

Episode 12

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, John Hall, Ethan DeLeon

J John Hall 00:00

there's a disproportionate need to get downtown right if the rest of the community is going to be able to thrive. And so yes, you, you are a retailer on the, the, throughout the rest of the community. We want to support you. We want to do what we can to help you as well. But we have to spend that disproportionate amount of time in downtown because if we don't do that, none of that will matter anyways.

E Ethan DeLeon 00:33

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 John Hall, the president and CEO of Marshalltown Area Chamber of Commerce in Iowa. 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, and to create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.

E Ethan DeLeon 00:59

So John, thank you for joining us today. Uh, Jason, can you outline the work that Small Nation is doing in Iowa and, and how you got connected with John?

J**Jason Duff** 01:07

Yeah, absolutely, Ethan. So, uh, we about, uh, I would say maybe about a year ago was our first experience to travel to Iowa. We met, um, some leaders in West Des Moines, which is a suburb of Des Moines. Valley Junction area is, has a lot of historic building stock and character. And then over the last 40 years, it's seen massive investment with technology companies and data centers. And so they're really working hard to preserve the historic integrity of what makes West Des Moines important, but also be relevant and innovate with all this new massive amounts of population and investment. But out of that visit, it was really great to connect through an article that was published *Governing* magazine about the work that Small Nation is doing to revitalize downtown Bellefontaine. And John reached out and we jumped on a Zoom, and I had the pleasure to learn about Marshalltown, Iowa. Marshalltown has so many, you know, characteristics that are similar to Midwestern towns and lots of other towns around the country. And it's crazy because he is literally in our studio here in Ohio. You know, we had the chance to visit and experience Marshalltown staying in this beautiful 11-room boutique hotel, meeting the owners of that hotel and the restaurant they had on the first floor. And then John curated a visit with area business owners and city officials and chamber officials to see and experience everything that Marshalltown has to offer. The thing that, you know, really brings us today is he's actually here in Bellefontaine. But, you know, John, how did you find Marshalltown? Maybe share, like, for those that have never been to Iowa, maybe we start there. Tell us about why Iowa is a great place to live, visit, and see.

J**John Hall** 03:01

Yeah, well, thank you guys for having me on the podcast. And yeah, I mean, so born and raised Iowan. I grew up in the Des Moines metro area. And looking back on even my upbringing, it's crazy the difference that growing up in the Des Moines bubble was versus anywhere else in the state of Iowa. Uh, and so, uh, when I went to school up in Ames at, uh, Iowa State University, uh, I, I ended up landing in Chamber of Commerce and economic development work. Started in a small town just north of Ames, uh, mostly because I could still live in Ames and still live with my college roommates and go to college bars on the weekend. Yeah, yeah. And, uh, and, and so I started there and really got to experience what it was like to be in a profession that could have meaningful impact on people's lives. And that's really what it boiled down to. And then from there ended up at the Ames Chamber of Commerce and then Marshalltown after that. And I guess one of the major reasons I love Iowa is it is one giant small town. I mean, it's a state of 3.1 million people, but everywhere you go, there are connections to be made with folks that have connections to you. I mean, you know, the, the, what is it, the, um, 7 people away from each other, 7 degrees of separation. Yeah, it's like, it's like 2 or 3 in Iowa. Uh, everybody is very, very connected. And in, in communities in Iowa, you can as an individual, uh, have access to make meaningful impact yourself. So even if you're not in a professional position to be able to do what I do, if you want to get involved with anything that, that you get excited about or get energized about, there's access to that. I mean, if you want to go and visit with the mayor, like, that's easy to do. Like, that's not, not an impossible task where when you run into some of these larger cities and larger communities like that, that kind of stuff doesn't happen.

J

Jason Duff 05:05

It doesn't exist. No. Yeah.

J

John Hall 05:06

Yeah. And so I guess I love Iowa for all the things that make Iowa Iowa. I will throw out that I do love the Iowa State Fair so that I know you guys' county fair is going on right now as we record this, but the Iowa State Fair, best fair in the country. I've heard that Minnesota has nothing on it. Uh, they claim the best state fair. They're wrong. Um, it's the Iowa State Fair.

J

Jason Duff 05:28

Next, someone from Minnesota coming. Best fair food if you were to go to the fair.

J

John Hall 05:33

Uh, so I really love the, the fried cheese curds. Those are always good. Um, I don't know, you can get anything on a stick.

J

Jason Duff 05:42

Anything fried, anything on a stick.

J

John Hall 05:44

That's true. Yeah, they had butter on a stick for a few years. I think they still do. Fried butter on a stick.

J

Jason Duff 05:48

That's when you know you've made it into the Midwest. Oh yeah, yeah, health food. Yeah. So John, tell us about Marshalltown.

J

John Hall 05:54

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 05:55

How did you find Marshalltown? And then what, what, what do you think makes Marshalltown special?

