

Episode 24

📅 Wed, Jan 11, 2023 10:00AM ● 50:03

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

excavating business, LeVan Excavating, Jeremy LeVan, family business, construction industry, septic systems, entrepreneurship, starting a business, customer relationships, small town reputation, West Liberty Ohio, heavy machinery, hiring friends, business growth, being coachable

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Jeremy LeVan, Ethan DeLeon

J

Jason Duff 00:00

I keep going back to this, starting with the right foundation, and I don't think it needs to be polished. I mean, I think a lot of people listening think like, if you're going to start a business, you have to have the perfect logo. You have to have all your financing in line. You have to have a business plan. I mean, the few things you didn't hear Jeremy talk about was really any of those things. I mean, he got a box of business cards because that's probably what people told him he had to do. But like, the real about it is, is just be willing to learn. And be willing to, uh, listen for opportunities. And when there is an opportunity, don't be lazy about it.

J

Jeremy LeVan 00:36

Strike and take criticism well.

J

Jason Duff 00:39

Be coachable.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:42

Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon, and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Joining us on the show today is entrepreneur Jeremy Van and president of LeVan Excavating. 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 create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.

J

Jason Duff 01:14

Thanks, Ethan. Yeah, hey Jeremy, welcome to the podcast.

J

Jeremy LeVan 01:18

Thank you, thanks for having me.

J**Jason Duff** 01:19

Great to have you today. So we have been talking over the last few podcasts, we've met with economic development professionals, investors, uh, folks working in government and a lot of the projects that happen. You know, you look at the finished project and you see a building that's new construction that's been put up, you see a building that's been renovated or revitalized, and there are lots of different people that are part of the construction team that make it happen. Why I'm excited to have Jeremy today is he is a guy that plays in the dirt.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 01:50

We do that.

J**Jason Duff** 01:52

I mean, he literally built a business playing in the dirt. And you know, we were talking earlier as he came in today and You know, many people know my family background. I grew up in family business, and we share that as well. There are lots of great things about working with your parents and grandparents and cousins and siblings, and there's some not so great things too that you have to sort out and work along the way. But, um, you know, our, our family business is we operated a rock quarry and sand and gravel operation. And then when my dad graduated high school, he, you know, went right in to say, how can we sell more rocks and sand and gravel? And started a ready-mix concrete operations. So I grew up a lot around those construction materials, and I saw a lot of Levan excavating trucks coming in and out of our quarry, which we are really thankful and appreciative because that's kind of feeds the whole small business ecosystem, is that everyone has a job. But Jeremy, I want to hear about kind of your story, is, um, how to be defined as an entrepreneur. I mean, when you're going through school, did you know what that meant? And how did you kind of get started in building and starting your business?

J**Jeremy LeVan** 03:03

Well, it kind of started early. My parents were business owners in the auto business world. They owned Levan's Body Shop.

J**Jason Duff** 03:12

But just, can I interrupt you real quick? Because this is another thing. So Levan's Body Shop, when I was 16 years old, and the craziest thing that happened to me, Jeremy, is I went to driver's ed. I had the nicest driver. Driver's ed instructor, he put me in the car and he was so fascinated, he wanted to talk about business. And he knew I was passionate about business and I wanted to talk about it too. He didn't teach me anything about driving. We went to McDonald's and just sat in the parking lot and talked business on the time I was supposed to learn to drive. Well, I got my, I passed my driver's test, which for those that are listening, you know, driver's test is like, either you're on and it's like no big deal or like you don't pass it because you hit those cones. But my first 6 months of having a car, I was in a fender bender and I got crunched from the front in unassured clear distance. I was sighted, I hit someone else. So I was so excited to get those wheels, hit on both sides, and I took the car to Levan's Body Shop and your parents took such great care of me. The embarrassment of it was like no big deal. They got it fixed up, I was back in shape. So that war wound, I gotta thank you while you're mentioning that family business.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 04:22

Well, thank you. But yeah, we, uh, all— I have 3 brothers. We were all raised, uh, like I say, our family was, uh, self-employed, had their own business. I think all of us, all us brothers, uh, would buy and sell. My dad was always buying and selling, uh, whether it be a wrecked car, take it in and fix it up and then sell it. So, you know, kind of on through high school, I really wasn't sure exactly what I really wanted to do. I had thought about the military. My dad had a pond beside it, and he, at the time when I was, I think, a junior, senior, we pushed out all the muck out of the pond. And that was my first really of running a bulldozer, Bobcat. And I thought, you know, this is pretty cool. So I went, I thought about the military again in a division called the Seabees in the Navy. But, you know, I talked to one of the recruitment officers, and back then, I don't know if they can now, but they couldn't guarantee you where you would be placed in the military. You know, you could be a cook or you could be— and I knew I wanted to do, you know, at least at that time I didn't even know what heavy machinery business was or excavating. So, um, I— a group of buddies of mine our senior year decided, well, let's— we don't know what we want to do, so let's go out and do the wheat harvest. We were all in FFA at school. We heard that you can go with a group of buddies, you can go out and run combines and tractors and get paid to do it. So we went, uh, to Texas and we was going to follow the wheat harvest up to Canada. So my graduation day, when we had our graduation party, I had to leave early and get— catch a flight out to Texas. So I flew out there, lasted 3 days, and got fired.

J**Jason Duff** 06:08

So, oh wow, wow, what an experience.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 06:11

So yeah, I damaged a combine and The owner basically told me, get out, you're, you're done.

J**Jason Duff** 06:21

And, uh, so that hurt the ego a little bit.

J

Jeremy LeVan 06:23

Uh, yeah, because I had a high school— I, I think reality set in. I'm going home and I gotta figure out what I'm gonna do for a living. So yeah, I remember talking to my dad when I was out there saying, can you find me an old backhoe? Can you talk to the banks or something and try to get me a, you know, a loan? Or, uh, back then they called them notes. So some people called them notes, to get an old backhoe and a single axle dump truck. So he had had one lined up that he saw on an auction. And when I got home, we went and got it. And he allowed me to set up camp right beside the body shop. So in a gravel parking lot. So we, you know, I started, I knocked on doors. I think like every business owner, I went and got business cards made up.

