


The Invisible Mentor

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The invisible Mentor Interviews Nadja Piatka, Food Entrepreneur

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Interviewee Name: Nadja Piatka

Company Name: Nadja Foods, Owner

Website: <http://nadjafoods.com>, <http://www.ultimategirlsgetaway.com>

Avil Beckford: Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Nadja Piatka: I'm a food entrepreneur. My company is called Nadja Foods and I also do the women's event called Ultimate Girls Getaway where I raise funds for women survivors of war. That's what I call my hobby business but it keeps me a lot busier than a hobby should. I also do consulting for women who are starting or trying to get into the food business, or growing their food business from kitchen to retail and I also do motivational speaking. So that's it in a nutshell.

Avil Beckford: What's a typical day like for you?

Nadja Piatka: A typical day would be to start with pilates. Once a week I do pilates with a personal trainer but the other days I do it in my home with a wheel, and that gets my day started on a really nice note. After that I enjoy a healthy breakfast of oatmeal, fruit and yogurt, and then I start my day.

Avil Beckford: How do you motivate yourself and stay motivated?

Nadja Piatka: I think what's really important is to focus on the positive things that are happening because everyone faces challenges. There are things that sometimes don't work out, especially these days with the economy and the news that's out there. Of course if it bleeds it leads so you always have more focus on that and I think it can be very hard on people to stay positive and motivated. But my mother used to have a great saying, "Everything passes, both good and bad."

I understand that things don't come the way you want to have them all the time. When you get those nos, or you don't get the response you want, what you have to do is think about the good things, the positive responses to things that have happened. Some days it's easier and some days it's harder, but it's really important because I think your mindset and your mood is going to determine how you react to the rest of the day and that can have a bad effect on everything. So it's probably one of the most important things to do is to keep that positive mindset especially if you're an entrepreneur.

Avil Beckford: If you had to start over from scratch, knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?

Nadja Piatka: To be totally honest, I believe that we have our biggest growth, and we learn the most from our mistakes. I say that I never make the same mistake twice because I wouldn't have time for all the mistakes that I am going to make. We have the perfect history for where we are today, and I really like where I am today, so I wouldn't change anything, and I'm grateful for what I've learned, and I'm grateful for what I'm going to learn as I go forward.

Avil Beckford: What's the most important business or other discovery you've made in the past year?

Nadja Piatka: I found that today it really is more important now than ever to diversify, to not depend on that one big client. I've done that in the past, and I was able to do that in the past, but I don't think you can do that now with the way things are going. And there is also more opportunities so you have to look at those and say I'm going to take those opportunities instead of sit back and rest on what we have because that can change. And if you have everything with a few clients or a few parts of your business all of a sudden doesn't sustain itself, then you have a real problem.

Avil Beckford: What's one of the biggest advances in your industry over the past five years?

Nadja Piatka: What I've seen is, and I really like this, is that there is more focus on healthier products. There is more focus on clean labels. People are wondering why you have to have so many preservatives and additives and all these ingredients that you can't pronounce. Why are we eating this?

I was diagnosed with leukemia years ago. Even though I was careful with what I used to eat, I was the person who would pour [Splenda](#) into every drink. I was the person spraying spray butter on everything. When I looked at those labels it was ridiculous and I said, "What am I eating? Sure it's helping me lose weight, but are they keeping me healthy?" And I just decided that I would stop doing that and I think it was a good decision. But with the food industry there are more choices now to eat healthier and there is much more policing of labels so I see that as a good thing.

Avil Beckford: What are the three threats to your business, your success, and how are you handling them?

Nadja Piatka: I think, what is a threat to my business, and everyone's business is I'm seeing shrinking profit margins, but there is more demand to sharpen your pencil. You don't have that wiggle room that maybe we have years ago because everyone is looking at what's the best deal, the best bargain. We see it in Groupon and places like that, and not that that is a bad thing, but everyone wants the discount price and the best price is very good for the consumer.

The manufacturers are tightening up more and more, and what I see is that's a challenge because you have less margins, but what I see good about that is we are looking harder at increasing our efficiency on how do we produce this better with less costs, or with savings. So it is making us think a little more on how we can do the best practices. But there is less profit to play with to kind of rest back on, and that's a difference that I see now.

