



Episode #129:

**Wolf + Friends' New App is
Bringing People Together IRL**

October 9, 2018

Debbie: Hi Gena and Carissa. Welcome back to the podcast.

Gena: Hi.

Carissa: Hi.

Debbie: So wow. I feel like we're having a little flashback because we had a conversation about Wolf and Friends, it feels like so long ago, we were just saying we were both really kind of newbies in our world here. So before we get into the crux of today's conversation, could you just take a minute to introduce yourselves separately and then just tell us your brief elevator pitch you know, for, for what Wolf and Friends is.

Gena: Okay. Hi, I'm Gena Mann. I am a mom of four. My two boys who are 16 and 14 both have autism diagnoses. And then I have two typical daughters, 11 and 4. We have been working on Wolf and Friends for about two and a half years. We are just launching our app, which is super exciting for us. We decided a long time ago that moms raising children with special needs need a happy and comfortable place to shop online for products for their children, to get tips from specialists and therapists about how to use those products, to find decor items, et cetera, for their children with needs. And then as we sort of were going along in this process and building our platform, we started to really connect with the moms in our community and learn that in addition to stuff and toys and decor, they really needed to meet other moms that understood what their life was like raising children with special needs. So we sort of pivoted our business about six months ago and decided to launch an app to help these moms meet other moms who get it. Um, so the app is currently in the App Store, which I'm sure we'll talk about and we're hoping that we're gonna really help moms all over the U.S. find friends who understand, you know, the challenges and beauty of, of raising these children with all sorts of learning differences.

Debbie: Sweet. And Carissa maybe just take a minute to introduce yourself as well.

Carissa: Okay. Hi, I'm Carissa Tozzi and I'm a mom of one. Wolf is my son and he is 6 just about to be 7. And he's actually neurotypical. And he sort of, he was the inspiration for me to create what was Wolf and Friends, which was a lifestyle destination for kids of all abilities. I really wanted to make something that was inclusive and inspiring and informative. And because he had some sensory needs when he was younger, it really made me realize how much parents needed support. But like Gena said, we were really, we realized that it was the parents and the moms especially that needed this connection in real life and we wanted to give them that and that's where the app idea came from.

Debbie: So tell me a little bit, because when we talked, I mean I think we started probably around the same time and I was so drawn to the work that you were doing in the aesthetic and the experience that you were creating for parents. So I'm just curious to know and I, and I want to hear more about the feedback you got from

parents and from moms specifically, but overall, what was the reception to Wolf and Friends and how, how did it grow before even you got to the point where you're like, okay, we need to pivot and really make this app? Like, I know you got a lot of good feedback and a lot of good press. Did you kind of realize pretty early on that wow we're really filling a need here?

Gena: We did. We had a lot of early very loyal and excited followers both on our Instagram and on our site who, um, you know, moms who felt like they hadn't been spoken to in this way. So we had all this amazing feedback. We got some good press and we had this amazing feedback from our users that really wanted to be a part of it and wanted to follow us on the journey. So what was the moment where we made the change?

Carissa: Yeah, I mean well part of our site has, in addition to featuring cool toys and decor, et cetera, and clothes and ideas and inspiration, we would interview moms like yourself who are raising children with different special needs. And every person that we interviewed, we'd ask the same question: what advice would you give to a new special needs mom? And they all said, find someone in your community that gets you, find a friend, that's the person you'll need the most.

Gena: Find your tribe.

Carissa: Yeah, find your pack, your wolf pack. And so after hearing that over and over and over again, we realized that the best way to serve the community was to create this way for them to connect. And also in a judgment free private space. There's a lot of communities on Facebook, et cetera that just open up a dialogue to have a lot of, in many cases, negative feedback. And I think that stops people from sharing or feeling good about their situation. And we wanted to move from that. And also, um...

Gena: We wanted moms to be able to connect with each other based on sort of their own profile, who also happen to have kids with special needs. So on our app, you know, moms go on and they sort of build a profile and they tell about themselves and of course it has a place to put in your children and what their needs are. But we felt like in the, in the vein of a dating app where you want to connect with people based on their personality and their likes and their hobbies or whatever, we wanted moms to be able to do that as well. You're not just a special needs mom. You're also a person who has you know other things in their life.

