

Jess Dang: Hi there. You're listening to episode number 22 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. Okay folks, I have such a treat for you all today, and it is completely unrelated to cooking, but it might just end up becoming your favorite Cook Smarts Podcast episode. I'm excited to share another part of our origin story today because there would be no Cook Smarts meal plan service without the talent and persistence of Jen Gilbert, who helped me build our meal plan service back in 2013. I know we're in the peak of New Year's resolution season, so I'm hoping that our conversation will inspire you to go after your dreams this year because if we did it, I know that you can do it.

Jess Dang: Okay. But before we walk down memory lane with Jen, just a little bit of Cook Smarts business. First, we are in the middle of our New Year's sale, and if you are still struggling with meal planning and the 5 o'clock dinner stress, now is the time to sign up for our meal plan service. For an incredibly affordable price, you can have hours back each week and hundreds of dollars back in your budget each month. This is the time to adopt new healthy habits, so head to [cooksmarts.com](http://cooksmarts.com) and use the code `dolessin2020` for 20% off. And if you already are a member, just because you've got the whole dinner thing figured out doesn't mean your friends and coworkers do, so share your referral link this month. Every new referral gets you a \$10 Amazon gift card. And of course, your friends get a lightened to do list just like you do.

Jess Dang: And the second piece of business is we are in the middle of a reviews giveaway for a \$100 Amazon gift card. If you haven't left a review on Apple Podcasts, please do that. After you do, just take a screenshot of it and text it to 650-386-0290. And if you already have left a review on Apple Podcasts, you can contribute a voicemail review at the same number, which again is 650-386-0290. I'm going to say that again. Just pick up the phone and leave us a voicemail message about why you love Cook Smarts and our podcast. We'll pick one winner at random at the end of the month for the \$100 Amazon gift card. All right. Now let's head to my chat with the incredibly charming and humble Jen Gilbert. So Jen Gilbert, welcome to the Cook Smarts Podcast.

Jen Gilbert: Thank you.

Jess Dang: You don't understand what a special place you occupy in my heart. I don't think Cook Smarts could've been built without you, so I just want to thank you for giving me such a great gift.

Jen Gilbert: Of course. I feel like we at least find time once a year, twice a year, to be mushy together about it in a heartwarming way.

Jess Dang: Yes. I am so excited that we're going to take a walk down memory lane together and dig out of the depths of our old brain memory, how two ladies who had just turned 30 left their careers, knew nothing about coding, but somehow built a pretty slick online meal planning service, if I do say so myself.

- Jen Gilbert: Yeah. Yeah. It was a long time ago now, in I think many, many ways. But I definitely think of it as the start of basically my technical career, to be honest. So definitely a special place in my heart as well.
- Jess Dang: Yeah. So before we dive into the whole story, the whole origin story, can you tell people what you were doing before you decided that you wanted to become a developer?
- Jen Gilbert: Sure. I was a ... Well, I was editing for Living Social at the time, so I was an editor for Living Social. But before that, I had I guess my experience was mainly in communications in manuscript editing. I worked in a newspaper copy room for a while, so yeah, words, lots and lots of words, not so much code.
- Jess Dang: Yes. But code is also words, it's just different words and putting them together in different ways.
- Jen Gilbert: Turns out, yeah, which was kind of an exciting discovery for me. I always thought that code was all about math. But it's really just machinery that you make out of words, which is a lot of fun it turns out.
- Jess Dang: Do you think your previous writing career helped you at all when you were becoming a developer? Or were they two totally separate beasts and skills?
- Jen Gilbert: I think it's a lot more helpful than people expect it to be. I feel like I just want to talk all of the editors in the world into trying programming because if you have one wrong semicolon and everything breaks. And I think when you have that eye for detail, it does translate really, really well to being able to debug your code and recognize what might be wrong. I was really interested in coding and always have been, but I also just had the sense that I had gone as far as I was going to be able to go in publishing. And yeah, it did feel even then, which was quite a long time ago now, it did feel like that trend was already happening. And I would be smart to go elsewhere, so I'm glad that I did.
- Jess Dang: Yeah. So was that what motivated you to make the change? You just saw that tech was going to be the new ... I mean, it already was the big thing. But that was really where we were going to be headed in terms of jobs and so forth.
- Jen Gilbert: Yeah. I feel like it was sort of a confluence of factors. It was that publishing was a little bit in trouble. I started my career in news and newspapers, where we would actually get all of the stories fitting onto the front page by 2:00 in the morning, so we could ship it to the press, and obviously that was changing. I think that was really clear to us at that time. But I also had always been interested in learning to code and had kind of dabbled I guess whenever I was younger. But I never really had enough motivation to do it. And then moving to the Bay Area, it just felt like everyone in here can code, I'm really jealous of them. And so it was hard to even resist that temptation, so it was sort of like one, publishing is a little bit in trouble. Two, always been interested in this, and

now I'm surrounded by it, which makes it just so much more tempting. And three, just I think that sense that, I don't know, you get a little bit older and you gain some confidence. And you start to think, "Why not me?" Versus, "Oh, I could never do that."

Jen Gilbert: And so kind of that sense that the best time to do this is now. If I'm going to do it, there's never going to be a better time. And starting to have a little bit more confidence that if other people can do this, I can do this too. And I think I had to sort of grow into that.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I love that because in our last episode, we were just talking about how we make New Year's goals and all these resolutions. And we just have a hard time following through, but clearly you made a big goal, and somehow you followed through. And we're going to talk a little bit more about that. But before we do, I just want to talk about that fateful night that we met, which I really think is the most important night in my 30s. It's not the night that my kids were born, but the night I met you.

Jen Gilbert: Sorry kids, your mother loves you.

Jess Dang: No, but I don't think that I would've been in the place to have kids actually if I didn't start Cook Smarts in a way. I think Cook Smarts paved the way for me to want to be a parent, strangely enough. But anyways, going back to that night. How much do you remember about it? Because I want to hear your side and see if it differs from what I remember.