One of the ways we look at this is to look at volume and if our profit is tight, we look at the opportunity for volume and try to make it there. Certainly there are different ways to think about doing things. It is a constant challenge. It's a way of making us do better at business, but at the same time it was nice having a little more profit.

Avil Beckford: What's unique about the service that you provide?

Nadja Piatka: I do different things. My basic thing is my food business Nadja Foods. We provide healthier food, desserts and snacks. That to me is what sets us apart, and has allowed me to get the big clients, and the big grocery store because we do have healthier products and we also have our delicious products and sometimes people think that healthier and delicious do not go hand-in-hand. That's exciting for us.

Also with the consulting services I like doing that because we see the difference in women who have an idea, have a dream, who have something that they do very well, but they just don't know how to get it to market. So that is a service that I enjoy providing because it is based on my experience.

Avil Beckford: What do you observe most people in your field doing badly that you think you do well?

Nadja Piatka: I don't like to think about what other people are doing badly. I focus on how I can do the best at what I do.

Avil Beckford: Describe a major business or other challenge you had and how you resolved it. What kind of lessons did you learn in the process?

Nadja Piatka: It was wanting to start a business and having an idea and some food products that I really believed in and loved, and how I would get them to market. I didn't have any money to do that because I was a single parent with two children. I was unemployed, and couldn't find work.

After a twenty year marriage I hadn't focused on my own education or career because I always thought that I would always be married and have someone taking care of me. That's not always the case and I wasn't prepared, and didn't plan for that, then when I had the divorce there was a financial crash that we had gone through so I didn't have alimony and I found myself in a situation where I did not have the ability to work. I had bill collectors.

I had this great idea of what to do and I started outsourcing my products. I went to a little bakery, and instead of trying to find the money to build a facility or bakery, or buy machines to bake my products, I went to a bakery and had them outsource my products and I just started with a confidentiality agreement. I couldn't afford a lawyer so I used an old aerobic waiver.

I "whited" out the words in the waiver and changed the words to baker. I gave them the recipe and had them manufacture my recipe and I went out to sell it to customers. Before that I was selling it myself out of my car and realized that I couldn't keep doing that, so that was my first major business challenge that I had, and the way I resolve that was to outsource my recipes to a small bakery.

Soon I outgrew that facility and ended up in a bigger one, and a bigger one, and the rest is history. I ended up supplying McDonald's Canada, Subway and big accounts like that. That was my first of many challenges.

What I learned from this is that I didn't really need the conventional way of starting a business. I didn't need the big loan from the bank because I couldn't get it, I tried. I learned that if you really believe in what you want to do I really think you are unstoppable. Especially as a woman, you may have everything going against you, but I'll tell you that when you set your mind and say, "this is what I'm going to do, even though I don't have the money, I don't have the experience, I don't have the resources, I don't have any of the things that I should have, business textbook that I should have," there are ways to do it. I learned that you shouldn't give up when you really believe in something.

Avil Beckford: Tell me about your big break and who gave you.

Nadja Piatka: My first big break was getting the account for McDonald's, and that was selling my low fat muffins to them. And I got to be good friends with the CEO and he grew to be a really great mentor to me. But it was starting as someone coming to them in a regional office with my idea, my low fat muffins, and finally getting to head office. It was a process, but it was through believing and having the best product out there and not thinking that what I was doing was impossible. Though later, the CEO of McDonald's said that generally it's a slam door policy and I had a better chance of winning the lottery.

Avil Beckford: Describe one of your biggest failures. What lessons did you learn, and how did it contribute to a greater success?

Nadja Piatka: When I was in debt, I had bill collectors coming after me, that's when we divorced. I couldn't pay the bills. I had to move out of my big, beautiful house, and moved into a little house. When the bill collector would come I would hide under the table so he couldn't see me when he used to look in the window, and I would hide there until he went away.

I felt like a very big failure because I had always been someone who paid her bills. My parents were hard working Ukrainian people who had a restaurant. We lived above the restaurant when I was growing up. I learned that you shouldn't buy something until you could pay for it all and now I found myself in a very tough situation, feeling very much like a failure.

