developer, Meal Planner, went from being customers, to then becoming employees. Was there anything that surprised, shocked, or scared you as you got a peek behind the scenes, and really saw "how the sausage is made"?

Sarah Byun: Yeah, well it was so fun because I, I mean I love Cook Smarts as a customer. And so, it felt really fun to get, it's like getting a backstage kind of pass, you get to see what's happening. I think that what surprised me the most is just how much work goes into things that just seem simple. Like, not even a whole meal plan, but just one recipe, that there are like 100 steps that go into everything. And, everybody is pitching in at

different parts, sometimes at the same time, sometimes at different ways. That was surprising, to see just truly how much work goes into everything.

Sarah Byun: Then, also it's so fun for me to see how much a small team can pull off, or how much a small business can accomplish with a small team. It's been so fun to see that, and that's one of my favorite parts of the job, is like the behind the scenes view. Sometimes I get to cook recipes ahead of time, and that feels really fun and exciting, to be behind the scenes. Yeah, definitely surprising.

Jess Dang: Yes. Yes, I like to think that our team is small and mighty, and that everybody kind of wears so many different hats. Even though you are the woman that's on the front lines of our customer service inbox, you also touch the meal plans in so many different ways. You help proofread, and like you said, you do some testing on the paleo recipes. Yeah, so everybody really has a part in the final product.

Sarah Byun: That is definitely true.

Jess Dang: I mean, customer service, it is a tough job. And, I remember when I was the one that was doing all of it, and trying to respond to all these emails. Because, most of the time people are reaching out to you because they've got a problem.

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: Are there things that you've had to do to kind of keep some of the more negative aspects from getting to you?

Sarah Byun: Yeah. Well, I think the flip side of that is that I also get to make people happy, which is really fun. They write in with a problem or not being able to figure something out, and I get to make them happy by helping them fix it, so that's actually the good part of it. And, a lot of times when people write in and they are harsh because they're frustrated, I mean we've all been there, you know?

Sarah Byun: You're frustrated because you can't login to your account, and you've got groceries, and people are waiting for dinner. I get it, that people get frustrated. But, I think that as soon as they realize that I'm a real person, a real person is responding to them and not like a robot. Then, they often take a kinder tone, and it's never ... I mean, Cook Smarts has such a great customer base anyway, that people are always kind.

Sarah Byun: And, the other part that I have come to realize that I really love about customer service is that, it really is like micro marketing. I get to help people understand, and know more about Cook Smarts. Or, maybe even appreciate Cook Smarts on a one on one level. I love it. All of that far, far outweighs any negative that would come from people writing when they're upset.

Jess Dang: No, totally. I do find that when people are upset and you respond to them in a respectful, kind manner, it immediately changes the tone-

Sarah Byun: Absolutely.

Jess Dang: ... And, they are surprised, and yeah. It is such like, in a way it is really lovely to just not let it get to you, and respond in a way that just shows empathy, that you understand the problem, and then go from there.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, absolutely.

Jess Dang: Have there been any customer service emails that have stood out to you? Whether they were good or bad.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, so I love, love when we get emails from people who are writing to tell us about a success story, and it really runs the gamut. Sometimes it's getting an email from somebody who has never cooked a homemade meal before, and because of Cook Smarts, they're in this new routine, and that's always really fun. Or, somebody like you, who had a health issue and was able to use Cook Smarts to help them either fix a health problem, or meet a health goal, those are really, really fun and fulfilling to read. Then, sometimes people write in with kind of like funny ... oh, we get a lot of people who write in because an email address was misspelled, and they just need help with that.

Jess Dang: Yes.

Sarah Byun: Those kinds of things are easy and kind of funny-

Jess Dang: We get a lot of "Gnails".

Jess Dang: Like, a lot of people who spell Gmail with a G-N-A-I-L. We get a lot of that.

Sarah Byun: We get a ton of "Gnails"

Jess Dang: Yes.

Sarah Byun: ... We get a ton of Gmail.cons, that happens a lot too.

Jess Dang: Yes.

Sarah Byun: But yeah, I just love it when people write in, telling us how Cook Smarts has helped them in the kitchen.