Debbie: Yeah. I mean I really, when you first told me about the app and I actually want to want you to just tell me a little bit about your crowdsourcing just for the, the mompreneurs listening because I think, you know, you pulled off such a really great launch even to make this happen. Which building an app is a huge undertaking. But I was so excited just when you mentioned we're doing this. I'm like, yes. I mean that's what I hear so much from parents in my community. You know? That's what I personally, I always say I'm kind of alone over here, which is why my book tour was so exciting because I got to touch people and hug people and be in the same space. But there's something that's so just valuable and having that real time connection with someone. So I want to go through because

the app's beautiful and I, and just really fun and it's over-delivered in terms of - I just didn't know what to expect. And so when I opened it up and started playing with it, I was like, whoa, this is really great. And it's so much more I think then, um, as you said, it's not just about, oh, special needs mom, here's another special needs mom. So it's very thoughtful. But before we get into the specifics, would you just take a few minutes to tell us about your crowdfunding campaign and how you made that happen?

Carissa: Oh, well we, we really wanted to get the word out in different ways and we were encouraged to try a crowdfunding campaign and when someone mentioned to us that there was the 'I Fund Women' campaign which was solely for female entrepreneurs, we thought that was the perfect place for us to spread the news about our app and sort of get people involved in the process. However, what we did learn from it is that we had our app, we, we were developing our app already and I think a crowdfunding campaign is really great if you actually, you know, if you are raising money to get something to happen to make an app available. And so I think we would have done a few things differently but it was really, really great to have that experience and put together the proposal and really define what we were going to do and how we were going to serve the community. So people really responded to it. And they...

Gena: It also forced us to create merch because the way 'I Fund Women' works is you basically people donate to your crowdfund and you give them something. So you know, companies that have, clothing companies or whatever, that have an actual product, they give away their product. We did not. So um, we brought in a designer and created some incredible merch which is now available on our site and available on our app. And people are really excited about it, both in the special needs community and not, because it's pretty and it's inspirational. And it's like, cool for everyone.

Carissa: Yeah, everything has our mottos. We have like three mottos. One is 'surround yourself with people who get it'. Number two is 'be nice, the end'. And the third is 'I am still learning'. So they just fit our vibe but they can be applied to anybody.

Debbie: Yeah, I love them. I mean when, when I saw the, the merch as you say, I haven't used that word, but the merch that you were making available, I was like whoa, love the taglines and beautifully designed. So. Well done. Well done with that. Well thanks for sharing that. I'm just always so curious. And again I know there's a lot of solopreneurs, mompreneurs who listen to this podcast. So um...

Gena: The answer about crowdfunding in general is it's really hard and really time consuming.

Carissa: Yeah, it's work. And I think -

Gena: It's not an easy thing.

Carissa: We were, we realized at the time we should also be pursuing friends and family. Like when you're doing a round of fundraising, at the end of the day you need to

go to your core friends and family first. And you know, everyone has a different experience. So we can talk about that for hours.

Debbie: All right, well let's talk about the app itself then. Um, I want to encourage listeners to download it, but let's talk about when you first go into set up a profile. So it really is. I mean, again, it was so thoughtful. It's not just like, here I am, this is where I live and I have this kid, you know, with these differences, boom, you know, so talk us through what a user experience would be in terms of someone who's signing up. What kind of information are they going to share and how does that help them have a, a good experience through the app?

Carissa: Um, well first you log on. And part of the onboarding process is to choose things, your interests. That's the first thing that you kind of do. And that could be you want to be a mentor, you want to find a mentor, you might want to make new friends. Um, the kind of information that you would like to get out of the app, because one of the things that we haven't talked about is that it's a content community and commerce app. Meaning that you, not only can you connect with people, but you can read content and you can also shop from the app. So we want to get, you know, in the beginning we want to get to know our members and um, and see what their interests are. Do they need relationship advice, you know, a lot of, a lot of families have struggle, you know, the parents when they have a child with special needs, or financial advice, travel ideas. Um just, you know, we're trying to figure out what, how we can serve the community in their lifestyle, not just, you know, meeting each other. So that's, that's the content part, to get to know them. And then the second part is a personality profile.