J

Jason Duff 07:07

You, do you feel official? Like, was that the moment? Like, I have got my business cards.

J

Jeremy LeVan 07:13

I remember getting them. You got a box and he's like, how am I going to get rid of 10,000 business cards? So, but yeah, I, uh, I guess kind of, I did it a little differently. I would like have a small job, go do it, whether it be a farm, you know, agriculture, clearing out some trees that From West Liberty, a lot of people, a lot of farmers, so I would knock on their doors. And then I got to trying to— how do I broaden out? So on rainy days, I would jump in the car and go to, uh, like Ari Becker Builders and Unibit— well, Unibilt Homes, a larger contractor, the longest contractors, and say, you know, who's digging your basements or who's putting in your leach fields? And, and I would hand them business cards. I did that for the first year, and finally Um, you know, I have to give a shout out to Ron Becker. He's kind of the really the one that let me— I've done hundreds of septic systems, maybe a thousand, uh, dug basements for him, and that kind of got me going.

J

Jason Duff 08:16

You know, you mentioned people like Ron that took a risk on you. Yeah. What, what do you think was the, the difference? Um, and a lot of people that are listening that are trying to find that break or that that client. For you, like, how— you mentioned how you courted him, but what do you think sealed the deal from him saying, I want to work with this guy long term?

J

Jeremy LeVan 08:40

Um, you know, I just— I think while we were talking, you know, just believing in yourself that, hey, I can do that. And, you know, be, I guess, stern with it and show him that, you know, give me one shot, you know, and make sure the first shot that he did give you or anybody gives you that even if you don't know exactly 100% what you're doing, act like it and, and follow through and follow through with it. Even if I remember I called, I had a laser, a rotating laser, and I set up on a project. I didn't even know that you could tilt them or how you get them level at that point. But I, you know, I call, you'd call your dad, or at that time we didn't have YouTube, and you'd call a friend that might have set it up You know, so, you know, I just think, you know, being straight up with them and, you know, and there's a lot of people that write estimates and, uh, will say, hey, I'll do it, do this work, the scope of work for this price, and the estimate gets signed.

J

Jason Duff 09:38

There's a lot of people that then don't even return the phone call or don't even meet the deadline or don't even, uh, you know, they, they don't do quality work. And, and I think What I hear from you, Jeremy, is like, like, even though at the time you didn't have maybe all the education knowledge, but you were upfront and honest with, with your customer and you got it done. Yeah. Um, and I think that so many people when they first start out where they sacrifice is they over-promise and underperform. And especially when you're younger, when you're first starting out, people are really forgiving if you'll just say, listen, This is what I know. This is what I'm really good at. I'm going to do my absolute best work for you. And then, you know, give, give me feedback. Like, how, how am I doing? You know, and if there's something you don't like, let me know now. Don't wait till the project's over, uh, and then we got some big conflict or issue. Like, let me know now. But that sounds like that relationship was pivotal, pivotal for you to, to grow and scale. That one client.

J

Jeremy LeVan 10:36

Yeah. And one thing we've always prided ourselves on, I always— and some of our, you know, the guys at Workforce, even though We'll be on a job site and I always try to do one thing more than what we were supposed to do that we quoted, whether it be, you know, go help the Mason clean up or, uh, you know, if they got an extra bit of parking lot that, hey, if you have extra stone, can you smooth this part of the parking lot up? So we try to do, you know, a little more than what we've, you know, guaranteed the customer. So, and it's always, you know, I've always been a believer you pay forward. And it comes back to you.

J

Jason Duff 11:11

Yeah.

J

Jeremy LeVan 11:12

And, you know, over time, that reputation, especially coming out of a small town, is gonna, you know—

J

Jason Duff 11:16

well, your currency is your word. So if you take advantage of one deal and other people talk about that, then you're out of business. Like, yep.

J

Jeremy LeVan 11:25

Um, yeah, word travels fast.

J

Jason Duff 11:27

Yeah, yeah, that's true. So that's how you got started. Um, what, what year was that? Did you—

J

Jeremy LeVan 11:32

so that was 1995, the year I graduated, the summer of 1995. Nice.

J

Jason Duff 11:37

And then, uh, since then, have you grown, scaled your business? Obviously you're still doing it today.

J

Jeremy LeVan 11:42

So yeah, so tell us about that. You know, we were in a residential, uh, actually it was just me, uh, at the beginning, and then I brought on, uh, a, a real close friend that worked with me.

J

Jason Duff 11:52

Um, now wait a minute, let's just pause there. We all do this when we're first starting out, uh, to grow the business. We try to find other people that we like and that have, you know, they communicate like we do. So we hire our friends and, you know, it's just the journey, the crux of that, it can be great, but it can also be pretty challenging. So for you, like, what did you learn with that?

J

Jeremy LeVan 12:21

Well, I've had plenty of ups and downs, you know.

J

Jason Duff 12:25

The war stories, right? Yeah.

J

Jeremy LeVan 12:27

You know, I mean, It's— we're on talking terms, and, and, you know, there's no bad blood. It's just, uh, I try to stay away from friends and family nowadays. You know, it's always, uh, I don't know if you would call it jealousy, but there's always tension there.

