

Episode 11

📅 Wed, Oct 12, 2022 9:00AM ● 50:07

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

small town economic development, Mercer County Ohio, workforce development, Hometown Opportunity, talent attraction and retention, rural population growth, community storytelling, manufacturing and agriculture, downtown revitalization, Bellefontaine, Grand Lake St. Marys, lake water quality remediation, tourism, regional collaboration, grant funding for communities

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Jared Ebbing, Ethan DeLeon

- J** **Jared Ebbing** 00:00
If you want to build a strong community, you got to have a sense of, of confidence and projecting that confidence. And everybody in the community needs to feel that sense of positivity. And that takes a long way. If everybody starts to feel negative, it's hard to get stuff off the ground, you know, for any investment or any development.
- E** **Ethan DeLeon** 00:18
Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Joining us today, we have the Community and Economic Development Director of Mercer County, Ohio, Jared Ebbing. We want to welcome you to the Small Nation Podcast, where we 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 to create value for you, the listener, to create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.
- J** **Jason Duff** 00:49
Thank you, Ethan. Hey, Jared.
- J** **Jared Ebbing** 00:52
Hey, how's it going?
- J** **Jason Duff** 00:53
Yeah, no, we're excited to have you today. Um, I— for those listeners that are on here, Jared is, um, a small town, small business advocate. We often say that small towns build great things, and the community that he represents, Mercer County, Ohio, is one of those places that build great things. And I'm excited to have you on today. Looking forward to it. So Mercer County, tell us about what makes Mercer County special.

J**Jared Ebbing** 01:21

Well, I mean, I always say, you know, it starts with people. You know, we have just a great, you know, community, good people, great work ethic, you know, the sense of community. People come together for, for a purpose. And when you combine that with a community that still makes things, produces things, manufactures things that the world needs, you add that to agriculture, we grow things that the world needs. Next thing you know, we have a strong GDP to go along with a strong community. And if you combine those things, my job is to not mess it up, you know, sustain that, grow that. So, you know, I'm lucky, you know, already start with a good starting point, you know, where, you know, sometimes counties that, you know, maybe aren't in the manufacturing sector, don't make things, don't grow things in agriculture base, it's harder, you know, where's your starting point? But I've been blessed, we've been blessed, the county's been growing in all facets. And like I said, my job is just to kind of continue to focus on how to continue that growth and small town, small town America, like you said, it drives the, it's the engine that drives things and just continue that potential moving forward.

J**Jason Duff** 02:37

So for listeners, when you look at the state of Ohio, where is Mercer County?

J**Jared Ebbing** 02:41

Okay, so Mercer County, we say west central Ohio. So we're right on the Indiana border, about midway between Dayton and Toledo. So right on the border there. You know, when I first started, a lot of times people would say, oh, you know, Mercer County, that's in the middle of nowhere. And I come back all the time and say, nope, we're in the center of everything because we're almost equidistant. Cincinnati, Toledo, equidistance in between there, um, or Dayton, Toledo, whatever, um, and Columbus, Indianapolis. So if you connect those four into a circle, yeah, Mercer County's dead center in the center of that, of that circle. So officially, the center of a circle is called the focus. So I would say Mercer County is the focus of your economic development needs by being in the center. So we're in the center of everything, not in the middle of nowhere. It's all how you phrase things. And, you know, when you talk to young people, when they say, oh, we're in the middle of nowhere, nope, you're equidistant. You can go to Columbus, you can go to Indianapolis, you can go wherever to have your city life. But man, the community values and what you grew up with is right here. Everything you need is right here in this county.

J**Jason Duff** 03:41

And you grew up in Mercer County in the town of Coldwater, Ohio. Tell me about that.

J**Jared Ebbing** 03:49

Normal childhood, you know, growing up, um, was a Cavalier, you know, quarter Cavalier, and, um, did that. Went away to college, went to University of Dayton. Didn't think I would come back, you know. What if you would ask me in high school, you know, what my plans were? It's like, I'm getting out of here, you know. But only took about 4 years, you know, senior year in college, it's like, man, you know, it's a nice community, isn't it? So I Found a job back in the area, worked for an architectural and engineering firm. That's my background is civil engineering. Took a job with Fanning Howey and worked there for about 13 years and ended up getting into economic development.

J**Jason Duff** 04:26

So when you think about your engineering background, what kind of skills does engineering bring as you look at how you do your work today?

J**Jared Ebbing** 04:37

Problem solving., you know, it could be a math equation or a sanitary sewer issue or a water issue, any kind of engineering. But at the end of the day, you know, in my new, you know, my job, I say new, but my economic development job, it's a different series of problems, but you still solve them the same way. So that's probably what I bring to it is, you know, hey, we have an issue. You know, years ago when we first started meeting with you guys on Hometown Opportunity and workforce issues, it's a problem, let's find a solution. So that's— you just, you know, go through the problem-solving techniques and, and get her done.

J**Jason Duff** 05:09

So when I first met Jared, um, I have to be honest, I was kind of jealous because in Mercer County they have held the record for having one of the lowest unemployment rates in Ohio. Oh wow. And I went to Jared and kind of gave him a high five and gave him a rough time about it, but he, you know, I said that that has to be you know, as the, the community and economic development director, a point of pride. And he was really quick to say, we are very proud of that, but let me tell you, when my job is to recruit new businesses and new factories and new businesses to the area, and there aren't people here to work at those places, that's a significant problem. Yeah. Tell us about, like, for those towns and communities, workforce development, um, why is that a problem, and what do you think some of the contributions to that problem are?