J

John Hall 06:00

Yeah, so, uh, growing up in, in, uh, Iowa, actually our school districts were in the same, uh, class or same conference. So, so I always knew Marshalltown, but I don't know that I had ever been to Marshalltown prior to really looking at this role. I mean, I think I'd maybe been there once or twice Um, but ended up finding this opportunity, uh, through, um, you know, hiring consultants and, and a number of phone calls that came into my, my office and the organization that I worked at before. And, and ultimately it was kind of at the prompting of my, my former boss that said, you know, uh, this would be a great opportunity because they could use you, you know. And that's really what it came down to is I saw an opportunity for me to have meaningful impact in the community Uh, and, and so I'm, I'm excited to be there. And, and the, the community has just a tremendous amount going in the right direction. They have strong leadership that are all pulling for being better than we are today by, by pushing the envelope on what can be. So we have phenomenal arts, uh, organization that is— I mean, you, you can't walk down a block in downtown without running across public art, uh, and that is continuing to happen and continuing to be invested in.

J

Jason Duff 07:15

Just a comment. They have something called the Van Gogh Park.

J

John Hall 07:20

Yeah, it's the, um, yeah, the— it's Van Gogh's— it's the Garden Gallery right next to the—

J

Jason Duff 07:24

The Garden Gallery. And they have this beautiful wall of flowers that is watered. Um, and then these fountains that, you know, just are— you wouldn't see— I mean, it's so surprising to see this in a small town, let alone a large city. It was really awesome, a huge asset.

J

John Hall 07:43

Yeah, art's really embraced everywhere, uh, and, and it's great to see, you know, we have strong city leadership that are all hungry for developing our community and making it better and, and driving things forward. And, you know, one of the reasons that I think we were most interested in bringing Jason out and talking with the folks at Small Nation was the parallels between Bellefontaine and Marshalltown. You know, so we as a community got hit by a tornado a few years back, tore right through our downtown. Then 2 years after that, we got hit by a derecho. And that was back when, in Iowa at least, we'd never heard of that before.

J**Jason Duff** 08:23

And if you, those that are local will understand, in 2012, Bellefontaine was hit by a derecho. And same story, we didn't even know that weather phenomenon existed. And I think when John and I connected, he was sharing pictures of the devastation that that storm had caused, and he said it impacted our courthouse. And I kind of, you know, I kind of, you know, was surprised by that because we had the same thing happen on our Main Street where literally the top of the courthouse tower was twisted. In the case of Marshalltown, theirs literally blew off.

J**John Hall** 08:57

Yeah, literally blew off. Yep, landed in the street. Uh, it was, it was devastating. And, uh, you know, we are, we are still at the end of the deconstruct period for our downtown buildings that were, were damaged damaged, devastated, uh, insurance didn't cover repairs or they couldn't be saved. Building owners didn't do what they needed to do to, to remediate it. And so the city had to step in and take, take over ownership of some of these. And, uh, so we're still in the, the end of the deconstruct phase before we can really lean into the reconstruct phase. Um, and our city leadership has leaned into this. So we are seeing facades being redone that the city has, has worked to get grants for. And we're starting to see some of that private investment sneak up and, and start to be a part of the conversation. Uh, but the unique aspect of what, what Jason's been able to figure out here and what the Small Nation team does is, is the ability to attract, uh, or, or propagate really, really meaningful and experiential businesses to take spaces. You know, if you think about the concept of downtown development or downtown redevelopment or downtown building redevelopment, That playbook is written. I mean, that playbook's been written and rewritten over and over and over. The, the use of public funds or not using public funds, uh, that, that story's out there. But the attraction of these really incredible businesses, that's not happening anywhere outside of major metro areas or, uh, propped up faux downtowns. And so to see that happening in a community which again, going back to the parallels, Marshalltown's about an hour outside of our capital city of Des Moines. We're a town of 27,000, so we're a little bit larger as a city is concerned, but still suffer that challenge of, well, I can just go to Des Moines and get it 'cause it's only an hour away, or why don't I land in one of the suburbs that's growing up towards Marshalltown that's only 45 minutes away. And so understanding that they are, they are moving the needle on that here in Bellefontaine. It's like, well, that's what I want to figure out. How do, how do we get that? How do we get that to happen?

J

Jason Duff 11:05

Can I ask why, why is it important to look at businesses like that to support the, you know, reviving your downtown, bringing it back? You know, I, I know it's kind of a very intentional thing, and either one of you can answer this, or maybe both, but, uh, let's touch on that first and go from there. Well, I, I think it's what gives your town a unique story and also what— why you'd want to travel, visit, live there. And one of the first things that when we visited Marshalltown, John said, well, I want to host you for dinner the night before you arrive. And so we went to Zeno's Pizzeria. And when you walk in, first off, on the exterior, it's got this old vintage neon sign with the logo on it. And you walk inside, we were greeted by friendly faces, You know, we sat down quickly and the pizza started rolling out and they were amazing. And I think that as I walked around the town and I would ask people like, well, what, what do you love about this place the most? It would— Zeno's was at the top of the list. And the other really cool fact about food is we, um, you know, learned that Maid Rite sandwiches— and if you've never had a Maid Rite sandwich, they're famous in Iowa. Like Maid Rites, which is a loose meat sandwich started in Iowa. And we had a chance to go to one of the first that was ever open, and it's still open in Marshalltown. So prior to us joining John for dinner, Nick and I did pre-dinner at the Maid Rite sandwich shop that was there in town. And yes, we did get a malt and we got a piece of pie.