J**Jason Duff** 12:43

I think the great— the pros of it, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, Jeremy, the pros of it are in starting out, you know what you're gonna get because you know the person, and, um, you, you kind of can dream a little bit with them because I think that's real important when you're starting your business. You want to find people that buy into your vision, your dream, your idea. And then as you're doing that work, I think where the friction starts to happen is, is there a, is there a business partnership? So is this person just an employee? Are they a partner? And then what are their visions and values? You know, could be work-life balance, could be family, could be growth strategies. There's a lot of people that are very content keeping a business at a certain size. Yeah. And, you know, some of our previous podcast guests we've had on have been some of my original employees that now are business partners. And then some of the guests that we have not had on that were friends are maybe not— no longer friends. I mean, it's just life, life evolves and life changes. And I'm sure maybe, Ethan, you can call some of them to say, let's bring them on.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 13:48

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 13:48

To hear all the terrible things. Yeah.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 13:51

Yeah, cool. But it sounds like, you know, you went on to do some pretty cool projects, right? Yeah. So, uh, after, you know, doing, uh, I don't know, hundreds or thousands of residential jobs, that was back when they were widening 33, turning it into 4-lane. Oh, wow. And I remember, uh, I don't know why I remember this so vaguely, but I set out on 33 one time and I thought, how do you get to the size of this company that is bulldozing through these hills. Yeah. And, uh, I, so I started looking into how, how do you get into commercial work? And then I saw the, the city of Bellefontaine had work and where do people even hear from it? So, you know, I, I just started doing a lot of research, found out the first stumbling block is you gotta be bonded to work for a lot of these big projects. So that started a whole nother, how do you get bonded? Well, you gotta show a really good financial statement and it's hard to have a financial statement. It's like the guy that you got to build 5 bridges before I'll give you a job to do this contract to build a bridge. Well, how do you get the first 5 if you can't? Right. You know, so it took probably 5 or 6 years to get to the bonding capacity or the financial capacity where a bond, a bonding company would take us on. And the first project that came out for bids, I thought, man, I'm going to do it, was the Village of West Liberty had brick sidewalks. Tear out all the sidewalks downtown and put bricks in. Had no clue how to do it. So I teamed up with a— I think I talked with your family, Jason, and they said, uh, call a guy Rodney Brandt. He knows all— I remember Rodney.

J**Jason Duff** 15:28

He knows, you know, he'd been doing masonry work and brickwork probably for, for 30, 40 years at that time when you talked to him. So he was an experienced mason.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 15:36

Yeah. So Rodney teamed up with me. I bid it and he laid all the bricks downtown. So then after that, we got hooked up with an online a company online that publishes, you know, commercial, governmental, municipality projects. And, you know, we bid them. You win some, you lose a bunch. So it took off from there. Then fast forward, probably 8 years ago, we were doing a project at Vandalia-Butler High School. They had a whole football stadium that they wanted bid, so I was crazy enough. I was— I don't know, my wife wants to strangle me sometimes on the project. Should we invite her? Yeah, of the projects. And I'm like, you know, that one's interesting, maybe I'd have bid on that one. So we'll bid on it. And I bid on a whole stadium, had no clue. That was when synthetic turf was just becoming popular. Yep. So we bid it. I reached out to a company down in Cincinnati and we 'Will you give me a price on synthetic turf? I know you're a company that does it. I've seen your work or heard of you.' So they gave me a price. When we done that project, it was bleachers, stadium lighting, running track. Back then when we did that project, running tracks have to be the tolerance of like a tennis court. And keep in mind, this is before we had GPS or all that, and we'd have people out there with strings and tape measures, and it took like a week to grade a running track. Nowadays it's a day's project. So, uh, how we got into the turf business was after we got done with that one, you know, the turf company was like, hey, we need people to follow us around to get the turf fields ready. Would you be interested in that? Not crazy enough, yeah, you know, that's when we're still looking for some work, we're not super, super busy. So while we're doing the excavating, uh, we got hooked up with, uh, They're the Motes Group out of Cincinnati. And once— as big of industry as a turf is, it's very small. There's a lot— there's— it's a big industry, but there's only a few contractors in the country that actually do it. And so we started bidding turf projects with them, and our first— our next one was all the way from Vandalia all the way to Hartford, Connecticut. So it was like, I didn't know if I wanted to chew off leaving West Liberty and going a day away for, you know, yeah, 12-hour trip. Ended up it worked perfect, and then the rest was history. You know, we've been from Florida, Texas, New Mexico. We used to spend our winters in New Mexico doing fields while it was snowing back here. When they had the oil boom up in North Dakota and South Dakota, we followed that because all the tax money or oil money was going to school. So we started putting fields in the Dakotas. Um, geez, a ton in Michigan, a bunch in Kentucky, West Virginia. So, so after you open that door, just all kinds of different—

J**Jason Duff** 18:32

the thing I hear that from what Jeremy's sharing that I think is a nugget lesson for listeners is he, you did that test project, something new where he sought out to learn about the turf, and then the vendor saw his work, how that vendor, uh, that he was using their product in it, and it led to saying, hey, we have a pipeline of deals, of leads, of opportunities for you in these other states. And I, I think for a lot of people, they start out being, um, in a business that's commod— like a commodity. Yeah. So, um, they— there's a lot of excavators out there, right?

J**Jeremy LeVan** 19:08

Oh, a ton.

J

Jason Duff 19:09

And there's a guy with a backhoe and a truck, um, and then there's the professional, and then there's what I would say these, these gigantic corporate people. So I mean, the landscape in the industry is, is wide and deep. But what I had really admired about what Jeremy's done is he listened and he worked with a partner that sold a niche product in an industry that was hot, but said, I'm willing to travel and do high-quality work and just using the principles that he learned when he first started out. And I would have to imagine that that niche is probably a more profitable niche than chasing the small middling many kind of jobs that exist everywhere else.

J

Jeremy LeVan 19:51

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it's You know, you said it right, it's a niche and you get, you know, you make good money off of those niches, but it's very— the hard part about it, that type of work is you're traveling, you're living in hotels, and getting guys that want to do that. You know, it's hard to take employees from their family, especially if they have families. So we kind of created a, you know, we treat— we give them what we would have if you know, they were at home. Yeah, you know, offer them everything under the sun that we can. Yeah. And make it worth their time being away from their— if they have kids, you know, their own bed. And it's, uh, but it's challenging, you know, it's, it's not easy. There's several phone calls, you know, something's broke down 400 miles from home, what do you do? Well, you know, what do you want me to do?