J**Jared Ebbing** 05:58

Well, I mean, you know, demographics are changing across the country, across the state. I mean, there are less, you know, families— family sizes have decreased. I mean, they, they are what they are. And in the farming community like we are, you know, my mom's from a family of 13 kids. How many people have 13 kids nowadays? They just don't.

J**Jason Duff** 06:18

So when a farm— and we're looking to you— don't look here, man.

J**Jared Ebbing** 06:22

So in a farming community especially You know, the potential for your demographic shift and for your population to dramatically decrease from having 10, 12, 13 in a family to 2 kids is profound. And we're no different than anybody else. But if you have those demographic challenges and yet you have companies that are growing and needing people, other than begging people to have more kids, that's, you know, you need to go out and find viable solutions to attract new people in. Retain your greatest asset, which is your people. If you can't retain your people, if the brain drain takes root and people leave and feel like that's their only way out, and then you combine that with demographic shifts, how can I convince a company to expand or a new company to come?

J**Jason Duff** 07:09

So that's—

J**Jared Ebbing** 07:10

that needed to be problem number one to quote-unquote be solved. And I'm not saying we've solved it, but you've, you got to identify and focus and figure out how to identify the problem and try to create things that can help mitigate those shifts. So at the end of the day, in a very low unemployment rate county, in a county that theoretically could have lost population, how do we overcome that so we just don't become another stat, another county that's basically said, well, we used to be up here and now we're down here. So it's that internal growth. It's that, What do we want to be in 5 years, 10 years, 20 years? And then let's chart that course and let's do it. So for us, it was— my job is economic development, make sure companies can grow and expand, but they can't do it without people. So hence my title, community development. Let's grow the community, whatever it takes to grow that community, our community, so that economic development can occur. Otherwise, I'm spinning my wheels. Oh, we want economic development, we'd love to have this company come. Yeah, but there's nobody to fill these jobs. Oh, I'm spinning my wheel. So focus on the community development side of it, the people aspect, the, you know, the human capital, if you will. But, you know, how do you attract somebody to stay or new people to come? What you guys are doing here at Buff Fountain— things to do, parks, places to live— that's all part of community development. So it's one thing to talk to people, oh, come, come back, or come to this area. You got to have reasons for them to come. So it's one big equation of community/economic development where You, you are putting the pieces of the puzzle together so that one can beget the other, and I think that's what we try to do. It's not an exact science, it never will be, but I think collaborating on different things, you know, Hometown Opportunity, we've learned a lot from what you guys have done here in downtown redevelopment, you know, and assets within your community. So we just focus on those things, and if you do that right, good things will come out.

J**Jason Duff** 09:07

Jason, I think, you know, we've— we're talking about hometown opportunity here and the effect of that. That's a part of Small Nation that we have not really talked about here on the podcast yet. Um, you know, there are several different arms of Small Nation, but, um, can you walk us through a little bit what hometown opportunity is and, uh, the need that it serves? I'm going to share the story of how it— the conversation started, and then I'm going to let Jared talk about how actually how it's working and, and how many other communities across the country are studying what happened 10 years ago and now is growing. So, you know, Jared, in sharing that his challenge was finding new employment and new employees to come from other places to locate to Mercer County, he was saying that many of the employers were spending a lot of dollars and money posting positions on national websites like Indeed and Monster and LinkedIn. And he was saying that the folks that were getting the most traction, visibility, that were closing the deals were some of the large companies that were spending the most money on advertising. And many of those employers happened to not be in Mercer County. They were in the larger cities, um, an hour away. And so he said it was a kind of a frustration. What can we do to use technology that highlights the folks that have available positions that are open and also has an opportunity for people that are looking for jobs to post their resumes. And it became more of a— and that's why I appreciate his engineering background. It was like, let's state the problem and then let's look at what existing structures and businesses are out there that are, are meeting this need. And if we don't like those solutions, can we build something locally? And it goes back, I think, to the Mercer County hustle or hard work ethic. And I do— we happen to work on our team, we have more people from Mercer County than any other county on our team. And I say it is— it's no disrespect to other parts of our state. There is something special that happens there. And I think it is that that hard work, um, and that, that willing to, to see something through. And so, uh, Jared kind of set out and, and doing that, and that's where, you know, we brought in Adam Rammel. So Adam today is our Vice President of Marketing, and he's got a, you know, he's from that area as well and knows Jared and, and knows many of the major employers. And I, uh, you know, we sat down and started on a big blank piece of paper.

J**Jared Ebbing** 11:49

It was a big marker board. I remember it like it was yesterday. You know, we just sat down and we were just, you know, just talking and just like, here's, here's an idea. I'm not a technical IT guy at all. So when you talk about coding and I don't know how any of that works, but we had a vision and kudos to Adam and listening to me and saying, hey, what about this? And, you know, we just basically had a marker board and we're just— and then I remember shortly after that meeting, you and I and Adam met together at a restaurant. We said, hey, here's the concept. Now can we piece this together and actually put it, put the technology behind it? So that's how it all, yeah, it was, it was an idea, but it takes a team in order to forge that idea and make it work.