Jen Gilbert: So I know we were at RailsBridge.

Jess Dang: Yes.

Jen Gilbert: Which, if you're unfamiliar with that, they offer free technical training for women. And I think they've kind of expanded, as we all have realized identity is a little bit complicated. But at the time, they offered anyone who identifies as a woman, they offered free technical training and childcare and all of that good stuff, so great organization. And I was there, I really barely knew anything about coding at that point. And I was there to attend their free workshop. You were also there as an entrepreneur thinking about Cook Smarts. And I think recognizing how expensive dev talent is, especially in the Bay Area, but just in general. So we just ended up sitting at the same table, and I know we just started talking. And you were like, "I'm going to make this thing happen. I'm really excited about what I'm doing." And I didn't know what I wanted to build. I had no real plan for how I was going to fit into the technical industry. I just knew that I wanted to learn to code.

Jen Gilbert: And I had actually quit my job and was ready to make this work. So I walked out of my job with a box of my stuff, thinking, "I don't know how I'm going to do this, but I'm going to do this," so I think we just met at a really interesting time

where we had a lot to talk about and were really interested in learning from each other. And I don't remember when we actually decided. I feel like it wasn't that long after that, that we decided to work together. But I know we did at least spend that conference together.

Jess Dang: Yeah. No, that is great. So this conference I think was either October or November of 2012. And at that point, I had been kind of trying to piece together Cook Smarts for not quite a year. And I think about that night a lot because originally I wasn't sitting at the same table as you. But the table that I was originally sitting at didn't have a power strip nearby, so I couldn't plug my power strip in, and so I decided to switch over. And I sat down next to you, and because I'm one of those people that just have to chat with anyone and everyone, I remember forcing you to talk to me.

Jen Gilbert: I did not mind, I don't think.

Jess Dang: And I knew immediately that you were the real thing. And I just globbed onto you like a leach. I'm like, "I'm not letting this woman go," because at this point, I had been kind of founder dating for a couple months. I had decided that Cook Smarts was going to be an online meal plan service. And I was going on these founder dates and meeting all these 20 something male engineers, who had absolutely no interest in my not sexy mom product. So I was just so excited to find you and maybe trick you into helping me, and therefore, I was just like, "I need to make sure that I get this woman's number," and I've talked to her a lot at this workshop and follow up, and just convince her that she wants to code a meal plan service for her first big project.

Jen Gilbert: Well, it worked. I totally thought it was my idea, so it totally worked. I was like, "Yes. I want to build Cook Smarts for sure." I'm glad you touched on the issue of dev talent just often being male because I do think it ends up resulting in technical products not happening for women. Right? I always say, "If men had to wear makeup regularly, I would have some machine that just stamps it on my face in two seconds." Somebody would've fixed this for me already. And that often happens. And I've had, even since building Cook Smarts, I've had people say, "Oh, of course, a recipe app." Women who are learning to code, they always want to build recipe apps. And I just always say, "Why do you think that is?" Why do you think that's important to them? And it's kind of funny to watch them realize. Oh, yeah, we eat three times a day. That's actually pretty important in terms of a product.

Jess Dang: Oh, yeah. Exactly. All that invisible labor that a lot of women have to do, of constantly thinking about it. What am I going to feed my family? And yeah, there's a reason why people are ... I think that's really coming to the forefront and people are finally building companies and services and products for women. And it's great when they can be built by women. It's not always the case, but it's really great when we do find men who are supportive of the cause and just

excited about rolling their sleeves up and building something that is useful and important and impactful.

Jen Gilbert: And you have found several since, actually.

Jess Dang: Yes. Yeah.

Jen Gilbert: So that's worked out pretty well.

Jess Dang: Yeah. We've had a great mix. But yeah, so even though living in Silicon Valley, we're surrounded by tech. And after seven plus years of keeping this web app alive with numerous great developers, I've just really grown a true appreciation for how hard tech can be, how precarious code is, and how quickly it becomes obsolete. I think the original code that we worked on is definitely obsolete. If that was still the code we had in place, everything would've been broken, and our service would not be working at all. So with all that, I especially know how hard it is to find people who say they want to learn to code and then actually do it, and then actually are good at it. And I'm sure out of all those people who attended that RailsBridge workshop that night, you probably are the one who made a true career out of coding. So do you remember why you decided to help me with Cook Smarts, even though I had no money to pay you? And not to out you, but you're not someone who was particularly interested in cooking at the time.

Jen Gilbert: No. I still struggle, ironically. But I do want to learn. I have cooked at different times when I had more free time. But I will say, a career in tech is not the most conducive to cooking, which you may have discovered that as well, ironically, that making time gets a little bit more challenging. But yeah, in terms of why I wanted this role, I needed, for one thing, that line on my resume. And I didn't, obviously, just want to put it on there. I wanted to earn it. But I wasn't even really sure how to find these opportunities to write code that was going to actually be out in the world and not just be a portfolio project or something that was sort of a hobby project. And so this felt like such a good opportunity because it was really clear that this was your dream. It was really clear that this meant a lot to you. And I think if I'm building my dream, it's sort of easy to let myself down. I hate to say that, but you'll forgive yourself.

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Jen Gilbert: I don't really have to do it. But if you have this person who's almost a total stranger, and it is their dream, and you have that obligation to them, I felt like it was just this perfect sort of galvanizing assignment, so I know we made that deal in a coffee shop. I still remember this, in San Mateo, made the deal in a coffee shop. And I went home and put rails developer on my LinkedIn profile and laughed like a crazy person because I was ... This is ridiculous. I have no idea what I'm doing. And I think that was sort of the exchange. You have no money and I have no skill. And together we are going to build this application and kind

of figure it out. And it is true that it had so much to do with where my career went. I learned so much. I wrote the worst code in the world, but I even had to learn an enormous amount to be able to do that, going from someone who had no experience building these things.

