

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 94

THE MAGIC OF HELPING KIDS REDISCOVER THE JOYS OF CHILDHOOD

Host **Shawn Nason**
Guest **Alicia Kabir**

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Shawn (00:00):

Welcome to the eighth season of The Combustion Chronicles podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO, and founder of MOFI. As a maverick-minded, human-obsessed experience evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is to put people first. Throughout this season, we'll be connecting you, the listener, with cutting-edge leaders who are challenging old ways of thinking with bold, new ideas and a commitment to human-centric design. Experience matters, people matter, and revenue matters. That's why it's time to ignite a people-first experience revolution.

My guest today, Alicia Kabeer, is Chief Executive Officer of Kesem. Which is the leading national nonprofit that supports children affected by a parent's cancer. Alicia has been involved with Kesem since 2017 and began serving as CEO in 2021. Kesem offers free, creative, fun-filled programs that foster a lasting community and allows kids to rediscover the joys of childhood. I know firsthand. What a fantastic program this is because last summer my daughter participated in their camp through the University of Kentucky, where she went by the camp named Cadillac. The program is filled by thousands of college student volunteers from around the country, and those volunteers make her and me hopeful about our country's future leaders. Welcome to the Combustion Chronicles.

Alicia (01:33):

Thank you, Sean. I've been looking forward to this. Thanks for the opportunity and thanks for being part of our community.

Shawn (01:38):

I'm honored to be a part of it, and I've gotten to know you through some work we've been doing for you here at MO, and I'm thrilled that our listeners are getting to meet you today and hear more about this amazing program that everyone needs to know about, but so many have not heard about. I know. That leaning and nonprofit isn't all rainbows and puppy dogs, but tell a story about the best day you've ever had doing what you do.

Alicia (02:07):

Yeah. Thanks, Sean. There are so many good days here at Kesem. still running a business. There are hard days. So many good days though. And, I always say to the team, I measure success here at Kesem by the number of tears, the number of laughs, and the number of hugs that we experience.

And my favorite day, where you see all of that the most. Is actually the last day of our camp when our families get to see each other after our kids have been in our Camp Kesem program for a year. So, to put it in perspective of what we do for the families, it is all provided at no cost. It is a year-round program. You kind of think about starting in the fall where families start to learn about Kesem. They're getting together a couple of times over the course of the year. They're getting birthday cards; they're getting care packages. But the real highlight of the year is Camp Kesem, and that's when these kids go away for a week, again at no cost of families. And my best day is at the end of that week, seeing the kids come off the bus or come out of that campsite and look in that crowd of parents and just reconnect with their mom, their dad, their caregiver. And just that joy, you can see the happiness that the kids have, the joy and thankfulness and gratitude the parents have, and it's just such a special moment for all of us at Kesem.

Shawn (03:23):

Well, as again, I can say yes to that. I remember our daughter Cadillac as her Kesem name as I mentioned. I remember her being a little apprehensive about going to camp. It was her first time to go to a sleepaway camp at 14, and but when she came. She had made lifelong friends. She said it was the best thing that had happened to her and when can I sign up for next year's Camp. And so she is very excited that we've already filled out her application this year and she's accepted and we're waiting for the June time for camp. So, I understand that feeling of watching her when she walked back into our home. I didn't get to pick her up at camp because I was going through treatment, but I remember her walking in and just saying thank you.

And that was a powerful moment. So, at MOFI here, and you know this, we've been doing work with you. We talk about experiences as an ecosystem and that there's this massive ecosystem that we have learned about even at Kesem that's massive to this. Can you tell the story? About when designing a better experience improved someone's life, either at Kesem or in your career.

Alicia (04:35):

Yeah absolutely, and I'd be happy, and I'm so, so proud of pointing to something at Kesem that we've done over the past few years. You know, when I first started, we were getting feedback that the teenagers who had come to our camp year over year needed something better. They needed a bit of a change. They needed to be treated like teenagers and not necessarily the same way that we would have treated them as a six-year-old, eight-year-old, or a 10-year-old. And we revamped our entire teen program, and I'm so proud of that work that we did. And unfortunately, a lot of that happened right before the pandemic, so it's only getting rolled out. Now. Some of our families were able to see this for the first time this past summer, and we got feedback, Sean, over and over again that this literally changed lives.

