

## Hannah Fraser, Professional Mermaid

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**Leanne:** Hi, everybody. This is Leanne Regalla with the Make Creativity Pay podcast and tonight I am very happy to be speaking with Hannah Fraser. She is credited with being the world's first professional freelance mermaid. So really happy to have you here today, Hannah.

**Hannah:** Thank you so much, Leanne! It's a pleasure to be here.

**Leanne:** Good! So Hannah's website is [hannahmermaid.com](http://hannahmermaid.com) and she also has a very cool Tedx Talk, which I highly suggest that you check out, called Turning Fantasy into Reality. And just going to ask you to tell our listeners about your story. How did you stumble into becoming a mermaid?

**Hannah:** Well, I was one of those little girls that was forever obsessed by mermaids and we all know the type. I was the one at the bottom of the pool holding my own little tea parties and diving for pennies. I was immediately comfortable with it. And before I could even draw stick figures, they had tails. And I used to go to the local library, which is before the internet and I would try and research and find out where can I find mermaids, because I completely believed that they existed. And I was always frustrated that no one could seem to tell me where I could go and how I would meet one.

And eventually at age nine, I saw the film **Splash** with Darryl Hannah and I was amazed. I finally saw that I could create my fantasy and wear it, like the tail that she had in that film. And so my mother was really creative and artsy and so she helped me to create this fun little mermaid tail. It was not very functional. I literally was sink or swim moment when I was falling into this pool wearing a table cloth material with pillow stuffing in the end of it. Was not functional at all.

It was a really great way to learn to swim in challenging situations with my legs tied together, so I had some very early training. And later on in my... I spent a lot of my earlier teenage and early 20s creating artwork of mermaids and fairies and fantasy creatures, as a way to kind of express that side of myself.

And it wasn't until I actually got this invitation to come to a modeling casting for an underwater shoot and I actually got the job against all of these gorgeous six foot supermodels that... and I did this amazing underwater shoot and I got the pictures back and when I looked at them, I realized that this was what I was supposed to do, obviously. I had a gift and I felt so comfortable down there. And those images were exactly the type of drawings that I'd been making my whole life.

And I had this wonderful moment where I realized I am my art instead of drawing my art. And I can embody it 100%. So that inspired me to create a fully functional, amazing adult tail. And that was 13 years ago and I've just been continuing to create them, lot of research and development and getting better and better. And lots of failures create lots of success.

**Leanne:** Wow! That's great. What a great story. So did you swim all these years where you still have a love of swimming all this time?

**Hannah:** Oh, absolutely. I was lucky enough to live in Byron Bay. I grew up in Melbourne mostly, and then when I left high school I did a couple years of work and then moved to Byron Bay, which is the most easterly point of Australia. and it is a stunning natural, beautiful spot with rolling green hills and surf location with dolphins and whales and rainbows. It was the perfect place for a mermaid. And that was where I really was able to live near the ocean for the first time. I spent a lot of time getting comfortable meeting animals in the wild and it's a really creative environment. So I was able to really dive deep into the creation part of this. And then five years ago I moved to the heart of Los Angeles in Hollywood to bring what I have created to the rest of the world. And so I don't get as much ocean time, but I take myself away and... like recently I went to Hawaii and spent nine days, every single day, hours and hours in the ocean with a tail on. So I kind of ...

**Leanne:** Good, good. So you've probably had some scary situations. What's the scariest thing that you've ever had happen to you in the midst of your work?

**Hannah:** I had, after many years of actually performing and swimming as a mermaid, I'd still never seen a shark. And I got this phone call from friend of mine who said, "I'm going to go and shoot great white sharks in Guadalupe Island in Mexico. Do you want to come and help make this film?" And I was like, "No, way. I've been trying to avoid them." 5:54 [crosstalk]

Kind of the first thing that people ask you like, "Oh, are you scared of sharks? Aren't you scared of getting eaten?" And I was like, "Yes, I am, but..." there was a part of me that I realized I had to get past that fear because you can't be an ambassador of the ocean and then pick and choose. These animals are pretty scary and intimidating and we've been inundated with really intense media since inception of **Jaws** and all that stuff that has painted them to be mindless killing machines.

And as I spoke to my friend more and he described his interactions with these sharks, I became really interested and I realized that maybe I was wrong. Maybe they weren't just out to eat me the first second they saw me. And I said to him, "I will travel across the world and I will come out to this island and I will get on the boat, but I don't promise to get in the water until I see what it's like."