Jess Dang: I definitely remember that meeting at that coffee shop, and feeling just excited and nervous. Are we going to do this? Is it going to happen? And I remember the way we decided to divide and conquer was you were going to take on the backend, and for those that are not well versed in tech lingo, that's just basically all the behind the scenes stuff that happens on your website. And so in our case, it's making sure we add the right items to your grocery list, pull up the right meal plan picture, let the person making the recipe enter all the recipe information. So you were going to figure out how to make all of that magic happen somehow, while I went and was going to learn how to code the front end, so basically how to make the thing look pretty, and not like some 1980s website. But do you remember how ... When you went home and you changed your LinkedIn title to rails developer, did you have a plan of how you were going to make this happen? .

Jen Gilbert: I had a strong idea of what I wanted the product to be, and I think that was important. So I really, really wanted to see flexibility around vegetarian options, vegan options, all that good stuff. I felt like this was sort of an opportunity to apply technical concepts to a problem that people don't historically think of as technical, which I think happens a lot. Again, it's something women do, and so it's kind of like I don't know that people are thinking about mechanisms for automating those things. And it just felt like: Why can't we apply some extra intelligence to this? Why can't we make this something that's more flexible than a recipe book, or a PDF, or something that people share? And I felt like that hadn't really been done before, at least not that I had seen.

Jen Gilbert: I saw where you could put in different serving sizes and things like that, but that seemed to be sort of the extent of it, which for me, I though was just a missed opportunity. So I did have that idea. But in terms of how it was going to happen, just from a technical perspective, that was a lot of trial and error and just a lot of hard lessons. But to put things in perspective, I honestly didn't even know how to collect credit card payment online at the time. So just the level of my ignorance was blissful, I would say. If I had known how much I had to learn, I probably would've been really daunted by it, but thankfully, I didn't, so it was fine.

Jess Dang: Yeah. Sometimes I think ignorance or just not knowing what you're getting yourself into is kind of your best, in terms of your best resource in a way, because you just, I will just have to learn. I have no idea what I don't know. And I'll just kind of take baby steps forward.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. People have those stories, right? Where they're like, "Oh, yeah. I moved to New York City with \$300 in my pocket," where you're like, if you would've

known what a terrible idea that was, you might not have done it, but you probably learned a lot.

Jess Dang: Yeah. But even going back to not so much maybe the product features, but I sketched out with you, this is the end goal. Right? We want to provide an online recipe service, where people can change up the serving sizes, or change up the diet versions, and they are shown different steps, and all of it gets collected to a grocery list. So knowing that was the final output, and where your level of coding was, did you know what you needed to learn even to get there?

Jen Gilbert: I did, thankfully, more or less. Sometimes I had to sort of Google my way to glory. But I did have enough preparation. I had gone through a couple books. I at least understood the theory of how to design these things. I think the part where I struggled was the reality of what happens when it goes into production and the reality of how messy real life is. So you can read the theory in the books, and you can say, "Okay. If I need these things to be different and these things to always be the same, and I need these templates for a recipe," you can think through it. But then whenever you see the user actually use the product, and I include the admin in that group, but also just regular users who are using the product, of course, it's a very humbling thing.

Jen Gilbert: You roll this thing out, and then people start trying it and using it. And there are things they don't understand very well. Even the way the data is stored can be confusing, or the way it needs to be inputted. So I think I had more confidence than I probably should have had because in theory, it's not too hard. And then in reality, and I think this is true for software in general, users, the minute they use it is the minute you realize all the assumptions that you made that you probably shouldn't have made.

Jess Dang: Yeah. Exactly. And I think also, one of the other things I've found really hard, and you wouldn't know this I think when you start out, is also where the product is going. You only, you make the code, especially with the backend stuff, like how all the information is held for that particular moment. And I think a lot of people don't think about: Well, what are my needs maybe five years down the road if this product still exists? And what do I need to build? How do I need to build this so it's going to be flexible for five years? And people don't know because code is completely different with in a year or two. Right? So it's hard to anticipate that future scenario. And so I think that's been what a lot of our problems that we've run into now is we are trying to kind of reconfigure things, and it's really hard because you get that legacy of how things were built in the beginning kind of stay with you regardless of how much you want to move away from it.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. It's true. There's a reason the phrase legacy code is a thing in the industry. And it's because you outgrow your code really quickly. And I think if you're not familiar with coding, you tend to think of it as you wrote the code, and now it works. What's the problem? But code ages the way everything ages. It's like if

you build a house, you can't expect it 10 years from now to be exactly the same with no wear and tear. And I just think it's counterintuitive to people because it's like this digital thing, it doesn't get old. But it does, actually.

Jen Gilbert: Even if you don't change a single feature of your website, even if you don't even plan to change anything, all of the code in the libraries and everything that you're using, they come out with new versions of the same way you have to update your browser, or the same way that if you don't update your browser, or you don't update something on your computer, eventually everything's going to break because they're going to say, "You can't use this. It's too old." So code does the same thing, but I don't think people realize that. And I didn't realize that, so even when I was writing the code, I was very naïve about, I don't understand why app companies have so many employees for years and years. What are they even doing? You know?

Jess Dang: Yes, exactly.

Jen Gilbert: And now I have clear answers to that question, for sure.

Jess Dang: Yes. And I think me as a founder, I was like, "Yeah. Jen's going to build this. And then she's going to get a job as a software developer. And I'll be fine because I'll have the product, and that's all we need." But that's just so far from the truth. It's not just the bugs that come about, but yeah, the code becomes obsolete, and we just didn't have the money to kind of invest in all that maintenance. And so now seven years later, our poor developer has been trying to update our systems. We're so behind, and it's been, yeah, it's definitely I've learned a lot. And I've learned that even though I didn't think of this as a technical product. I thought, "I'm building a recipe website." It's a content product. But at the end of the day, it's a technical product. And I'm now just really learning we didn't really price the right way for what it takes to support a technical product long-term. And so yeah, these are all things that I'm still learning, and all the challenges that I'm still facing.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. It's a shame. I don't know. It's so expensive I think in general to hire developers and to maintain products. And it's a shame that it has to be that way. It's part of my sort of platform of wishing more people would learn to code is just wishing there were more people because there are definitely more jobs than people by far in tech. And that can make it really expensive too.