J

Jason Duff 20:40

When you first started out traveling and getting these big jobs and getting to explore and see other places. Were you excited about it?

J

Jeremy LeVan 20:49

Oh, I was super excited because usually fields go in places that are pretty neat towns, you know, like back then it was if you got a turf field, you were usually a wealthy village or a wealthy, wealthy town. Nowadays everybody's getting them. But it was really neat places in Florida by Disney and it was Myrtle Beach and it was, you know, it was kind of touristy towns.

J

Jason Duff 21:12

And I think one thing that I like to talk to people about is like how you think about life in your 20s versus your third— I kind of take it in decades, like 20s, 30s to 40s. But like a lot of those new business owners in their 20s, and I don't care what industry you, you put it in, it's like, I'm gonna be a, a speaker, a motivational speaker, and I get to travel and get in the, the, like, get in the airplane and like, I'm gonna sit and They're going to serve me a drink. I just love to hear, like, you know, people share that story. And then you actually kind of through your 30s get a little more seasoning in life, right? Like where, you know, it's like, oh, this, this vision and idea of staying in these hotels and like your airlines get canceled and you get sick and you're, you're away. Because I think there's that thing. I want to, I want to leave home. Yeah. And so like, Is there anything you can speak to, like, how you looked at life and your entrepreneurial journey, like, through those decades?

J

Jeremy LeVan 22:11

Well, it's funny because me and my wife were talking about this. Like, when I first started, it was 7 days a week and I worked sunup to sundown and go, and I was always looking for the next deal, trying to chase the next dream.

J

Jason Duff 22:23

You were hungry.

J

Jeremy LeVan 22:23

I was hungry and I would try anything once. And now, 27— well, this is year 27, you know, you fast forward to 27, it's like, uh, No, I'm not going to take that job, you know, but any other— and I still have problems doing that. I have a very hard time of saying no. There's nothing worse that eats at me than a customer calling and almost begging you to come do a job. You didn't even bid it to them. They're just saying, come do it, we need somebody to do it. And you're like, I can't make it. But then I'll call, you know, I'll wait until I'm by myself in the office and call them back. Do you really? You know, maybe I can fit that in. I love that. And it's It's hard to say no.

J

Jason Duff 23:05

Yeah. So I know, you know, this is still going strong for you, but you didn't just stop with excavating, right? You branched off and did a couple other things. Um, like to maybe touch on those a little bit.

J

Jeremy LeVan 23:15

Um, talk to us a little bit about, uh, Levan Investments. So yeah, um, well, a few years ago—

J

Jason Duff 23:22

are you loaded? No, listen, no, listen, I love that when you add the word investments because there's some people, they ask me questions like this too. It's like, fair enough, you must just put the name investments and money started rolling in. This was so I imagine it's easy. Yeah. Like, tell us about how you built your investment company.

J

Jeremy LeVan 23:41

Well, first, you know, I guess what I got to say, the good, great thing about the US of A, it's so easy to start a company. I think it's \$75, you know, you can have an LLC. Now what you make of that LLC or corporation is your own destiny. Completely up to you. But, you know, being self-employed, the biggest thing that I always worried about is when is the day that I can turn the light bulb off and say, I've done enough, I've saved enough money. And then it hit me, it's like, you don't have a retirement, Jeremy. Your excavating is your retirement. So, you know, we made, we made, you know, decent money starting out. So I thought, well, I'll get into rentals. Bought some rental houses, found out very quickly.

J

Jason Duff 24:23

Aren't people great? You love people.

J

Jeremy LeVan 24:25

I found out very quickly that I wasn't made to be a landlord. If you ever want to live in an apartment free, come to one of mine because I never followed up.

J

Jason Duff 24:36

Well, advertise that.

J

Jeremy LeVan 24:37

Yeah, you know, you get a month behind, I'd let you go get 4.

J

Jason Duff 24:41

Because your heart, you want to believe people. Yeah. And, and there, there are moments of humanity where like people are honest and good and just need a hand up, but there's unfortunately a lot of, a lot of people that, that don't tell the truth and take advantage of situations too.

J

Jeremy LeVan 24:56

Yeah, so I guess the best money I made with those is the day I sold them, you know. Yeah, I sold them, and then, you know, some land came available on Main Street, you know. And I've always been told from a lot of friends and people that I listen to, like, the best investment you can make is real estate. I've tried the stock market, I've tried grain futures, I've tried just about every investment, oil wells, like, you know. And the best one that I found was, you know, Dirt.

J

Jason Duff 25:25

Yeah, real physical assets like a ground. Yep.

J

Jeremy LeVan 25:28

Okay, so we would buy it, or, you know, I would buy like the corner of Main Street, and then just so happened Casey's came to town and said, hey, we like your piece of land. And that was our first deal, and I was like, nice, wow, this is pretty fun.

J

Jason Duff 25:42

And just to give a little color to that, it took acquiring like a few parcels, right?

J

Jeremy LeVan 25:47

Correct.