J

John Hall 12:37

They didn't tell me that before dinner, by the way. They sat there and ate The whole pizza.

J

Jason Duff 12:43

Listen, when it comes to food, you put the food in front of me, I will eat it. But I think it's those kind of things that will provide the character and the stories and the history and the point of pride. And what was neat about speaking at their annual chamber dinner, the owner, which I believe she's either second or third generation, literally came up because I mentioned the Maid Rite shop. And remind me the name.

J

John Hall 13:08

Sandy.

J

Jason Duff 13:09

Yeah, Sandy. And what's the name of the local Maidrite shop? Taylor's Maidrite.

J

John Hall 13:12

Taylor's?

J

Jason Duff 13:13

Yeah, it was Taylor's. So she literally came up and told me her life story and their family business. And that's, that's character, that's DNA, that's history.

 J**John Hall** 13:24

So, and, and, and to kind of piggyback off of what Jason said, you know, my background is economic development. That's, that's ultimately why I was hired to come in and run the Marshalltown Area Chamber of Commerce was because we were lagging behind in the development that we wanted to see as a community. Uh, in, in my philosophy is that, uh, we are really in kind of the third generation, third wave of economic development. So if you'll, if you'll stay with me for, for a moment, I'll kind of, uh, run through. So the first phase was really the old guard in the community, and this, this happened, um, you know, 60, uh, plus years ago. The, the, um, old guard in the community stroking big checks to try and attract new industrial development. So it was a lot of land development, a lot of road infrastructure, and then the second phase came a few years after that, and that's really where professional economic developers started, and that was, well, we need to spend time with our existing businesses too. So that's when our business retention expansion programs started to pop up, professional economic developers started to pop up, and then still working on the attraction of new business and industry to our community. We are in the third wave of it, and this really started back in probably 2008, 2009 with the economic downturn and the millennial generation deciding that, well, if I'm going to be unemployed or if I'm going to be a barista at a coffee shop, I'm going to go someplace that I really want to be, and then I'll find that job or, or won't find that job, but at least I'm someplace I want to be. Uh, that has continued, you know. Now, as the job market rebounded They're, they're moving where they want to, and folks are doing this, continuing to do this. They move where they want to be and then figure the job thing out later. And now with, with work from home, it's, it's getting even, even more, uh, acute. And so we as economic developers have an obligation to create really incredible communities, uh, that cause people to want to say yes to taking that opportunity to be in your community. And so downtown is the natural starting spot. You know, I know that my peers throughout the country routinely get beat up about, well, you know, the chamber's only focused on downtown, or it's not spending time across the rest of the community. Well, I'd say this, there's a disproportionate need to get downtown right if the rest of the community is going to be able to thrive. And so yes, you are a retailer on the, throughout the rest of the community. We want to support you. We want to do what we can to help you as well. But we have to spend that disproportionate amount of time in downtown, because if we don't do that, none of that will matter anyways.

 J**Jason Duff** 16:09

Wow. Yeah, that's really good. Um, yeah. And I, I just think of, you know, getting those businesses in there, making it sustainable enough, you know, so that it's not dependent on other monies and things like that, or You know, you create this environment and then over time people will be coming to you, you know, because they want to be a part of that ecosystem instead. So that's really cool.

J

John Hall 16:30

And, and here's what I mean. I can boil my entire, entire philosophies down, and this is I think what Jason has, has been able to figure out, but I don't know that he necessarily characterizes it in this way. But you know, when I came to Marshalltown, what I, what I kept telling people is what we want to do is we want to create more cool shit. If we can create more cool shit, people will say yes to being here. We'll see more job— more businesses start to open up here choose to locate here, more opportunity happening, more housing, more of everything we want to see to grow our community if we can just focus in on creating more cool shit.

J

Jason Duff 17:05

And let me ask you a question with that. So the pushback is, is that when you bring in something new or different or maybe a little weird or surprising, um, people— makes people uncomfortable. How do you deal and how do you lead in your community to encourage that, that change?

J

John Hall 17:23

Uh, I, I just lean into it. I mean, that, that's, that's why I'm here. I'm here to be the courageous leader who, who says, no, we can do this. Uh, no, we, we don't need to, uh, slow down the efforts that we're pursuing. And the reality is that, you know, if, if somebody wants to do something new or weird or, or, uh, out of the box if it's not going to work, it won't work. That will be the judge of whether it should happen or not. Don't—

J

Jason Duff 17:52

Have the courage to try it.