So it took days of travel. I finally got there. I'm on this stinky old fishing trawler and the first thing I see is a 17-foot great white shark circling the boat. That instant, I was like, I want to get in there. I want to get in there with my tail.

**Leanne:** Oh, my gosh!

**Hannah:** They were so beautiful. And taking the mystery away, like this pure blue water and just seeing them casually cruising around the boat. Now this is a beautiful animal and they weren't there like baring their teeth and trying to eat everybody. It was like, "Oh, OK, we're entering their world and they are apex predators, but they are also very intelligent, very magnificent beings."

And actually quite wary predators. They like to check everything out; they want to make sure they're going in the right thing. Humans are not actually on the menu. However, getting in the water with them is definitely pretty intimidating. And I had this moment where I said to the crew, "What happens... I'm there in a mermaid tail looking like dinner, six-foot shiny mermaid and what happens if it starts coming at me as opposed to just kind of checking me out? I've got nothing, no protection. I'm holding my breath; I can't even see very well underwater. I've no mask, what do I do?"

And they said, "Don't turn tail and run away. That's the worst thing you can do, will bring on whatever predatory instincts that it has. You need to show it who's boss." And I laughed and I said, "How am I going to remember to do that if a shark's coming at me, let alone have the balls to do it?"

**Leanne:** Right, right...

**Hannah:** But I actually had that moment. The shark decided it was curious enough to come directly at me. And it wasn't like Jaws, it wasn't coming at me with teeth bared, but it was definitely curious and a curious shark doesn't have hands, it has teeth that kind of check out what you are. So I suddenly realized... I replayed the whole conversation in my head and realized this was the moment of truth and so I stuck my hands out and I started swimming directly at it and screaming under water. I won't tell you what I said, because it's probably not appropriate for the radio, but there were some swear words involved and I was owning it and I

was like, "Come on. I'll take you on..."

And it just swam away and it realized, "Oh, well that's not food. That's not how seals act." So you can really start to understand the psychology of interacting with these animals and if you do your research, understand, work with the right people, watch, listen, learn before you try to jump in and try to do anything silly, you can really find a way to interact safely with these animals.

So that was probably one of the most scary moments. I also went swimming with tiger sharks in the Bahamas last year. And I actually touched them, tickled them on the nose, even. And there was definitely some moments where I was like, "Holy crap, I must be insane." But it's the most beautiful thing was to see these huge predatory animals coming back time and again for physical interaction. They literally liked being tickled on the nose. And this is different to any other animal that I've encountered in the ocean. Dolphins don't let you touch them. Whales don't let you that close to them. But these huge beasts were coming up for a little nose tickle and loving it.

So it really shifted my perception and I never forget that they are apex predators and that you have to be 100% aware and knowledgeable, but I did totally come to a place of being able to love these animals and really respect them and understand that they have this magnificent personality that I'd like to interact with.

**Leanne:** Right, right. So it's obvious just listening to you that you absolutely love what you do. So tell our listeners a little bit about the hard work that was involved in making your dream a reality and is there some part of your job that you just can't stand at all?

**Hannah:** Oh, yeah. I hate being cold. And I am cold all the time.

**Leanne:** Oh, no! I'm full of admiration for you because I hate being cold too. And I was like, "Oh, man, she's..."

**Hannah:** So nearly every shoot that I've done that's been truly amazing, if you could see me afterward, it's entirely different vision. Because there I am underwater, I'm like "Ahhhh... This is amazing. These animals are awesome..." And then I come out of the water, I'm literally shaking with hypothermia, blue lips and stuff.

It's a real challenge and it is really physically challenging on a lot of levels. There's a lot of breath hold, obviously that goes on that can be really challenging. And little moments of panic of realizing that, "Holy crap, I need air right now and I'm just going to have to hold on a little bit longer." The challenges of wear... sometimes I wear big long dresses or material, not just mermaid tails and can get carried away with rips and tides and currents under the water. Or

you can't reach the surface as quickly as you would like to.

I've been bashed against rocks by waves and scraped the crap out of my legs. There's just... being out on a boat for weeks on end, hoping for that interaction and trying to place yourself in the right moment and just waiting and waiting and waiting. So there's so many different challenges that go into creating that one perfect moment where it all comes together -- weather conditions, clear water, temperature, animal shows up, I can bring my skills into play and the photographer's the right person to be able to capture that, that it is truly every single one of those moments is once in a lifetime unique.

**Leanne:** Wow, wow. That's pretty amazing stuff. We certainly don't see that when we're looking at your videos, you know.