J**Jason Duff** 25:47

So, you know, this is, I think, the strategy that Jeremy you know, took from his excavating business is that you work on property, there are property lines, there's zoning, there's utility infrastructure, there's things underneath the dirt. And then there's things like environmental. It's like sometimes, you know, you may not know what is— was on that property 50 years ago, and you need to, you know, do a little homework and research. But I think him thinking about— I, I think if I bought this parcel and got an option, or, or purchased this one and this one, then you just got something real to market and promote together.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 26:22

Correct. Yeah. And, and I learned a lot the first one, you know, when the, I call 'em the big guns come to town that, you know, that hunt out property, you know, there's, they wanted a phase one study. I'm like, well, what's a phase one study? You know, I'm like, okay, do a phase one study on that land. And then it just snowballs. And then after I got through the first transaction of that property, it's like, okay, now I know what they're looking for, what intersections they're looking for. What they like to see in car accounts. And, uh, so we had that led into buying some other property in town that I, you know, I always thought that Bellefontaine had sat stagnant for a long time and it was just a matter of time before something's going to take off. And, uh, so we bought some land out on 179. I said I always had a vision of putting in a housing development. I thought nobody better but the guy that's got the equipment to do it. Uh, I never had the vision of building the houses, so I thought, well, we'll put in streets, started a street, um, and, uh, that took off. So, you know, we've got, uh, we've since then sold all the lots in the first phase, so we're ready to start phase 2.

J**Jason Duff** 27:26

And for those listening, yeah, well, we need, we need more housing, and so thank you for making that investment. But if you think about it, it's buying a, a piece of land and then surveying and platting it out from a large piece to a small piece and then being able to market that these lots can be sold to build your own home. Same thing can be true for industrial ground, like if, you know, build your own industrial building or commercial building. But what it takes is the infrastructure. So you need gas, electric, water, sewer, that kind of stuff. And I think what's great of how Jeremy's integrating his investment strategy, it's taking what his core skills and core businesses business and, and being able to use that to develop the land. And I, I just imagine probably if you sell the lot to them that you have developed, and you know, you've got your fixed cost of, of the real estate and the improvements that you've made, and you want to, you know, sell the, the, the property for more, so that's your profit. But I imagine that home builder is also going to need a foundation dug. Oh, maybe a swimming pool. So it leads to other types of business opportunities for you too.

J

Jeremy LeVan 28:32

You know, everyone back there takes a basement or a crawl space and And yeah, but the crazy thing is, is that we were so busy during all that going on, that was kind of— I put the subdivision as a kind of a side thing, hobby at first. I'll do it when I have time. But then it kind of took off faster than what we thought. And the home builders were building back there and they wanted to know, well, I'm sure you want to dig the basement, don't you? And I was like, really, I don't.

J

Jason Duff 28:57

Because you're that busy.

J

Jeremy LeVan 28:58

Yeah, that's a crazy— and, uh, And you get to the point where you have overhead that's more than what the basement costs by the time I move in there. So, you know, that's when we would kind of give them names of people in the area that, hey, call this guy and he can help you out. So we try to push business that is really not, you know, justifiable for us to do, that I shouldn't say is too small because I hate saying any job's too small, but one that we can't be profitable at, we'll give to, you know, local contractors or push them that way, or at least give the name and number.

J

Jason Duff 29:32

You know, I think the nugget with that is build your referral network, because if you're— you, you give referrals and leads to other people, that reciprocates back to you too.

J

Jeremy LeVan 29:42

Let's, let's riff on that real quick.

J

Jason Duff 29:43

How, how would you imagine, you know, starting to build that network? Think back to— I mean, I'm looking at you. So like, in your Rolodex, if you think in the, the scheme of construction and development kind of share like who are some of the partners that you refer business back and forth? Do you have to say names, but it could be like different industries or—

J

Jeremy LeVan 30:02

Yeah, so we use, you know, concrete's a big one we use. You know, we— there's a local guy in town that we use, all just Alexander Concrete. We use him a lot. He's great. Yeah, he does all of our concrete work. There's, you know, we use— of course we rent porta-johns. We—

J

Jason Duff 30:17

you need people that do our directional boring, um, You, you, everyone needs a porta-john vendor.

J

Jeremy LeVan 30:24

Yeah, porta-john.

J

Jason Duff 30:25

You don't have that one, you must be— ask your guys. Yeah, exactly, exactly.

J

Jeremy LeVan 30:29

I used to be too cheap to even get them on job sites and now they order them themselves.

J

Jason Duff 30:33

Did you give them a bucket, say here's a bucket?

J

Jeremy LeVan 30:34

I'm like, save the \$150, man.

J

Jason Duff 30:37

That's funny.

J

Jeremy LeVan 30:39

But, uh, no, there's a whole, a lot of, a lot of vendors that we use. Uh, concrete, asphalt's another big one we use. Asphalt. So it's mainly just from, from jobs that you've worked with other people, right?

J

Jason Duff 30:49

And then—

J

Jeremy LeVan 30:50

yeah, you, you work, Have a good experience. Through the early years, you figure out, uh, he— no, I'm not having him back. Yeah. And you, and you be loyal. I've always been the type, you know, with our subs that, um, you, you can use my stuff and they let us use their stuff. And you, you bond a relationship and they'll bend over backwards. I mean, they'll, they'll tell a customer they can't— they're gonna have to push their job a little bit to get to you because they know that, you know, what they're coming into and, and how easy we are to work with, not just being me, but, you know, the whole company. You know, you have a great relationship back and forth.

J

Jason Duff 31:23

Time is money, and especially in construction, if you aren't coordinated with people that are, you know, understanding the schedule, the deadline, and the, the bigger vision, like the sharing of equipment. If you've got a lift on site or a certain piece of equipment, you know, in a very corporate litigious liability world a lot of projects don't allow any of that sharing. So what it does, it takes your co— your, your project cost and like quadruples it. But like where I think the nimbleness of a team that has those relationships, they work together, which gives the client a better quality project. It's probably going to get done faster. And because of that coordination, it's probably going to be cheaper for them to get it done.

J

Jeremy LeVan 32:05

Yeah. Yeah. And one thing with subs that, you know, the ones that we built relationship, you're not keeping score. A lot of what I mean by score is like we've had them before. Well, we picked up all your trash, you know, and I'll say, well, 2 weeks ago we stood here and was down and we don't keep score because we just both do stuff for each other, you know? Yeah. At the end of the day.

J

Jason Duff 32:28

And walking around, you know, here in downtown Belfort, I like, I often see that with our maintenance and construction teams and our subcontractors.

