

Episode 7

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Axe Ventura, axe throwing business, Shannon and Anthony Taylor, entertainment entrepreneurship, customer experience, building company culture, scaling a business, systems and processes, managing multiple locations, surviving the pandemic, Bellefontaine Ohio, hiring great managers, business partnership, small town attractions, Axe Masters

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Anthony Taylor, Shannon, Ethan DeLeon

S

Shannon 00:00

We don't fight without a purpose. Yeah, we don't argue without a purpose. Like, we do a really good job of like, feelings aside, this is what happened, this is what I think should happen, your side of it, and we get to a solution. Um, but very rarely is it ever like— you can find yourself in the middle of a construction build and you hate everything and you're so sick of the project and you can't start nitpicking because that's when it falls apart. Fight with a purpose and get to your resolution and then go with it and, and let the— let that just be it.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:36

Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO Jason Duff. Today we have the founders and owners of Axe Ventura, our local axe throwing spot here in Bellefontaine, Ohio. We want to welcome you to, uh, the small Small Talk Podcast, where we try to share some of the valuable lessons with what we have learned about entrepreneurship, real estate, economic development, and more. The point of this podcast is really to create value for you, the listener, and to create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.

E

Ethan DeLeon 01:04

So, uh, Jason, how did you get connected with Shannon and Anthony?

J**Jason Duff** 01:07

I actually think it was through a Facebook post, and there's kind of like a theme, um, over the last few guests that we've had is that Facebook has been a powerful tool for us to meet people doing amazing things. And, uh, you know, we started revitalizing downtown Bellefontaine about 10 years ago, and it started with recruiting restaurants and then places for people to shop. And one of the most common things that were coming up kind of in the, the more recent years has been, what is there for people to do? And, uh, I about 8 years ago went down to Austin, Texas, and met up with some friends in Austin And we were like traveling, you know, Austin's pretty hip. A lot of the things that are trending in food and technology, like that's the place where it happens. And some friends, we were looking for something to do while we were down there. There was the, you know, 3D virtual tour experiences. There was the Segway tour in the town, so you could jump on Segways. But then there was this thing called axe throwing. And when I was going through the list, honestly, I was making fun of it. I'm like, who would pick up axes in their right mind and throw them? And the other thing that was crazy as I was looking at the marketing for this business, it was like, yeah, and we've got a great bar in the axe throwing facility. Great idea. It's just, just, you know, to me didn't make sense. And, you know, fast forward a few years ago, I was reading about this business that had opened up in Ann Arbor and then second location in Findlay, Ohio. Called Axe Ventura, and it just happens to be that the guests on our show today are the founders of that, Shannon and Anthony Taylor, and we're so excited to have you on the show.

S**Shannon** 02:48

Thank you.

J**Jason Duff** 02:50

So how did you guys get into axe throwing and what made you want to start a business in it?

A**Anthony Taylor** 02:54

Well, so I was a student and I needed a break, right? So we went down to— we just drove south. We were just going over New Year's, just driving south. We had nothing in mind, we just drove. We landed in Louisville and we were at a bar or restaurant or something, and we asked the waitress, what's there to do around here? She was like, go axe throwing. I was like, come on, like, let's get serious. Like, what can I do?

J**Jason Duff** 03:18

Is that a real thing?

A**Anthony Taylor** 03:19

Yeah. I was like, what can I really do around here? And she's like, seriously? And I was like, all right, well, we must do this. So we went right from there. And then this is where she's going to come in and say that she won, which she did, which is fine.

J**Jason Duff** 03:30

Like, how badly did you get beat?

A**Anthony Taylor** 03:32

I couldn't do it. I was so frustrated. I could not, I couldn't get it to stick. The second, I still loved it. Like, I had so much fun. I was like, I want to do this every weekend, right? Um, so on the drive home, we were looking into Ann Arbor because I wanted to do it every weekend, and the closest place was 45 minutes away. So we were like, oh, let's start a business. Let's, let's just do it. Let's just open one. And we even named it on the drive home. Boom, Axe Ventura. Within like 10 seconds, that's what we named it. And this was in like January 2nd. Of 2019. And then, yeah, I think in February we started— she made like— she's really good at Excel spreadsheets. She did the whole Excel thing and it was like, we looked at it, the numbers actually really made sense. So we were like, oh, let's— I think we got something here. So we started looking into real estate and that's when—

S**Shannon** 04:20

little did we know—

A**Anthony Taylor** 04:22

yeah, that's when all the fun started. I'm telling you, it was, uh, it was There's a lot of, a lot of stuff. So between February when we started looking and then I think August is when we actually got something signed, and then we opened in December, and that was 2019. We all know what happened a couple months later.

J**Jason Duff** 04:43

Yeah, so yeah, it's another common theme, right before the pandemic. So what did that mean for you guys? What did that look like for you?

A**Anthony Taylor** 04:49

Uh, that was not to give you PTSD, uh, the opening process was actually worse, but So for us, it was, you know, hard shutdown, 7 months. Like, we weren't even allowed in the building. So, uh, that was Ann Arbor. We are both from Kenton, so we both just moved to Kenton and we spent the whole 8 months down here. So actually, without the pandemic, we wouldn't have other locations. Like, I don't think— that was when we were like, all right, well, they shut down this source of income, this revenue stream, we have to create another.