Jess Dang: Yeah, exactly. This is definitely an area where the demand exceeds the supply. But hopefully we'll get there as more people really understand that the universal language that everybody should learn is coding.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. It's true. Some people say it's the new literacy. And I don't think we're there yet. But I can see that becoming a factor eventually. You already hear conversations where people don't really know what a tech company is anymore

because it's like everything is software at this point. Right? Hospitals use software. Everybody uses software.

Jess Dang: Exactly. Yeah. So going back to our coffee shop meeting, so I remember meeting up at this coffee shop in San Mateo in December. We were going to hammer out all the details. And we both agreed after talking through this is the final output, that this should take five or six months. So in December, we decided that we were going to aim to have a live product by May first the following year, so that gave us just really four full months really to make it happen. And again, after having experience with a lot of coders, who have a lot of experience coding, I just think we must've been so crazy to make that estimate.

Jess Dang: People who are trained in the thing that we were trying to teach ourselves can't give realistic estimates. And here we are, two women who had no idea what we didn't know, saying, "Yeah. In four or five months, we're going to have a live product that people will pay us for. And it's going to work, and it's going to be great." So why do you think we were able to get this done when there are so many reasons that we should've failed?

Jen Gilbert: I think you should never underestimate the power of stubbornness. I feel like we were both very stubborn that we were going to make this happen, to the point that we ended up at your kitchen table working on it leading up to the launch, just I think we just both really wanted it for our own reasons, and were excited about it. I think even that enthusiasm can keep you awake a lot of nights whenever you normally throw in the towel and say, "I can't keep doing this." But yeah, just I was extremely stubborn about getting it out the door. And I know you were just as excited as I was. And I don't know how we did it in retrospect, to be honest.

Jen Gilbert: And I know we cut it really close in terms of at the last minute realizing that we ... I blame myself, but realizing, oh, we don't have what we need to actually launch this. But we made it happen, which I'm still very proud of even today. I've come a really long way. I've learned a lot. And it would be a completely different experience now. But I still recognize that achievement as just something that I'm really proud of.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I just remember those last two weeks. Even though I had so many doubts running through my head, I remember those last two weeks where we met up every day at my house and stayed up way too late coding and debugging, just eating too much pizza. Those were two of the most memorable weeks of my life. But did you ever have moments while we were either during those couple months, where you were teaching yourself and trying to piece everything together, or even in those last two weeks, where you thought this isn't going to happen?

Jen Gilbert: I think I only kind of had two points where I felt that way. And one was, believe it or not, accepting credit card payments, which is the most common thing that

happens online all the time. But it was really challenging. There's a lot of security around it. Of course, that's what you want. You can write lots of bad code, but you're not allowed to write bad code that takes credit card numbers, and that's a good thing. But doing that part was really challenging, and I wasn't sure I was going to be able to do that. Ironically, I ended up teaching Stripe's internal coding bootcamp, and of course became very comfortable with Stripe as a product, but at the time, wasn't sure how to use it.

Jen Gilbert: And then we had the 11th hour issue, where our server was not secure, and it needed to be. And I don't remember even how we handled that, but it was a very last minute unpleasant discovery. I did have that moment of, oh no, we've come so far. We're almost there, and this may be the thing that we just can't figure out and can't get done, at least in time for launch.

Jess Dang: Yes. I remember it was April 30th. It was the night before we decided we were going to launch. And it was an SSL certificate. We didn't have that, or it was not installed correctly for us to accept payments, and therefore, that was the thing. And it was I think at 3:00 AM when we discovered this. And somehow you called in a crew of software developers, and they happened to be up at 3:00 am because I guess that's how software developers are. They're just up all night. They're nocturnal. And we did fix it. I think I went to bed. You were like, "You should go to bed," because I wasn't going to be helpful at that point. And I woke up at maybe 6:00 AM because I was just so excited. I had maybe a quick catnap and woke up, and it was working. And I was like, "We're live. We can accept payments today and start getting subscribers."

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. I was glad I had made a few friends by that point because I think the phoning a friend is a time honored tradition in tech in general. A lot of times, you can't figure it all out yourself and you need to escalate. And thankfully, I had people I could escalate to. But yeah, it was the SSL certificate was not installed correctly. And so that's you don't want to take credit card payments over a server that is transmitting your information in plain text, where anyone could intercept and view it, so it was good that we fixed it. But yeah, not a pleasant realization late at night right before launch.

Jess Dang: Yeah. But at the end of the day, I just love that story that it really was down to the wire. And I had many points throughout the process as those months I was trying to teach myself the front end code and design. Maybe this isn't going to work. Is this going to happen? But I also remember feeling the sense of if I'm going to do everything that I can to make this work and happen. And I felt the same sense of partnership from you. I just knew you had the same determination that I did. And even though I had these doubts, I think I still had the confidence that we were going to pull this off somehow.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. Yeah. Agreed. I don't know if it's ... I think courage and stupidity can be very similar. I don't know which it was, or maybe it was both. But I don't know,

I'm glad that that's how we approached it. I think sometimes you've just got to go for it and make it happen. Right?

Jess Dang: Yeah. Yeah. Those last two weeks we had all these post it notes up on my kitchen wall. And we'd take some down, and then others would go up because we'd find other bugs. And I remember at one point, I said to you while I was pushing out code, and I was really, really scared that I was going to break the whole thing. And I said to you, "Jen, I'm afraid to push. What if I poop on the table like they do in birth?" And you said to me, "Don't worry. I will just wipe it away. No one will know." And it was one of the most romantic things anyone has ever said to me.

Jen Gilbert: What can I say? I'm a charmer. I have that bedside manner.