J

Jeremy LeVan 32:34

Like often the lines get real blurred sometimes out there in a good way. Like I don't mean that.

J

Jason Duff 32:38

And you want to set up those relationships where people are talking and working together. It's not always perfect. Yeah. But I do think that's where you kind of get these, your own little, you know, we use the term mastermind in this podcast before. It's kind of like your own little group that's like, listen, we see what the goal is. I'm going to help you. I might need your help sometime. Yeah. And I like that, you know, kind of not keeping score, but it's just reminding, do the right thing. And when you pay it forward, it all comes back to you. Yeah, it's just funny. I was literally on the phone with a friend today and he's like, I, you know, I'm thinking about we need somewhere just that we can compile trusted people. Uh, you know, in my world it's like I just need somebody that I can trust to take on this edit if I can't, you know, do it myself. I don't have the time. So it's just cool since I have this opportunity here to have, you know, talk to you guys. Um, I just, you know, building that network. Um, the last thing I wanna touch on before we kind of, you know, talk about some, some bigger picture, uh, you know, topics here is, uh, tell us about the Country Legends Concert Series.

J

Jeremy LeVan 33:35

How'd you do that?

J

Jason Duff 33:37

Country music. It goes from excavating to investments to develop and now— Yeah. Country music star?

J

Jeremy LeVan 33:44

No, no. Far from that. I always wanted to know how to play an instrument. That was the whole reason I asked you on the podcast, man.

J

Jason Duff 33:51

I thought you were going to sing us a little something. These mics are really great for that too.

J

Jeremy LeVan 33:53

I don't have a music bone in my body. No, it's— So it kind of— I've always had a thing. I love going to concerts and I always went to country concerts. I always thought something needs to happen around Logan County. And I'm from West Liberty, and they've always had the Labor Day Festival at West Liberty. And, and it was steam engines and tractors and the flea market for ever since I've been a little kid. And remember, and I, you know, something— the younger generation is coming up, they, they need something to do rather than go look at tractors and steam engines all the time, which is— there's nothing wrong with that, but the younger crowd doesn't— it doesn't draw their attention. So I thought, I always wanted to do a concert, and so I started out with one, uh, 3 years ago. We had one band, uh, Little Texas down. It was a free, uh, a free concert we just put on as sponsored by Levan's Excavating. We put on— it was a great success, uh, because it was free, you know. But as soon as you start charging for something, you find out who really wants to come to your concerts or whatever festival you put on. The next year, just nature of me, I went from, uh, we went from 1 band to 6. So I didn't take a little step, I went from 1 to 6.

J

Jason Duff 35:07

Yeah, you're leaping ahead.

J

Jeremy LeVan 35:08

Yeah, so we went to that, uh, ended up the day of the concert just poured rain all day. And, uh, but we had a lot of national acts there. Uh, anything we could do to help the community to bring in, you know, for every person that comes into the concert, or whether it be the Labor Day Festivals probably going to stop at the Shell station on the way home or the way there and get gas, or going to stop at the ice cream parlor and get ice cream, or the Subway station and get something. So we're just trying to work with the community, bring, you know, bring commerce in, uh, people in that might have never seen West Liberty before and thought, well, this is a neat little town, we'll come back, you know, when the stores are open.

J

Jason Duff 35:45

Yeah. And I think, you know, my point in, you know, touching on all of these, and I appreciate you sharing your story a little bit, is that you know, whether you intended to or not, you're an entrepreneur, right? And in fact, you were just awarded Entrepreneur of the Year. Exactly. The official proclamation from the Logan County Chamber. Jeremy is being recognized as Logan County Chamber Entrepreneur of the Year, which is a very big deal. Yeah. You know, and it just goes to show, like, the journey that you've had. When you were in school, did you know you were going to be an entrepreneur?

J

Jeremy LeVan 36:19

No, no, no. It's still—

J**Jason Duff** 36:21

that word is— I mean, and I think you talk about people, it's like the identity. It's like, Yeah, that imposter syndrome where it's like, am I really that? But you know, this, this award is very well deserved. And you know, the other thing just to hit on with creating concerts and events, like you see the benefit of the economic development it's going to do for the ice cream parlor and all the venues and places he was mentioning, but your chance to give back. And I think that that's what gets a lot of entrepreneurs. There's a, there's a misnomer that that we do it for the money. And, and in money and energy as a currency, but, like, I, I think what I hear and what I learned from Jeremy, and I think it's a story that is a lot of other great, gifted, talented entrepreneurs, especially in small towns, is that their purpose in making money is what can they do to leave a positive influence.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 37:13

Yeah. And that's— if I was wealthy, it'd be scary because I give— I'm a giver, so I would probably give everything away. Like, I, my heart's in West Liberty. We do a lot for Bellefontaine too, but, you know, we, we, we try to give as much as we can to help the community, you know, whether it be we put in a synthetic turf baseball field for the village of West Liberty for the kids to play on. A team got together and put the splash pad in. So, you know, we always try to, whether it be monetarily or, you know, helping out with doing free services or whatever we can do. I'm always, you know, I'm like, like I said, pay forward.

J**Jason Duff** 37:53

And yeah, and those are the obvious things, but even the things that you're making money on, building the housing development, like what does— what do our communities need a lot of right now? On a national issue, I mean, and I think that's for the government folks that are listening, is the economics problem is really what the issue is with housing, is to put in a new development, the amount of cost of that infrastructure for you know, putting in the water and the sewer. And then the tap-in fees that sometimes in some communities to bring that stuff to, to your property or facility can be very high. And then the real estate taxes start once those properties are typically developed. And I think that's the kind of thing that we on the, the private side are trying to share. Hey, community, I know you need more housing. Let's figure out how to make the numbers and the metrics work so other people will want to sacrifice their risk, their talent, their time to start more housing developments.