J**Jason Duff** 05:20

Really?

S**Shannon** 05:21

Okay.

A

Anthony Taylor 05:21

Yeah. So we spent that time instead of— we can only sit still for like a day.

J

Jason Duff 05:25

Yeah.

A

Anthony Taylor 05:25

So we were like, well, what do we do now? So the first thing we did was we're like, well, let's go flip a house. Like, there's one in Kenton, there's tons of houses. So we just went and flipped a house, right? And then, uh, she was like, I really like Findlay for the second location. I was like, I don't know, I don't know. And then we went and looked, and the one day we looked, we found the perfect building. And so we did it. And then that was, I think, August as well of 2020.

S

Shannon 05:54

We have a track record of like timing.

A

Anthony Taylor 05:56

And then December 2020, we opened Finley. And, you know, that was mid— we didn't know what was going to happen, like how long, you know, things were going to be shut down, but we just knew it wasn't going to be forever. So we were like just investing while we could. And then that's how we got Finley.

S

Shannon 06:10

And then COVID was definitely like a interesting time for us because we were pushing forward and we definitely benefited from a little bit of it because if we had been running the other location, we couldn't have built like we did. And, uh, yeah, but then about a year later, we're like, okay, this can— it can be done now.

A

Anthony Taylor 06:28

Yeah, it was— yeah, it was something.

J

Jason Duff 06:30

How, how does your business funnel work? So if people come axe throwing, you know, for someone listening that maybe has never been axe throwing, what How do they— how does that work?

A

Anthony Taylor 06:42

Well, you get a couple different types of places. Some places you go and they just give you an axe and they might give you a brief rundown of what you're doing, and then they say, have fun, and then they check back in with you later. And you're kind of stuck there. You don't know how to throw, you don't know how the games work, you don't know what the scoring is, and it's not that great of an experience. So what we've learned is you take all the thinking out of it and you just make them have fun. Right? So you don't have to think about how to throw, we'll show you how to throw. You don't have to think about what the game is, we'll tell you what it is. We don't have to think about the score, we'll keep it for you. All you have to do is have fun, right? And that's how we do it. So you come in, you get an instructor, they teach you how to throw, show you how to throw, teach you the games, keep your score, and you just have fun.

S

Shannon 07:26

And they really keep the love, the energy level up. When you, when you kind of reach that peak, they, they're able to take you the step further and yeah, create the experience.

A

Anthony Taylor 07:34

One of another thing that we've really noticed is, for example, if you get a group of 15, 20 people together and you're like, all right, so you guys can just kind of call each other out and play and we'll just keep score for you. Everybody just stands there and they're like, well, yeah, well, who's up? Like, who's gonna go? So that's a big thing. We take that out. We're like, you and you, fun. So there's literally no thinking. All they're doing is having fun. So the entire time is fun. And that's what really separates us is we put the experience into it instead of just saying, you go figure it out. That's why I love that. Yeah, that's where we really—

J

Jason Duff 08:07

and you call those, those folks, they have a name when they come to your establishment. What are those folks?

A

Anthony Taylor 08:12

Those are the Axe Masters.

J

Jason Duff 08:14

Yeah, Axe Masters. I love that. Which in terms of building like a culture, you know, finding people today is so hard. And one thing I want to compliment you, I've been to all of your locations in fact, and, um, the people when I walk in, they make you feel welcome. And I also think like they enjoy being there. How have you built that secret recipe with your culture?

A**Anthony Taylor** 08:37

That is exactly what it is. It's a culture, right? And there's a big difference between working at an axe throwing place and, for example, working at a restaurant, just randomly, right? Everybody comes into the axe throwing place with the mindset of, I'm gonna go have fun. So you're not getting those customers that are usually coming in like, oh, I'm gonna go complain, right? But the culture is, it's a fun place to work, you know. And while there's downtime, we encourage you to get good at your craft. Just go throw. And then, you know, with that, uh, competition, those sort of things, and friendly banter between the staff, it's just a really fun environment to be in, whether you're working or whether you're just hanging out, you know. And we've really noticed that people want to work there and they want to continue to work there. And we don't have a retention problem at all. Once they come in and find out what we're about, usually hang out.

J**Jason Duff** 09:29

That's really cool. So you have a location in Ann Arbor, now you have a location in Finley, um, and you know, eventually— I mean, I want to talk about this too, you moved into Bellefontaine— but, um, what role does your, your managers play? I mean, I'm sure you, you can't be everywhere at once, like, and I know, I mean, from what I've experienced with just going when we went to Finley, you know, That was— they did an amazing job. And like, you know, you're talking about, you know, building that culture for your employees, but like, can you speak to just like how you approach your management, like in your own business?

A**Anthony Taylor** 10:04

Oh, um, go ahead, you got this one.

S**Shannon** 10:06

I'm gonna throw this out there that, um, we lucked into— we're blessed to have, um, which is COVID-related. He— Brian lost his job because of COVID with the school.