Jess Dang: Yeah, so if you are a member listening and you have a success story, please don't keep it to yourself. This really is the stuff that makes our day.

Sarah Byun: Absolutely.

Jess Dang: Send it over to Sarah, just email her at [Hello@CookSmarts.com](mailto>Hello@CookSmarts.com). That is one part that I miss the most, I do feel like because of the Facebook Kitchen Heroes group, that I still

feel very much in touch with members. But, just not having that day to day in the email in our customer service inbox, I do miss that a lot.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, it's so fun. It's one of my favorite parts of the job.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I do remember some funny ones though, like it's kind of bad where people ... sometimes the bad stuff is what stands out, and you kind of forget the hundreds of good stuff. But, I definitely remember a few kind of just off like ... you're just like, "What is this ..." I got one where this gentleman was really upset that we were not being very American, for not doing-

Sarah Byun: Oh no.

Jess Dang: ... More red meat in our meals, you know? It's like, well, there are other ... Yeah.

Sarah Byun: Oh no.

Jess Dang: Yeah, that's one I remember very, very clearly for some reason.

Sarah Byun: Good thing we have ... yes. good thing we have lots of versions for him to try out.

Jess Dang: Yes. Do you feel like the job has gotten easier over time? Because, I'm sure in the beginning it was a bit of a learning curve, just like from getting to know the ins and outs of the service, and some of the more technical side of things. But, I'm sure that now, we are more than four years in, you're such a pro.

Sarah Byun: Oh, well I mean it definitely has gotten easier just because I feel more confident in what I'm doing. In the beginning especially, it felt stressful because every question that we got in customer service, or anything that came up as I was proofreading meal plans, or doing metrics. Whatever I was doing, I felt like I had to reach out to you, or reach out to somebody to ask how to do just every single little thing. Now that I feel like I'm in a groove, and I feel more confident with what I'm doing, that makes it a lot easier, certainly.

Sarah Byun: But, I think that even that said, I do still have to stay flexible as things change, whether things are changing when we changed our website, and then other technologies, and using new tools, those things. Just staying flexible, but everybody has to do that, right? You have to be open when things change, and that's fine.

Jess Dang: Yeah, exactly. We've added a lot of different features, and I'm sure that's increased questions here and there. But, I think really for me, and this is advice for anyone that's kind of running a solo business that wants to grow, just document everything. I think this was such a great thing that, it was such a forcing function for me to like, when I hired people to like offload tasks off my plate that I just was like, "I need to start documenting things, of how I do things, or how things need to get done."

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: Now, we have those things, so if ever we need a substitute for you, or you need backup, at least we have that documentation in place, that someone can find how to do the wide variety of things that need to be done.

Sarah Byun: Right. I think that's great advice.

Jess Dang: Also, we have a really small team, small and mighty team, so everyone does a lot. You have been such a huge part of building Cook Smarts to what it is today. You came on in 2015, and that was such a transformative year for me personally, because I had my first child, and also then hired three amazing employees to help me out so I could actually take some maternity leave, and just-

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: ... Not do nearly as much as I was doing. Jackie Sun, she had been a contract for us, but with my family growing I was ready to take a leap and hire official employees, and really make that commitment to the company.

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: And, it was incredibly scary to do, but I just ... yeah, I just knew within the five minutes of talking to you, that you were the exact person we'd been looking for, for this Kitchen Happiness role.

Sarah Byun: Oh, wow.

Jess Dang: That conversation just almost didn't happen, because you were actually in Korea at the time, right?

Sarah Byun: That's right, that's right. Yes.

Jess Dang: Yes. I can't remember exactly the order of events, but we almost didn't interview you.

Sarah Byun: Right, because I was in Korea, and I was still really on the fence about applying. I applied kind of at the last minute for the job, and then when we were setting up the interview I was in Korea, and the timeframe that you had for me because of the time difference in Korea, I was going to be on an airplane the entire time. It was just insane, like madness. We couldn't nail down a time, and all that starts to happen. Then I was like, "I don't know, is this really the right thing to do anyway?" Looking back at that, Jess, I'm so glad that we made it work. Thank you so much-

Jess Dang: Oh, gosh.