You know, these are teenagers who have had a really hard couple of years. Teenage times are just really, really hard, and we have these teenagers coming out also saying the same. It was the best week of their life. We have kids from 13 to 18 coming to camp, putting down their phones. Being away from screens, connecting with each other, giving opportunities to work with the, the younger campers being treated more like adults. And it is changing their lives. It's changing their perspectives. And what's most important, many of those teenagers are graduating from our camp, going to college, and saying, I need to be part of Kesem. I need to be a counselor. I need to be a volunteer and continue this. And so much [00:06:00] of that is because of our focus on the teens that are part of our program.

Shawn (06:03):

And that was a program that Cadillac got to be a part of. And yes, she loved it. And you just started to hint at something that I think our listeners need to really understand because a huge part of the magic at Kesem is your thousands, literally thousands of college student volunteers. And I was very fortunate this past fall to actually attend the leadership summit in Chicago where we met hundred of these leaders and college leaders, what can employers. Learn from how you recruit, train, motivate, and communicate with these college student volunteers.

Alicia (06:46):

Yeah. Our college students are simply the heart of our organization and the work that they do. Is just truly incredible. So, so many of them say that they join for the mission, and they stay for the community. And I'd say we do two things here really, really well. One is we lean into our why. Why are we all here? Our mission is clear. I would think everyone in this community could point to the fact that we support children whose parents have or had cancer, and that brings us all together in ways that other organizations can't necessarily, so we lean hard into our mission and making sure that, that's super clear of when you're getting recruited, when you're getting interviewed, when you are part of our community.

That is the why and that we, we need you to really believe in that cause and be part of that. And I'd say the other part is we give them a lot of responsibility. A lot of organizations and companies look at me and go, Alicia, are you really having college students raise this money and work with these families and start negotiating you know, some of the contracts, of course with support from staff? And my answer is absolutely. Like you said, Sean, I have such hope and excitement for this next generation, and it is our role here at Kesem to give them these leader opportunities, leadership opportunities, and to treat them as I would an adult because they are our next generation of leaders and they need real responsibility and they step up and do this work time and time again, so very, very well.

Shawn (08:13):

And I've seen that work in hand, in hand with the University of Kentucky chapter here, like they're running a business. Yeah. And it's powerful. But I, I really want our listeners to understand, and you said it, you lean into your why and into the mission, and I hope employers and leaders that are listening to this understand that in the day we live in today, post pandemic, post covid, that purpose and why. Is probably, and I haven't done a study on this, so I'm not, but I, I'm going to put a hypothesis out there that it's probably the number one thing that is driving people to change jobs and go to companies because they want to be aligned to the why and purpose and fill that and not just get a paycheck every day.

So, I agree. Yeah, so I want to talk about your career path and in your journey some. And one of the things I've decided is that most people don't discover their true calling until well into adulthood. I am now in my fifth career, and I think I know my calling at this point, but it took five careers to figure it out. And unfortunately, as we know, some people never discover theirs. But how on earth did you go from. I know this is true here from a career in environmental engineering to leading this amazing nonprofit.

Alicia (09:37):

It is a true story and its always amazing right? To really speak with someone about their trajectory of their career. And I agree. There's always twists and turns, and I always tell my staff, You can't project where you're going to be in five years or 10 years because you don't know. And some of that you do have the ability to influence and some things you've just got to be aware of opportunities that you can't anticipate and just take advantage of them.

So yes, I have an engineering degree. I'm a civil engineer and environmental engineer by degree. I worked in technical and environmental consulting for 22 years prior to coming to Kesem when I was still in the consulting world. I was already part of Kesem. I was part of the Boston board and was introduced to Kesem through a close college friend, and by that point in my career, I was not doing as much technical work. I was leading global teams. I'd found I was really good at connecting dots and creating new opportunities for the organization, my organization and the clients. And as being part of Kesem and a board member. They needed to hire, and they had needed to hire a new chief operating officer. And I looked at the position, I said, oh, no, no, no, no. I will not be recruiting this opportunity to my network. This is my job. I want this one. So, I really, you know, I applied, I spoke with the CEO at the time, and I wanted this position for a number of reasons. I'm just, who doesn't want to be part of this? Right. And I was ready for a career change and to do something different and so I went through the process and I feel it was meant to be that I was able to become the COO in 2017. And I've been with the organization since.