J

Jason Duff 12:28

And I think the two words we were trying to think, what do you call this? Like, is it job posting board? Is it a, you know, a website that highlights videos and, and high quality stories and photos about local employers? And really, it moved from what was a basic WordPress website to a software platform. And that evolution has been really listening to feedback of users of how you reduce friction and how do you make it easy to find jobs and to post jobs. And then, you know, I think the software piece was— and I also tell you, I'm not a software coder. So you find people in your network that are really good at those things. And we developed a brand. I mean, the brand was Hometown Opportunity. And really the premise behind that is some of the best jobs, careers, potential to start your own business could exist in your very backyard. And so how do we put a spotlight on people that may be graduating high school? How do we highlight the local companies that are doing these amazing things that are impacting places around the world? Just to take a little quick comment about that, like, you have some local companies that are impacting the world and doing really cool things. Can you brag a few of those examples?

J

Jared Ebbing 13:55

Yeah, I mean, many. I mean, 49 Degrees, for instance. I mean, they do graphics for all the major college sports stadiums, basketball arenas, etc.

J

Jason Duff 14:03

Wow.

J

Jared Ebbing 14:03

And that's just one example, but most people in town don't know they even exist. They just look at that as another big— oh, that's a big factory, it looks like. So that right there, I mean, we have multiple, I can go on and on, JR Manufacturing and Coldwater Machine, all these companies that are just doing amazing. That's why I like my job, because I can go out and see all these companies, but, and just in awe with what they do. But my task was how do I get other people to know that? Because when I would, before Hometown Opportunity, I would go into these schools where I would talk to parents and they'd say, boy, we love this area, but there's nothing here for my son or daughter.

J

Jason Duff 14:34

I was like, excuse me?

J

Jared Ebbing 14:36

You should do what I do. You should see what I see.

J

Jason Duff 14:38

Because you see it, you get into those businesses.

J**Jared Ebbing** 14:41

Opportunity was more about, yeah, it's about job postings, you know, monster.com at the local level. But it's more about telling that story because if you have a job, you know what you do, but you don't know what anybody else does. So how do you tell your kids that? And so if you don't know something doesn't exist, you have a negative perception of it. Yeah. So if nothing else, it's just that community storytelling and everybody's busy with their lives. So we created a site. Yeah, there's job postings on there, but it's an opportunity for these companies to tell their story. And for people, not just students, to realize what's done here and to then kind of change their mindset. Oh wow, pride, you know, community pride. So it's technology, but it's really, we're a tight-knit community, but we weren't telling that story right. So if you take that storytelling capability and add jobs like a monster.com or Indeed and focus it on your hometown community, now you've got something.. And that's what I'm most proud of is when I go through communities now, oh, did you see what so-and-so does? They saw that on Hometown Opportunity. Whereas before, well, there's nothing in our small town. There's nothing here for my kid. That negative glass half empty, glass half full. And it's flipped that switch. And that's what amongst everything else I'm almost more proud of than anything. Now, real quick, when we started it with Jason and Adam, it was Mercer County and then we included Aughley's County. Mercer and Oakley do a lot of things together, but you're only as strong as your region. And we looked at, you know, sounds weird, but who do we play in sports, you know, as far as the surrounding areas? That's your hometown. It's not just arbitrary county lines. It's what is your hometown? So we looked at who we played in football and basketball and things like that. So we immediately, not immediately, but shortly after the site was up and running, we included Darke County and then Shelby County. So hometown opportunity is 4 counties. We kind of stopped there. If we went too much further, then you lose that sense of hometown, you know, in that sense of community. So officially, Hometown Opportunity, it's run out of our office, but it's Mercer, Auglaize, Darke, and Shelby County.

J**Jason Duff** 16:39

And just to share for, you know, to give some context, give us some data points of how large your county is just in terms of population. And then maybe when, you know, how many active empty jobs are kind of out there? How many are posted on the site? Kind of walk us through some general metrics of what, for your community, what that actually looks like.

J**Jared Ebbing** 17:04

Yep. So the population of Mercer County is just right at under 42,000 people, and we were one of only, I think, 5 rural counties in the last census, in the last 2 census, that has shown growth. So, you know, your urban, suburban centers, you know, obviously show growth, but your rural counties that may not have the potential for growth. You know, they're— I don't want to name them, but there's several of them that have had negative numbers. You know, you can see those numbers going down. So one of the things we're proud of is over the last two census, Mercer County has had 4, 5, 6, 7%, you know, growth, you know, from a population perspective. And back to that demographic, in the face of smaller family size, having population growth is a, is a big deal. One of the— real quick sidetrack— one of the things that I look at as much as low unemployment rate numbers, every year I go to all of our local schools and ask for their kindergarten enrollment. Hmm. And it's all growing almost to the point where, you know, we've got to add 2 more kindergarten teachers, we got to add on. That to me is more important than what our snapshot unemployment rate is at this moment in time. So That tells me we're on the upswing. You know, people are moving back, having kids, sending their kids 5 years later to kindergarten, and those numbers are going up. So population, 42,000, just under, that's that. From an industry sector, a lot of manufacturing, advanced manufacturing, ag, as I mentioned. So, you know, pretty well diversified. So if there is another downturn in the economy, just like in the past, we've always been able to weather that pretty well. And, you know, steady as she goes. And, you know, that type of, you know, when you have a steady population, growing population, and those kind of industries, it usually works out pretty well.

J**Jason Duff** 18:55

Well, I think if you think about those available jobs, you know, stacking from, you know, the total population to how many companies to how many available jobs there are, would you say, you know, at any given point in time on Hometown Opportunity, would you have 300 jobs that would be posted? Is that a reasonable number? And then how many kind of resumes you have people kind of searching in a community of Mercer County size?