J

John Hall 17:53

Right, exactly. You know, lead with yes. There are a multitude of businesses that I've seen pop up in my time in economic development that I've thought, God, I don't know if that's going to work. And then they make a go of it, and they're tremendously successful. And I love that.

J

Jason Duff 18:11

You know, previous guest that we had on was Shannon and Anthony from Axe Ventura. And, you know, they share their story of, you know, coming out of Ann Arbor, Michigan and creating axe throwing. And of course, people made fun of them. And I have to admit, I was one of those folks that was questioning, can axe throwing really be a thing? It's not only a thing, it's a, it's an entire industry movement that creates something entertaining, valuable, and fun in any town, in any neighborhood, in any community.

J

John Hall 18:39

Well, and that, that entertainment sector is seeing such an incredible revitalization. I was in Chicago It's probably been 3 or 4 years ago now, and that what they've done with axe throwing, they've been able to do with darts to update it to make it really tremendous in the engagement and, and, you know, make it a whole, whole thing. You know, escape rooms have become a big pickleball. Pickleball is a huge—

J

Jason Duff 19:04

so what our grandparents used to— what our grandparents used to play, we make fun of them. It is like the hottest, coolest thing right now that's trending.

J

John Hall 19:11

Yeah, we've got like 3 different locations in Marshalltown for pickleball.

J

Jason Duff 19:14

Uh, no, they're like trendsetters in Marshalltown. They've got like publicly owned and beautiful— so where's it at in Bellefontaine, Jason? We— I was taking pictures, and, and you laugh about that, Ethan, but like, it, it's an opportunity. Oh yeah, that— I, I, even in Columbus, I go to just the regular parks is usually where, you know, I only see pickleball courts. Tennis courts being remade into pickleball courts, and you see all different ages and, you know, people from all over just there. Like, you have to wait in line to get onto the court. Like, they just rotate people, and it's really quite amazing.

J

John Hall 19:48

Yeah. And so in our downtown, the city had a lot right next to the Parks and Rec office, uh, where it was, it was parking. And they have a parking lot across the street, and so they're like, we'll just park across the street. They've, they've now turned that into, uh, a pickleball court. They've got a beautiful mural on the wall, uh, behind it. And then stamped into the concrete, they actually had a poet who came in and interviewed a bunch of folks from throughout the community about the tragedy and devastation with the two wind events that we, uh, we went through.

J

Jason Duff 20:17

Oh wow.

J

John Hall 20:18

Uh, and, and, uh, this, this person wrote, wrote some poetry about it. And so they took, uh, excerpts of that poetry and actually stamped it into the concrete all leading up to this pickleball court. So we took something that was just a parking lot and said, yeah, we don't need as much parking, uh, which I I'm sure you have a whole people that would disagree with you. Yeah, 100%.

J

Jason Duff 20:38

But you still— but that takes courage. Yeah. And I do think like that's part of what we have to do today in testing things or trying things out is, is you don't have to do what everything— everyone has always done.

J

John Hall 20:50

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 20:50

Let's try something different. Can you speak a little bit about as you've joined the chamber and how you think about planning out your, you know, the strategic plan and leading and structuring committees and meetings. How do you operate your chamber and go about your day-to-day?

J**John Hall** 21:07

Yeah, so, uh, coming into the organization, um, I've come from a background— so the, the first organization I worked for had a lot of volunteer-driven activities and efforts, and then when I, I joined Ames, it was all staff-driven. And the, the remarkable difference there is the amount of work that you're able to get done, and, and frankly, the amount of BS you're able to leave at the door. Uh, and so, um, that's the philosophy I brought to Marshalltown. So we eliminated almost all the committee as soon as I started and really leaned in on it being staff-driven. Because at the end of the day, if we are going between, you know, one month to the next month relying on a volunteer to accomplish something and that person doesn't do what they said they were going to do, that's a disservice to the entire community. And all we are doing is trying to, you know, convene volunteers and keep them moving in the right direction. And we could just do that ourselves. I mean, and so that's the philosophy I bring, is that we need to be staff-driven as an organization, uh, to work to drive things forward as, as quickly and aggressively as we can in the community. From a strategic planning, uh, perspective, we're just coming out of our strategic planning. Um, I, I just got done writing the, the first draft on that, and board seemed pretty, uh, pretty, pretty good with it. But, uh, the reality is we've got to do everything. You know, there's, there's not an area in the community, not a thing happening in the community that we are not at some level a part of because they need us as local champions, whether we are the ones driving it, the ones pushing it, the ones cheerleading for it. We need to be at the table because we are the ones who have the insight into the community to see how everything overlaps. For instance, in Marshalltown, one of the challenges we've had is childcare. I think that's, that's happening in a lot of places. Well, we have the Iowa Veterans Home in, in Marshalltown that recently got approved for substantial state funding to actually build a child care facility, but they needed to raise about \$1 million locally in order to make that a go. In a completely separate conversation a few months later, I actually was working with our largest employer, and they're like, yeah, we put up— we put about \$900,000 in our budget this year to work to try and figure out child care. And I'm like, all right, these are the kinds of easy connections that we have to be at the table for everything on because That was an easy match. That was an easy matchup. And so, so they're that much closer to having that problem solved for both of their industries and organizations. And by the way, there's going to be room for additional folks from throughout the community to participate in a space that doesn't have the high overhead of building a brand new child care facility, but still has a dedicated support structure in through both the public and private sector., so, so you know you're going to be able to get a high-quality childcare experience.