**Hannah:** I know. People tell me I make it look too easy. [12:58 \[crosstalk\]](#)

I was training a young girl for a mermaid show recently and it was her biggest dream to be a mermaid and all of a sudden she was on a film and she's there with her idol, Hannah Mermaid, and she's like, "Yay, all my dreams!"

And then by the end of the day, you could just see, oh the reality. She's got blisters on her feet from the fins, she's exhausted. Her eyes are burning red. She can't hold her breath as long as she wants... It was just like, "Oh, OK, it's actually really, really hard work." But for me, work is incredible.

One would be that moment of interaction with a creature that is like an alien from another planet that has some kind of amazing intelligence and two, that finished piece where I can sit back later and look at what I've created and just see the beauty and the connection between nature and human is something that... It's what I'm here to do. And so I feel fulfilled.

**Leanne:** Right, right, wow, OK. So we have a lot of different... we have people from different backgrounds listening. We have writers and musicians and artists and performers. What do you say to people who are creative who think that their dreams are unrealistic?

**Hannah:** No dream is unrealistic. You can only be unrealistic with yourself. If I had thought to myself, Oh, I'm going to be a world famous mermaid traveling the world, doing all this stuff when I first made that one tail. I would have laughed, of course. I didn't believe that it would be like it is now.

However, I believed in each step of the journey enough to fulfill and continue creation. So I think it's not getting overwhelmed and not putting yourself too far ahead. It's like you create a manageable goal for right now and you absolutely believe that you can do that and you take that step. And that leads you to the next open door and so it's really just 100% commitment to

continuing your art, which shouldn't be hard because you love it. It's the thing that you wake up and you think about it and you get that little bubble of excitement in your belly. Whatever that is, you got to do it.

So, yeah, I find that I've been successful because I've learned so many aspects that people wouldn't necessarily think when they go, "Oh, she's a mermaid. She's this underwater performer..." But I've learned about so many different ways of running a business that has been really helpful. As an artist learning Photoshop and editing and the computer and business skills and social media skills and people skills...

So nothing that you do is irrelevant. I've had a bunch of other jobs before I did this that I thought at the time were off-track, but those little pieces have all been part of my puzzle that comes together to make me who I am now.

**Leanne:** Right, right. That is just excellent advice. I agree 100%. I never think... no learning, no experience is ever wasted for some reason. Like the longer you're on the planet, the more things just kind of tend to circle back around.

**Hannah:** Exactly.

**Leanne:** So one of the things I was... made me really want to talk to you is I'm a huge believer that having a mission and a cause that you champion is really important for creative people. And sometimes when I say that, people have no idea what I'm talking about. But can you explain to our listeners why you really believe in having a cause and having a mission?

**Hannah:** Absolutely. I feel that giving back to the world in general, as opposed to being focused on what I'm getting is much more fulfilling and enlivening experience, to be able to share something. So once you put your focus on being of service, then things start to come into support you anyway and you don't have to worry about clambering to look after yourself so much.

For me, it was a moment of realizing, "Oh, I've kind of created my dream. I made a mermaid tail and I was swimming around and I was having this lovely time and people were taking some photos and I was getting a bit of attention, I was like, "Yay!" And then I started to see that the reefs were deteriorating around me. Animals were being slaughtered that I had no idea that that was happening. Dolphins and whales were being killed in front of my eyes. Manta rays were becoming endangered and plastic was everywhere on the beaches. Literally, I'd go to one pristine beach and come back a couple years later and it would be decimated.

And so for me, it was realizing that the thing that I loved was in jeopardy and who else was going to do something about it, other than me to be a spokesperson for that. So for me, I've gained so much in having a purpose to what I do because otherwise, if I was just putting

on a tail and being pretty, I don't think that I would feel any kind of real sense of accomplishment or satisfaction in my purpose in the world.

So it's like finding that place where your skills can help an aspect of the world issues and marrying those two aspects together is a really beautiful place for creation.

**Leanne:** Yes, right, because you've had a couple of videos that you shot that went viral and they really did make a difference on some policy levels.

**Hannah:** Yeah, in particular we had a wonderful win with the manta rays, who I didn't even realize, but they're being hunted relentlessly just for their gills, which are sold on the Asian food market. And the **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species**, which is a meeting called CITES, meets only once every three years and they decide which animals are going to be listed for protection and which will not.

So two weeks before that meeting convened -- the last one -- my amazing underwater film videographer/partner Sean Heinrichs and I traveled to Hawaii and we created "Manta's Last Dance," which was a short film of me underwater interacting with manta rays at midnight at about 35-foot-deep down in the ocean. And they are literally dancing like just above my fingertips and doing these beautiful balletic dance.