Jess Dang: But anyways, yeah, it was a miracle, but we made it happen. And shortly after we launched, to no surprise, you did leave Cook Smarts, which I knew was going to happen. You were just too talented not to be snatched away. But then we got you back part-time for a little while again a few years after that. But now you left us again to do big baller Silicon Valley things. And can you just share what you've been doing since leaving us this second time?

Jen Gilbert: Sure, yeah. So the last two major projects I've had, one was building the coding bootcamp at Stripe. And I was still with Cook Smarts at that time, and then ended up sort of transitioning to do a little bit more of that. And then I ended up at Lyft, and I started their technical learning team, so that was sort of an interesting initiative to come aboard at Lyft. And they just wanted basically technical knowledge. How can we exchange technical knowledge more effectively? With the biggest need they had at the time being onboarding, so this is something I care a lot about. It's something that people don't think a lot about. But in terms of getting women and the underrepresented groups into tech, you hear the phrase pipeline problem, just getting people from high school into college, into an internship, and getting women into tech.

Jen Gilbert: And there's a lot of focus at the front of that funnel saying, "How do we get beginners excited to code? How do we get them to feel comfortable taking those classes in college if they're in college?" But once they get to the company, it's like that support, just nobody's thinking about it really. It's like, "Okay. Great news. You got a job as an engineer." And now you're at this company, and knowledge does not travel fairly on its own organically. It travels along the lines of privilege in the way that lots of things travel along the lines of privilege.

Jen Gilbert: And so it was really important to me to build a program where I felt that anyone coming in got a fair and equal shot at succeeding in their job, which whenever you're joining a place like Lyft, there's a ton of proprietary technology. Everything's proprietary. We don't really use anything that's out of the box at Lyft because we're operating at such a large scale that we need to build our own

tools. The problem with that being if you get hired at Lyft, and there's no real formal education, you're having to figure it out.

Jen Gilbert: And of course, it's a lot easier to figure out if you have nine friends who also have CS degrees and work there, or you look like everyone there, or whatever the case may be. So I wanted to make that more fair, and so I ended up building kind of a weird little school that every new technical person at Lyft goes through. So I write the tools myself, so my team and I, I have a team of engineers, we write teaching tools. We write a lot of code to deliver these things and to sort of auto grade and all that stuff. And then we also write the curriculum to introduce new employees to all of those tools that even if they've been coding for 10 years, they wouldn't know how to use, at least at Lyft.

Jess Dang: That is so amazing. So you said every technical hire at Lyft goes through your program. And how long is it?

Jen Gilbert: It's two weeks for engineers. And it's about a week for non engineers. So we have technical roles like PMs, designers, technical program managers, data scientists, people who are in some technical function, but not software engineers. And so they go through the first part, and then the second week is just for engineers and a little bit more around how to write code safely, how to respond to incidents, how to do those things. And yeah, it's been a wild ride for sure. I worked with a bunch of architects and built my own learning space. So I always say, "How many people get to build their own workplace and then work there?"

Jen Gilbert: So I've had some really cool opportunities. And part of that is just having the communications skills and having that communication background, and then having a technical background and being able to put those two things together, which this is my plug. I've probably already touched on this a few times. But getting people into tech who are not traditionally who would be in tech is so important because communication skills and tech are not always things that people think of as going together. And if you have a skillset that's existing, and then you get into tech, you have so many opportunities not just to succeed in your career, but also to impact tech and make it better for people like yourself, or make it better for everyone, honestly.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I so agree. And I'm so happy that you've had this opportunity to make this impact. Looking back eight years ago I guess, when you left Living Social, left your career as a writer, and you decided that you were going to embark on this big change of becoming a software developer, did you envision that this is where you're going to be? You have this role where you get to basically create your own job, or create this whole environment that is really helpful to folks that haven't had access, as well as being part of a big Silicon Valley big tech company that just has gone through this IPO? Did you envision that?

Jen Gilbert: I didn't. I didn't even know this was a job. And it kind of wasn't a job at the time. I think technical education has become more of a thing in large tech companies at least, realizing how difficult it is to transfer knowledge and how difficult it is to keep everyone trained sort of on those proprietary systems. So yeah, I just thought I'm going to become an engineer, and I did. And I was an engineer for several years, and decided to get my CS degree a little bit belatedly because I felt like I'm already learning all of this stuff anyway, I might as well get my CS degree. And so I signed up for an online program. And because, I think because it was an online program, it was 40% underrepresented groups, which I thought was fantastic. And I had a feeling that part of that was the online safety and kind of the sense of I'm going to be able to learn in peace. I'm not going to have to, I don't know, deal with people cracking jokes or whatever just because I'm different. And so 40% underrepresented groups, I was so excited.

Jen Gilbert: And then in the first week of that curriculum, I had to watch tons of those people wash out. And it was just really heartbreaking to see because they blame themselves. We tend to treat coding like it's this sort of sword in the stone. And if you can't do it, it's because you're not cut out for it, or whatever the case may be. And we sort of sell it as this thing that's so hard to learn. And so I think if you don't do well, then you're like, "It must be me. I must just not be right for this." And these are people who decided to major in CS, so it's not like they were there to play around. Right?

Jess Dang: Yeah.

Jen Gilbert: But the first week, it was not ... I hate to say it wasn't taught very well because I actually think it's one of the better programs there is, but it was so challenging for a beginner. I just don't see how a beginner would've succeeded. So of course, I succeeded because I was already an engineer, but that's not the target demographic that they should be going for. I just said, "Okay. This is distressing to me because they're leaving. They're blaming themselves." Nobody ever says, "My coding instructor must not have been doing a good job," so they blame themselves. And they're not going to be back. And so I was just watching these people get blocked from this industry that they had been excited to part of. So then I felt really fired up about that. I had very strong opinions on what the first week of a coding program should look like. It definitely wasn't you have to SSH into a remote machine and use VIM to edit C plus plus code. And if what I just said was terrifying, you can imagine how they felt because that was what they were told to do with pretty much no experience.