J**Jason Duff** 24:01

Let me ask you this. Did you receive a lot of pushback when you came in and start like, you know, shutting down different committees and things like that? And, you know, these ideas, I feel like it sound like, yeah, of course. But I feel like a lot of people get hung up on maybe like the first level of pushback, the second level pushback. I don't know if you had any experience with that.

J**John Hall** 24:21

Uh, not really. Or at least what I'll say is not that I noticed. Wow. Uh, and, and maybe it's because that's that's who I am, that I just don't pay attention to that kind of push. Perhaps I was getting more than I recognized, but— Yeah. You know, there was a desire from a particularly an economic development perspective for a breath of fresh air that was changing things in a really substantial way. And so, you know, and I was upfront about all of this philosophy that I have when I was going through the interview process. I was like, you know, if you don't want me to be the guy to push, then I'm not your guy. That's what I bring, is I will be the one to knock down every barrier in the way. And, and as I was interviewing with my board, I said, look, at some point I'm going to overstep my bounds. You're going to have to clip my wings, and, and that's okay. I'm okay with that balance, uh, but I'm going to continue to push things as hard and as fast as I can until that happens, because that's what you want. You want me here to be that champion and, and be absolutely all in on Marshalltown being as incredible as it can be, and where we're at today is just not there. And so we've got to move all these things forward.

J**Jason Duff** 25:37

What advice do you have for someone that might be listening that wants to be that in their town, but they just maybe don't have an idea on how to go about being that person?

J**John Hall** 25:47

Uh, what I'd say is Uh, if you're looking at other playbooks that have been done, it is often hard to be the bulldog in the room when you're just bringing them, uh, what— and I know you guys, you guys have a lot of these playbooks, but you have to think about how to be innovative in bringing all the people together and casting a vision that looks beyond even your time with the organization. You can't be, you can't be hung up on what are you doing, what are you going to see happen, what can you take credit for. It's got to be about being bullish on your community and, and really wanting to, to make a meaningful impact. Um, gosh, I, you know, I know that a lot of folks get, get hung up with their board structures maybe aren't in the right place or, or they don't have the right board leadership. I was really, really fortunate. I still am really fortunate in Marshalltown that I've got an incredible board who fully subscribes to the idea that we need to push the envelope and, and need to, to be better and You know, for folks that are in positions where they want to be that champion, they want to be, uh, the one driving development and their board's just not supporting them, it, it might, you know, and, and I get it, a lot of folks are taking these jobs in communities that they grew up in, but it might be time for you to spread your wings and go to another community where you have that opportunity if that's what you desire. If you're within your own community, I guess I'd turn to you, Jason, and say, hey, how do you do that? Because that's what you figured out how to do in your community.

J**Jason Duff** 27:13

Well, and I think where you and I have really connected, um, when I came into Marshalltown, uh, one of the, the questions that I had was, what are some of the things that are working out really well, and what are some areas or gaps that, that you're, you're frustrated with? And I think where we ended up after spending a few days there, a lot of the things that you already knew and kind of highlighted to us, um, they were— we, we agreed. And what was interesting is that when you have someone from the outside come in and give a fresh perspective or just to re-verify what the known is, it's like, well, that's an expert. Even though you're there every day pounding the pavement, have the best local recon advice information, you're just John, right? And I think that's what we, you know, sometimes what I struggle with sometimes in the work that I do it's like people, they, they, they, they see the, the, they look at the incremental changes, but over a period of 12 years, they often forget the beginning stories of where we got started and, and where we want to go. And I like what you just said about painting that bigger vision even after you are no longer in that position or you're no longer in that town or no longer on this planet. Like, we have to think bigger.

J**John Hall** 28:30

Yep.

J**Jason Duff** 28:31

That's really cool. So you went on a journey from from Ames to Marshalltown. Ames obviously has a big, bigger university there, and I feel like, you know, what little I know about economic development is like, uh, college towns are almost like— I don't want to belittle any town or anything, but like, it makes it a little bit easier, you know, to bring in, attract new businesses and things like that. So, um, and again, I don't know a ton about Marshalltown, but when we're thinking about economic development with a small town where you're really focusing on the people and things like that, What are, what are some things you can do without having a big university, you know, being that, that big attraction?