A**Anthony Taylor** 10:20

Um, And he applied to us as a joke, and his ex-wife actually told him that it was a scam. Yeah, they're like, no, they're scamming you. Oh no, they're trying to pay him money.

S**Shannon** 10:32

Um, and so Brian on paper was technically our second choice. Um, push come to shove, he obviously is the first choice.

J**Jason Duff** 10:41

And yeah, he's incredible.

S

Shannon 10:42

We cannot— he's, he's something. Like, I don't even have the energy to keep up with him half the time. Um, So I'm not really sure we can take credit for that one.

A

Anthony Taylor 10:54

Oh, we got— like she said, we got very fortunate with Brian. We didn't know as business owners what we were getting ourselves into with a second location because we never had to work with the manager. The manager that we had in Ann Arbor was just one of my friends, you know. He was, uh, one of my people that I went to school with. He studied economics. It made sense. He was really good with people, so it just worked. But then when we got into hiring somebody to run a location where we weren't going to be all the time, we didn't know what we doing. We didn't know what we were looking for. We're like, oh, this, this person has some qualifications, sure. But we got so lucky with Brian because he took what we had and he grew it into— he put his own special blend of Brian into it, and it was like— and it just took off.

J

Jason Duff 11:34

How important are systems and processes as you scale and grow?

A

Anthony Taylor 11:38

Now we know, very important. Yeah, but you know, when we only had 2 locations, now 3, like there were certain things that we did in Ann Arbor, it was just us doing them. It didn't matter because we were doing it. But now that we expect things to be done a certain way, we're not around all the time, it's very important to have protocols and systems and checks and balances, right?

S

Shannon 11:56

That was the one thing we've done a really good job with, like our employees and having the expectations and the handbooks and all of the charting for, um, Axe Masters. But it wasn't until we launched Bellefontaine that we were like, we really need to get the same setup in place for managers with all of that. And that's actually kind of been one of the things we've been working on the most.

A

Anthony Taylor 12:17

Brian was even one of the front runners on that. He's like, look, we need to have like an employee handbook. We need to have this set up, this set up. And it was things that we didn't even think about because we were so busy just running the place, right? We didn't even think that, you know, these things need to be set up. So Brian's been such a huge part of Axe Ventura that, you know, just shout out to him. Big shout out.

J

Jason Duff 12:38

So where do you guys spend most of your time now? Ann Arbor versus— I mean, ever all the locations, like how often you pop in, how often, like who is kind of your— the person overseeing each of those locations?

S**Shannon** 12:50

So we just hired— has he been there a month maybe? Um, a general manager in Ann Arbor.

J**Jason Duff** 12:56

We—

S**Shannon** 12:56

Ann Arbor is a little bit slower in the, um Is it seasonal because of like college town or? There's still, we ebb and flow with kind of what's going on around the world in Ann Arbor. And so we didn't have the need necessarily for a manager. And also people weren't out searching for jobs like they were originally. Just like you said, it's just impossible to find and keep staff at this point. And then when you're looking at somebody with the qualifications to come in that a manager needs, We're going through hundreds to find two. And, um, so we just hired that manager. He just graduated.

J**Jason Duff** 13:38

Congratulations.

S**Shannon** 13:39

December, technically.

J**Jason Duff** 13:42

And what'd you graduate with? What, what are your degrees in?

A**Anthony Taylor** 13:45

Uh, it's just a Bachelor's of Science of Kinesiology.

J**Jason Duff** 13:48

Okay, cool.

A**Anthony Taylor** 13:50

Yeah, nothing in what I'm doing. Everybody's always—

J**Jason Duff** 13:53

you know, if you talk to folks and depending on— like, I was a music major during college and I'm, I'm really not daily practicing that.

A**Anthony Taylor** 13:59

So yeah, I can totally see.

J**Jason Duff** 14:02

Yeah, I was— and I think you were—

S**Shannon** 14:05

did you do—

J**Jason Duff** 14:05

you had a background in music too, right? Yeah, so my mom was a piano teacher. So like growing up, we always had like random kids coming over playing piano. And actually, I just like— it's funny, you never know who's going to come back in your circles. I, uh, was filming a wedding over this past weekend, and the art director at a wedding venue was like one of my mom's like students at the, like, 10 years ago and like just remade that connection based off of that, like, solely. It was crazy. But anyway, yeah, um, so, so what made you think of Bellefontaine, Ohio? How'd you, you know, think of out of all the places? And how do you come in contact with Small Nation? How'd that progress?

A**Anthony Taylor** 14:44

You got to take this one.

J**Jason Duff** 14:47

Um, you came and took a tour. We did, we did on a Saturday. I remember that Saturday.

A**Anthony Taylor** 14:52

I think he's— what he's getting at is how did the tour get set up?

S**Shannon** 14:57

Um, I had— we were looking for a third location, um, and we actually had another one in mind, and, uh, Small Nation was brought up as a resource to kind of look at these different things. And so I actually had had a phone conversation, and at that point then I was like, well, I think you should come take a tour of Bellefontaine. And so We did. And we're like—

J**Jason Duff** 15:20

and you really weren't considering Bellefontaine at all at that point?

S**Shannon** 15:24

Nope, it wasn't even on our map.