J**Jared Ebbing** 19:23

Yeah, so, you know, it's funny when we first started the site 10 years ago and I vividly remember it's like, oh my God, we got 50 jobs on this site. Look at that. A couple months ago, I think we were at our high point, 985 jobs on the site. Wow. And for a population that we have, again, Mercer-Augliese, Darke Shelby, fairly rural community. Yeah. To have that many jobs posted in one time. Now, keep in mind, the jobs that are posted on the site, they sunset after 45 days. So if somebody fills a position in that 45-day window, then they take the job down as a filled position. They check that box. But if they don't, if they forget that it's on there and whatever, it goes down. It goes down to 45 days. So in a 45-day moving window to have over 900 jobs on the site, Just like, you know, we talked about too low unemployment rate is a challenge. That many jobs on the site when companies are posting, they see all those jobs, it makes you proud that companies are using the site. But it's like, oh my God, that's a lot of jobs. I think we're at just under 600 right now. It's usually between 500, 700 in that time frame. So again, companies are using it. We get thousands of hits a day on that site, probably 3,000 hits a day. When you talk to people in the community, it's like, oh, I check out Compton Opportunity every single day. It's like, oh, you're looking for a job? Nope, I just want to know what's going on and see what jobs. My cousin may be looking for a job. So people use the site all the time. So we're very proud of that. A lot of jobs being posted. And again, for a rural region, you know, in our 4-county, we're proud of— we're never— we're not trying to compete with Monster. We're not trying to compete with— in fact, we complement Ohio Means Jobs. Ohio Means Jobs is a very nice state of Ohio website, and You know, we've told the state that has a purpose, you know, statewide jobs, and you can filter down. But we wanted more of that intimate feeling, that intimate storytelling, and oh, by the way, jobs, etc. So that's kind of how we focused it, and that— how many— that many jobs on the site at any one given time. And there's probably, um, 600 resumes on the site where companies, you know, if they're not even posting a job, they can just log in and look at resumes. Look at resumes, categorize. I'm looking for sales and marketing, just click that box and just look at all the sales and marketing people that have, you know, put resumes on. And what's cool about that is, you know, there are people from all over the country that maybe used to live in this area or have heard about it and now are posting. I look at resumes every so often and, you know, they're from Illinois and from New York, and I might recognize the last name that they may have lived here or they had a relative here, but they're posting their resumes on Hometown Opportunities website. I'm sure they're doing it on LinkedIn and Monster and Indeed, but for them to put that on that website. Yeah, that's what it's called. And like I said, we tell people all the time, Ohio Means Jobs, etc. We're not trying to compete with each other. We're just creating another resource for that hometown feel.

J**Jason Duff** 22:09

So, and, you know, I think that's a solution that the community owns that software. It's local. You know, it is a, it is a tool that, you know, can be licensed to like, like you've done to add on other counties in your region. But there's something to be said about having local control. You know, it's not some big company in New York City. You know, this is, this is a software that, that, that your economic development agency owns and maintains and controls.

J

Jared Ebbing 22:38

It helps with news. You know, if a company's doing something new, we can highlight them. You know, it's — we have direct control. We can adjust that dial and highlight a company so, you know, people are aware of a new contract Company X gets, you know, they may or may not put that in the newspaper, you know, if people read the paper anymore, but we put that out there as, you know, events and news.

J

Jason Duff 23:00

So the people who are looking for that and are interested can find it.

J

Jared Ebbing 23:02

I didn't know that company did that. Wow, they landed that national contract. That is cool. It's just that flow of information. And again, back to community pride and looking for jobs, looking for— if you want to build a strong community, you got to have a sense of confidence and projecting that confidence. And everybody in the community needs to feel that sense of positivity, and that takes a long way. If everybody starts to feel negative, it's hard to get stuff off the ground, you know, for any investment or any development. So I think it starts with that. And again, that's back to that community development.

J

Jason Duff 23:33

So yeah, again, talking about small town revitalization, you know, we also talk about how just signage and windows showing that things are happening, uh, new paint, you know, all those things is strategy that Small Nation does here in Bellefontaine, just so people aren't so negative all the time. And for me, I love this conversation because one of my questions was, you know, why is it important to talk about economic development? We gear this podcast towards real estate, you know, small town revitalization and economic development, but talking about the impact of just the mental state of your community and like fixing problems of like You know, I'm sure there are several other, especially right now with employee shortages, you know, other economic developers out there kind of worried about, you know, we want companies to come in, but we can't promise that people will be there to fill it.

J**Jared Ebbing** 24:24

So I mean, for me, that kind of answers that question of, you know, why is it important to talk about economic development and getting everybody involved in that conversation so that you're coming at it from a position of strength as a community, but you got full, not just investment in dollars, but input from companies, and we're all promoting the same thing. And yeah, you're right, what you guys have done in downtown Bellefontaine and promoting that psyche of positivity and more people wanting to come and come back to, that's all part of that same, the same discussion. Whether it be a website promoting jobs and companies or your downtown, that's all part of that. Let's face it, there's enough negative stuff going on in the world, you know, at the world level, a national level, and even the state level where it could get you down in the dumps. Whether a company trying to find employees or people just fretting about life in general. So we're trying to shine a light on positivity, telling stories on our website, you guys putting, you know, signage up in buildings, new coming soon. That's all part of that, things that you can control here locally. And that's what I kind of came back to, of you can't control things that are out of your control. You can fret about it, it doesn't do any good. Focus on what you can control. So other economic developers, other real estate, put all that off to the side. Focus on what you can control and hit it out of the park, whether it be a website or things that we do or things you guys are doing at Small Nation. Hit that out of the park and portray positivity, and it's a magnet, and people will follow that. So even if they turn the news on and, you know, God, what's going on in this part of the country, and yeah, workforce dilemmas, but they know you got a team here that we're working together to help employee, you know, find employees, or, you know, downtown revitalization, etc. That's what they can control.