J**Jeremy LeVan** 38:46

Yeah, and one thing I've always, you know, being a business owner, not everything you do makes money, you know. Not a lot of things we do cost us a lot of money, but I think it's just having the guts to take a chance. You know, there's been a lot of things I've failed at and probably will be a lot more that fail at, but I've never been afraid of failure. That's probably the best lesson I've learned is the times I fell down, you know, you get back up. There's so much opportunity, whether it be in excavating or tomorrow I get into selling, you know, encyclopedias. You know, you can make a dollar at anything if you put your time to it.

J**Jason Duff** 39:19

That guy in Texas that fired you on the first day, you almost really want to call him and thank him.

J

Jeremy LeVan 39:24

Yeah, I never thought of it that way.

J

Jason Duff 39:27

Yeah, I mean, and I think that's the thing, uh, I, I talk to folks, you know, if you think of sports analogies or whatever you're competing in, like if you didn't get that trophy or you didn't get first or second place. Like, it's those people that I'm actually more interested in, in, in knowing what their journey is to then work hard to win. Um, because, you know, a lot of the, the folks when they were always the top of their class, always the best athlete, like, is stuff that came natural and easy to them. Sometimes they hit that point in life where they got stuck, and I like the attitude I'm always hungry and I'm always wanting to, you know, figure out the next thing and the next iteration. And we're, we're seeing that all through your DNA. So yeah, and, uh, for anyone listening, you know, you have an idea or you want to start a business, like, what I like about your story, Jeremy, is that you, you just did the next thing, right, that was in front of you, right? Like, you, you got fired from that job, so you needed something to do. So you, you know, you got started, you started working, right? And then you started doing residential, and then when you outgrew that, then you moved on to commercial, and then stadium museums and then started your next business. And, you know, that's how you became the entrepreneur. And you did it sustainable, too. So I don't know if there's anything you want to say to listeners, entrepreneurs, that— the other thing is you have a family, right?

J

Jeremy LeVan 40:47

You have a wife and how many kids? 2 children, 14.

J

Jason Duff 40:49

She hasn't got rid of you yet, so you're doing something right.

J

Jeremy LeVan 40:52

Well, I was told if I open up one more LLC, she's done.

J

Jason Duff 40:56

One more, out, out. So, but I'm sure that it wasn't always easy as you're going about your you know, your, your different business ventures and stuff. I don't know, do you— what would you say to someone listening? I have a family, like, I— the balance between sustainability and pursuing this next idea.

J

Jeremy LeVan 41:13

Do you— yeah, I'm probably a poor person to ask that because I've— my family has sacrificed a lot, which a lot of small business owners do. Um, there are several— every Saturday and Sunday I spend time in the office or out in the field. But, you know, I've, I've always been— I was raised with a family of workers, so I learned that from my dad that, you know, he might not have been at every ballgame, but I knew they loved us. And, you know, we talk to our kids that, you know, Dad and Mom might not be there all the time, but, you know, we're trying to do what's best for you. And maybe when we get older, we'll make that up. But it's hard to make time up. But, you know, we're making. You know, there is a sacrifice.

J

Jason Duff 41:58

And, you know, and I appreciate you mentioning that. So like, you know, there was a concrete pour, a big one on the day of my birth and my dad was late. Like, and my mom reminds him of that, but like, that was, it all worked out. And I think that's the thing where it's the benefit of that is I grew up around parents and grandparents that that's, that was what we knew. Like we worked together. And there's, there's a lot of great memories and experiences. And truthfully, the reason why I'm doing the work I'm doing today is because I was surrounded with that. But it's not for everyone. And I think that's where I've made mistakes is I have taken those values and try to at times force them on other people that, yeah, is not meant for them. And so that's kind of been a gut check for me. And that kind of starts out when we've hired our friends. Like it's what we know. So we assume that, well, you should definitely want to work 80 hours a week because that's what you do to get ahead.

J

Jeremy LeVan 43:00

Where— no, Jason, you just have a bad addiction.

J

Jason Duff 43:03

Well, and truthfully, the word addiction is probably appropriate. It's what we do. I work, um, generates dopamine for me and probably maybe does for you too. So like, but I'm, I'm self-aware. And I think the other thing is finding a significant other. That knows and creates boundaries. If they really love and care about you, they'll create boundaries with that and they'll call you on your own shit.

J

Jeremy LeVan 43:28

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 43:28

I mean, because in my head I can sell, I can convince that, well, no, this is what we got to do. No, you need someone that's like, nah, this is the line where we're going to draw it. I like that. No more LLCs.

J

Jeremy LeVan 43:40

He's done.

J **Jason Duff** 43:41

He's done.

J **Jeremy LeVan** 43:42

Cut off. She didn't say nothing about corporations or nothing like that. Oh, see, that's the part I like about her. Loophole.

J **Jason Duff** 43:46

I like that. Yeah, no, that's great.

J **Jeremy LeVan** 43:50

Yeah. Thank you so much for just being on, sharing your story.

J **Jason Duff** 43:53

Congratulations on the award.

J **Jeremy LeVan** 43:54

Thank you.

J **Jason Duff** 43:55

Thank you. I think by the time this podcast comes out, it's probably old news, but it's fresh here. So, and, you know, good luck with your next, you know, ventures and stuff. What were some of the professional development resources such as books, podcasts, courses, etc., that, you know, maybe helped you along your journey?

J **Jeremy LeVan** 44:12

Well, starting out it was actually, I would go, you know, like, I don't know if you call it mentor or watch others how they were doing. I would actually visit job sites after hours and just walk around and look at how, how did they do that? Because I got one coming up, I need to do that.

J **Jason Duff** 44:27

And then that was rip and duplicate, right?