 J**John Hall** 29:13

Yeah, so obviously in a university town, the university is the economic driver. You know, in a lot of, a lot of cases it was shooting fish in a barrel, uh, in order to land economic development projects. It was great, it was, it was wonderful to cut my teeth as an economic developer, um, jumping into a community that's smaller. So a bit of history on, on Marshalltown is we have a tremendous history of innovation in our community. So, uh, the Fisher-Governor Foundation, or the Fisher Governor Company, started in Marshalltown. They made valves, governor valves, and really built up this, this huge innovative company. They now belong to, or a part of, Emerson out of St. Louis. Dave Lennox started Lennox Companies, so the heating and air conditioning manufacturer in Marshalltown. The second biggest plant or plant in their in their company is based in Marshalltown that actually got completely wiped out in the tornado and is almost done with being rebuilt now, 4 years later. And then Marshalltown Company, Marshalltown Trowel as it used to be known, all started all kind of with the same group of entrepreneurs that, you know, Bill Fisher kind of started with them. These guys would have ideas and he'd tell them to go off and go start it over here because He couldn't, he couldn't manage all of it and growing all of it. And so we have this really deep history of innovation, and we're trying to figure out how do we bring that innovation back into the conversation. So we're partnered with our Arts and Culture Alliance to look at things like makerspaces and how do we, how do we bring that back into the fold? Because we have a lot of engineers. And actually, so at Emerson, we have a lot of engineers who have access to 3D printers. And so I routinely have heard of things where They'll be working on a home project and, and, you know, a part will go out on their air conditioning unit, or, or they'll have a problem here or there, and they'll go into Emerson, they'll 3D print what they need, and then they'll go use it. And it's like, I want that kind of stuff to happen in a public space because maybe they're not alone in that need, and maybe there's an opportunity for innovation and a new company.

 J**Jason Duff** 31:23

Not to mention the energy stuff like that brings.

J

John Hall 31:26

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Or, or even somebody who's a creative who doesn't necessarily know how to operate the 3D printer, but if they're in the same space, yeah, that cross-collaboration is so incredibly valuable for sparking innovation and creativity in a community. And so I'm really bullish on trying to pursue some of those things. And then from just kind of a broader industrial development perspective, we're doing what we can to position our community for based on the unique assets that we've got just with, with land and, and, and resource availability. But we're trying to lean in in spaces that maybe haven't been as pursued by anybody in the state of Iowa. So we've got a, about a 300-acre piece of land that used to have a power plant on it, and there's a new power generating station right there. But it's all in floodplain, so it's really hard to develop, hard to use. But our utility provider is really interested in it. And so we're, we're starting to head down the path of looking at, at indoor agriculture as a vertical. So not only climate-controlled agriculture where you'd grow things like strawberries or tomatoes inside, uh, but also things like aquaculture or, uh, alternative protein like mealworms. All of these things are grown inside now, uh, and it is continuing to be a growing industry. And so if we can uniquely position ourselves to capture that market, and there's there's some things on the taxing side that makes it less attractive for cities to draw. So if it's a greenhouse in the state of Iowa, it's taxed at agriculture values instead of industrial value. So it's a little less maybe exciting for a lot of communities to pursue, but if we can really own that space, not only can we partner in logistics companies, but we can also partner in the university and the folks that they've got working in food science and working in the indoor ag space., and we can carve out a unique niche for ourselves to pursue. And so, again, just trying to think about a space that we otherwise can't use, bringing an innovative approach to it. It's the exact same thing that we do with downtown. It's just done on a macro scale versus a micro scale.

J

Jason Duff 33:35

Yeah, I, I love that. Um, you, the— you mentioned agriculture, um, and how important that is to a place like Iowa. The same is true as here in Ohio and a lot of other places. But I had a chance to meet your wife, and I know that arts is something that's important to her and especially to your family. But you, you know, you mentioned as you walk around, you see the murals and the focus on arts there. Tell me about how that feeds into economic development.

J

John Hall 34:04

Yeah. So, yeah, you did have the opportunity to meet my wife. She has blue hair at this—

J

Jason Duff 34:08

at the time. I told her, I complimented her. I said, I love your hair.

 J**John Hall** 34:11

Yeah, she was the only one with blue hair. At our annual banquet. She's, she's very proud of that. No, she's all in on the arts. Her and I are very different people from, from the, the creativity perspective, um, but, uh, arts is, uh, incredibly important to the community of Marshalltown. So, uh, take you back a little bit in the, the history. So we have a, an art collection in Marshalltown, um, that was donated by Bill Fisher. It's the, the Fisher Art Collection. But just this incredible art collection in the, um, what was known as the Fisher community center is now the Marshalltown Arts and Civic Center. And so art is kind of ingrained in the history of the community. Now, the accessibility of that art has always been a challenge. I mean, this is like going to a gallery. It's very, very different. And so the Arts and Culture Alliance has really tried to embrace making more art happen in public spaces. And so that's been a big, big challenge of theirs. And so the 13th Street District, there's a huge sculpture in the centerpiece of that, but then just trying to bring art into every place that we can possibly pursue it. And so when they started to go down doing an arts and culture master plan this last year, they asked me to step in and be a co-chair on it, and I of course said yes. You know, the idea of integrating art with everything that we do is what creates really unique and meaningful spaces rather than just spaces. And so, uh, even taking things simple like bridge design and development, if you take the time to do them in an artistic way, in a meaningful and creative approach, you may get something that is of significantly higher value to you and your community in the long run. And so I am bullish on embracing arts as a tool within economic development because again, it goes back to— it'd be one thing if all we needed was a new business to land and then people would move to your community. But now you got to recruit the people to your community for the business to choose to land there. And so if you want people to say yes, you've got to do those things that create those really cool and meaningful things.

