

The
**TRUNK
SHOW**

With RW ELEPHANT

SEASON 3 EPISODE 6



**GROWING THROUGH UNEXPECTED
CHANGES WITH PARTY AT THE
MOONTOWER**



WELCOME TO THE TRUNK SHOW,

hosted by Allison Howell and brought to you by RW Elephant. Episode **6** features **Christie Zangrilli, founder of Party at the Moontower in Austin Texas.**



Christie Zangrilli is the Co-Founder and CEO of Party at the Moontower, an Austin based boutique event rental company specializing in modern-eclectic furniture and custom build backdrops and decor. Christie holds a BA in Communication Design from New York University and a MFA in Design from The University of Texas.



What's in this Episode:

- Studying design, and moving to Austin
- The seed idea, fundraising, and launching with 3 partners
- The five factors in setting your brand apart from the pack
- Discovering your core values with frameworks for operational guidance
- Navigating relationships and buying out partners
- Managing growth from the post COVID boom and customizable builds
- The importance of Lend & Gather Conference in the business's growth



QUOTES:

“Another thread that I see through the people who have that sticktoitiveness, that longevity, are really just people who can see the bigger picture. They see, oh, I'm not just dropping off stuff at a wedding or not just renting tables and chairs. **You recognize hey I'm creating culture here. This is the stuff of celebrations.** This is what makes up these milestones and memories for people. ” – **Allison Howell**

“And so I think what I learned from you, Allison, which you've always said is like **more inventory doesn't mean more money.** And so we've really taken that to heart and that we don't just buy things that we think are cool. There are exceptions. I would like to say we're more intentional and focused and super planned out on what our collections are, but they are largely driven by what the market is asking for and what also feels on brand to us.” – **Christie Zangrilli**

“Tomorrow, this big box company could literally go buy every single thing that you have. **So inventory is never going to be your unique differentiator** and so I was like, oh man, like that's super scary but made us realize how important all of the brand pieces were and how that goes into operations. So again, what are the things that you are winning?” – **Christie Zangrilli**

“We are going to reevaluate once a year, it is planned. Let's stick it on the calendar. We will hire somebody to do it. **It becomes less uncomfortable because it was pre planned versus a reaction** to something happening that seems more confrontational.” – **Christie Zangrilli**

“You're liable for them as the business owner. I personally am liable for their well being. And I'm also personally liable for keeping them paid. I was at the point where I was like, **if I'm going to shoulder all the additional stress of having all these employees and also the business was growing and doing really well, I want to be responsible for all of its successes.**” – **Christie Zangrilli**

Episode Transcription

Intro: Hello and welcome to the Trunk Show. I'm your host, Allison Howell, here to talk with leading professionals about their event rental businesses, hard-earned wisdom, and ongoing adventures in the industry.

The show is brought to you by RW Elephant, mighty inventory management software designed to help you conquer the chaos in your event rental business and reclaim your creativity, because the world needs more of the beautiful events and environments you create!

In this episode, you'll hear my conversation with Christie Zangrilli. She's a serial entrepreneur and graphic designer by trade who brought together her creativity and problem-solving skills when she started Party at the Moontower Rentals in Austin in 2016.

Christie's focus on design and consistency throughout her brand experience has helped her grow Moontower Rentals to the operation it is today. I can't wait for you to hear her story of triumphs, challenges, and adventures along the way.

Christie Zangrilli: I'm Christy Zangrilli. I'm the co-founder and CEO of Party at the Moontower Event Rentals.

We are located in Austin, Texas. We officially launched in October of 2016. So coming up in a couple weeks will be our eighth birthday. So we're really excited about that.

Allison Howell: Yeah, that's very exciting. Let's go way back. Before we talk too much about Moontower, tell me about growing up. You grew up in a small business family, right? Tell me about your childhood.

Christie Zangrilli: So my dad is a restaurant owner, entrepreneur, and his business, which is called Dante's. It's over 60 years old. He just started really young working in high school for a guy who had a pizza shop there. And then he started to go to school at Penn State and helped him open up a shop there.

He ended up dropping out of school and bought that restaurant from the original owner. And that has just grown into a really big restaurant company, if you will. My mom is an artist, and so she was part of the business and did all of the



Austin, I had no clue what it was like. So I would come here and be like, this place is so fun and cool. And it was always during these times where fun stuff was happening.