And the connection was so obvious that when we put that video online, it went totally viral and people became aware of the issue and started campaigning really hard to get manta rays put on to the protected list. And a lot of people had told us that that was not going to happen because most people think of manta rays and they think that they are sting rays and they're like the animal that killed Steve Irwin and nobody really knows about them or really cares about them, was the perception.

But we were able to show connection between humans and animals in a way that people related to and so we actually brought that film to the convention for international trade on endangered species meeting and showed it to the delegates and amazingly, 80% of the delegates stood up in favor of putting manta rays on the protected list. And even one of the countries that had been previously killing them most stood up and gave a speech, an impassioned speech about why we should protect them.

So you can see that connecting people on an emotional level where they can see a human with the animal is really effective in touching people's heartstrings.

There was also another film that we did which was called "Tigress" where I went and swam with the tiger sharks and we were helping to campaign against the Australian shark cull that happened last year and joining with... we got like 50 million views in the first day that it was

released online, it went... every single country ran news about it and it helped with the push to end the shark cull in Australia.

*Today's success story from project AK-47 is about a nine-year-old girl named Yemon. She was in a high risk family. They were very poor. Her brothers and father already were soldiers and she was nearing the age where she would be forced to join the army. She was brought to the attention of Project-AK-47 and they brought her into their children's boarder home.*

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**Hannah:** So we've been really successful finding our way of making this pertinent to humans, as opposed to them sort of seeing these animals at a distance... they never see them, they don't interact with them, they don't really care and it's like bringing them into the household. So that's kind of where we're working from.

And I was also part of an organizational team that brought a group of artists, musicians, actors to the Bay of ... Japan where we were attacked by fishermen that slaughter hundreds of dolphins every year. And the footage we captured was televised worldwide and featured in the academy award winning film ***The Cove***. And that was also instrumental in getting mercury laden dolphin meat taken off the supermarket shelves and out of the govt funded school lunch programs.

So, yeah, those... we've had a lot of successes in utilizing this marriage of humans and animals with beauty as opposed to... a lot of the imagery we see which is asking for help for these animals, features them being killed or that whole like guilt trip feeling where you're like, "Oh, I just don't want to see any more animals being killed. I feel sad enough. I'm just going to click somewhere else."

**Leanne:** Right...

**Hannah:** And so what we're trying to do is create an alternative where people are engaged and inspired to help, as opposed to guilted into helping.

**Leanne:** Right. And it's really... like that's the purpose of art in the first place, really. I mean, art can be shocking and it can be kind of hard to look at sometimes too, but it's also inspiring and uplifting and hopefully you're helping people to experience a reality that's something better than their day-to-day lives.

So I just really want everybody listening to understand how all these things can work together, that they're not at all mutually exclusive.

**Hannah:** Yeah. The thing that inspires me the most is I can choose the most random fantastical thing that I want to do with my life that seems somewhat self-involved like, "I just want to be a mermaid..." and I can utilize it to actually make massive change for thousands of animals and humans around the world.

Don't write off your passions. Don't belittle them just because they seem far out, wacky, weird or unattainable like just find new ways to work with them and to present them to the world in a way that people are inspired by it.

**Leanne:** Right. So some people I know, probably some people who are listening even, are actually afraid to take a stand on something that they believe in. It's hard because they don't want to alienate anyone. So what would you say to any of our listeners if they are afraid?

**Hannah:** Yeah, the first thing that comes up for me is I get a lot of emails from specifically younger people who write in and say, "Oh, I want to do what you do, but I'm really scared that people will laugh at me or that I won't be accepted or they'll think I'm silly." And for me, I have found embracing it 100% other people can't help but love that.

*Hey, guys, I want to apologize, my interview with Hannah actually got cut off at this point for some reason. We were almost done; there was only another minute or two left in the interview and Hannah, her closing thoughts were just very encouraging that if you have a dream to stick with it, even if it seems like it might be pretty unlikely to happen right now.*

So, if you'd like to check out Hannah's website, all you need to do is go to [Hannahmermaid.com](http://Hannahmermaid.com) and you can learn more.

Thanks so much for listening to the MCP podcast with me, Leanne Regalla. If you'd like to grab the show notes and transcripts and links from this episode, just go to [makecreativitypay.com/13](http://makecreativitypay.com/13).

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So thanks so much and I'll talk to you soon! 'Bye.