Sarah Byun: ... For letting me interview, and for hiring me, because it has all just been so perfect.

Jess Dang: Oh, if ... I mean, it really felt that way. It was just kind of kismet and fate, where I remember-

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: ... We had interviewed, I don't know. We had interviewed a lot of people. A lot of people applied for this role, it's just ... to me, I think that just speaks to what an amazing community we have, that we don't really, we don't advertise on any of these job sites like, I don't know, like ZipRecruiter. All this stuff you hearing, listening on-

Sarah Byun: Right, sure.

Jess Dang: podcast advertisements. I just remember sending out a blast to our email list, which is significant. Then, people clearly shared it with their friends, and we got a lot of applicants, and we sorted through them. And, Jackie and I got to a shortlist that we interviewed, and I think we had spent like a week on interviews, and we had interviewed probably a dozen people. We were sharing an office, we were renting a co-working space, and she and I were doing kind of tag team with the interviews where, as soon as I would finish, I'd go up and find her. We were in a conference room, and I would find her, and then she would go to do the interview.

Jess Dang: I just remember after talking to you, just being so excited to talk to Jackie. Being like, "Sarah's the one-"

Sarah Byun: Oh my gosh.

Jess Dang: ... "We don't need to look further, I'm done."

Sarah Byun: Oh, that is so fun to hear.

Jess Dang: I didn't want it to be like so topped out, and she was just like, "Yeah, I feel the same way." It was just perfect.

Sarah Byun: Oh, that is so nice. Thank you.

Jess Dang: Yeah. Now, you've been with us since 2015, how do you think the company has grown and changed during the time that you've been with us?

Sarah Byun: It really, I mean it really has a lot. I feel like that we have hit our stride. We have such a solid foundation, and a good, solid kind of order of operations that we get everything done. And because of that, it gives us a lot more freedom and flexibility to focus on innovating, and kind of improving things, and doing things. Further adding to the service, and further reaching out so we can expand our base. That's been really fun to see. But, then there's so much about Cook Smarts that's just, it's always been great, and it's still been great. I'm happy for that. I love that, when a company is able to change,

and grow, and keep moving forward. But, doesn't lose itself, and I love that, because Cook Smarts has definitely not lost itself.

Jess Dang: No, no, definitely not. I think one of the things I realize as we've built up this team of four, that since you started out as a customer, you had so much more to offer than just the customer service stuff. You really had the insight of what ... like, how a customer wants to use the service, and what things we can improve on, and it was great to just pull you in to help with the meal plans, especially with the paleo stuff because you had experience making the paleo meal plans.

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: That first year, I think you were very much ... I very much just wanted you to get up to speed with the customer service stuff, but after year two when we were really gelling as a team, it just made sense that everybody would be part of creating the meal plans together. I think it was the following year that we started to do the meal plan brainstorm as the whole team doing it, versus just Jess and I doing it-

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: ... Through email and stuff. I think over the years since we've started doing it as a team, and every year the process has improved, it's just been so fun. I think you're totally right, we've just hit our stride, and it's been so great.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, it is so fun.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Sarah Byun: And, I also really love that about Cook Smarts, that it's not ... in terms of how it works behind the scenes, it's not siloed, you know? I'm obviously not a meal planner, that's why I joined Cook Smarts in the first place. But, even though that is not my natural strong suit, I feel like it's something that I've been able to develop, and you and Jess are so open to our ideas, which is great. It works out, I think it works out for everybody that way.

Jess Dang: I feel like the last year, I remember you had so many great ideas that were ... I was like, "See? Everybody can become a recipe developer."

Sarah Byun: I think it's because I've been a member of Cook Smarts for so long, you've taught me well Jess.

Jess Dang: No, that's great. I don't want people to think that we are really just a team of four. We are small and mighty, but we have a whole team of contractors that also help out with everything, and it's just been-

Sarah Byun: Yes, right.

Jess Dang: ... We have our four core members, but lots of people behind the scenes also helping with our graphics, and email marketing, and it really is such a big team effort. Everyone kind of works with everyone, and it just ... because we are very organized, while not surprising for a meal plan service, we are a product that helps people organize their life, so therefore we ourselves behind the scenes happen also to be very organized. That makes everything work out really well, because everyone is remote.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, which is great. Yes.