J**Jason Duff** 26:04

Yeah, and doing something about it.

J**Jared Ebbing** 26:05

Yeah, and getting their input, not just investment, but input in that discussion makes them feel better, but it projects positivity. And I think coming from a position of strength on anything we're doing, you know, real estate, workforce, economic development, community development, it just makes it so much easier. We're all in this together. It's a team approach. But by being positive and focusing on things that we can control and the positive aspects of it makes my job a lot easier. It makes all of our jobs easier.

J**Jason Duff** 26:31

So today, before you came into the podcast, you had a chance to go over to Brew Fountain. And, you know, Mercer County is about an hour away, so 50 minutes. Yeah, the Brew Fountain in Bellefontaine has been the number one craft beer bar for the last 4 years running. And, you know, what I think is neat about the storytelling of that business opening is Adam Rammel, who you just mentioned, we, you know, launching the software, helping and working on Small Nations Marketing, being a part of our billboard company. Um, he had the courage to say, I want to open up a new business. And he decided to do it in a building that did not have a roof, did not have a floor, but has built this really amazing craft beer bar and restaurant in downtown Bellefontaine. People in Mercer County will drive easily 50 minutes to come and experience the Brew Fountain.

J

Jared Ebbing 27:20

Is that right? I think I saw colder people in there when I was just in there.

J

Jason Duff 27:24

Yeah, all the time. And this is what's kind of surprising to us because you don't kind of appreciate when you're local and in front of it every day how special something is. But you know what I think is awesome is that there have been people that have eaten, come and taken the Small Nation tour, got to meet Adam, meet its team members, and that has inspired them to go back to Celina, which is the county seat in Mercer County, to open up new restaurants and new experiences there.

J

Jared Ebbing 27:53

Right. And every one of them talks about their pilgrimage to Bellefontaine to learn from that. Yeah. Everybody that I've taken to Bellefontaine has either started or thought about doing something in one of our downtowns. You know, so again, it's that positivity, connecting the dots and talking through it. And it's one thing to say, hey, wouldn't you like to redevelop a business in Celina? Maybe, you know, voice, maybe kind of thought about it. Let's go to Bellefontaine and let's talk about it and let's think about it. And it gets them amped up and excited about it. Again, that's part of community development too, is getting people to want to invest in your hometown. It takes courage. It takes risk.

J

Jason Duff 28:30

It takes risk. It's courage. And, and I think part of what you mentioned about community building is it's putting the right— from the engineering side, putting the right infrastructure, the right people, the right financing. But at the end of the day, someone has to say I am going to sacrifice something and I'm going to do something big and bold that makes me uncomfortable and is going to push me out of my comfort zone. How do you, how do you help people do that?

J

Jared Ebbing 28:55

Get them inspired, you know, get them to come here, meet you, meet Adam, whatever, and say, God, that's, that's cool, I could do that. Um, they still come here, you know, there's some people, you know, they, you know, they, they come here to have fun on the weekends and do whatever. Um,. And they take a little bit of that experience back and say, yep, let's replicate, replicate and repeat. And, you know, to us, we're a region, you know, you can't expect people to stay, you know, get new restaurants coming up in Salina. Oh, okay. Only stay in Salina. We want them to experience restaurants in Greenville and Sidney. And there's so many cool things, Bellefontaine, etc. So we all benefit from it. And again, that's that positivity of, you know, checking things out, replicating it, but still keeping that on their maps. You know, people that have started their own business— the anchor in Slidell, for instance, I know he still comes to Bellefontaine.

J

Jason Duff 29:46

We love Cody.

J**Jared Ebbing** 29:46

Cody's great. Yeah, so that's part of that, again, that positivity. And, and, um, we're all in this together in a rural region. And I wouldn't— Mercer, Augliese, Darke, Shelby, Logan, Van Wert, I mean, Miami County— I mean, we're all in this together. And it's not, not— it's not us versus them, metro. I mean, it's I'm not trying to say us, we small communities got to stick together in comparison to Columbus. I'm not trying to say that, but we do have something to offer. And collectively, if we kind of brag up our small town and that experience, and I think people are looking for that. Now, at least we're giving additional alternatives to, oh, I've just always got to go to Columbus for that experience. You can keep going to Columbus, but look what we have in Bellefontaine, in Celina, and, and give people that opportunity. And I truly think in an increasingly crazy world, that small town experience, that specialized experience, I think now that teeter-totter is kind of tipping the other way where people want to come to the Bellefontaines, the Salinas, St. Mary's has some cool things going on in their downtown. It's just, I think it's starting to shift. Again, we're not trying to necessarily compete. We just want to say, hey, we're here too.

J**Jason Duff** 30:54

You want to plant your flag and be something original and authentic. And I think people crave that.

J**Jared Ebbing** 30:59

I think they're looking for it.

J**Jason Duff** 31:00

You know, your community, Mercer County, is home to Grand Lake St. Mary's, and Grand Lake is, I believe, the second largest or maybe first largest inland lake in Ohio, right? It's the largest. The largest. So, you know, it is a tourist destination, and now more than ever, when gas prices are what they are and getting in an airplane to go another state is a frustrating experience, Tell me about how, how you look at tourism and what your community is doing to, to double down on that huge aspect of it, um, of the economic and community development side of it.