J**Jason Duff** 36:22

And just a heads up on the arts ecosystem, things like when you do recruit a new business, How do you find someone designs the logo or the branding? How do you work with someone that will lay out all the furniture and the fixtures and, you know, get the property flowing and just even selecting music? We know that there are certain types of music that causes you to buy and shop and experience more like that. It is a science. I mean, it's real. But I think that's been the thing. They have a theater that is undergoing restoration and kind of repurposing in their community. And I shared that the Holland Theater here in Bellefontaine was about a 15-year effort by some really incredible leaders and volunteers, one of them being a retired teacher, Chris Swisher, that, you know, engaged her, her class to write a play to save the theater. And it's pretty amazing that when you, you know, walk by and see the programming and the types of things that are happening in that space, that wouldn't have been possible unless some people decided to come together to, to make that, that change. And I think those things, same things are happening in Marshalltown, and John just shared some great examples. Do you think in our, any of our upcoming projects here in Bellefontaine that there would be space for the arts, murals, things like that? Um, can you share some of that? Yeah, I mean, we, uh The mural, the public art piece, is something that I think gets the most traction, and people really, you know, resonate with that. Um, getting funding for it, that's probably the, the more challenging, is a lot of people want to see public art. It's getting local leaders that believe and will fund it. Yeah. Um, but we have seen some success with our local chamber, um, you know, using, uh, graphic design and actually printing murals that can be installed with a sign system on brick. And so it's not actually hand drawing it, but it's digitally drawing it. But you know where that creates controversy is that some folks that hand draw art feel that digital art is not art, and we all know that, that it is. And a lot of those things are evolving and changing. So I would love to see more public art in our downtown. I know live music recently has become a big focus, places like the Holland, the Syndicate. You know, many of our restaurants are also, you know, providing live music, the local brewery, Roundhouse. So those are things I think we want to double down on. Creative spaces for people to do art, that is one thing that we have a gap right now. There isn't, there isn't really a place here that's focused on that. I mean, we have some great people that make pottery, we have great people that paint, Um, but really bringing that into the fold, I think, is a great goal. Yeah. So I went to, uh, Southeastern University. Main campus is in, uh, Lakeland, Florida, but they just opened up a branch campus here in Columbus, Ohio. And that's where I studied. I studied business there, but I mean, it was a brand new branch campus. I mean, using all of the, the curriculum and everything from the main campus. But we, in my second or third year there, which is like the fourth or fifth year of their existence, right, they decided they got more of the building as they were growing, and they went kind of all in on this like business creative space kind of collaboration. And that's why I got excited when you were saying, you know, in the downtown having a space like that and the energy that brings it. It almost like made that the focus of, of the school, that it was— there's like two major, um, programs that the school offered, and then like, you know, once we opened up that space students were in there all the time, almost exclusively, you know, compared to the other spaces. It's like almost a little, you know, case study of what we're talking about here. I was driving through from Indianapolis back to Columbus this weekend and had a chance to make a pit stop in Muncie, Indiana, and, uh, really beautiful downtown. Obviously there's some restoration there that's happening, which is really exciting to see, but they had a community

kitchen concept in their downtown where they had multiple commercial kitchens set up in one space that you could rent based on the hour. And this was on a Saturday. Like, I saw on the sign it offered cooking classes. It had catering services. It had listings of some of the members of the community kitchen. But I peeked in the window, and that particular Saturday morning, there were people that were baking. There was someone that was doing frozen juice pops. Like, I saw energy in life, and I think that's where we've got to create. And you mentioned earlier, John, like a lot of your job is that connection and convening. I think we as developers and we as entrepreneurs need to continue to work with leaders and economic development folks like John to take buildings and create those kinds of spaces for people to incubate, test new ideas. And cooking is an art. Like, it's obviously part science. I'm the kind of cook that doesn't read a recipe. I just throw it all in and good luck. And some days it turns out awesome, and other days, oh, maybe try that again.

J

John Hall 41:37

Well, and that's, that's the— so the idea behind makerspace, maybe it elicits a certain expectation in people's minds, but it could be art studios, it could be, uh, kilns to be able to throw pottery, it could be woodworking, it could be metalworking, it could be glassblowing, it could be kitchen incubators, it could be all kinds of different things that you can pair into makerspaces as you start to find markets of folks that are interested in, in coming out of wherever they're doing their craft, wherever they're practicing their craft, doing it in a more public space. But you think about that opportunity for cross-collaboration that occurs as soon as folks find their way out of that space. That's when really unique innovation starts to take place. And that's where, you know, I actually toured a commercial kitchen facility like that in Missouri a few years back, and there were companies that were starting up that started with an idea and, and then started to get into something and then grew up into manufacturing businesses. I mean, that, that's the kind of stuff that happens when you create spaces where people can, at, at very low cost, very low barrier to entry, start with an idea.