Jen Gilbert: So then I got into teaching, and that was kind of it. I just never really looked back, and have found a way to still write code quite a bit. We've written a lot of custom libraries that we deliver curriculum with. But yeah, it's a nice mix really. I think I would've missed working with people if I were at a desk writing code all day, which is often what being an engineer means.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I'm so happy that you made this transition because even though I clearly know that you are a great coder, I feel like there are not very many people who are great coders and communicators/educators. And the fact that you have those skills and have combined them, I think is even more important and impactful because you can now impact all these people. And I had a friend who was at Stripe during the time you were building their bootcamp, Dan, and he just raved about your class. He said, "Jen is just such a great teacher," because you're silly. You don't make it intimidating. I think that's so important because this is a field that has been still run by men. And there is this sense that this is really hard. And so I think people make it harder than it is. People kind of have that as they go in already intimidated. And they just don't grant themselves that patience of practice.

Jess Dang: I think we talked about this in the last episode of Cook Smarts Podcast, where when you make a goal, most of it is just practice. You need to be practicing towards that final goal. You're not going to get there on day one, or even day 10, or even year one. And so you just have to go through that messy period of practicing. And I think people just forget about that. And sometimes the curriculum is not built for that, so clearly you've had the time to practice with Cook Smarts. And I'm still practicing... I don't know what I'm doing every ... I'm still practicing as being a founder of a company. I don't know what I'm doing.

Jen Gilbert: I realize no one does. I feel like the people who think they know what they're doing are the ones that are often scaring the rest of us. I think generally some of the most competent, caring, successful people that I know would be the first to admit that they're faking it and just kind of figuring it out as they go. So I think that imposter syndrome, I don't know, it never really goes away. But I think you can become more comfortable with it over time, for sure.

Jess Dang: Yeah. Well, for me, it's I don't even think it's imposter syndrome. I just own the fact that life is just, you're just practicing. It's like that's the whole point of it, is that once you master something, then you have to move onto the next thing, so you're back in practice mode.

Jen Gilbert: It's true. And I think a lot of the people who would be amazing at coding, or amazing at really all kinds of things, are often, they are really intelligent people. They are hyper functional almost sometimes. And some of those people have not failed in a long time. They've been able to maneuver themselves to a position where they don't really have to do that. And they don't remember being six years old and bad at literally everything. And so it can be an uncomfortable experience to go back into code, and they're just awful at it. And that's just how it is. You have to be awful at it first.

Jen Gilbert: And it was really interesting to watch my students sort of redefine that relationship with failure, and understanding, yes, you've been successful in your field. You maybe haven't failed like this in a really long time, but you're not going to be able to grow if that's not something that you're sort of willing to do.

So women especially, and I think anyone who could experience stereotype threat, not just women, I think there's a different relationship with failure in any environment. And that's something that you have to sort of accommodate too, is help people just to recognize these feel like really negative emotions. There's a lot of baggage there whenever you see an error message, or you realize that you didn't do it right. But it doesn't have to feel that way. You can recast that feeling.

Jen Gilbert: So I was always proud. I would tell my students, "If you get frustrated, or you feel like you're not doing a good job, try to recast that into something more positive." And I would just laugh because they would say really adorable things. One of my students at Stripe was like, "Okay. This frustration, it's just motivation burning in my chest." That was amazing. Yeah, so just helping them sort of redefine that.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I really loved learning to code. And I think one of the reasons was because you're constantly problem solving. And I'm someone who just loves problem solving. And eventually when you get it right, it is such a gratifying feeling. When it works, and you're trying this and that, the other thing, when it finally works, you're like, "I did it. It's so great." And there is that immediate feedback loop with code. You can change something and see if it works. And if it doesn't, you try it again. And whereas, when I was working in the corporate world, you didn't have that. We would just make these PowerPoint decks and pretend we're solving problems. But the actual outcome, you often don't even find out about, or things just don't get implemented. Whereas code, it's immediate problem solving and immediate feedback. And I really appreciated that about it.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. And there is no high like making something work after hours of not having it work. You want to tell everyone you know. You want to call them up and tell them all about it, except they wouldn't understand what you were talking about, and it's 2:00 in the morning, so you can't. But it is very exciting.

Jess Dang: It is. Yeah. I think having gone through that process with you and just seeing how hard it is, I find that I hope that everyone that's worked for me and with me on Cook Smarts, especially on the technical side, I am very empathetic when things don't work. And I really appreciate honesty when a developer comes to me and is just like, "Okay. I screwed this up. This didn't work. And as a result, we were not able to accept payments for a day or two. I'm sorry." But it's like, "Yeah. That's not great." But it happens. And I can understand why it happens because once you get to the point where we are, at least with our product, there are so many moving parts.

Jess Dang: And it's so easy for one part to break, and you just kind of not catch it. And we're getting better about that. And I think every time that happens, our developer learns something about what they need to do in the future to secure that and put in the insurance to make sure that doesn't happen. And so yeah, we're all practicing. I have a very experienced developer, but we're all still in

practice mode, and we're all still learning. And mistakes are constantly being made still.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. I will say no matter how experienced your developer is, this sort of company is just very technically demanding because it's small enough that it's really just going to be one developer, two developers, which means the people working on it have to be familiar with so many different things. At a bigger company, a developer might just have one little slice of that app that they're very familiar with, and so it's a little bit easier for them. This is like this person has to really be knowledgeable about everything on the application.

Jess Dang: Yeah. And we have been very lucky. We have found just great people. And I've taken in lots of folks after you that were kind of in your shoes, like I just want a chance. I'm willing to work hard. I'm willing to figure out what I don't know. And yeah, we've been pretty successful for a small company at churning out some really great developers after Cook Smarts. And they've gone on to do really awesome things.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. It's true. You were great to work for. I feel like you are just kind of a natural cheerleader in terms of you've got it, let me know what you need. I believe in you, kind of thing.

Jess Dang: Yes.