J**Jared Ebbing** 31:36

So you probably know a little bit about the— about 10 years ago, about 10, 12 years ago, we had a major problem with our lake. Same thing Lake Erie had is, uh, called microcystin toxin, this new thing called a toxin that, that algae releases. Nobody really knew much about it before that. And I had just started at the county, and the commissioners looked at me and they said, oh, you're an engineer, good luck, you know, figure that out. And just to give it in context, anything above what they call 20 parts per million of toxin was considered— you can't— you're not supposed to be exposing your skin to it. We were at 120, 130 year after year after year, and people had no idea what this was. So talk about desolate. All these restaurants and property values, everybody was fleeing the lake. Oh my God, toxin's going to kill us all. But just like any other problem, we figure out how do you solve this. I mean, people say, oh, it's going to take decades. It took decades to get to this point, it's going to take decades to fix. We just got to work, rolled our sleeves up, and start building, you know, wetlands all over. And that's a good thing too. People like that, wetlands and nature trails and things like that. But when you let Mother Nature do her job, she'll do it. Last year, two, about three years ago, it started to really— the toxin levels started to noticeably come down. Still above the threshold.. And then the state lowered the threshold. So instead of 20, they said, uh, good job, but now get it down to 8. And I'm happy and proud to say that, uh, we just took our readings again here going into Fourth of July weekend at 2. 120 down to 2.

J**Jason Duff** 33:05

Congratulations. That's huge.

J**Jared Ebbing** 33:06

Yeah. And you should see the lake. It is hopping. And economic development, we have a new, um, it's kind of a Key West-themed restaurant and VRBOs. It looks like Key West. They literally brought in palm trees. Right along the lake, and that place is hopping all day, every day. Boats coming in, jet skis, because people want to use the lake. Yeah, so that's tourism. That's— but it's also, again, community pride. People— gas prices what they are, maybe I don't have to go to Key West. Now I'm at this— people from around here are renting these VRBOs out. They have the restaurant, they have the nightlife. It's cool. It's just so neat to see, again, community pride, but people coming to and staying and and having their relatives fly in from wherever, Illinois, to stay at Grand Lake or driving to Grand Lake. It's just neat. And that is a huge part of it. But again, when faced with a challenge, hit it head on and tackle it. And anything we can do to help. I know, you know, Indian Lake's going through some other issues, but it's all, we're all in the same team, you know, what can we do to help?

J**Jason Duff** 34:05

And I think that's another example of how we in small towns can support each other. You don't have to recreate the wheel. There are examples and models. And like, like Jared alluded to, Indian Lake, which is— so Grand Lake's the, the largest, Indian Lake's the second largest, you know, they have a different problem. Um, you know, 25, 30 years ago, they were ahead of creating, um, the wetlands and the areas. So it wasn't the, the algae, but we inherited zebra mussels at Indian Lake, and that has made the water super clear. And so clear, in fact, that the sunlight is getting to the bottom and it's causing massive vegetation and weed growth. And so, um, what a strange problem to have. Who would have thought? I mean, it's how— and that's just how interconnected the environment is. And so we are looking in this, this community, and, and the leaders that are working at Indian Lake are looking to what Grand Lake did or what Buckeye Lake did. So I think that's again about being a good neighbor. It's like, what can we do to help and support for you to solve that problem. After you, you address that problem, did you find you have to convince people to come back and change their mind about it, or did they kind of migrate back?

J**Jared Ebbing** 35:15

It's a marketing— it— you can— we can be technical and as an engineer be so proud of numbers, and I can go on about, oh, 2 versus 120, and— but if you don't tell the story, nobody knows about it. Yeah, back to the company's issue, you have to tell the story. So we've teamed with our CVB and our chambers and, and our local businesses to really promote that. Um, yeah, because if you don't, you still talk to people, oh, that dirty lake.

J**Jason Duff** 35:41

Yeah, I was going to say, I grew, I grew up in the Lima area, but I, I went to church in Walpark. Okay. And I had several people in Salina area, St. Mary's, and like nobody wanted to go.

J**Jared Ebbing** 35:50

It sticks in their mind. Yeah, I could guarantee you right now you could go to any pond in anybody's backyard and that microcystin toxin level is over 8 right now. I guarantee it. It's just the nature of the beast. For us to get it down to 2, we're cleaner than a lot of ponds. Yeah, but people would just say, oh, that, that— yeah, like, so it just takes time. But, um, like I said, you go out there on a weekend and you see all those boats and all those people and go into restaurants and walking through our downtown, which is being revitalized thanks to, you know, some of the folks that are taking a risk. It's just neat to see. There's just so many things to be proud of that You know, again, whatever's going on in the world or the country or the state. Yeah, I'm not going to say it doesn't matter. I mean, obviously it matters, but you focus on what you can. And whether it be workforce and hometown opportunity or business development or downtown or lake, it's just neat. It's just, you just feel good that, you know, you can have an impact on your little part of the world. And that's what you guys have done here. You're having an impact on your part of the world. It's profound. People see it. People appreciate it. People flock here to experience that. And it's just, we're all kind of in the same, you know, that, that mindset.

J**Jason Duff** 36:55

Yeah, I love how you, you mentioned that because, you know, I've said this before on other podcasts too. It's like the rising tide raises all ships, you know. It's something we preach about, like, you know, uh, oh, competition here locally, like amongst businesses, but like counties too, and rural areas and things like that. Like, you know, you're saying control what you can in your own area and then Next thing you know, you might be impacting— like, I'm not sure that this is— we knew what, you know, you guys at that whiteboard knew that it would be affecting all these different counties and things like that. And next thing you know, you're affecting the whole half the state, then the whole state, then different parts of the country, you know. And before you know it, you do have—

J**Jared Ebbing** 37:34

and I do think it can grow to that level. I mean, I've talked to many people in other parts of the state and other places where, you know, replicate and repeat, you know, if it can work. And we all want the same thing. Small town America needs to survive.