Jess Dang: Yeah, yeah. Speaking of that, I would guess that being remote, that probably is one of your favorite parts of the job. It'd be great to see each other in person, but it's probably really great to have flexibility, especially being still a stay at home mom.

Sarah Byun: It really is, and there's no way that I could work otherwise. I feel like a lot of businesses, small or otherwise, really miss the mark on this because I feel like there's this whole kind of group of people ... I mean, women in particular if we're being honest in terms of people who are stay at home moms, or people even who want to be home with their children, but who would also like to work in some way. I think being open to hiring that kind of person is so important, because there's this huge untapped potential. People who want to work, and who want to use their strengths, and put it towards something bigger. But, they can't commit to working 40 hours a week, and I feel like I get so much more done in little chunks of time that I do my Cook Smarts work, than I would if I were chained to a desk all day. I feel like that's so inefficient.

Sarah Byun: And so, the flexibility that it gives me, not only does it work well with my lifestyle, but it lets me be part of a team that I otherwise would never be able to be part of.

Jess Dang: Yeah, and for us it's just worked so well because I really do believe the same thing as you do, that women ... you had this whole career, and this whole identity before you had kids. That doesn't-

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: ... Just go away. It's not like all that development you did in skills just goes away forever. I feel like not taking advantage of that, the companies that don't take advantage of that are kind of really missing out. Because, it's right there-

Sarah Byun: Absolutely.

Jess Dang: ... This huge, untapped resource of labor. I just feel like the contribution you have made to Cook Smarts is so great, and I love that we are all remote, and we love that everyone works on their own time. We're all responsible people, and know what our deadlines are, and it's just-

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: ... Never been a problem. The work always gets done.

Sarah Byun: Right, exactly. And, you're willing to ... because we get to be so flexible in our work, then it's no big deal if we're texting each other saying, "I need this." Or, "Can you help with that?" It's kind of part of being a part of a flexible team, which is so great.

Jess Dang: Yes. I mean, let's switch gears a bit and talk a bit about your family, because I know it's a huge part of what makes you the great woman you are. Can you tell us a bit more about your kids, any eating challenges they've had?

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Sarah Byun: Sure. We have two kids. I have a nine year old daughter, and a five year old little boy. They are just so fun. They really keep us on our toes, but they are so much fun to be around. In terms of eating challenges, so I would like to say no, my kids eat everything I give them, and we've never had any trouble. But, I'm going to be truthful to you, Jess. Sometimes it's really hard, and I feel like we did everything right. We did the whole baby-led weaning, and introducing foods early, and my daughter was eating kimchi when she was 18 months old, those kinds of things. Then, I feel like there's something that just happens in every toddlers brain, where suddenly they only want foods that are white, or crunchy, and it's very hard.

Sarah Byun: My daughter still kind of eats like a bird. She just, she doesn't eat that much, and she doesn't like that big of a variety. She'll eat healthy foods, you know? She would be totally fine eating air popped popcorn, and cucumbers for dinner. That's her idea of the perfect dinner. Then, our son on the other hand, eats like a grown man. There's got to be some kind of happy medium, I haven't found it yet. I'm going to keep introducing them to new foods, keep on with Cook Smarts, and hope for the best. But, it's tricky for sure.

Jess Dang: Going back to Ellyn Satter's Division of Responsibility Philosophy, you're doing your job. You're providing them with healthy meals, and good options, and set meal times, and it's really up to them at this point.

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Sarah Byun: I think that's fine, I think that's good for them.

Jess Dang: Exactly. I think, I mean my kids are still really young, but I've already seen them go through so many phases that I really do think that a lot of it is just like the patience of time, and just letting things run its course.

Sarah Byun: Yes, and not making a big deal about it. Like, not making food emotional, or stressful. To just, like you said, just kind of wait it out, and it'll all work out.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I think so often we make it about us in the sense that like popcorn, cucumbers? I think that actually is a perfectly fine dinner. But, I think a lot of it's like, we spent the time, mental energy, and physical energy to create this meal. Why are you rejecting it, you know?