The biggest failure was when I made my daughter Veronica hide under the table with me when one day the bill collector came when she was home from school for lunch. That day, I was not only a failure to myself, but a failure to my child.

Avil Beckford: What has been your biggest disappointment in your life – and what are you doing to prevent its reoccurrence?

Nadja Piatka: I don't think that something that doesn't go well in your life is a disappointment, or is something that shouldn't happen. But I truly believe that every disappointment, or failure, I learn from. Again citing the case where I made my daughter hide under the table from the creditor, from that failure I decided that I would never let this happen again. I wrote down my goals and said, "I was going to be a success." That forced me into a position of resiliency in saying that, "I could either curl up in a ball, and feel sorry for myself, or I can start to achieve and do what I want to do."

I was also in a partnership for a while, and one thing about partnerships, is that when they come to an end, that is a disappointment. I have decided not to go into a partnership again. I wouldn't do that going forward. Those are the disappointments you try to prevent or not let re-occur again.

Avil Beckford: What's one of the toughest decisions you've had to make and how did it impact your life?

Nadja Piatka: One of the toughest decisions was moving from Canada to the United States. I lived in Calgary and had my business there. I was also doing my woman's event out there and I met my wonderful husband-to-be on a trade mission with the Canadian government. I used to be an advisor to the Minister of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and I was in the States and met my future husband. As a result, I ended up leaving Canada and moving to the United States. That was a really hard decision, but I was very happy to know that I could maintain my Canadian citizenship and become a US citizen at the same time so I could have dual citizenship. That impacted my life and I'm glad that I was able to do that.

It allowed me to start my business in the United States and today my US company outsources in the United States and my Canadian company continues to outsource in Edmonton, Alberta in Canada.

Avil Beckford: What are three events that helped to shape your life?

Nadja Platka:

1. Growing up and working in my parents restaurant shaped my life. I used to be a teacher before I got married and I was 20 years out of the workforce, couldn't go back to teaching, and really had to learn a new career. I kind of fell back on what I knew growing up with my parents having a restaurant. I went back to my first love which was food. That certainly shaped my life.
2. Getting leukemia changed things for me. I'm now in remission, and I'm grateful for a healthier lifestyle that I've lived but it has changed my life because now fortunately instead of being able to run on five hours of sleep a night, now I need eight to 10 hours, and that was a really hard adjustment. I feel like I'm sleeping my life away.
3. My divorce. As difficult as it was, it made me find the strength to survive alone, that I didn't think I had.

Avil Beckford: What's an accomplishment that you are proudest of?

Nadja Platka: I'm proudest of my children. My daughter graduated with her MBA from York University in Toronto a few years ago and joined my business and now works full-time with me. That's the little girl that was hiding under the table with me so I think we've come a long way. My son lives in Canada, is a very talented, artistic writer, and I'm very proud of him. My children are my biggest accomplishment.

Avil Beckford: How did mentors influence your life?

Nadja Platka: I really believe in mentors, whether you are a mentor or mentoree. We grow and we really need to have other people's experiences. I have always belonged to a group of women called the Equinox, and it's just a cluster of women that we formed in Calgary. We are businesswomen who meet once a month, have dinner and share our challenges, our successes, anything that we can talk about freely and confidentially amongst ourselves.

That was such a beneficial experience that when I moved to the United States, to western New York, I formed a group of women. We call ourselves the Equinox and continue to meet once a month for dinner and just share our experiences, our businesses, personal, whatever there is to talk about. We take turns to tell everyone how we are doing and it's a great thing to do because sometimes when you are an entrepreneur it can be a solitary occupation. The mentors I have gathered around me or mentor to, have been really great. Also, I find in my consulting business it allows me to mentor, and again I feel there is so much for you to learn from everyone around you.

Avil Beckford: What's one core message you received from your mentors?