J**Jason Duff** 37:46

Yeah.

J**Jared Ebbing** 37:46

If it doesn't, we lose a sense of who we are as an identity, as a country. No offense to the cities, but— We're just different.

J**Jason Duff** 37:55

It's just different.

J**Jared Ebbing** 37:55

It's just different. And you can't lose that. So that small town community pride, we have to work together to it. And anything I can do to, you know, talk to whoever about, you know, hey, I'm not saying we have all the answers, but here's what we've done. Maybe it can help you revitalize your community or your downtown or your workforce initiatives. So I think we have to look at it that way. And you look at it from a county-to-county perspective. Now, maybe my commissioners look at it differently. I don't think they do, but I've told them, I said, what's good for Mercer County is good for Darke County and vice versa. And you have to look at it that way. If we get into a competitive drive and compete with each other, we all will lose. Yeah, we have to look at this as, again, not that we're competing with the city centers, but if we don't join forces and brag up all the things we do— heck, half of my marketing materials have activities and things to do outside of Mercer County. I know I have Mad River Mountain and Eldora Speedway and things that are outside of my county.

J**Jason Duff** 38:47

In the region though.

J

Jared Ebbing 38:48

In the region. We have to do that. I've never, in the 13 years I've been at the county, I've never ever thought of any other county surrounding us as a competitor. It's what can we do to figure it out because, hey, if somebody moves back to the area and they're living in Greenville but working in Mercer County or vice versa, that's good. That's a good thing. That's a positive. So that's— I think we got to look at it that way. And collaborating and joining forces and bragging each other up and helping each other, I think, is what it's all about.

J

Jason Duff 39:18

So, uh, quickly, uh, you talked about, you know, community development a lot, and we talked about Hometown Opportunity a lot as being part of that. What— something we like to do in the podcast is just leave, you know, golden nuggets for people listening, um, because there might be other economic developers listening to this or people going through a similar situation. What are some of those other intentional ways that you have focused on community development in a way that will, you know, eventually impact economic development?

J

Jared Ebbing 39:48

You know, we go after a lot of— it sounds mundane, but going after as much funding as we can to help our communities within our county, you know, revitalize themselves. Um, \$50,000 here, \$75,000 there, grant money is what I'm saying, to help, you know, fix a curb and sidewalk or do whatever.

J

Jason Duff 40:08

So how do you find that? So that's a question, I'll be honest, it comes up a lot. Like, how do you find those grants, and what advice would you have for listeners to like find those grants?

J

Jared Ebbing 40:17

Well, I was lucky. I mean, the firm that I came from, that was my job, is to work with communities across the state and investigate and find all these potential funding sources. And I was paid as a consultant, me and my assistant from Fanning Howey, to help these communities find funding. And because we knew if they'd get the funding, we'd get the project, right, as a consultant. So when I started at the county, my first hire was my assistant from Fanning Howey. You know, she's a rock star on grant administration, etc. So I snagged her and she came to the county with me and we just knew the tricks of the trade. So we, we constantly apply for on behalf of our communities instead of as a consultant. Yeah, as economic development to get these funds.

J

Jason Duff 41:02

And, and what kind of projects are you talking about here?

J**Jared Ebbing** 41:05

Water projects, sewer projects, curb and sidewalk, park project. We do a lot of park projects, lake projects. We get a lot of, we get a lot of funding. And my theory on that is, hey, we all pay taxes. Why not raise your hand as high as you can to get your tax money back to the area? So we go after as much as we can. If there's an application out there, we find it and we'll go after it and put the best application we can, and we're, we usually get it. That's great. So that's a community development aspect of if there's money out there to supplement, it's not all 100% free. I mean, you got to supplement what the villages and the counties can put in with their own funds, but let's go after funding and let's get these projects done. So like I said, whether it be a downtown revitalization so that businesses want to revitalize the buildings It's one thing to do that, but if the streets are potholed and whatnot, nobody's going to— so redo the sidewalks, downtown revitalization grants, or, you know, at the end of that is a park. Let's get park equipment in there. I mean, I don't care what it is, we're going to find money to, you know, raise the bar and to get more money into these communities so that they can— so that's the traditional, what I would call community development. I mean, we talk about human capital and community development on that, but it's— The traditional, I guess, definition of it is community development grants, block grants, those types of things, and go after it as hard as you can, get the money into the communities, and they invested. And God, we've done amphitheaters and new pools and walking trails and all the different things that you can think of to invest in the community. And people see that. People like infrastructure being redeveloped. So that's part of that traditional community development. And again, I think, My background as an engineer helps with that because I can do the— I could do my own estimate and apply for the grant based upon knowing what it's going to cost to do the project and put together a pretty good application as a result and get the money and then, and then invest it. So my, my background probably helps in that regard.

J**Jason Duff** 42:58

Yeah, no, I think that's good. I just— I know sometimes when you look at, okay, we need more businesses but we don't have enough people, we don't have enough people because our downtown is kind of a wreck, you know, so I feel like it can get overwhelming quick. So just like one quick little like direction, you know, a little nugget like that I think can go a long way for to the right person.