Sarah Byun: Yes, yes.

Jess Dang: We just take it as like, you're rejecting us, and I'm-

Sarah Byun: Taking it personally.

Jess Dang: ... Yes. I am in the same boat and trying, trying really hard not to take it personally. It's hard, especially since we work in a company that helps other people put dinner on the table.

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: It's extra, extra hard.

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: You are still home schooling your two kids.

Sarah Byun: Yes, we home school.

Jess Dang: Yeah, and so what was some of your thinking behind that, when you decided to do that?

Sarah Byun: Yeah, so again, just like I said earlier that I would never in a million years thought that I'd be a stay at home mom, I definitely would not have thought that I'd be a stay at home, home schooling mom. It just, it wasn't something that was ever on my radar as something that would be good to do. Then, we moved to DC, and DC has tough school issues to deal with. I started meeting lots of different types of families who were home schooling, so it wasn't just from one specific area, or they were ... everybody wasn't home schooling for the same reason, and so then when I started to realize how diverse it is, and how many options there are with it, I started to look into it more seriously.

Sarah Byun: Then at that point, it really became something that seemed like it would be fun to do. I was a stay at home mom at that point, I guess Joy was about three when we kind of made the decision that we were really going to do it. Really what it came down to, Jess, is just that I like being with her when she learns, and I like helping her learn, and helping her discover things. I really wanted the opportunity to do that, and let's kind of see how this goes. And, DC is a great place to live for home schooling families because, there are a ton of resources, and so many of them are free. When we're studying about the

constitution, we don't just read about it in a book, we hop on a bus and go over to the national archives, and get to actually see the constitution. And, get tours about it, and all that good stuff.

Sarah Byun: I really love it. It's so much fun to be with them, and then I'm learning and growing. I got really good advice from a woman before we even started this journey. She said, she advised me to just reevaluate every single year.

Jess Dang: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sarah Byun: So, every year just say, "Is this still working?" If it is still working, keep at it. And if it's not, switch it up, or do whatever you need to do to make it work. There's just so much freedom in that. Then we just do it, and as long as my kids are learning, and having fun learning, and I'm happy, it's great. I feel like we're in a great spot.

Jess Dang: Yeah, and having spent a lot of time with your kids through all these meetups we've had, they are just like-

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: ... They're doing so well.

Sarah Byun: Awe.

Jess Dang: Not to say that, it's just like they are learning so much, they're so curious, and it seems to be really working for you. Honestly, when I see you guys, you and your family, I'm like, "I should move back to the DC area and home school my kids."

Sarah Byun: Awe.

Jess Dang: I seriously have thought about it. You know, because I grew up around the DC area, and there are so many times when I'm like, "Man, that was a really great childhood, growing up outside of DC and having access to all these great resources." Yeah, it was just a great area-

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: ... To grow up in.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, and I think it's a little bit tricky to talk about school decisions with people, because it almost seems like if there's something that you love, then innately it's kind of like judging the other option. It doesn't have to be that way. I mean, I think that there are schools in DC that are great, private, public, charter, whatever. And, my kids would probably thrive there and be fine, but I love, I'm so grateful that everybody has the freedom to do what works best for them, and for their kid, and their family regardless. Yeah, there are lots of places for that, but I feel especially lucky to be in DC for it.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I mean, I feel like it makes so much sense in terms of the role you have. You get to be this frontline cheerleader for your kids every single day as they're learning-

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: ... And, doing the same for Cook Smarts customers, helping them learn to put dinner on the table, improve their cooking skills.

Sarah Byun: I love it.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Sarah Byun: Yeah.

Jess Dang: I see how it works really well. But, you do have a lot going on. You are with the kids all day long, and helping them with their lessons, you've got customer service emails waiting for you, not to mention the fact that you've got a household, and a husband, and all these other things, and friends. How do you do it all and balance, and make sure that everything you love fits into your life?

Sarah Byun: Right, that's a great question. Benaiah, my youngest, was 18 months old when I started. I've pretty much been working at Cook Smarts the whole time. I think because of that, it's just always been a part of our daily routine. Then, because we home school, when the kids sit down to do certain work, then I'll sit down to do Cook Smarts work. Or, sometimes there are school activities, or things that we'll do that involve the computer, so then they're doing their computer work, and I'm doing my computer work.