Gena: So the personality profile is we intentionally made it sort of light and fun because first of all, it's all quick. This whole onboarding process itself takes no more than really 5 minutes. But we felt like, you know, a lot of raising a child with any sort of needs is very heavy and very difficult. And you're forever filling out questionnaires and profiles for your children. This is sort of who are you in addition to just, you know, being a special needs mom. So you click off five things about you and then you put in your children and their ages and their diagnoses, including of course if you have typical children as well to sort of build a full picture of what your family looks like. Um, and you can put in pictures of your family as well. And then you have your profile. Obviously the most important thing being your zip code so that the app gives you back people who are in your area to connect with.

Carissa: So you can post a question on your profile and have people answer it or you can send direct messages to people you want to connect with directly. And once you do have a sort of a community on the app, you can do group chats and make plans together, share information. You can also with the content portion of the app, um, you know, there's different articles which was based on Wolf and Friends. So decor tips, uh, you know, interviews with cool moms, shopping advice, et cetera. You can save it, you can bookmark it, you can share it and you can shop from it. So it really is all one, you know, it's a lifestyle app.

- Debbie: So cool. So one of the things that I noticed and when I filled out my profile, I was like, hmm, I could do this or I could use this. You have find a mentor and be a mentor. So can you talk more about that as an interest?
- Carissa: So you know, there are, of course a lot of moms we're hoping that will sign up for our app that have young children who are newly diagnosed with different things or in the process of, you know, evaluations and receiving diagnoses or just kids with speech delays or you know, sensory processing issues. Moms that like are really trying to get a handle on this new world that they're thrust into. And then there are moms like me who have teenagers who have sort of been in the special needs world for 10, 12, 15 years who really just want to help those moms who are starting out. So there's, you know, there's all kinds of, there's all kinds of people that can utilize the app and that it's right for.
- Debbie: Yeah. And so if someone is looking for a mentor, and I don't know how functional, because I know you guys just launched as we're talking, maybe four days ago, so first of all, congratulations. It's a huge, huge to launch this. And so if someone signs up for a mentor, how would that actually work? Is it something they would coordinate then offline or they would communicate through the app and then make their own arrangements? Just curious.
- Carissa: Yeah they can communicate through the app. Everyone would have on their profile, they'll have a description. You can either be a men-, you can be everything, but you can find, you want to meet new friends. You can be a mentor or find a mentor. And so when you open someone's profile that you're interested in, you can see what they, what they want to bring to the table. So you know, you sort of get to know everyone in your area and see what they, why they're there.
- Debbie: Very cool. Yeah. And you know, I just wanted to name some of the things that were in here that were really exciting for me to see. So you could check and attend events, I mentioned be a mentor, find a mentor, discover the travel ideas, you mentioned, find the apps for kids I think is a great thing to offer. Get book suggestions, meet new friends of course, see relevant news. You even have 'try kid friendly recipes'. So I. There was just such a nice range of the different kinds of experiences that moms could plug into. It was really cool.
- Gena: Thank you. Those are all the things that are going to help us tailor the content for the user. So if we see a lot of people are checking 'get travel ideas', then we'll be able to create more travel content. So it's really a lot of that is for us to be able to best serve our community.
- Debbie: Right. And in the 'this is me', you ask people to choose five and that's to kind of more hone in on who people are. I will just share the things that I shared or that I clicked, which I think would probably change on a day to day basis, but today I checked 'barely keeping it together', 'CEO of my home', 'everybody's therapist', 'fitness fanatic' and 'multitasking ninja'. So that kind of sums up my day. But you also have, you know, 'all day Instagram' or I love that 'bookworm', 'binge watcher', which I think I could also fit into depending on how busy my, uh, my

evenings are. 'Foodie', 'news junkie', 'party planner'. So again, just so many ways for people to feel like this, they're able to individualize the experience.

Carissa: Thank you.

Debbie: So I'm wondering, can you tell us in terms of the feedback that you got from moms that went into this, tell us about how what you heard from moms specifically went into the creation of this and I'm assuming you tested it with moms. Tell us a little bit about that process.