So the impetus really is that my best friend was here and that it was just a fun place to party in.

Allison Howell: I think sometimes people, especially in this industry, discount the life experiences and the other parts of training and the things that have really helped them cultivate their eye, and their style, and their business sense, and I think so much of that is required in order for you to be successful at this. Because there are tons of people who are starting businesses like this, putting up a shingle and say, "Hey, I'm a rental company," and you see them come and go because there's no barrier to entry, right?

You can buy a couch and start renting it out tomorrow. And it's really easy to start, but the people like you who have longevity at this, the things I noticed, those trends are, wow, you've got a really great eye. That's not just random. You've trained it either professionally or through school or through a lot of time doing design work in a number of ways.

You also have some exposure to business, right? Either you grew up in a business family or you started multiple businesses or you worked in a couple of different businesses that didn't go well until you got to this point where you started your own. And then another thread that I see through the people who have that "sticktoitiveness," that longevity, are really just people who can see the bigger picture.

Like they see, oh, I'm not just like dropping off stuff at a wedding or not just like renting tables and chairs. You recognize hey I'm creating culture here. This is the stuff of celebrations. This is what makes up these milestones and memories for people.

And on the one hand, you don't want to take yourself too seriously, but on the other hand, this is really important. And you recognize that what you're creating in your collection and your company and your brand is influencing. The kind of celebrations, the very stuff of our culture, happening around you.



Christie Zangrilli: Exactly. I think that's, you hit the nail on the head. The interview's over. That is clearly the reason why I'm in it.

Allison Howell: Tell me then, how do we get to Party at the Moontower? Where did this idea come from? At what point does this start bubbling up for you?

Christie Zangrilli: I graduated school thinking I was a total failure. And what the hell did I just do for two years? And I was just watching my best friend Tenaya Hills Robinson.

She was working. She is still working for a company called Bunkhouse here in Austin. I was planning my wedding. It was so DIY, I didn't have any clue about the event industry, about how you need a planner. I was just like, oh, I'll just do this myself. Like I think. So many people do.

Allison Howell: Well, already you've described that's how you grew up. So you just make it yourself, right?

Christie Zangrilli: Yeah, and plus being a designer I was like I like this stuff. Why would I hire somebody to do all this for me? I was super excited I letterpressed all the invitations. I letterpressed just so much stuff. I really like paper and the physical stuff.

So I was really into doing letterpress stuff, but nonetheless, we found this company, YEAH! Rentals, which I know, because they have been a guest. I'm sorry. Remind me of his name.

Allison Howell: Michael Antonia.

Christie Zangrilli: Yes, Michael. And I think I fangirled him at the first Lend & Gather that I went to like, "Oh my god! You were my inspiration!" We saw what he was doing out in LA, which was very focused mid-century modern, very colorful, cool rentals. And we were like, wow, like there's nothing like this here in Austin. Loot here in town who we were all aware of, and they're so successful, at the time they were just doing vintage rentals and they were pretty small at that time as well.

Yeah, we just had this idea. And by the way, this was a good one, two, three, four. This was almost four years before we actually launched Party at the Moontower. But we had this idea. And we were like, wow, nobody's doing more colorful, fun



Christie Zangrilli: A hundred percent. And I will say that is the biggest pain point of me and every other single rental company out there. I guarantee you. We should take a show of hands at Lend & Gather.

What are you dealing with? That's the thing I ask other rental company owners about when we come to conferences like yours is all of us are just like, oh my gosh, how do you schedule? How do you hire? All of these things on the delivery side that are, it's just a lot of moving parts. It's a lot of moving parts.

Allison Howell: Speaking of moving parts, you started with investors and then eventually you got to a point where you realized, hey, I want to be steering this ship that is absolutely not sinking on my own. So tell me a little bit about how you come to those conclusions and how you approached those people.

Just to be clear, at Lend & Gather, Christie's going to be part of a panel where we're going to be discussing maximizing the value of your rental business. We'll be talking with several people who've either bought or sold a rental business in the last year or so. And they're going to be talking about how they came to their evaluation of the business, the negotiating process, how they might do it differently going forward, all those things.