J

Jeremy LeVan 44:29

Yeah. So, and then, you know, moving forward, it was like, you know, the creation of YouTube came on, you know, and if I got paid for every hour I've watched YouTube, I wouldn't need to be sitting here right now. So, you know, I've learned a lot off of YouTube. You know, the technology has changed so much since, uh, who would think technology would change in moving dirt? But, uh, it's changed so much since start. You know, I've had to learn. I wish I would've taken more computer or IT stuff when I was younger and when I said I didn't need it, but now everything's running off of, you know, satellites. Uh, you know, so I've had to learn all that. We brought in, uh, we got a civil engineering office now, you know, which is a huge help. You know, it's irreplaceable to have somebody like that, you know, that can navigate you through those waters. But, uh, yeah, it's just, uh, you know, I listen to podcasts, I listen to other business people, you know, but there is— I have not yet found a podcast that has to do with dirt work. I've looked everywhere.

J

Jason Duff 45:27

We have an idea for you.

J

Jeremy LeVan 45:29

You should—

J

Jason Duff 45:29

I mean, seriously, start that.

J

Jeremy LeVan 45:31

Well, I've thought of that too, and I'm like, when do I have time to do that?

J

Jason Duff 45:35

I said the same thing. And, you know, we right now today, so I think we have dropped live, we're episode 7, episode 8, uh, 10 today. Episode 10. Well, so we're in, and just to, you know, share transparently, and I appreciate the listeners that are listening, it is getting evolution as, and we seem to get better, stronger, uh, and, and, and get more practice at this. But the number of conversations that people come up to me, just like you said, coming in to say, I have listened to that podcast, and I learned this, and I benefited from this. I am getting that feedback everywhere, and it's leading to new introductions, to new business, to, uh, you know, new growth. Sure. And so I'll— for those of you that are kind of sitting on the line, and we, we're, we're also now being guests on a lot of other podcasts kind of in similar types of industries too. Yeah. Anything else you want to mention with that? Like, no, it's been fun. I mean, uh, it's not everyone thinks it's like a hard thing to get into. It's really not. And then, you know, it's a saturated thing is another thing I hear a lot.

J

Jeremy LeVan 46:35

No one's got your voice, right?

J

Jason Duff 46:37

No. And especially for you, I mean, like, that's a, that's a niche you got.

J

Jeremy LeVan 46:40

And everybody's got different interests.

J

Jason Duff 46:42

Yeah, exactly. So what, what's your favorite podcast besides the Small Nation podcast? Of course. What's your favorite podcast?

J

Jeremy LeVan 46:48

Probably Trey Gowdy. I listen to him. Yeah, he puts one out every Thursday. Yeah. And, uh, yeah, I've always like listening to, and he's real.

J

Jason Duff 46:57

Yeah, that's the whole key. No matter what political side, what business side, where you're from, like finding someone that's authentic and has a voice, that's, that's what matters with this. Yeah, absolutely.

J

Jeremy LeVan 47:08

And for our listeners, if you have been listening from the beginning, thanks for bearing with us as we just try to figure all this out.

J

Jason Duff 47:14

Thank you for bearing with us since you listen. Um, but where can people find you and keep up with what's happening with your business?

J

Jeremy LeVan 47:19

Well, we have a website, it's, uh, leiohio.com. Facebook, I need to be better at that.

J

Jason Duff 47:28

Don't we all? Or maybe we don't.

J

Jeremy LeVan 47:31

Yeah, maybe you need to dial it back.

J

Jason Duff 47:34

You know, it's one of those things. Social media is awesome, but it takes a lot of time, a lot of mental energy, you know. But the amount of podcasts we, you know, started and like, how did you guys first meet?

J

Jeremy LeVan 47:46

I think it was a Facebook.

J Jason Duff 47:47

Yeah, exactly.

J Jeremy LeVan 47:49

Exactly. So Facebook's a strong tool, but it's just, you know, something I need to, you know, get somebody doing that better. Yeah, you know, maybe that's what I force my kids to do, but that's their business.

J Jason Duff 48:00

Start them out.

J Jeremy LeVan 48:01

Yeah, there you go. Oh cool, thank you so much. So at the end of these episodes, we always, you know, give Jason an opportunity to kind of recap or give a, you know, a little lesson from today.

J Jason Duff 48:08

So what do you got for us today? I keep going back to this, starting with the right foundation, and I don't think it needs to be polished. I mean, I think a lot of people listening think like, if you're going to start a business you have to have the perfect logo, you have to have all your financing in line, you have to have a business plan. I mean, the few things you didn't hear Jeremy talk about was really any of those things. I mean, he got a box of business cards because that's probably what people told him he had to do. But like, the real about it is, is just be willing to learn and be willing to, uh, listen for opportunities. And when there is an opportunity Don't be lazy about it.

J Jeremy LeVan 48:48

Strike and take criticism well.

J Jason Duff 48:50

Be coachable. That's huge. I mean, I think, and I wish we could teach more young people that skill because there's so many interviews or, you know, young people I meet that like tell me all the things that they already know. It's like, wow, that's great. Like, again, it's kind of that trophy mentality where it's like, yeah, you, you, there's nothing more I can teach you or do for you versus just the attitude. It's like, I'm here to learn. Can you give me feedback? Yeah, that's great. And everyone needs to go play in the dirt.

J Jeremy LeVan 49:24

All right. Well,

E Ethan DeLeon 49:24

thank you, everyone, for tuning in and checking out the Small Nation podcast.

J

Jason Duff 49:27

You can find us anywhere that you listen to your podcasts, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even the Small Nation YouTube channel.

J

Jeremy LeVan 49:33

I hope you were able to pull some value from that conversation.

E

Ethan DeLeon 49:36

We hope to see you in the next one. If you enjoyed it, be sure to leave a like, comment, or a 5-star review to help more people to discover this podcast.

J

Jeremy LeVan 49:43

Stay tuned to Small Nation on social media to keep up with all the cool projects that are happening here.

E

Ethan DeLeon 49:47

And until next time, this is Ethan with the Small Nation Podcast signing off.