Gena: Um, so like Carissa said in our, you know, in the many, many mom interviews we've done over the last two and a half years, that last question of what, what advice would you give to a new special needs mom? The answer was every single time find someone who understands what you're going through. So that was certainly the impetus to create it. And then we found an app developer in New York and we sat down with them and we started talking through the process of how to build a profile and how to make sure that everybody will be able to find themselves in there. And it was a months long process of fine tuning and sharing it with, you know, a few moms in our community and then sharing it with more and then sending them the app when it was, you know, before it was built, when we were testing it and we sort of took into account everybody's feedback and really built on other ideas that people gave us while still staying true to what we knew we wanted to do. And you know, obviously knowing you can't please everybody the first time out and there will be updates down the road, but we felt like we definitely included some moms in our small inner circle and the process of you know bringing it to life.

Debbie: And so tell me, where do you see this kind of, in terms of where you've launched today, if you, you know, a year, two years from now, where would you like this to be? Like how many moms do you envision in this community and, and do you have plans for things that you'd like to add to it?

Carissa: Oh, I mean we definitely, you know, it's only available for the U.S. market in the App Store. So for Google Play or Galaxy, I, you know, I'm an app, I'm an iPhone person so I'm not even sure like we have to, you know, develop it for them. Then we have to bring it to other countries and we already have feedback already. The app's been out for three days, four days and every, and we're getting like when is it going to be in Canada? When is it going to be in London? When is it, you know, so it's kind of amazing. I mean, the thing is, is that we want to create this community for people and, and one that feels good. I mean it was always our vision to do that.

Gena: Yeah, I mean in the short term, we'd love to have events. We'd love to have more opportunities to bring these moms together in real life. But the thing with an app where you're allowing people to meet each other is, it's really going to have a life of its own. You know, once we sort of set it out there and enough thousands and thousands of moms sign up, which we're hoping, it's gonna exist on its own and these moms are going to meet each other and then, you know, we just hope to hear their stories and hear how we're helping.

- Debbie: Yeah. We have about maybe 25 percent of the audience for this podcast is international, so I expect that you'll get a few more emails from people asking when it's going to be made available in, in their countries.
- Carissa: Also for dads, you know, we're, we're starting out with moms specifically because that's the audience we want to test with first and see how that goes and then do, are there enough dads that would benefit from having this kind of app or even caregivers who want to meet up with other caregivers during the day? Is there an opportunity, you know, I think the opportunity is, is somewhat endless in this space. We will spend our time figuring out how to best serve the audience.
- Debbie: Right. Well, it's super exciting. Um, before we say our goodbyes, is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you would want to make sure listeners should know and then also tell listeners how they can access the app?
- Carissa: Yeah, so the app is available in the App Store, search for Wolf Plus Friends and they'll be able to find it. And if they're hearing this very soon, this podcast, please bear with us for any, any sort of bugs, because what we did find out is that in this whole process is how many, just how buggy it can be, no matter how much work you do and how much preparation you put into it. Um, and we have developers on standby with us constantly, at all hours of the day, and there's still always these tweaks that need to be made. So please bear with us. We want to make the experience as amazing as it as we imagined it to be.
- Debbie: So exciting. Well, I'm super excited for you. I am signed up, as I said, um, you know, as we're recording this, I'm still in Amsterdam, but as my listeners likely know by now we are repatriating back to the U.S., so I'm going to get to take advantage of this as well. So I'm excited for that. So -
- Carissa: It will be great for you, because you're moving to a new place, to connect with people. You know.
- Debbie: That's true.
- Gena: And, and on that too, you know, we have the opportunity to share books, you know suggestions like yours or podcasts like yours within the app. So we'll be discussing all that.
- Debbie: So exciting. So exciting. Well, congratulations. It's really, um, it's just exciting to see this direction for, for Wolf and Friends and this is such a needed aspect to this work of building community and connecting. And again, you know, as we talked about, this is the one thing I hear the most from every parent is that sense of isolation and not knowing how to find each other. In fact, I've mentioned this on the podcast before, but someone at that I met this summer suggested that, you know, we get t-shirts made that say my child has an IEP just so we can find each other, you know, identify each other. So yeah, so this is another way to do that. So thank you so much, both of you, for taking time out of your, I know, busy, busy days right now especially as you're in launch mode, but um, I appreciate you stopping by and good luck with the app.

Carissa & Gena: Thank you so much and thank you for your continued support since the beginning. I know you're, yeah, you knew us when.

Debbie: I know a good thing when I see it.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Wolf + Friends](#)
- [Wolf + Friends App](#)
- [Wolf + Friends App in Google Play](#)
- [Wolf + Friends on Instagram](#)