So we'll talk about the nitty gritty of actually the transaction at Lend & Gather. But I want to hear from you now, Christie, about the process of coming to this place. And then how did you navigate it relationally?

Christie Zangrilli: I have been the only managing member. The other partners are just members and they have an ownership percentage. I think this would be my advice to people that are about to start and take on partners or take on investors or whatnot. Had I been smarter, I would have thought oh, hey, this is going to be really successful one day. That's not to say I didn't think I would be successful, but when you're bootstrapped, basically bootstrapping a company, like I said, the investment money paid for inventory and the rest, we are basically bootstrapping.

You're just thinking about making ends meet on the regular. You're not thinking about what happens when this business is making millions of dollars or whatever it is, right? And so the idea that you would have to share in the wealth of your work down the line at some point, it's just not a big thing in your mind at first.



Allison Howell: Well, I mean, that's a good practice no matter what, right? Whether you're thinking about an exit strategy down the road, or whether you have partnerships, or anything like everybody should be thinking about that on a yearly basis. Hey, does this still work for both of us? Really fairly, talking about the distribution of work.

Does this account for the ways that we're putting into it? And if not, should it be adjusted? How can we adjust it in a way that feels fair to both of us, right? And the thing is, if you think, oh, that's going to be so uncomfortable, then maybe you should consider not being in a partnership. Because if you can't have those kinds of conversations, then it's going to be really hard for you to be in a partnership with anybody because those conversations are required, right?

Christie Zangrilli: Yeah, I just didn't know part of it is fear, like "Oh, I don't want to offend my friend," or whatever it might be. But I think if you go into it, somebody like me being like, hey, we are going to reevaluate once a year, it is planned. Let's stick it on the calendar. We will hire somebody to do it. It becomes less uncomfortable because it was pre planned versus a reaction to something happening that seems more confrontational or something. 2022 when I think everybody was experiencing the post COVID event boom, we grew and we also took on delivery in-house. We were literally using a third-party delivery and up until that point.

We took delivery in-house because we control it way more, right? Like, make sure they're wearing the uniforms. The third-party guy we had just would roll up in whatever random clothes he was wearing. So as we were taking that on, we grew from four people to, I think, four to eleven full time people in just 2022.

That's actually what the impetus for us joining EOS. Which, by the way, if anybody is in a growth phase, I would highly recommend using EOS. And hiring an implementer through them to put the structures and systems in place to handle the growth. And we did that on recommendation of another business owner friend who is just a little bit ahead of me in terms of years and experience.

And I have always looked up to her as a mentor. She owns a really successful day spa company here called Viva. She was like, "Christie, if we did this years ago, we would have double the amount of locations." I was like, okay sold. I need some help. Let's do it. So that's how that decision came.



Christie Zangrilli: Customs was on the list of our services when I first launched our first website.

It was always something that I wanted to do, but then I realized I actually didn't know how to run a rental company first. And then you do this custom, like the custom makes things a different beast in a way. So I kind of had to learn how to run the rental company first. And now that I feel like we've got that down pat, we were like okay. Who do I need to hire? Is it somebody more design focused? Is it somebody more building focused?

We do have a builder, a carpenter, Build Engineer is his title. And he's a big part of this. So it's building up other third party vendors, artisan makers, and just figuring out the SOPs for how this side of the business works in conjunction with the rental side, because it's different. It is different and thought we were just in a place that we were rocking and rolling on like our operations of the rental side and again, this is all learned from Lend & Gather, just so everybody knows.

Paisley & Jade were the first ones that I saw that gave an awesome talk. I think I might have paid them to get copies of SOP templates or something like that. Developing our own, just being so strict on recording them and can write great SOPs all day. It's following them and making sure it's communicated and all that stuff.

That's the pain points of the everyday, right? That's just the never ending kind of situation.

Allison Howell: And now I'm wondering, in addition to trying to get people to actually follow your SOPs on the rental side, do you think it will be at all difficult to maintain the brand or the Party at the Moontower flavor while offering custom work, because I know sometimes people can ask for things and you're going to want to do some of that and sometimes not, or not in the way they want. Do you think that will at all be difficult?