Sarah Byun: I read a really interesting book called, "The Fringe Hours," that made me rethink kind of how I'm spending my time. I think a lot of times too, instead of kicking back and watching a movie, or watching a show, or whatever people do. That, when I do some of that, I either do work instead of that, or do it while I'm working. My husband also sometimes works from home, and so we'll do that together, which is fun. Either before the kids wake up, or after they've gone to bed.

Sarah Byun: It just works. It doesn't feel like I don't have time for Cook Smarts, it doesn't feel like I don't have time for other things, because it's been just a part of our routine for the whole time. I think really, you make time for your priorities, and it all just kind of works out.

Jess Dang: Yeah, and I do think that probably just the fact that the work is flexible and also remote, that even though you're on, it doesn't seem as maybe as like draining as having to be in the office, or getting through a commute, and really feel like those are-

Sarah Byun: Absolutely.

Jess Dang: ... Often the fringe hours I would think about for most people. Today, there's so many good podcasts to listen to, but it still does feel like wasted time, you know?

Sarah Byun: Right, yeah.

Jess Dang: Yeah. Because for me, I have no commute these days, and if I had to do one again, I don't know what I would ... I would just feel-

Sarah Byun: Oh my gosh.

Jess Dang: ... So frustrated, angry I think.

Sarah Byun: Yeah, I can't imagine.

Jess Dang: I know there are lots of people, especially moms out there who are looking for this type of work that you do, the part-time flexible remote work. Do you have any advice for them on how to find something like that?

Sarah Byun: Gosh, I feel ... Jess, I feel so lucky that I found this. I feel like my advice would be more geared toward business owners, to really tap into people, to look for people who maybe don't want to, or who can't do a full 40 hour, at a desk job, and to be open minded about hiring other people who have tons of skills, and tons to offer but they want to work from home instead. Because, it would just be so great. I have so many friends who would love to be able to do something like this, but there just aren't ... it's so hard to find something that allows you kind of the best of both worlds, really.

Jess Dang: Yes, I agree. Yeah, I really do feel like more businesses should be open to it, and I would love to add more roles like this. People, if you're listening, tell your friends about Cook Smarts so that we can make more money, and then hire more people.

Sarah Byun: Yes, yes.

Jess Dang: Yes, because we would love to have a bigger team, and do more things, and really take advantage of this amazing resource out there.

Sarah Byun: Right.

Jess Dang: All right, so that's everything I've got, but I would love to do a rapid fire round with you before we close.

Sarah Byun: Oh fun. Okay, let's do it, sure.

Jess Dang: Okay, so you just name ... I'm going to say something, and you just name the first thing that comes to mind for you.

Sarah Byun: Okay, got it.

Jess Dang: Okay. Your most important kitchen tool?

Sarah Byun: Cast iron skillet, hands down.

Jess Dang: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. Your go-to breakfast?

Sarah Byun: Fried egg, and coffee.

Jess Dang: You have 15 minutes to make a meal, what is it?

Sarah Byun: Korean veggie fried rice.

Jess Dang: Favorite Cook Smarts meal?

Sarah Byun: Oh gosh. The steak with Chimichurri sauce. Oh, that's really hard though.

Jess Dang: Oh, yeah. Oh.

Sarah Byun: That's our recent favorite, yes.

Jess Dang: One ingredient you always have in your pantry?

Sarah Byun: Good olive oil.

Jess Dang: Hmm. A guilty pleasure food or not?

Sarah Byun: Oh, there's this new chocolate place that's opened up in Union Station that's called Neuhaus, and they have the best chocolates. Sometimes I'll go out of my way so I can be near Union Station. So, Neuhaus chocolate I will say.

Jess Dang: Oh, I need to make a stop when I'm back in DC in a few months.

Sarah Byun: Oh my gosh, yes.

Jess Dang: Your favorite life optimizational organization app?

Sarah Byun: I am so old school, I have a paper planner that I carry around in my bag all the time. It's always with me.