Shawn (11:15):

Yes, and congratulations, like not only COO, but then obviously as we know you've moved into the CEO positions. So, with that, because I don't know how you prepped for being CEO I've learned that in my life. Besides trial and error, how did you figure out how to do your job?

Alicia (11:33):

First year was really hard. It was really hard, Sean, I don't know if your twist and turns in your career path had the same twist and turns, but it was hard because I went from a career of working. With people like me, right?

I was a technical person leading technical teams, working for clients who were in the technical field, and suddenly I came to Kesem and I was working with the most diverse group of people I had ever worked with after 20 years of, of building my career. And the first year was hard. It truly was to understand different perspectives, different ways of working, different experiences personally and professionally, and figure out how to get teams to work in a way that I hadn't had to before. So, for me Sean, it was a lot of listening. It was out doing like the voice of the customer kind of experiences, shadowing calls internally, meeting with our college students, meeting with families, meeting with campers. Going out to see camp, you know, shadowing every role possible. Just getting out there and learning how Kesem ticked and what worked and what could be, you know, continued to be improved based on feedback from the community. So, it was really a lot of listening and very quick learning and trying to make sure I made good decisions that first year.

Shawn (12:46):

Well, and you have done an amazing job. I saw that, like I said, firsthand at our leadership retreat where we saw you pouring into college students' lives. So thank you for that. So, we use this term a lot, and I use this term a lot about being maverick minded and human obsessed. And we believe that the best organizations and the best leaders have to have a bit of that maverick minded mindset and need to be human obsessed, in my opinion. So even though Kesem camp. all share the experience of being touched by a parent's cancer journey. Each one actually has a unique story. How do you stay focused on each kid's unique needs as they're going through this journey?

Alicia (13:28):

Yeah. There's a couple of ways that we do this. One way is the planning ahead. So, before a family comes to camp, you know, they give us some information about their child so we can get ahead. Dietary needs, additional support that's needed. Like we can provide American sign language interpretation as an example. So, the way we do that at the planning stages is simply ask and be very transparent to what extent we're able to support those accommodations or not. And in most cases we can, but where I'm most proud of, is what we talked about a little bit earlier about the transformation and the relationships in the community that's built over the course of that week of camp.

And the counselors. Those college students are truly incredible at looking at every child we serve and figuring out what makes them tick. And they are highly empathetic volunteers, so it's really impressive to see over the course of the week. Those counselors unravel, you know, silly things like, okay, the, that kid is not going to eat their breakfast. This is going to be a battle every day. You know, we're going to figure that out. But what they also start unraveling is, oh, you know, your parents in treatment.

That probably needs a little bit different, uh, one-on-one interaction or support than maybe someone whose parents aren't in treatment. And so the counselors really, really dig deep and it's really impressive how quickly they get to know these kids in the course of 24 and 48 hours. And that is really how we start to understand how to support each of these children, where they need similar support and where they need different support. And that's really where the magic happens. And what's always incredible is when you go to pick up your son or daughter or child, almost every counselor can come up to you and tell you a story about what happened at camp that week with your family member. So, it's really to me about spending time and being human, like you said, and really thinking about the person. And that we are here to support these kids and knowing that in some ways it looks the same. And in many ways, it's very different.

Shawn (15:13):

And again, to our personal journey. People that know me and know we have two children. I've talked about Cadillac and our son who has special needs. We are leaning this year to send him to Camp Kesem, and we've done the paperwork and it has been amazing to see the conversations I've been having on the phone of how do we really meet him where he's at so that you can feel relieved to send your son with special

needs to our camp. And so kudos to that team as well. So, I wanted to move on to some advice for our listeners because I thank every one of our guests. Has such a wide variety, such a spectrum of what's happening in here. Can you tell me what's one thing that every nonprofit could do to grow its impact?

Alicia (16:26):

It's hard to come up with just one. For me, it is thinking about the people again, and being as human centered and focused as possible and making sure that as you're growing your organization or making changes along the way, as you're growing and scaling, that you are using those voices, the people you serve, the people in your community. To get their input to make sure you're, you're doing right by them and making decisions that make sense for them. I know sometimes at custom we've been at risk. I know a lot of organizations that are can be at risk of saying, I know what the answer is, and this is what you all need. This is what this community needs, this is what the nation needs. For us, it is super important to. Listen to get feedback and input in order to scale and to make good decisions that truly drive impact and meaning with the families that we serve. I love that.