Christie Zangrilli: That is a great question. I actually hadn't considered it from that point of view. My experience so far. We actually are baby stepping into this, mind you, didn't want to come out of the gate being like, we're going to do the whole stage facade for Austin City Limits Music Festival or something like that.



We're starting small and it's like custom photo backdrops for weddings or for corporate things

Allison Howell: Or for pickleball tournaments.

Christie Zangrilli: Yeah, pickleball tournaments. You know, things that we can think we're building just, wall things, cool looking shelves that you can brand, right?

Everybody's looking for those brandable moments. That's where we're getting to stretch our creative legs to be like, okay, and this can be thought of in the wedding aspect too, right? The wedding brand is the couple, right? The couple's name or whatever design, like theme that they've chosen.

They're very much the same as a company where the company has their brand name and their own personal aesthetic that they're trying to get across. So it's been such a cool design challenge. Again, going back to design thinking to say, hey, the parameters are that we need to build things that are neutral enough, right? Not totally out there.

And so while we have wanted to lean very hard into this Austin, cool, funky thing at the end of the day, if you look at our stuff, it's pretty neutral. So it's finding those pieces that are neutral, but well designed. And I think, that's like the key guiding.

Allison Howell: Right, it seems like that's the key to the profitability piece of the custom work is making sure that at least some elements of it are reusable, because otherwise when you're reinventing the wheel every single time, you're probably going to have to price it so high that it's not going to be appealing to the clientele or you're not going to be pricing it high enough to actually make any money on it.

Christie Zangrilli: Customizable. That's probably a better word for it. These are like backdrops, like archways, right? And you get, with the price comes, you have to pick a color. And you can put some sort of vinyl graphics or CNC cut logo or something like that. We'll do that for you. That's where we are starting, right? That's most of the stuff that we're doing.



Are these sorts of pieces that are customizable and then you can start combining them in cool ways, right? And starting to get a little more creative. Like maybe somebody wants to hang, I was doing a Western theme and we start hanging cowboy hats or whatever it might be. And then there's the full fabrication piece, which is where we're going also.

And that is where we felt like it was worth it for us to start this other arm of the business that we do think it's a profitable arm, although it is different. It's different pricing. It's different processes, all that kind of stuff. And that is what, like I said I'm trying to figure this out myself to figure it out and then we'll go from there, but that's the stuff and the big creating cultivate stages or like other big conferences where these you know, they're totally custom built backdrops and structures and stuff like that we would we are charging full price to build those and we're not expecting to rent them again, right? Like they might go into a recycling bin

Allison Howell: It sounds like what you're talking about is Kaizen, the Japanese principle of always getting better. You're looking at these SOPs and saying, "Okay it's great, but can it be better? Can we improve it?" So this concept of continually improving but also there's a little bright shiny object syndrome in there, right?

Christie Zangrilli: Oh my god, my team. They're like, "Christie, you will just swoop in, commandeer somebody because I have an impulse to do something. And it's endlessly annoying." I understand. I'm trying to be better about it, but yeah.

Allison Howell: Is Party at the Moontower the business you imagined it would be when you started?

Christie Zangrilli: No, that's so funny. Cause it's like, of course I thought it would be successful or I wouldn't have tried to do it. But I'm like, it was hard at first to give up that. Like I was the one that was designing all the lounges for the clients and blah, blah, blah. And then you hand it off and you think other people can't do it as well and they actually do it better or different in ways.

And you're just like, wow, that's so cool. And so, and I, the other part too, is I think I feel so honored that I can support... I'm going to get, totally this honestly is really important to me. I think that I'm sorry, like my team actually are probably if they were to listen to this be like, "Oh, Christy hasn't cried yet." Because I cry when I talk about things that I care about.



RESOURCES:

[The Lend & Gather Conference](#)

The **[RW Elephant mailing list](#)** features more event industry resources and happenings—including announcements about new Trunk Show episodes!

THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSOR:

RW Elephant: Mighty inventory management software designed to help you conquer chaos and reclaim your creativity!

[Website](#) | [Instagram](#)

And our guest:

Christie Zangrilli of Party at the Moontower

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Pinterest](#) | [TikTok](#)

The
**TRUNK
SHOW**
With RW ELEPHANT