J

Jason Duff 42:49

Yeah, you're facilitating innovation, really. Um, but I, I just love— I— we've had, you know, we're going on a bit of a series here. Uh, we've had the opportunity to have several economic developers on the podcast, and just the whole concept of, like, I love that you also talked about kind of the, the new era of economic development. We had someone on talking about how community development was almost like his preferred title, you know, because, like, you are engaging and breathing life into the community, making people want to be there. You know, through the whole, the whole, um, employee, you know, crisis, shortage, whatever you want to call it. And, and, but as an economic developer, you're still trying to, you know, bring in companies and attract business and try to supply that. But like, starting with the community and, and making these, uh, unique, you know, experiences and making it a place where people want to live, come back to, starting with, you know, that's where they live versus where they work kind of thing, I think it's really cool. And it's just a theme that I'm identifying as we go on and I'm excited because we have a couple more cool episodes coming up where we can kind of unpack that a little bit more. But thank you so much, John, for just being on sharing with us. Where can— oh, sorry. First, I'm going to ask, what are some of the professional development resources that have helped you along your career, whether it's conferences, books, podcasts, anything?

J**John Hall** 44:08

Yeah. So I would say there's professional networks within the economic development space in everybody's state. That's the first and foremost. That's the barrier to entry. That finding folks that are successful in economic development or pursuing things in other communities that you want to see. In Iowa, it's one small town in the state of Iowa. So we want to be— within the profession of economic development, there's an expectation for those of us that have pursued the certification in economic development to give back to the profession. I try and be as generous with my time as I can for folks that need assistance or want assistance. I'd also point to the Mid-America Economic Development Council. It's a 14-state region for those that are in kind of the upper Midwest. That is a great, great place to not only learn about, but also experience resources that are taking place all across the Midwest. In fact, that's kind of how I'm here in Bellefontaine today, as I was going to be down at the Mid-America EDC conference in Springfield. And then I'd also point to IEDC, the International Economic Development Council, for additional economic development tools. But there's a growing cohort of folks in our profession that are pushing the idea of community and downtown development a lot more. And so you're going to start to see that creep more and more into kind of the— the, the older organizations that have been more focused on just traditional economic development because it's time to rewrite the script on that. So my hope is that you start to see more coming out of those professional organizations focused on how do you create really incredible communities, and that can be done. You know, the idea of drawing a new, um, you know, I know you guys have a Honda manufacturer not far. The idea of drawing a new Honda manufacturing company isn't a reality for most folks that are in economic development. When you're serving a community of 5,000 or 10,000 people, you're not going to land that facility. There are obviously pieces that you can glean from an industrial development perspective, but creating a really incredible community is going to completely rewrite the script on what your community can be and what you can pursue.

J**Jason Duff** 46:28

That's great. And where can people follow you or what's happening in Marshalltown?

J**John Hall** 46:32

Yeah, so, uh, I guess Facebook's probably the best way for the Marshalltown Area Chamber of Commerce to, to get notice. I do a terrible job of self-promotion and talk about myself, so follow that.

J**Jason Duff** 46:43

And you know, all the listeners that are listening, they're now going to be stalking you.

J**John Hall** 46:46

That's fine, that's fine. You'll see occasional posts of my daughter, but mostly it'll be things that my wife has tagged me in. I do a terrible job on that, but I'm on LinkedIn. I mean, that's probably the easiest way for you to get in touch with me professionally. Like I said, try and be as generous with my time and energy as possible, so if you've if anything resonated with you, feel free to reach out.

J**Jason Duff** 47:08

Perfect. Thank you so much for that, John. At the end of these episodes, usually we just have Jason kind of give a quick gold nugget just based on, you know, what we've been talking about. And so if you want to— yeah, I mean, the thing that resonated that John said today, and I think more people need to hear this, including myself, is that be committed to build cool shit. Yeah. And I think that, you know, that's some of the things I saw in Marshalltown that where I remember Bellefontaine 10 years ago, they're so far ahead of where we first started. And what was great is there were people around the table including representatives from the city, the chamber, the local business community. Like, they are setting the foundation to develop, to recruit, and build some cool shit. And I think under the leadership of John, um, I can't wait to go back and visit and see some of the progress and changes that they made. Perfect. Thank you, everybody. All right. Well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 47:59

thank you, everyone, for tuning in and checking out the Small Nation podcast. You can find us everywhere that you listen to your podcasts, 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. If you enjoyed it, be sure to leave a like, comment, or 5-star review to help more people discover this podcast. And stay tuned to Small Nation on social media to keep up with all the cool projects that are happening here. And until next time, This is Ethan with the Small Nation Podcast signing off. Thanks.