Nadja Platka: The most important message I ever received was from my mentor back in Canada when I was supplying McDonald's. I was going to be awarded a Woman of Vision presentation for my business and I was very excited about winning this award from the television station. My daughter Veronica was coming back home, she was away at school, and she was coming back for this special award. I was told I had two minutes to give my acceptance speech. I met with my mentor, with Veronica there at the awards I really wanted to express and talk about how we were here hiding under the table from bill collectors, hugely in debt, and here we are now having a successful business and accepting an award, but I said to my mentor, "If I tell this story, the secret that my daughter and I have held for these years, and if I stood up and tell that secret they would think I'm not a woman of vision and would think she doesn't deserve an award. It was a humiliating situation that I had put myself in."

I remember my mentor said, "You have to tell that story. That's your purpose. You have to share that story," and it was the hardest thing I ever did when I stood up and told people about how I used to hide, and how I made my daughter hide, and I looked at my daughter and said, "Veronica, today we are sitting at the table instead of under it." And I'll tell you, everybody was so kind and so gracious and people were crying, and people clapped. And I realized that day, that I had to share my story, but it was my mentor who told me that I needed to and I wouldn't have otherwise.

Avil Beckford: An invisible mentor is a unique leader you can learn things from by observing them from afar, in the capacity of an Invisible Mentor, what is one piece of advice that you would give to readers?

Nadja Piatka: The advice would be to follow your dreams in spite of people who tell you that you can't. I remember a teacher in school making a joke at my expense because I stood up, and I guess I wasn't very smart that day and the teacher was saying, "Nadja, don't ever take a job where you have to put a sentence together," and everybody laughed and it was very hard for me to hear that and later, when I got older, and the day when I wrote all my goals down of what I wanted to do, one of the goals was that I was going to be an author and public speaker, and I was going to have a newspaper column, and guess what? all that came true. Sometimes when people tell you that you can't, if you truly believe in yourself, you can.

Avil Beckford: What are five life lessons that you have learned so far?

Nadja Piatka:

1. I wish I had visited my parents more often. When I moved away, my parents lived in another city. A life lesson is that you get very busy and do not stop to visit your parents, and I would have liked to have visited them more.
2. As much as I love to take time for myself, I try to do more if I can. I am not very good at trying to get off the treadmill, and that's something I'm trying very hard to do.
3. Forgiveness – because the alternative takes too much energy.
4. Aging, it's inevitable so try and do it gracefully.
5. Don't love anything that can't love you back. I learned this when I lost my beautiful home and [Mercedes Benz](#).

Avil Beckford: When you have some down time, how do you spend it?

Nadja Piatka: My favourite way is to cook because you cannot cook and worry at the same time.

Avil Beckford: What process do you use to generate great ideas?

Nadja Piatka: I find that I get the best ideas when I'm exercising. If I'm on a treadmill or I'm walking or on the stair-master, my mind kind of zones out and those are the times I end up with some good ideas, or ideas that I'm going to use.

Avil Beckford: What's your favourite quotation and why?

Nadja Piatka: My favourite quote is by [Thomas Edison](#) and I love this quote. He said, "If you did all the things in life that you were truly capable of, you would literally astound yourself." And I really believe in that because sometimes people just don't do everything they're capable of. I think we have so much potential and there is so much that we are capable of. There is so much talent and there are so many people who have not realized their potential yet, and sometimes adversity brings that out. I think that for me that's how I learned more about my potential was through adversity.

Avil Beckford: How do you define success?

Nadja Piatka: Freedom!

Avil Beckford: In your opinion what's the formula for success?

Nadja Piatka: One of my favourite philosophers is [Goethe](#), and he has great clarity about success. "Just make that decision to go with your idea, define clearly what it is you're going to do and the universe will follow through," and it's such an interesting thing that when you have this unshakeable belief, and you're going to do what it is you have planned or destined to do. When you make that decision, this sense of urgency that you're going to follow through on it, it's almost like the universe falls into place. People come into your life, opportunities present themselves, that otherwise would not have been possible, and I really think that is truly the formula for success.

Avil Beckford: What are the steps you took to succeed in your field?

Nadja Piatka: Because I didn't have the resources to go the easier route, the first step was to start small in my kitchen. I would get up in the morning 4 o'clock and start baking and I would sell to little coffee shops in the city I lived in.