Jess Dang: Oh, yes. I still think paper is the best.

Sarah Byun: Yep.

Jess Dang: Yep. Hardest thing you've done?

Sarah Byun: Having two home births I think, yes.

Jess Dang: If we ever do an episode, as a little off tangent on home births, we'll talk about that.

Sarah Byun: That sounds great.

Jess Dang: Proudest thing you've done?

Sarah Byun: I guess two home births.

Jess Dang: Yeah, I would ... that is a very amazing thing. The last book you loved?

Sarah Byun: Oh, I just finished The Great Alone by Kristin Hannah, and it was so good.

Jess Dang: Oh, this is the woman that wrote The Nightingale, right?

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: Did she write The Nightingale?

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: Oh, okay, all right.

Sarah Byun: Yes, she wrote Nightingale, yes.

Jess Dang: Okay, I love The Nightingale, I have not heard of this new book.

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: The last TV show you loved?

Sarah Byun: I'm kind of embarrassed to admit this, maybe this is also a guilty pleasure. But, I'm rewatching Grey's Anatomy on Netflix, and it is ... it's so good. Like the old, the first seasons are so good. So yes, old school Grey's Anatomy.

Jess Dang: I still watch Grey's Anatomy. I think they're on season like 35, I don't know what it is.

Sarah Byun: I think you're right.

Jess Dang: But it's like, I still watch it. It's one of those shows that I feel like makes you really appreciate ... like, all these medical drama shows make me really appreciate life.

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: I'm like, "I ..." Yeah.

Sarah Byun: Yes, that's a great point.

Jess Dang: Like, I'm not dying on a gurney right now, so, yeah.

Sarah Byun: Right, yeah.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Sarah Byun: A bomb didn't explode around me, so I'm doing just fine.

Jess Dang: Oh yes, yeah. They really go off the rails, but yes.

Sarah Byun: They do. I try to stick with it though.

Jess Dang: Oh gosh, Sarah. It was such a pleasure to chat with you today. We've been teammates for over four years now, but I really-

Sarah Byun: I can't believe that.

Jess Dang: ... I know, the time just flies. I have a four year old now.

Sarah Byun: It does.

Jess Dang: When I brought you on to Cook Smarts, when you came to Cook Smarts I didn't have a kid, and now I have a four year old.

Sarah Byun: That's unbelievable. There are so many new Cook Smarts kids now.

Jess Dang: Yeah. But, it's just been so great to kind of go through this parenting journey through a wiser, more experienced parent like yourself.

Sarah Byun: Awe.

Jess Dang: I've just really ... we've been teammates for a long time, but I really just consider you just like a wise and great friend, and I'm so happy-

Sarah Byun: Awe.

Jess Dang: ... To have you as an integral part of Cook Smarts.

Sarah Byun: Likewise, Jess. Thank you.

Jess Dang: For the folks listening, if you ever want to say hello to Sarah, just email her at Hello@CookSmarts.com because she is the woman making sure all of our members are happy.

Sarah Byun: Yes.

Jess Dang: Yes.

Jess Dang: Isn't she fantastic? I hope you enjoyed our chat, and getting a peek into our small little company where everyone wears a dozen hats, because we have to be an incredibly small and lean company. And also, because moms can do it all, and do it all so efficiently because we have to. Public service announcement for other companies out there, moms are amazing workers, please hire them.

Jess Dang: If you are a meal plan service member, I hope it makes you feel good that your monthly, quarterly, or annual payment goes to support such great team members, and a pretty great product too. If you are not a meal plan service member, come onboard. You can grab a free 30 day trial at CookSmarts.com, and maybe one day you'll find yourself working for us too. I am actually in the middle of crafting some job postings, so make sure you're on our email list, or following us on Instagram because we will post it there first.

Jess Dang: And lastly, I mentioned this in episode number three when I interviewed Jess, but if you are an entrepreneur listening right now, I know that hiring good people is really hard, and deciding who to hire can be some of your hardest decisions. For me, I use a combination of creating an application that really screens for what I'm looking for. I care way less about resumes and cover letters, because it's really hard to pinpoint from those types of things, can this person actually do this job? And also, just gut feel.