Shawn (17:21):

Obviously. Going back to the human obsessed, being human focused as possible. All right. What's the best advice you've ever received about leadership?

Alicia (17:32):

I've gotten a lot. I've been very blessed with a lot of coaches and wonderful mentors along the way. For me, I would say it's being simply being real and being as transparent as possible and providing that why. So, I work really, really hard as a leader to be as open and transparent as possible, to provide as much context as possible, to the point where sometimes my staff are like, all right, what else is she hiding? I'm like, I really am not hiding anything. Like you have the full story. And for me, that is leadership. The team knows that I am sharing. As much as I can with them and providing as much context as possible in order for them to get on step with where we're going and to make sure that they feel good about the direction of the company and some of the decisions we're making.

Shawn (18:19):

Again, I love it, In our book, Kiss Your Dragons. I preach a simple three point sermon and I say leaders need to be transparent. You know, build relationships and you have to love people. And I don't understand how our world has got to the point where we have leaders that don't like people, and what that does to us, but it is, so thank you for that. Being real. Be transparent and back to leaning into the why.

Alicia (18:47):

So, well, thank you so much. All of this amazing knowledge and for everyone to know about Kesem. What's the best place? If someone wants to go find out about Kesem, where to find out about it? You can go to the website. It's Kesem, K E S E M dot org. Everything. Awesome. When you're ready to sign up, your, your kiddo for our camp, everything's right there online as well.

Shawn (19:06):

Yes and you can reach out to us too as well. If you're listening, you can reach out to me, and I can get you there. But it has come to that point in time in this episode where we do our combustion questions, which are three randomly selected questions by our human algorithm that we call MOFI Mike. And I do not see those questions. They were actually just handed to me on Post-Its here behind the scenes. So, Alicia, are you ready for your combustion questions?

Alicia (19:33):

Oh, I'm ready. Bring it on MOFI Mike, we're ready for you.

Shawn (19:38):

So, question number one, if someone were to give you a private jet, how would you want to paint the outside?

Alicia (19:47):

Wow, that's a lovely question. I'm going to use this for one of my icebreakers, I think for an upcoming team meeting. This is amazing. I would want it to just be happy. I would want it to have some hearts and just a lot of fun colors and rainbows that everyone looked at. It, knew that this was going to be the fun Jack going somewhere really amazing.

Shawn (20:07):

Sounds more like a party jet, but yes. And we would know when Alicia arrived. When the jet came, the fun jet came. I love it. Alright, magic Kingdom, Epcot, Hollywood Studios or Animal Kingdom. Which would you pick?

Alicia (20:25):

Oh man, those are hard. They're all such good spots. I am a firm Epcot. answer on this one. I love to travel. Traveling is my passion to the extent I can travel the world in just a couple of hours or a couple of days. Epcot's it.

Shawn (20:42):

Are you happy with all the changes they're making at Epcot?

Alicia (20:45):

That's another episode. Right? But yes...

Shawn (20:49):

So maybe you know, me being a former Walt Disney Imagineer, there are some changes happening, but as far as I know, world Showcase is not changing. So, you can still go and travel to 18 countries in two hours? Yes. All right. Last one. What do you think about penguins?

Alicia (21:06):

Oh my gosh. I love penguins. So, I didn't expect to be this passion about this question, but I actually am. Our New England Aquarium, plug for them, is the Wonder Most wonderful aquarium in the world, I swear. And they have a beautiful penguin exhibit. And I always say to my husband, at some point, I'm just going to go volunteer and take care of those penguins. That is my next career goal. I love penguins. I think they're lovely.

Shawn (21:30):

I love it. I love that we hit a passion of yours with that random question, MOFI Mike. So that was. Well, thank you again and thank you for what you do for what Kesem does. I know it's impacted my family and impacting thousands of other families, and until we talk again and meet again, stay safe and be well my friend.

Alicia (21:51):

You too. Thank you so much, Sean. Take care.

Shawn (21:52):

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Combustion Chronicles. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate, and review. Remember that I'm always looking to meet more big-thinking mavericks, so let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn. If you want to discover more about human-obsessed, maverick-minded Experience Ecosystems™, go to <http://MOFI.co> where you'll find ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution, or go to experienceevangelists.com to learn more about my mission to challenge leaders to blow up outdated, siloed systems and rebuild them with an aligned human-first approach. As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing shit up.