A**Anthony Taylor** 15:26

No, never. Like, never would have thought of it.

S**Shannon** 15:29

Um, so we took a tour of everything and all the— and I love the old buildings, so I'm like looking at all these photos and I'm like, it's so cool because so many downtowns are dying. And, uh, these people get it, they understand it. And, um, Jason had the perfect building in mind, um, We probably walked through 20 buildings that day, and he goes, but this is the one. And we walked in, I was like, oh, okay, I can see it.

J**Jason Duff** 15:54

Yeah, part of like looking at their other locations, I was also asking them questions about, as you were renovating spaces, what kind of things did you run into? And you know, what's challenging about taking an old building is you've got to work with design professionals and contractors and folks that can help bring that building up to code, and then also modernize it so it's energy efficient and effective for the businesses going in there. And, you know, they were sharing that they had learned a ton doing their first and their second location. And when they kind of brought up that they needed high ceilings, when they needed a solid concrete floor, that there were certain features, we started looking at the inventory that existed in Bellefontaine, and we really landed on this beautiful 1929 Strand Theater that at the time was called The Bell, and it was here in Bellefontaine. And Bellefontaine had 3 historic theaters, the Holland of course being the largest. There was another small movie theater on West Columbus that's a medical practice today, but this building was, was a Strand Theater that was built specifically for movies. And what was great, it's very long but these big, beautiful, soaring 25-foot ceilings. It's prominent right on Main Street near most of all the restaurants, and it's got this really cool marquee in the front that when we were kind of dreaming a little bit, just seeing how those changeable copy letters could highlight different groups and events and things that were coming in. But I think that the challenge that we had is that was all in that dreaming phase, and then you guys were speaking about lessons learned from your previous renovation projects, um, that were kind of frustrating, to say the least? Like, if you were— if people were listening that they're getting ready to lease a building and, and renovate it to open up their business, like, what, what are some of the key lessons that you can deduce down that may help a listener?

S**Shannon** 17:55

If, if this is your first time, make all the phone calls you can think about and talk to anybody. I know that you want to keep— and we, especially in Ann Arbor, the first time, really wanted to keep what we were a secret. We kind of felt like we were racing the clock. It was one of the last large cities not to have a location, and that made it a little challenging because I would call the city and ask vague questions, but they could only give me vague answers. Um, but just developing those relationships where you can get a hold of the building inspector and say, I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. My architect's telling me one thing, I'm hearing another. Can you give me some guidance? And just mentally store all that and know that at the end of the day, if they come in and they say this has to be done, whether you agree with it or not, you need to do it. We had to tear down perfectly good bathrooms for 6 inches.

A**Anthony Taylor** 18:52

And—

J**Jason Duff** 18:52

Oh man.

S**Shannon** 18:53

Oh, it was a nightmare. Yeah. Which required all new plumbing, all new HVAC, all new electrical. So it wasn't just like, oh, bump the wall out 6 inches. Um, and really do your research on it. It's not impossible, but you, you want a good backing of people that have some knowledge.

A**Anthony Taylor** 19:14

Yep. And then triple what you think you're going to spend.

J**Jason Duff** 19:18

And then budgets— close— budgets are hard. And, and then, you know, once you got the experience in Ann Arbor Finley, again, I think you inherited a shell, but you were kind of expected to do all of the heavy lifting and the renovations to that space.

A**Anthony Taylor** 19:35

Yeah, Finley was a special, special case where we thought we were getting a building in one condition, and we walked in with, you know, our bays built in a U-Haul to bring them in to set them up, and the building had not been renovated at all.

S**Shannon** 19:50

So we had to do it, and it was like, well, and also Dave passed. Yeah, so a guy overseeing it had a heart attack and passed away. So our like key—

J**Jason Duff** 20:00

so things got dropped.

A**Anthony Taylor** 20:01

And yes, so it was a whole, it was a whole thing. So then obviously, you, you know, where you come in, you have to get an occupancy, you have to get inspections, you have to have electrical up to date, HVAC, all those things.

S**Shannon** 20:13

And none of it had been done, and it had not been too bad, most of it.

A**Anthony Taylor** 20:16

Yeah, so all these things needed to be done, and we are in here trying to build what we're doing. And it was, it was just a whole situation where things just happen, right? Life happens, and you gotta roll with the punches, and you gotta figure it out because it's not gonna do it on its own. So you have to be flexible, and you have to just—

S**Shannon** 20:36

time frames too, on all of our projects, time frames, because you don't know what happens from day to day, or if the inspection is this week or 2 weeks from now and you're stuck. For that time.

A**Anthony Taylor** 20:46

Yeah. And it's always really hard to do the marketing for your business because you don't know when you're going to open. You're like, oh, when— I would think I'm going to grand open in, just for example, December.

J**Jason Duff** 20:54

Yeah.

A**Anthony Taylor** 20:55

But then you have to get inspections. If those inspections don't pass, you don't open. So you can't be like, it's this day.