Jen Gilbert: That's what people need when they're getting started, that kind of soft place to land, where I think you have high expectations and you have a lot of ambition for Cook Smarts in general. But you're always willing to sort of approach it as a person first, which I think is really valuable.

Jess Dang: Yeah. And I think the ethos at Cook Smarts is all about learning and screwing up in the kitchen, and getting back in there. And so yeah, it's important to me that I apply that actually behind the scenes to my team and how I run the company. So Jen, it was so fun to catch up with you. But before I let you go and get back to work, even though it's Saturday, I want to take you through a rapid fire round if that's okay?

Jen Gilbert: Sure.

Jess Dang: And some of these, you might not have answers to, and that's totally okay. Your most important kitchen tool.

Jen Gilbert: Oh, spatula. I make eggs every morning for myself. I'm learning to perfect them.

Jess Dang: Okay. My next question was your go to breakfast.

Jen Gilbert: Guess what, it's eggs.

Jess Dang: Yay. You have 15 minutes to make a meal. What is it? I think I know.

Jen Gilbert: It can't be eggs again.

Jess Dang: No, it can be. Eggs are so versatile.

Jen Gilbert: I'm kind of a fan of, this is where you can tell I'm Midwestern because it's not a rice bowl, it's like a mashed potato bowl, which is probably way worse for you. But if I only have 15 minute, then you can do worse than potatoes health wise, in my opinion. So potatoes and some veggies, or some sausage, or whatever I have that I throw into make a very fast shepherd's pie sort of situation. I'm pretty into that.

Jess Dang: Wow. Okay. Once we get over this whole paleo thing, that's the next fast casual restaurant, Chipotle style restaurant, is the mashed potato bowl.

Jen Gilbert: I might be the only person who goes there, but I would be so into it for sure.

Jess Dang: No, there's a lot of people from the Midwest, they would love that. What's one meal you never get sick of?

Jen Gilbert: None of them are good. I could eat pizza forever, but I shouldn't. Any combination of carbs and cheese, which you will realize there are many.

Jess Dang: I know. We ate a lot of that.

Jen Gilbert: Bagel and cream cheese. All the health nuts are not going to love my version of these answers.

Jess Dang: No, that's fine. I think we all realize that coders lead sometimes an unhealthy lifestyle.

Jen Gilbert: Luckily, Lyft feeds me, and they feed me vegetables and salmon and stuff, so I accidentally eat very well, but not through my own devices.

Jess Dang: What ingredient do you always have in your pantry?

Jen Gilbert: I do always have rice. You can use that for anything, so rice and my rice cooker are a good combination.

Jess Dang: Guilty pleasure, food or not.

Jen Gilbert: Guilty pleasure is boba. I've got to get off the boba. It's dangerous.

Jess Dang: Oh, yes. It's so good. Even my kids, who are very young, are hooked on boba. I just now make it myself because I'm so cheap. I'm not paying for a \$4 boba for a three year old.

Jen Gilbert: I've heard it's hard to make.

Jess Dang: I just buy it at the Asian grocery store. You just buy a bag of it. It's like pasta, dried, and then you just boil it.

Jen Gilbert: Oh. Maybe I shouldn't get into this. This might be dangerous.

Jess Dang: Your favorite life optimization or organization app.

Jen Gilbert: Oh, man. I actually tend to use the to do list in Gmail, which I think is sort of an unsung tool that most people don't use. But I get tired of all the contact switching. And I end up, I feel like I make to do lists, and they're too elaborate, and then they just collapse under their own weight. And I feel like it forces me to just think about the five things I want to do today.

Jess Dang: So do you still do that within the to do list in Gmail? Or are you saying that you just are still writing things out?

Jen Gilbert: I do. I use that list. And then I also do, I have five questions every day that I answer that are promoted by science, so I didn't make them up. And I answer three questions in the morning and two at night. And some of that fuels my to do list as well.

Jess Dang: Oh, wait. I know this is a rapid fire round, but I kind of want to get into this. So wait. Are these the same five questions every day that you answer?

Jen Gilbert: Same five questions. This is a Google-able thing, five minute journal. You answer the same questions every day. It will change your life. I feel like I am a believer. I was very skeptical at first.

Jess Dang: Do you mind sharing the five questions?

Jen Gilbert: Sure, sure. Yeah. So in the morning, you complete the sentence I am grateful for. So that's where you start. You kind of start in a place of gratitude. And I will tell you when I started, I'm embarrassed at how hard it was to come up with things because I swim in privilege, but somehow could not. It's definitely a practice. And now I'm grateful for everything. I'll be like, "My tea is so warm and wonderful." It's interesting how that habit forms. And then the next question is: What would make today great? So just thinking about that focus and saying, "I want to make sure I say hi to people today," it doesn't have to be a to do list thing. But it does really clarify that focus. Then the third one, which I had issue

with for a while because again, this was definitely a big out of my comfort zone sort of thing for me, was affirmations.

Jen Gilbert: So you write a few affirmations. And I thought they were supposed to be really cheesy, but I realized I could just focus on something I feel that I've been doing well that I want to do more of and really write that down. And that has helped, so I end up with some pretty concrete affirmations because that works better for me. And then at night, you answer three amazing things happened today, so you try to think of three things that have happened that you're excited about. And then the final question is: What would make tomorrow even better? And a lot of times, whenever I'm writing it out, I'm like, "Well, tomorrow would be even better if I already prepped my lunch, or if I already... Getting up and doing it and realizing that I have set myself up so much better with the thing that it didn't even occur to me to do until that point.

Jess Dang: Oh, I love this. We're going to use this. We're doing a meal prep challenge with our Facebook group next month. And I feel like kind of using that as the prompt will be so helpful for people.

Jen Gilbert: Yeah. Apparently, there's a lot of research that has gone onto these exact questions. And I have no idea how true that is or not, but actually it has really shifted my mindset. I was very skeptical, but was talked into it, and now am a true believer, and probably tiresome to the people who don't want to do it.

Jess Dang: So give me an example of what an affirmation is.

