Elijah's Baby Bucket List

Amy Tarpein's life, marked by personal adversity and fierce determination, became the foundation for a global movement: Elijah's Baby Bucket List. Amy is a dedicated single mother, blogger, author, and public speaker. Her journey took an irrevocable turn when her youngest son, Elijah, was diagnosed with a rare, terminal brain condition called Lissencephaly at eight months old. The prognosis was devastating: doctors gave him less than two years to live. Prior to starting her business, Amy had worked for the post office for 15 years, a demanding schedule that eventually led to a shoulder injury. Faced with Elijah's diagnosis, Amy found inspiration in the past. Her late mother, who passed away from ovarian cancer, had often expressed regret for never traveling. Amy promised her mother she would see the world and live her life fully. This memory, combined with her son's diagnosis, fueled a radical change. Amy took her children on an unplanned road trip to see the ocean. Standing by the waves in Jacksonville, Florida, Amy made a solemn promise: "If he was only going to live to be 2, we were going to show him as much of the world as we could." This quest became the origin of Elijah's Baby Bucket List.

As Amy and her family embarked on their adventures, she quickly realized a significant, often heartbreaking, knowledge gap: the lack of accurate, honest information regarding wheelchair-accessible family adventures. The pivotal moment that launched her business came during a trip inspired by a popular travel blog. Amy arrived at the location, only to discover the main attraction was "down two flights of stairs, and there was no elevator." This barrier didn't just exclude Elijah; it excluded the whole family from making a memory together. "When those barriers are in place, it stops them from making memories together," Amy explains. She realized that accessibility for someone with a cane is vastly different from accessibility for a child in a power wheelchair. Compelled to fill this void, Amy transformed her personal journey into a professional venture. This became her business idea: creating a reliable resource to help families like hers navigate the complexities of accessible travel.

This mission was the core reason why she wanted to start a business: to create moments of pure joy for her son and inspire others globally, while simultaneously filling a critical niche in the travel industry by consulting with destinations on inclusion. Amy also understood the profound reciprocity of their journey: while she intended to show Elijah the world, she "quickly realized that the world needed to see Elijah," and his life could be a source of inspiration for countless others. Amy's success is built upon a firm foundation of community, a philosophy captured in her best-selling book, Braver Together. She credits her resilience to her mother's wisdom, who taught her to actively "choose joy" even when facing life's greatest hardships. This became the inspiring tagline for her business.

For Amy, what she likes most about owning her business is simple and profound: the ability to spend time with her children. Having left the post office due to injury, she faced the stark reality of balancing caregiving and income. Starting her own company was a necessity, giving her the flexibility to be present. "The fact that I get to make my own hours, and if he's having a bad day and he's having seizures, I can stay with him. I can just be here, and be present, and experience everything with him, instead of paying somebody else to raise him." This freedom allows her to nurture the incredible community she has built, which includes over half a million followers worldwide, and extends to her local church and supportive friends.

Despite her established success as a blogger, author, and speaker, Amy realized she needed expert guidance to grow her business professionally. Up to that point, much of the destination consulting was "basically free work." To solidify her future, gain contracts, and monetize her immense impact, she needed to formalize the business structure. She heard about the Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at WIU QC after looking online for information on registering and structuring her business. Her original reason for contacting the SBDC was seeking a partner who could guide her through the necessary legal and financial steps. Amy connected with Director Ann Friederichs, who provided the clear, step-by-step direction needed to formalize the company. Amy credits the SBDC's support in allowing her to focus on her core mission: "Having her there to be like, 'Okay, this is your next step, this is your next step, it's okay, just get it done' even when it felt a little overwhelming." This assistance is vital for her transition to booking more formal speaking gigs and professional consulting work.

Her future plans are as ambitious as her journey has been. Elijah has lived well past his initial prognosis, and the business continues to soar. Elijah's Baby Bucket List was named the Best Accessible Family Travel Blog in the United States for 2025. Furthermore, the project won two Anthem Awards: Elijah's Baby Bucket List Accessible Family Travel: Pioneering Inclusive Family Travel Through Storytelling: Silver and Community Voice Winner in Diversity, Equity & Inclusion: Special Projects. The travel is constant—from California tours to speaking at the Travel Ability Conference in Oregon. Amy sees her future plans as continuing to "show people what accessibility and inclusion really means" on a bigger, more structured stage, allowing her to influence destinations globally. For any future entrepreneurs, Amy offers two powerful pieces of advice, including a quote from Nelson Mandela that hangs above her desk: "It always seems impossible until it's done" adding "fortune favors the bold." Amy Tarpein's journey underscores the importance of courage, community, and the choice to seek joy, demonstrating that even the most daunting personal challenges can be transformed into a powerful, successful, and inspiring legacy.

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