J**Jason Duff** 21:01

Yeah. That's one thing I wanted to ask you about, is as you were expanding, I mean, as a small business owner and then you're moving— I mean, these are— these cities and these locations aren't close to each other at all. So like, no, like What are some of the things that you guys have done to get people through the door in a new city that, you know, aren't familiar with you or anything like that? Like you don't have the connections here necessarily. So like what was it that like when you finally did open your doors, like what was it that brought them in?

S**Shannon** 21:29

Ann Arbor, we are still the best kept secret. Mm-hmm. We are still kind, which is a good thing and a bad thing. It means there's room for growth, but it also means like where are we missing the target here? Because we will have so many people that come in. Been there almost 2 years, over 2 years.

A**Anthony Taylor** 21:45

Oh wow.

S**Shannon** 21:46

Yeah. And we'll still have people come in and be like, we had no clue you were here. Um, and that's hard in this day and age because if you don't have a social media following because you're a new business, how do you market on social media? Um, and then we're dealing with a lot of college kids where it's way cooler to be followed by more people than to have people that you're following.

J**Jason Duff** 22:04

Yep. So you don't just follow random business.

S**Shannon** 22:06

No. So we're not— we definitely don't make that cut. Um, and then with it being during COVID We had a great in with the university at first, um, and had a lot of momentum. We had a huge MLive that went all over the state. All of that we had in December, and from December to the end of February, beginning of March, we were booked. And then we had that COVID hit. People didn't know what businesses survived. We lost all that momentum. We lost the connection at U of M. He moved on, and it's very hard to get in touch with the athletic directors and that kind of stuff. Like, they don't just give you their emails, make the connection again. Yeah, so Ann Arbor is still the best kept secret. Finley, just kind of— we put a sign in the window and we're just waiting. They were like, yeah, I think we were booked out opening night there.

J**Jason Duff** 22:55

Because at this point, people know what axe throwing is or have an idea of it, and so now it's like something cool and new to do. So Finley is located in downtown area, right?

S**Shannon** 23:06

Correct. So all of our locations are right downtown.

J**Jason Duff** 23:08

Yeah. So can we touch on that a little bit as from like a, you know, uh, how all the businesses feed off of each other kind of standpoint? What— I mean, it's fairly obvious, right? You know, you go eat somewhere and then you're looking for something to do to make a night downtown and you guys become that solution, right? So that was intentional, I think.

A**Anthony Taylor** 23:25

Well, because of the marketing, we didn't know what we were doing. We knew we wanted somewhere that would give us window service because that's free marketing. We always make sure we have a lane that people walk by, look in, they can see somebody throwing. So they're like, oh, that looks fun, I don't know what that is, I want to do that. So we make sure to do that.

S**Shannon** 23:44

Um, but as far as how we went into the restaurant across the street in Finley and they didn't know who we were, um, again, Brian's kind of like the face of the company. We get to kind of hang back and enjoy kind of watching the ride. And, uh, so they didn't know who we were in this restaurant, and we're going like, hey, kind of talking to— he was a hibachi guy. And he goes, well, you gotta go across the street after this, try that.

J**Jason Duff** 24:08

That's the right place.

S**Shannon** 24:10

But people come downtown, and they're either coming downtown to us, and then they're like, well, let's grab a bite to eat or grab a beer or whatever. Or they're coming downtown to eat, and they come in and they at least check it out, if not come in, and we have space. And Saturdays are pretty booked out. We don't— you need an appointment on Saturdays. But other than that, we do typically have a little bit of walk-in room. And we do, we really just kind of feed off the whole vibe. And if they don't stay that day, they're coming back next week.

A**Anthony Taylor** 24:39

Yeah, downtown restaurants love us because we bring a lot of people. And like you said, it pairs with a nice night out. Like they're going to a restaurant or a bar afterwards.

S**Shannon** 24:48

We're not direct competition.

A**Anthony Taylor** 24:49

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 24:50

You complement them.

A**Anthony Taylor** 24:51

Yes, very much so.

J**Jason Duff** 24:52

And I will share that, you know, we've had a lot of restaurant owners on the podcast and, you know, they have seen and benefited by entertainment options like you. And I think that's part of what we get excited about at Small Nation is thinking about ways that the whole ecosystem can win. So economic development really starting on the local level. And I think that Axe Ventura and businesses like what you have created are doing just that. Um, one thing I want to touch on is, is you came and took the tour in Belfound, and you were open and vulnerable enough to share that opening up new locations was a challenge, and particularly the challenge with figuring out that renovation, um, you know, process, because it is clunky for, you know, most small business owners. What traditional landlords typically do, and I think this is pretty similar to the experiences that you had, and you can share differently if you feel differently, but generally that you sign the lease and the responsibilities of renovations is usually the tenant's responsibility. And so they kind of hand you the keys and say, start paying us rent, to put the utilities in your name, and good luck, figure it out.

A**Anthony Taylor** 26:03

Sounds very familiar.