Jen Gilbert: A lot of times, like I said, I'll pick something that I feel is a behavior I've started to see in myself that I want to encourage. Affirmation I guess could be anything really. You could say, "I'm doing a great job, or I'm doing my best." It could be kind of vague. But mine tend to be I'm doing a really good job sticking with my yoga routine. Or I'm doing a really good job, whatever the case may be. If I know that maybe that behavior is sort of at risk, and I want to praise myself for it, because it's like, oh, you're doing great, keep going, even to myself. But I suppose it could be anything you want it to be. I will say doing my best does come up. I am doing my best is in frequent rotation in my affirmations. But I'm not really good at the cheesy I'm good enough, I'm smart enough kind of joke, so I do tend to just try to think of things that are concrete that I'm proud of, that I really would like to not drop the ball on essentially.

Jess Dang: This is great. We're still in kind of a New Year's resolution mode. And we scheduled you for this New Year's time because I knew you would have this kind of encouragement and ideas to help people stick with their goals.

Jen Gilbert: I'm terrible at rapid fire rounds, but I am good about being excited about how you can improve your life.

- Jess Dang: Yeah. Okay. Three more things in the rapid fire round that I know we just had this long tangent. But anyways, going back. Hardest thing you've done.
- Jen Gilbert: Oh, man. If I'm going to be honest, I once survived a military deployment where my partner was deployed in the military and at war. And nothing will ever be harder than that. That was very challenging. So I know there are probably some Cook Smarts folks who have military spouses, and that is a huge sacrifice. It really is.
- Jess Dang: Wow, I did not know that about you. See, we should do podcast interviews more frequently. Actually, I lied, I still have three more things after that. So proudest thing you've done.
- Jen Gilbert: I think it was conquering roller derby as a sport. We haven't talked about this in the podcast, but I played roller derby for a number of years. And I was the last person who should've been playing. I was this awkward, uncoordinated nerd who edited books for a living. And I decided I was ready to ... I decided life was too easy, and I just really needed to fail at something and kind of shock my system a little bit. I felt like I was in kind of a rut. And I signed up for roller derby. And that was an experience, and extremely, extremely challenging to conquer, but so much fun, and just taught me a lot. And now all of life seems easier because no one's chasing me.
- Jess Dang: Yeah. And you're not on wheels. Or maybe some days you feel like you're running around on wheels. Last book you loved.
- Jen Gilbert: I might not have the title right. Maybe You Should Talk to Someone.
- Jess Dang: That was my favorite book of this year.
- Jen Gilbert: Oh, I loved it. I thought it was great. It was riveting. And I felt like I learned a lot. And it definitely talks you into therapy, so if you read it, be prepared.
- Jess Dang: Yeah, it's so good. I've gifted it to many, many friends. Last TV show that you loved.
- Jen Gilbert: I've been watching Making It. I don't know if you're familiar with that.
- Jess Dang: Yes, that's also one of my favorites of 2019. Everyone, go make something fun and colorful and whimsical.
- Jen Gilbert: I do think life is stressful enough. I do think there's been that trend of terrifying shows that you should watch about horrifying crimes. And I'm not judging. I think that's fine. But I think that's too stressful. I really am at a point in my life where I'm like, "I've been working hard all day. I just want to watch people glue pool noodles into some kind of shape." That's what I want to do.

Jess Dang: People are so creative. I know if you got your hands on some unicorn and cat appliques, you'd be all over that.

Jen Gilbert: I would be, indeed. That is my personal style, for sure.

Jess Dang: Yes. Well, Jen, thank you so much again for coming on the podcast today and being such an integral part of the Cook Smarts origin story. I feel so lucky to have met you, and so admire all your talent, persistence, and all the hard work that you've done.

Jen Gilbert: Thank you. It is not an exaggeration to say it has all been my pleasure, both the podcast and just the trip down memory lane I think is really nice.

Jess Dang: Yes, this was fun. All right. Good luck with all your next steps. I'm so excited for you.

Jen Gilbert: Thank you.

Jess Dang: So was it pretty obvious how in love with Jen I am? I feel so incredibly lucky to have met her in 2012. It was just kismet, and she was exactly the person I needed to meet at that time. And I truly don't know if Cook Smarts would be what it is today without her. So I know you may have your own version of a meal plan service dream within you, and I hope that you make a plan to go after it after listening to today's episode. Like we mentioned in our New Year's resolution episode, which was episode number 21, the last one, it's all about starting small and making a plan. We had a lot we didn't know when we started building Cook Smarts, and we just broke it all up into pieces and tackled each problem on its own.

Jess Dang: Even after almost seven years, there are still so many improvements to be made, but we just had to start somewhere, knowing that it wasn't going to be perfect from the start. And like I said, I am still practicing every single day. If you're new to the podcast and want to hear more behind the scenes episodes, check out episode number three, where I interview Jess Smith, who is our very talented recipe and meal plan developer, and episode number 18, where I interview Sarah Byun, our incredibly charming and sweet kitchen happiness cheerleader.

Jess Dang: Before we say goodbye today, I wanted to share AndyJess2002's Apple Podcast review. I love being a part of a like minded cooking loving community. Cook Smarts also gives me tips on helping my child try new foods, cooking with more flavor, how to jazz up leftovers, and I find these tips so helpful in my daily life. Thank you AndyJess2002. We have loved having you in our community. And you are the winner of a Cook Smarts tote bag. Just reach out to us at [hello@cooksmarts.com](mailto:hello@cooksmarts.com). If we read your review in a future episode, you've got a colorful and very functional Cook Smarts bag waiting for you.

Jess Dang: And remember to contribute a review by Apple Podcast or voicemail for a chance to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. The number is 650-386-0290 to text a screenshot of your Apple Podcast review or to leave a voicemail review. And with that, I want to hear some of your big dreams, so drop me a line at Instagram @Cook Smarts or @JessDangCS, or even just a text to 650-386-0290. I'm so excited to support you in and out of the kitchen, and 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.