After I was on [the Oprah show](#) people contacted me because they had this product, this idea, and they would give it to friends and family for free and everybody loved it. But when you are giving things away for free you don't have a neutral or unbiased focus group. You have to test the market with your product, and have people who are willing to buy it, and buying it more than once then you have a product that the market will sustain.

If you're just depending on friends and family, if they like it, it really isn't a true sense of what the market will do in this very competitive business that we're in. And every business has to have the ability to rise above everyone else's, so what I did was tested it in the field with smaller shops, and then grew from there. That is one of the ways that I would recommend to people is to find out if the market will sustain their products.

A lot of people have an idea, they have a product that they want to get out to the market and they spend an awful amount of money on the packaging. By the time you have something that you haven't even sold, I see people have put hundreds of thousand of dollars into a product before they have even sold one dollar of it. There are ways to do that without such a huge investment with your product and I try to advise people that there are ways to do that. There are many steps to be successful in your field and one of the biggest steps is controlling and having a handle on how much money you're spending. I've seen people run out of money before they made one sale.

Avil Beckford: What advice do you have for someone just starting out in your field?

Nadja Piatka: Test out your products in the marketplace and don't just rely on friends and family.

Avil Beckford: If trusted friends could introduce you to five people that you've always wanted to meet, who would you choose? And what would you say to them?

Nadja Piatka:

1. I would love to meet the Pope. I think it would be amazing to talk to him.
2. In the entertainment world, I wanted to meet **Oprah** and I have met her so I'm very privileged to have done that. It was a great experience.
3. I would love to meet my grandparents. I have heard wonderful stories about them, so they are people who I'd love to meet.
4. I would also love to meet [Maya Angelou](#), [Warren Buffet](#), and [Matt Lauer](#).

Avil Beckford: Which one book had a profound impact on your life? What was it about this book that impacted you so deeply?

Nadja Platka: The book that really impacted my life was *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill. That's a book that was written decades ago, an old, old book. The theories, the stories, the philosophies, the lessons in there work today just as they did many years ago. It's not a very big book, but it was a great book to read, and it is one of favourites.

Avil Beckford: If you were stranded on a deserted island, what are five books that you would like to have with you and why? Summarize the book in two sentences.

Nadja Platka:

1. The Bible.
2. *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* by Deepak Chopra.
3. *The Book of Poems* by Taras Shevchenko.
4. *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle.
5. *The Great Gatsby* by Scott F Fitzgerald.

Avil Beckford: What one music CD and movie would you like to have with you (on the deserted island) and why?

Nadja Platka: The movie would be a comedy, okay. If I'm going to be on a deserted island by myself I would like to laugh, and it would probably be a Lucille Ball movie because I think she was hysterical, especially the one where she is eating chocolate in the chocolate factory. It's food related, she is on an assembly line making chocolate and she ends up having to eat most of them. For the music CD, it would be any romantic CD, by Steve Tyrell, a romantic singer, great voice and since it's a romantic CD I hope that my husband would be with me on this deserted island, but since I'm stranded I would have to be thinking about him I guess.

Avil Beckford: What excites you about life?

Nadja Platka: There are so many things that it is so hard to put my finger on any one thing. And I thought about this and it was funny it was almost like a flood of thoughts. What excites me is the possibility of being a grandparent. I can't wait for that to happen. I don't think it's going to happen soon. What excites me is we adopted a rescue kitten from the SPCA at Christmas, and I love animals, and the thought of having one purring in my lap now is such a comfort that I would hate to miss out on having that privilege. What excites me is a good meal and a bottle of wine. What excites me is a beautiful, sunny day where I can be outside. So there are just so many things. I think after being diagnosed with leukemia and thinking about our mortality, it gave me such an appreciation that I get excited easily about everything.

Avil Beckford: How do you nurture your soul?

Nadja Platka: Prayer.

Avil Beckford: If you had a personal genie and she gave you one wish, what would you wish for?

Nadja Platka: I would hate to waste it on one wish. And this is going to be one of those conventional, traditional answer, but it would be I would wish for good health for myself and my family.

Avil Beckford: Complete the following, I am happy when.....

Nadja Platka: I'm happy when my kids are happy!