J**Jared Ebbing** 43:18

My best advice to others is don't try to hit a home run every time. You're not going to gobble it up and solve every problem at one time. So hit a lot of singles. You know, it seems mundane, but go after this grant for park equipment. That's a single. Yeah, hit singles and it will all eventually come together and you collaborate, you get other people involved and businesses and investors.

J**Jason Duff** 43:36

It's practice, you know, and that's the thing about those singles. It's like you've got to, to get the rhythm right and you've got to score a few wins. And I think those, those initial wins lead to bigger opportunities.

J**Jared Ebbing** 43:48

I'm not saying, you know, don't— we've hit a few home runs here and there, but I'm not swinging for the fences every time because then you get frustrated, you know. It's, um, you know, you're not going to solve it all in one, in one fell swoop. One bite at a time. And that's kind of what we focus on. And, um, So far, you know, again, but having the right people, you know, team. I mean, it's Renee and I in our office, and two people are not going to change the world, but we can help, you know, connect with the right people and inspire others, investors and whatnot, to do some things that maybe otherwise they wouldn't have.

J**Jason Duff** 44:21

And that's a humble person speaking there, just so we know.

J**Jared Ebbing** 44:26

But it's fun. I mean, it's neat to see other people light up and get excited about something. It doesn't all have to be about you and your office, etc. It's about, you know, we all want the same thing. The end result is what we're going for. And it's just neat to see, you know, I'm as excited as when I see somebody else get excited about it and want to take the charge. And that's, I think that's leadership, you know, getting people to be inspired and to do some things. So it's, it's fun.

J**Jason Duff** 44:46

Last question, um, where would you advise business owners or just community leaders if they wanted to be a part of the conversation on how they could help in their community, engage? I know we talked about hometown opportunity. That would, you know, seems like that would be a good starting point. But what would you say? I mean, think of your area and other parts of the state. If they wanted to be a part and make a difference in their community and learn what's going on, where would you direct them?

J**Jared Ebbing** 45:14

You know, just to have conversation and communication. I don't care what group it is, whether you're dealing with businesses or investors or schools. I talk with schools all the time. It's just, I think having that conversation and including their input and their different perspective and inspiring them to want to be engaged in future discussions. Again, hey, that's a great idea. What if we pull 4 other people together and let's have another meeting and talk about it? Just to build upon that concept to get, to magnetize the initiative. And I think, so my advice to others and other communities is be open to conversation. Listen first, you know, make sure that you don't have all the answers, don't pretend to have all the answers, but just create networks. And, and whether it be real meetings or virtual meetings or online, just to encourage that conversation. Because again, we're all so busy with day-to-day life, and people walk past you all the time and are focused on their things. But if you all want the same thing, to develop that community, you got to start with conversation and listen to each other and get their input and Sometimes that input's right on the mark and sometimes it's not, but at least you're—

J

Jason Duff 46:21

or painful. Sometimes it's painful. It hurts a little bit.

J

Jared Ebbing 46:24

Stings. Yeah. So I think that's, you know, to get engaged and to be involved and figure out ways. Everybody's going to look at things differently to get people together and engaged, to give them a reason to come together and show them the success stories of what you have and the potential and other, other side stories that could inspire them. And usually, like like in most things in life, things will take care of themselves if you, if you handle it that way.

J

Jason Duff 46:47

So yeah. Oh, sorry, I know I said it was the last question. This is the last question. These are not the good ones. Do you have, uh, do you have any of the like resources that helped you along your journey, whether that's a book, podcast, article, uh, some course or group or anything that you would recommend to other people?

J

Jared Ebbing 47:04

Well, I mean, in the economic development world, you know, we're part of different groups, you know, EDA, Ohio EDA, um, We're part of the Dayton Development Coalition, JobsOhio. I mean, so there's networks of folks to bounce things off of. So I think that's helpful. Again, networking and talking to folks. Books, Revitalize was a book. It just inspired you to say, don't take for granted that things was once grand and now it's not and got to move on to revitalize things. You guys revitalizing buildings and revitalizing, you know, different things, activities that used to be there. And why dwell on why it's not here anymore? Revitalize, you know? Yeah. So that book really hit home with me to say, you know, don't take at face value what it is today and what it— oh, what it once was back in the day. You know, people romanticize, oh, our downtown used to be great and now it's not. Don't focus on that. Focus on what it can be and hit that revitalization button and move ahead. So it's the same thing, you know, in all aspects of what we're talking about— community development, downtown development. Workforce development, population development and redevelopment. You know, it's just how do you tackle that? And woe is me isn't going to solve anything. Yeah, you know, so focusing on how you revitalize it and get people to want to join that, that journey is, is cool, and the outcome is usually pretty positive.

J**Jason Duff** 48:24

Yeah, very good. Thank you, appreciate it. Um, something we do at the end of every episode is I kind of tee up Jason here with, uh, one last golden nugget to, to leave us. I have overuse the word golden nugget in this episode. But, um, Jason, what do you got for us? You know, I think the message today that Jared's provided us is how to be, you know, the definition of being in the middle of nowhere, looking at the glass half full and being the center of everything. And, and I think what's awesome about that statement is that he is a leader. They as a community embody that and they live it.. And if you go and visit Mercer County, you go to Grand Lake, you eat in the Anchor and some of the restaurants that are there, like, that's how you feel. And, um, I think that's a powerful message to other people that are listening. It's like, what can you do in your community, um, to be the center of everything? And, and it's a place that it's affordable, it's a place you can dream, it's the place that you got an idea, you can actually execute it. There's not many places in the country you can do that. Yeah, it's good. All right, well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 49:30

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