J**Jason Duff** 26:05

Well, and I think what we're trying to do is make that model different, and I think when I heard about you looking to expand and you took the tour, we walked through a property. I think what next that really got me excited is you came to the table saying, what can we do to help speed up making the dream and the possibility of opening up in Bellefontaine faster and better? And for us as a company, we really resonate with those values because we also want to lock arms and see long-term success for our tenants. So we've created a model That isn't, you know, buying and investing in historic buildings. It's actively recruiting new businesses and new tenants. It's, you know, helping them get access to capital and financing and then partnering up with marketing, promotion, and support. And, uh, we visioned up in the theater when we first inherited, had a drop ceiling, did not have enough bathrooms, did not, you know, that the floor, um, it had been a Sears store and then it was a flooring store for about 40 years, and it had like 4 different types of floors in the building. Um, we also had a major plumbing issue, so even if you tried to use the bathrooms, the sewer was going nowhere. Not a good thing, right?

A**Anthony Taylor** 27:24

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 27:25

But, you know, we, we— you laid out how many booths you needed for axe throwing, the vision of how you could set up a bar and create a welcoming lobby. But I think what was unique about the ways we work together is our construction team and you and your team, we partnered up and did it together.

S**Shannon** 27:46

Oh yeah, and there were many. Poor Dale. Yeah, I'm so sorry, Dale. Uh, there were so many times that you look at like what you take on and you're like, I don't see the end, I don't see the end of the tunnel anywhere. And then all of a sudden one day it's done and you've done it and you've taken every day head on. Um, the people on your team out in the field, I could call them at any moment and within 15-20 minutes somebody was either answering a question or had a direction for me to go. Um, he was finishing up his last semester, so he was not down here as often. Um, and so having that connection and then our small team it's invaluable. I mean, we would— it would have taken us a while.

J**Jason Duff** 28:35

I just want to share that, Shannon, you can put any guy under the table that says they're a contractor. The amount of lumber that she can carry, the amount of nails that she can throw.

S**Shannon** 28:46

I don't know, right?

J**Jason Duff** 28:47

I mean, there's a new baby on the way, so right now might not be—

A

Anthony Taylor 28:51

it's not slowing her down much.

J

Jason Duff 28:52

But, but in all seriousness, I think that's another thing that we just really admired, is that the grit. And a big shout out to your dad Scott. Like, he was there every day with the attitude, the energy, like, we're gonna, we're gonna solve this problem.

S

Shannon 29:06

Never has a bad day.

J

Jason Duff 29:07

He is a beam of positivity.

S

Shannon 29:09

He probably does have bad days, but he's always like, all right, so we'll fix it.

J

Jason Duff 29:13

Yeah, yeah, that's awesome. And I think, you know, for those of anyone listening to this podcast, for thinking about their own small town revitalization, like, I mean, I think you're, you're hearing testimonies of that as like it's a collaborative effort, you know. Absolutely. Absolutely. Between all small businesses. So like being closed off and like, you know, siloed off from the rest of the downtown is not— it's not necessarily like, you know, one wins, you all win kind of thing, and you're going to win together. Um, and I feel like at least the way that we've seen it here at Small Nation, I think that's like one of the main ingredients to see your small town or your downtown small town win, you know. So that's really cool. So how is Bellefontaine doing Um, how long you guys been open here in Belltown?

A

Anthony Taylor 29:59

January something, end of January, I think.

J

Jason Duff 30:02

Awesome. So how's business going for you? Is it what you thought it would be? Is it different?

A

Anthony Taylor 30:07

So it was, uh, it was interesting because we had trouble finding a manager, right? That was right in the midst of, you know, really hard to find employees. So Brian took it on himself to basically run Finley and Bell Fountain. So that was a lot, you know, for him because we're in Ann Arbor. So we finally got a great manager. We love him, uh, and he's really taken on the role of like making Accenture his, like Brian did in Findlay. And them together, it's like, it's a winning combination and they're doing great. The Fountain's doing good.

J**Jason Duff** 30:42

Good. Glad to hear it. Um, the one thing, just to brag a little bit about just what they've created, like when you walk into this space, um The ceilings are these original tin ceilings that Shannon like literally hand-painted. Her and her dad like—

S**Shannon** 30:59

my dad scraped them.

J**Jason Duff** 31:01

Yeah, it— I mean, but they are these, this gorgeous, gorgeous metallic. And then, you know, they've got this polished concrete floor, this, you know, there's a private lounge in the back. So if you've got parties or events, um, you can book that. And then we're under construction right now for a new outdoor patio. You know, with the weather getting ready to turn, just having an outdoor space for that family reunion, that, that class get-together. So I'm just so excited because I really feel, um, and maybe I'm a little biased, I probably am, but I feel like you've got probably one of the nicest and maybe largest axe throwing venue spaces in the state.

S**Shannon** 31:39

Oh, I would say that we are definitely a top contender when it comes to any of that.

A**Anthony Taylor** 31:43

Yeah, it's very beautiful. It's, yeah, it's really good. It's better than our other ones. Like, each one gets better and better because, like, you know, we learn, like, oh, we didn't like that on this one, and then the next one we're like, well, let's do this. So it just gets better.

S**Shannon** 31:57

But you, you kept saying when we were working on Buffout, and this is going to be our— what was the word you would use? This is our, like, uh, I don't know, just— it's— oh man, I wish I could think of it because you described it the same way every time, but like the best one we have created so far, the, the epic one, like Nothing's going to touch what we've been able to put into this space and, uh, the environment and the atmosphere. Because, uh, you're small business and you're starting out, the first thing you want is to just get your doors open. And then the next time you learn a little bit more. And then with Jason's vision and, um, you know, Callie working behind it, all of a sudden we're like, oh, oh, this is, this is Exventura, but it's, it's Exventura nice.

J**Jason Duff** 32:39

How do you think about your industry? You know, one of the criticisms are, is this too niche? Meaning that, is axe throwing a fad? Have you thought about the ways that your business will evolve and is evolving, um, in your markets?

A**Anthony Taylor** 32:57

So it is pretty niche, but it's, it's sort of like bowling, right? When bowling first happened, they probably said the same thing. But if you look at bowling now, it's close to dead, right? So, you know, there's definitely a shelf life to it, we think, but I don't think it's anytime soon, mainly because of that experience that we were talking about that we, we provide. Like, it is— it's a, it's a lot of fun, and it's not something that I just want to do once and never do it again, which is what I thought it was going to be. But the moment I stuck the first one, I was like, yep, I'm hooked, you know? And then how it's really evolving is competitions, um, leagues, tournaments, those sort of things. So you get the people that are really excited about it and you get them to come back and compete against other people and see who can, you know, be the best instead of just competing against your friends.

S**Shannon** 33:47

And, and that's a— as business owners, we have to think about that too. Um, how do you hold tournaments? Obviously the cash prizes keep some people coming, but, uh, how do you keep growing that, involving in and evolving.

J**Jason Duff** 34:05

Yeah, that's okay.

S**Shannon** 34:06

That— and, um, so like we've talked about like running a Triple Crown where you enter at all 3 locations and all 3 locations have small pots, but you enter all 3 of them and if you win all 3 of them you win a big pot. So like how do you constantly work on that and growing that? And, uh, that's a daily challenge sometimes.

A**Anthony Taylor** 34:26

It is.

S**Shannon** 34:27

Yeah, I think the competition though is one of our biggest things. Like, people are like, he won this time.

J**Jason Duff** 34:31

But yeah, that was going to be another one of my questions, is like, obviously, oh, you know, opening the doors and getting people in in the beginning is, you know, one problem with the— or one thing you have to worry about. But then, you know, once you did it, like, it can't be a, you know, oh, I went axe throwing and experienced it once kind of thing. Like, you gotta figure out ways to keep them coming back. So I was curious how you did that.

S**Shannon** 34:50

That's how we ended up opening one, is because I clearly beat him. I had to open one to practice.

J**Jason Duff** 34:56

Yeah, that's excellent.

A**Anthony Taylor** 34:58

Um, but no, it's that experience, like, it keeps them— it keeps them coming back because they go talk about it, right? And they're like, that was a lot of fun, I want to do that again.

J**Jason Duff** 35:07

Yeah, yeah.

A**Anthony Taylor** 35:08

So, you know, a lot of places that are doing axe throwing where they just give you an axe and basically tell you to figure it out, we think is giving axe throwing a bad name, and that's going to make axe throwing go in the opposite direction. Because the people aren't going to go and they're not going to have a fun time. They're just gonna be like, well, that was all right, I did it, but it wasn't anything special. So if anything's going to take axe throwing down, it's going to be places like that that just— they don't put everything into it and make it about the customer anymore. It's more about, you know, just them.

S**Shannon** 35:38

Um, that's probably one of our biggest things we hear coming back from customers at the end of their hours, like, oh, I went and tried axe throwing at this place and this is completely different. Like, I actually could get good and I stuck them. And, uh, so we really— it costs, you know, you gotta have the staff to be able to do that where these other places don't. Um, but then the other thing, the other thing we're finding is these locations that are bringing in multiple different business concepts are not doing as well because they're go-karting in one space and foaling in another space. And what is all these different random things, which are totally fine. But when you're dealing with axe throwing, you need people that know what they're doing. You can't hand them a football and say, throw it at those bowling pins. And, uh, that we're finding that because we focus on that, we are pulling away from other locations.

A**Anthony Taylor** 36:32

Specialized, right?

J**Jason Duff** 36:33

Yeah. And again, it's, it's— you're almost like strengthening the community, you know, trying to like protect the reputation of axe throwing, as you're saying. And in turn, that like, you know,, gives back to your business a little bit because they want to keep coming back to you because you are so focused on the fun. And I like the leagues and everything like that. That's like, those are creative solutions to, you know, keep them coming back. So that's really cool. I got one question. So it's rare to find a couple that both share entrepreneurial values. Here we go. I mean, let's get the good stuff. Were both of you like that kind of thinking coming into this, or one more than the other?

A**Anthony Taylor** 37:12

It was the perfect storm. We met at the exact right moment in each other's lives again. Like, we've known each other for 20 years, but, you know, we rekindled at the exact moment that both of us were ready to do something. We just didn't know what it was. And then we were presented with this opportunity, and we were just like, let's go. And we never looked back.

S**Shannon** 37:31

He, he definitely was into the axe throwing more for the axe throwing originally, whereas I, I'm like spreadsheets. I'm like A plus B equals C. All right. Um, but we definitely have our lanes. He's very good with staff. Yeah, I prefer— I am more active in the, um, upfront or back end, depending on what I'm put it, but the how to set the place up, the space that's going to be used, that kind of thing. Um, whereas he takes more of an active role for the rest of the time. Um, but we have lanes and for the most part we stay in them.

A**Anthony Taylor** 38:10

We complement each other very well.

J**Jason Duff** 38:11

How do you handle conflict?

A**Anthony Taylor** 38:13

Oh, we don't conflict very often.

S**Shannon** 38:17

Uh, we don't fight without a purpose. Yeah, we don't argue without a purpose. Like, we do a really good job of like, feelings aside, this is what happened, this is what I think should happen. Your side of it and we get to a solution. Um, but very rarely is it ever like— you can find yourself in the middle of a construction build and you hate everything and you're so sick of the project, and you can't start nitpicking because that's when it falls apart. Fight with a purpose and get to your resolution and then go with it and, and let the— let that just be it.

A**Anthony Taylor** 38:49

We really compartmentalize very well. Like, okay, so we're together in all walks of life, like you know, relationship, business. We also do real estate. So like, we have all these different things that we do, and we put ourselves in the mindset like, okay, right now we are sitting down, we are doing business. So even if we argue about business, once we hang up that and we go back to being relationship, that's done.

J**Jason Duff** 39:12

It stays there.

A**Anthony Taylor** 39:13

Yeah. So like, we keep them all in their own little areas, and we do that pretty well.

S**Shannon** 39:18

I would say it makes relationships outside of ours interesting because how we speak to each other is not how you can speak to the general population. And because I'll be like, what do you think about this idea? And he'll come back where some people are like, oh, that's terrifying, why would you do that? Like, it's, it's a different dynamic because we can bounce those ideas.

A**Anthony Taylor** 39:39

Yeah, we work together very well.

J**Jason Duff** 39:42

Very cool. Okay, so at the, uh, usually towards the end of these episodes, um, as we close up here, we usually have Jason just give a little gold nugget at the end of just basically, you know,, around the conversation that we've had today, something to, to just provide value for anyone listening. So if you want to go ahead and just hit us with something. Well, I think the thing that stuck out to me is just how important it is to have someone in your life that supports you but also challenges you. And what I really admire about your relationship and your business partnership is that you are aligned on a lot of things. And I loved your example, um, of sharing that when things are not in alignment, fight with a purpose. Like, that stuck out to me today, um, and I think that's a, a value that we need more in our country is the, the concept of grit. Like, the things that you have done and accomplished have not been easy, but like, you have dug in and you have pivoted and you have innovated to now have 3 locations, and you also are building and growing your real estate business. Which, um, is all along the same as you're having a family and planning a family, and then also just graduating college.

A**Anthony Taylor** 40:53

Sounds like a lot.

J**Jason Duff** 40:56

But can I tell you though, for people listening, like, there are parts of all the things that you're doing that people dream about, and it's hard to accomplish them all. And at times, I'm sure you have felt very lonely, but when you can find other people that have your back but also push and challenge you, and they're not afraid sometimes to say no, but here's no, but why. So why is important? I would just say, you know, today what I took away, and I think others listening will, is like, it's okay to fight with a purpose.

A**Anthony Taylor** 41:31

Absolutely. And that's, you know, that's her, like, she's the communicator. I didn't know how to do that. She was like, here, here's what we're gonna do. I was like, okay, okay, we'll play it your way. Yeah, I was like, fine, we'll talk about it.



Shannon 41:44

That's awesome.



Jason Duff 41:46

Thank you so much for being here today, guys. Appreciate it. And so excited for you guys here in Bellefontaine especially, um, and just, you know, wish you continued success as you, uh, carry on with this brand. So, and future growth too. Like, I know you're charting out and looking— we discussed, it sounds like Indiana is another market that you're really looking at right now, and potentially other locations too. So that's fantastic. Two more.



Anthony Taylor 42:09

Okay, at least.



Jason Duff 42:10

Oh, hot take here. You can see Shannon's face.



Anthony Taylor 42:14

Brian's gonna— we'll do the next two and then give Brian.



Jason Duff 42:16

Okay, all right, Brian, we got to get him on here sometime too. Yeah, yeah, Brian's the man. Um, so if people want to find you on social media or your website, uh, where can they find you?



Anthony Taylor 42:27

So it's, uh, axe-ventura.com. Locations, obviously, Ann Arbor, Finley, Bellefontaine for now. More coming.



Jason Duff 42:34

Yeah, stay tuned.



Anthony Taylor 42:36

Coming soon.



Jason Duff 42:36

Yeah, thank you guys, appreciate it. And, uh,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 42:39

thank you everyone for tuning in and checking out the Small Talk Podcast with Jason Duff. You can find us anywhere that you listen to your podcast, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even the Small Nation YouTube channel. I hope you were able to pull some value from that conversation, and we hope to see you in the next one. And if you haven't subscribed already and are looking for more of this kind of content, be sure to check out the Friday Small Talk newsletter that goes out every week. Stay tuned to Small Nation on social media to keep up with everything that is happening here, as there are lots of exciting projects in the works. And until next time, this is Small Nation with Jason Duff signing off. Thanks, guys.