Jess Dang: For this role, people were given three real customer service emails that we had actually received, in real life, in our inbox, and asked them to answer them in their application. I was looking for one, has this person done their homework about our meal plan service to answer these emails? Two, what their writing skills were. And three, how do they react when they're sent something really negative? Because unfortunately, that is just a part of the job. We rarely get those kind of emails, but it does happen from time to time. And, for those wondering what the negative email was, here is what they had to respond to.

Jess Dang: Okay, so this is ... I can't remember what year this person wrote in, but here it is. "I discovered your website through a blogger who claims this website saves time, and delivers easy to make, tasty recipes. I decided to look into all the hype and rave, only to be disappointed. After looking at the sample menu, it doesn't fit my diet at all. For religious reasons I do not eat beef and pork. Moreover, I'm allergic to shellfish, and despise seafood in general. It's almost infuriating to see the recipes divided into only four options, which implies how narrow minded the creators are. As a physician I would never divide patients into four groups, and treat everyone the same way."

Jess Dang: "Everyone has different dietary requirements that must be addressed. For example, a person without a gallbladder cannot digest any form of fat. Doing so would cause extreme pain and discomfort. But, since I am not a client, I doubt I will receive a response, or merely the typical, 'Thank you for your suggestions, we'll keep that in mind,' condescending tone. Assuming this email has been read, thank you for your time."

- Jess Dang: I remember getting this email and having to take a moment before I responded. Clearly this person was truly upset, and we wanted to acknowledge that. But, our service was also never going to work for them, and we wanted to make that clear too. That's what I was looking for in a response, and here's what Sarah wrote.
- Jess Dang: "I'm so sorry that Cook Smarts does not meet your needs. While we try to provide easily customizable meals that suit a wide range of tastes, it simply is impossible for us to accommodate every type of diet. As you pointed out, our service likely isn't the right fit for someone with sensitive dietary needs. That said, we're committed to continuously improving, and we take customer feedback very seriously. We're hopeful that as we grow and learn, we can offer even more recipe options. Thank you for taking the time to let us know your concerns, the Cook Smarts team."
- Jess Dang: This was just such a great answer from Sarah. I love that it addressed the writers feelings, because we like to acknowledge everybody's feelings. But, she also kept her response short, because this was a customer we were unlikely to win the business of, and maybe not even want the business of because she was looking for something that we just could not offer.
- Jess Dang: Anyways, there was lots more to the application, but I was able to just quickly skim the answers job applicants provided to these three customer service questions, and then narrow down to a to be considered list of candidates. From there, I let the other answers help guide me some more, and from the moment I met Sarah on our video chat, our video interview, I knew she was the one.
- Jess Dang: Good luck with building out your team if you're an entrepreneur. If you want to see the job description and application for this role, head to our show notes at CookSmarts.com/Podcast/18, and you can check it out, and I hope you find your Sarah.
- Jess Dang: Before we go, it's review and tote bag time. This one is from Nikita Josephine. What a cool name, huh? "I am really enjoying this podcast. Jess is informative, and gives solid advice everyone can use in getting meals on the table, and not wasting food like herbs, who hasn't thrown out herbs they forgot to use up? I especially enjoyed the episode with the interview with Jess, who develops the meal plans now. You can tell they are passionate about food, and really want to help everyone cook better."
- Jess Dang: Thank you, Nikita, for the sweet review, and for pointing people to the interview I did with our teammate, Jess. That was again, episode number three for those who haven't heard it, and want to search for it in their feed. Nikita, you've got a tote bag waiting for you, just email us at Hello@CookSmarts.com to claim it.
- Jess Dang: If you want to hear your review on a future episode and win a really cool tote bag, just leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. It'll take just a few minutes, and it makes a huge difference in helping us grow. And, another new way to help us grow is by simply telling a friend about the podcast. We also would love for you to call us. If you've got questions you want us to answer in a future episode, comments about a previous episode, or just

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want to say hi and share some love, give us a call at 650-386-0290 and leave a voicemail. You might just hear your voice on a future episode.

Jess Dang: With that, thank you for letting us join you in your kitchen, or wherever you're listening to this podcast. And until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader.