

Episode 32

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Main Street Reimagined, downtown revitalization, Marion Ohio, historic building renovation, real estate development, business partnership, wedding and event venue, Brickyard on Main, Topped Ice Cream, loft apartments, Lois Fisher, tenant recruitment, small town entrepreneurship, vacant buildings, lawn care business

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Luke Henry, Ethan DeLeon

- L Luke Henry** 0:00:00
One day, it was July 5th, 2018, I asked him if he wanted to have lunch downtown at the one restaurant on South Main Street. And so he agreed and we sat outside and we looked all up and down South Main Street, all these empty buildings. The block was 70% vacant at that time. And there was this one restaurant and a tattoo shop and a couple lawyers' offices and this—
- J Jason Duff** 0:00:25
Sounds like a great day.
- L Luke Henry** 0:00:26
Yeah. And he, I basically pitched him and said, uh, what do you say we partner up and, uh, buy up some buildings and try to make a run at this thing?
- J Jason Duff** 0:00:41
Hey everybody,
- E Ethan DeLeon** 0:00:46
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 we have entrepreneur and developer Luke Henry. 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.
- J Jason Duff** 0:01:08
Thanks, Ethan. Welcome to the show, Luke.
- L Luke Henry** 0:01:10
Great to be here, Jason.

J**Jason Duff** 0:01:12

So you mentioned entrepreneur and developer, but I have to just say Luke has a few more titles. I know that he is founder of Henry Development Group. He has also helped found and has served in CEO capacity of ProScope Lawn and Landscaping. And also is a part of a movement in Marion, Ohio and a company called Main Street Reimagined. But what I, when I first met Luke, he was mowing yards. Yep. We met in college and you know, when you're on a college campus, you kind of gravitate people that are kind of like you. And I think I shared in the podcast before, I'm kind of weird. And so some of the weirdisms, when you find other people that are like you, you become friends with them. So are you calling Luke weird? He on the weird spectrum. Totally fair. More than fair. He's pretty high on the weird spectrum, and I do question his wife Lindsay. We want people to come back to this podcast. Well, no, they're going to want to listen. You want to keep listening? No, we resonated with, you know, we found Ohio Northern together, and Luke happened to be a pharmacy major and I was in the business school, but we resonated with music, performing in the arts. And so we're a part of University Singers and Men's Chorus and a number of productions on the Freed Center Stage, and he's a very talented baritone.

L**Luke Henry** 0:02:34

All right, here we go.

J**Jason Duff** 0:02:36

You prepared anything for us today?

L**Luke Henry** 0:02:38

I, I have not prepared anything, so a little rusty from back in the day. We won't say how many years ago that was that we—

J**Jason Duff** 0:02:46

time flies, time flies. No, the other thing is that when we would go on a lot of these, um, choir, uh, tours, you had a lot of time on the bus, and on the bus, like, you just would kind of chat and get to know people at a personal level. And there wasn't many people— it in the music and arts crowd that also was passionate about owning a business. And to me, like Luke was basically describing, like not only did he kind of start mowing yards, but he was like doing, he was thinking about buying rentals and he was starting to think about how to service commercial businesses in his town. But Luke, tell us Mount Gilead, right? Is that the hometown?

L**Luke Henry** 0:03:22

That's where it all started, yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 0:03:24

Get us, get us up to, how did you get started, Luke?

L

Luke Henry 0:03:27

Well, I started mowing lawns when I was like 12 years old. So, um, literally my first mowing job was for my great-great aunt and uncle. Took me 2 and a half hours, they paid me \$5. Boom! I used their mower and, uh, I was happy, you know, to be making bank like that back in the, uh, mid-1990s. And so, um, yeah, just kind of went from there. So I, I did that for a summer and I earned you know, a little bit of money and went and bought a push mower at a garage sale. And then that was my first business expansion. And so I started—

J

Jason Duff 0:04:03

I like it.

L

Luke Henry 0:04:04

Mowing for other people and making a little bit more money now that I had my own equipment. And one thing led to another and bought a little bit nicer stuff and my first vehicle finally when I could drive and trailers and mowers and started doing all different services through the years. And, uh, have, have continued till today. So it started very humbly, and yeah, yeah, it was— it's still in the growing phases in college there. I would mow lawns on the weekends. I'd skip class all day Friday. I'd leave Thursday after my class and mow all weekend and go back home. And there was nights that I plowed snow all night, and then I'd go and take a pharmacy exam on Friday morning.

J

Jason Duff 0:04:44

And yeah, so listen to that, he said pharmacy exam. So Luke is a licensed pharmacist, or was, right? Was, yes, for many, many years. Yeah. Which, what you know about pharmacy, they make bank, right? Right. So like, us, all the other students at the university I went to, we're always super jealous of the pharmacy students because yeah, they, they had to study a lot and they had to take like 2 more years of college, but like, they're gonna graduate making bank. Who in their right mind would like leave their very great career path that's probably going to make a lot of money that they went 6 years for school to go start a business. Someone who has entrepreneurial bug, I guess.

L

Luke Henry 0:05:23

Apparently, yeah. I actually, I had gotten a, uh, not only did I quit my job as a pharmacist to go do landscaping full-time, but I actually, I had gotten a sign-on bonus and actually had to pay back my sign-on bonus. Ouch. In order to quit my job. So it was like, so it cost you double whammy. Yes. And, uh, But I just decided that it was something that I needed to do, because prior to that, I'd been in junior high, high school, college, or working a full-time job. So I'd never done it full-time. And so I thought, yep, if I'm going to do it, after working a couple of years doing both, now's the time to do it. Before we had kids. So we just went for it.

J

Jason Duff 0:06:04

Wow. And what was your first— I mean, so you continued on with the lawn mowing business, right? So that was your first entrepreneurial journey, I take it. Did that continue on?

L

Luke Henry 0:06:12

Yeah, well, actually started before that. I had like a mail-order coin business when I was also in middle school, and in elementary school I had like a paper that I wrote and charged subscription for and had like a library. We lent out stuff and charged people a fee. It was like early Netflix but with books.

J

Jason Duff 0:06:32

Were you advertising in Coin World, or where were you— where were you selling your coins through mail order?

L

Luke Henry 0:06:36

Yeah, there was a couple of like the mag or, uh, newspapers.

J

Jason Duff 0:06:41

Yeah.

L

Luke Henry 0:06:41

Uh, and, uh, yeah, so do you still collect coins? Classified ads. I still have them in the basement.

J

Jason Duff 0:06:46

I am super nerdy. I'm a coin collector. Someday we should like swap or hang out to look at coins.

L

Luke Henry 0:06:51

I haven't told that story that to very many people in my whole life, but, uh, see, the weirdisms continue to come out. Absolutely. You know, it's just like we're always looking for that way to make a buck. It was like I had a hobby and, you know, I needed somebody else to pay for it, so There you go.

J

Jason Duff 0:07:06

Marion, Ohio. So tell us about Marion.

L

Luke Henry 0:07:09

So Marion is now where I live, where my wife and I are raising our two children. And my wife is from Marion, and so we were debating where to move after we both finished at Ohio Northern. And she was from Marion, I was from Mount Gilead, so we compromised and moved to Marion. And as these things go, yes, I learned early to go along with what she wants. And, uh, so, uh, no, she's, she's my biggest supporter. But, um, so Marion's a town of about 35,000 people, and, uh, just like so many towns that I've visited throughout Ohio and all across the country, had the big exodus, you know, with the shopping malls and changes that came in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. And similar to a lot of other towns our size, the downtown was sort of left to rot. And there was a lot of buildings that hadn't been occupied for many, many years, or had been underutilized, or had started what I refer to as the death spiral of first floor residential. Not good. See, in some of the, you know, roughest parts of, you know, big cities, you go to the outskirts and you see, you know, first floor residential and old commercial buildings and we were seeing some of that in Marion. And so it was in rough shape. And we heard the stories of yesteryear, all the people that are maybe my parents' age, and they'd say, you know, I remember coming downtown and buying my first suit and shooting the loop and meeting friends in high school and all those sorts of things. And unfortunately, there was very little. Yeah. Several years ago. And, uh, so that's where the story starts.

J

Jason Duff 0:08:59

And if you're from a lot of small towns in Ohio, you're probably shaking your head right now listening in agreement, because I feel like unfortunately that story is just all too common.

L

Luke Henry 0:09:06

All too common.

J

Jason Duff 0:09:07

And Marion in its heyday, the things that the town was most proud for, like it, it actually, it turned out a president. Like there's a lot of things, points of pride. What are some of those?

L

Luke Henry 0:09:19

Yeah, yeah. So there is a lot of things around President Harding being from Marion. There's the Harding Memorial, which is— I go by it 2 or 3 or 4 times a day and you kind of get hardened to it, but it's a beautiful, incredible memorial that is housed in Marion. His home where he did his front porch campaign is there, and just a couple of years ago, the Harding Presidential Library opened in Marion, which is spectacular. It's, it's really a neat, neat building and a lot of history there. Museum. Yeah. Library. And so there's a lot of history around Harding, but there was also just an incredible boom of manufacturing at one time in the, like, '70s and '80s. There was the highest number of ad agencies per capita in Marion, Ohio. And so these were really good white-collar jobs.

J**Jason Duff** 0:10:24

Lots of creatives, lots of entrepreneurship. Like, though, that ad agency business probably brought a lot of, a lot of great things to town.

L**Luke Henry** 0:10:31

Yeah, absolutely. And so there was that, you know, great white-collar businesses and professional, uh, businesses. And then there was also great manufacturing, good-paying jobs. And so a lot of that is reflected in our downtown architecture and in the homes around Marion. Yeah. You know, not only starting in the 1800s with all of those very strong businesses and manufacturers and presidents and, you know, important folks and, you know, some, some affluence that was there. And it's awesome, but, you know, so much of it has been left to die or has been knocked down. And, you know, there's a parking lot.

J**Jason Duff** 0:11:16

I think this is kind of interesting. I mean, we were joking about, you know, the weird parts of us. And, you know, we've talked about this before on the podcast where like entrepreneurs are oftentimes the weird people, quote unquote, you know, or the people might be different from everyone else, but like you're you're doing something that you talk about all the time, and that's making a habit of talking about what makes you different. You know, that could be as an entrepreneur, but we're, you know, talking about downtown here. So like, I just thought it was funny, just out of habit almost, it was like, what are those things that make you different? Let's focus on that. And that's almost a starting point. But, um, and there's some people we've been learning, uh, through doing some personality assessments, there's some people that all they see when they look at something is why and how it's different versus some people look at what's the same. Yeah. And I do think that's a skill set where, you know, we kind of have that trigger when you go into a town. It's like seeing and noticing the things that are working and the things that are not working, and then being able to use your entrepreneurial mindset to actually go bring those ideas back home. So how did you, uh, continue your entrepreneurial journey in Marion then?

L**Luke Henry** 0:12:24

Well, it really started, um, actually even back in college. So I remember, uh, Jason and I talking when I was contemplating buying my first rental property when I was 19, and I bought a home, big 5-bedroom house in Ada, Ohio. All right. And learned a lot through that experience. Ultimately, I sold it several years ago, and I think lost money on the, on the deal overall, but learned so much through that whole process.

J**Jason Duff** 0:12:53

That was your college education, Luke. You just didn't recognize it at the time.

L**Luke Henry** 0:12:57

Forget pharmacy, man. Yeah, yeah, that's a great point. I never thought about it that way, but I would, I would say that was because I learned about roofs and frozen pipes and boiler systems and wallpaper and lead-based paint and home improvements and, and really learned a lot through that. And so then when my wife and I moved to Marion. We were there for a little bit of time and bought some rental properties and started just learning and continuing a learning journey of, of all of that and just enjoyed primarily residential. Yes, yes, uh, for many years that's, that's all it was. And so not all it was, but that was where our focus was. But learned a lot through that experience just about fixing up old things and It's very gratifying work, as you know. And I think that similar to how I caught the entrepreneurial bug through college and beyond with business, I also caught that on the real estate side of things and just love that idea of taking old, you know, beat up, busted up things and making them new again and turning them into something that was purposeful. And so, you kind of got hooked on that as well. And so, then eventually, turned our attention to downtown.

J**Jason Duff** 0:14:16

In, in your downtown, like you said, there was a lot of challenges with that, seeing first floor residential there, but there were some people that were trying to pave the way. And I'll kind of share, you know, my first introduction to Marion was really hearing some of the things that Luke and Lindsay and their team were doing. But one thing amongst the state level, so there's organization called Heritage Ohio, and Heritage Ohio hosted in Marion Ohio, an upper floor loft tour. And I had a chance with one of my team members. We went over and participated in that. And what blew me away is that while there were challenges in a lot of the first floors of Marion, there was an investor and I'm going to say a visionary. She kind of paved the way to creating and taking historic downtowns and building up her floor loft apartments. But that was Lois Fisher.

L**Luke Henry** 0:15:13

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 0:15:13

And what was so awesome about Lois at the time, she was really helping communicate with state leaders about the building codes for upper floors and about how some of those laws and rules were not working for developers, uh, for, for them being able to put the cash and the time down to do more upper floor development. So she was very instrumental in working to create something in Ohio called the Historic Building Code. Um, and to me taking that tour, meeting her gave me more confidence to start to work on upper floor lofts here in Bellefontaine.

L**Luke Henry** 0:15:51

Yeah, Lois and I have become really good friends, and she's been a great resource. And she really did— she's been doing this work in Marion. She did it incrementally, very slowly over time, just because that's how she could do it. And at the time, there weren't the resources that there are today, both with, you know, funding resources, as well as just, again, as you mentioned, the code and some of those issues, but developed this idea and really kind of brought in, into the spotlight, the opportunities for loft living, and in fact, herself lived downtown for about 10 years, in a really great loft apartment space. And so she has been a wonderful help as we've embarked on this journey. And now things have kind of come full circle where I've actually bought a number of her buildings from her. And so we've gotten close through that process as well and have shared a lot of war stories as we've went through that.

J**Jason Duff** 0:16:52

Can you speak how important finding people like her are and how that relationship that just started as a conversation has now been a a business opportunity for you and for her.

L**Luke Henry** 0:17:02

Yeah, yeah. Uh, I— it's so important, of course, to find people that are doing the type of work that you're doing, that think like you think, that see the visions that you see, and have gone where you want to go. And so just to, to reach out to her and say, hey, we're planning some things, we'd, we'd love to learn a little bit from you, and, and she was very gracious along those lines. And so it's been helpful, and I think she's learned from us some things as well, and we've learned a lot from her, and she really started the ball rolling. And so we have a great relationship where I've told her, you've brought it so far, and it's now our job to take it to the next level. And so it's been really fun to do that and to take some of the buildings where she maybe did— there's a couple of buildings where she developed one floor and we've purchased it and now we're developing additional floors. And so it's quite literally something that we've partnered on over decades even to bring to its full new use for the next 100 years. You know, some of these buildings are 100, 150 or more years old. And to see them where they're going to last for another 100 years is so gratifying. One of Lois's famous sayings is that she says, "We're just the keepers of the keys of these old buildings and that they've been here longer than we have and they'll probably outlast all of us as well." And so, you know, we consider it a privilege to keep the keys for this period of time and to bring these buildings back to what they once were because—

J**Jason Duff** 0:18:44

It's a really good perspective.

L**Luke Henry** 0:18:45

At one time they were unbelievably ornate and full of life and full of community and, and all these things that we want to bring back.

J

Jason Duff 0:18:55

Yeah. So starting to look at downtown Marion, what was your first, what was your first buy down there? What was your first project?

L

Luke Henry 0:19:03

Well, so as, as I love to do, we don't, we don't do anything halfway. And so my wife will tell you that. No. And so What, what happened was basically, actually, uh, you mentioned loft tours. Kind of funny, my, uh, now business partner on some of our downtown work is Alex Sheridan.

J

Jason Duff 0:19:24

Great guy.

L

Luke Henry 0:19:25

Yeah, absolutely. Uh, we are yin and yang. And, uh, so, uh, he and I met on a loft tour that was hosted by Downtown Marion Inc., which is like our Main Street organization in Marion. And Downtown Marion Inc. was doing this loft tour. And we in fact met outside of one of Lois Fisher's loft projects that she had just completed. And I'd kind of heard about him because I actually worked with his dad when I was a pharmacist or when I was in pharmacy school on rotation. So it was kind of this whole full circle thing where, you know, you can connect the dots going backwards, but not forwards. But I worked with Alex's dad. He's a pharmacist. Work together. And so I had seen some of the work that Alex had done. He also was kind of in the rental space doing some flips, doing some rental work around Marion. And so I recognized him. I said, hey, are you Alex Sheridan? And he said, yeah. And so we were both with our wives, and, uh, we, we got to chatting, and we're just talking about things around Marion and, and rental stuff and downtown and how cool some of the lofts were. And he said So, um, I just bought this building over on South Main Street, and I'd like, uh, do you have time? Do you want to go check it out? I was like, sure, of course, let's go. You know, look at my wife, she's like, okay. And, uh, so we went over, and that building he just bought, it was starting to clean it out and everything is just full of so much junk. And that building is what is today the Brickyard on Main, which is our wedding and event venue. And so he had bought it like at an auction for cheap, and because that's what it was worth. And so it had been vacant for 40 years. There was a fire there in the '70s, and it really hadn't been occupied purposefully since then. It was just kind of used as an old warehouse space. But through that, we, you know, we ended up spending 4 hours or something together that evening. And looked at that space and really got the creative juices flowing. And he and I continued to talk. We had lunch several times over the next few months and we're talking about downtown. And, and then one day it was July 5th, 2018. I asked him if he wanted to have lunch downtown at the one restaurant on South Main Street. And so he agreed and we sat outside and we looked all up and down South Main Street, all these empty buildings. The block was 70% vacant. At that time. And there was this one restaurant and a tattoo shop and a couple lawyers' offices. And, and this sounds like a great day. Yeah. And, uh, he, he, uh, I basically pitched him and said, uh, what do you say we partner up and, uh, buy up some buildings and try to make a run at this thing? And so, can you share—

J

Jason Duff 0:22:24

so you mentioned earlier that you and Luke are a little different. If you were to say profiles of what that is, what you are, what he is, and then how you're working together. I think that's helpful.

L

Luke Henry 0:22:37

Yes, yes. So Alex approaches most things as an artist, so he is very gifted artistically. He can take a rendering and just sketch up things and do some models and things like that, like, very well. He's musically gifted as well with mixing tracks and things like that, and just very, very artistically creative. I'm creative but in more of a visionary way. And from the business standpoint, you know, very— you know, I've learned from being in business for you know, almost 30 years, I guess, if you count my, uh, early childhood, uh, years of business. And so I, I bring those qualities and experiences to the table of, you know, working a P&L and doing pro formas on properties and working with banks and all of those kind of business-sided things. And, and then he's very good at the visioning and layouts and, helping make things, uh, dope, as he says.

J

Jason Duff 0:23:50

And just in hearing that, that's very special when you can find the, the things that you're naturally not good at and be able to then work with that someone and communicate in language that each other understands. And you know that in essence what you decided to form that day was a business partnership.

L

Luke Henry 0:24:11

Yes.

J

Jason Duff 0:24:12

So legally you committed time and talent and treasure and money and charted out on creating a wedding and events venue. So that was kind of the first big project commercially in Marion, right?

L

Luke Henry 0:24:24

Yeah, yeah, that was, uh, that was our flagship project.

J

Jason Duff 0:24:28

What led you to that decision to start that specific kind of business?

L

Luke Henry 0:24:33

Yeah, so, um, I guess backing up just a little bit, so when we, when we met that day and we kind of looked around we, we agreed to be partners.

J

Jason Duff 0:24:41

Yeah.

L

Luke Henry 0:24:41

Um, and so he had bought that building and then a building across the street. And so we, we brought those into the partnership, and then we went around and we quietly bought several other buildings that either he or I had identified as possibly for sale.

J

Jason Duff 0:24:57

Sure.

L

Luke Henry 0:24:57

They were vacant, they were underutilized, they were actually, you know, listed for sale. And we quietly bought 8 buildings, and then we put them all into this partnership, Main Street Reimagined.

J

Jason Duff 0:25:10

And that was our— what a great name. I love that name.

L

Luke Henry 0:25:12

Yeah. And so we did some, some visual renderings and explained that our vision for this was to make South Main Street, which was at the time 70% vacant, make it the center of dining, retail, and entertainment in Marion, Ohio. And so that's what we set out to do. And so we really felt that a wedding and event venue was actually a dream of Alex's because he was a wedding DJ for a number of years. And so he had been in many, many venues and seen pros, cons, different vibes, different amenities and that sort of thing. And so he had a lot of experience that he brought in that regard. And we really agreed that that would be a great place to start because it was a way to bring people on a consistent basis. To, to downtown Marion from other communities for events and for weddings. And as we fixed up this area of town for them to hopefully go back to their communities, tell their friends, and come back and spend time and money, hopefully, uh, on the other businesses that we hope to bring. Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 0:26:23

And, and you did bring some more businesses. So you have today, kind of in that neighborhood, let's talk about Topped. Mm-hmm. What do you guys do there?

L

Luke Henry 0:26:32

Yeah, so Topped Ice Cream and Eatery was actually our, our first completed project. So it was a much less heavy lift than the Brickyard was, and it was a tattoo parlor when we bought it and really, really dark and dingy.

J

Jason Duff 0:26:47

We— why didn't you keep that? Well, you know, I like tattoos.

L

Luke Henry 0:26:50

It, you know, maybe we'll bring it back. We still have some of the equipment in the back.

J

Jason Duff 0:26:54

It's still good. Okay, good, good, good, good. Yeah. So rusty needles.

L

Luke Henry 0:26:57

Yes, yes, we are looking to— we do piercings if needed.

J

Jason Duff 0:27:02

So yes, lots of those too.

L

Luke Henry 0:27:05

But we felt that that was another really just staple for a downtown to have. It could be something that was a destination, something that would be popular with kids, with adults, with grandparents. Everybody loves ice cream. And so we felt that that would be a great place to start as well. So You know, also with sharing some of the not so pretty parts of this whole journey was that when we made this announcement that we acquired these 8 buildings, we had these plans and pictures and pretty things. And so we went out and we started trying to recruit tenants. We, we talked to someone that had an ice cream shop in another community, a bakery in another community, a salon in another community, a restaurant. And said, hey, this is our vision. Isn't this a pretty picture? And it's going to be a lot of people will say yes, right?

J

Jason Duff 0:27:57

In the beginning, the point to the pretty picture. That's really neat.

L

Luke Henry 0:28:01

Well, everybody was excited. Yeah. You know, everyone in the community was really excited.

J

Jason Duff 0:28:05

Go, go, go, Luke.

L

Luke Henry 0:28:06

That someone, that someone was going to do something, you know, air quotes, they need to do something about downtown.

J

Jason Duff 0:28:12

The word they.

L

Luke Henry 0:28:13

Who is they? Yeah, there is no—

J

Jason Duff 0:28:15

where are they?

L Luke Henry 0:28:16
There is no they. There's only us.

J Jason Duff 0:28:18
Yeah.

L Luke Henry 0:28:19
Wow. That we've learned.

J Jason Duff 0:28:20
Yeah.

L Luke Henry 0:28:21
And, and so, yeah, so right there we started recruiting them and they said, you know, hey, we love your vision, we love your spunk, but honestly, this is a little too early in the process. It's pretty speculative and we wish you the best, but it's not for us. And so we were, we were committed and we were undeterred.

J Jason Duff 0:28:41
And so not only were you committed, like you've got everything on the line.

L Luke Henry 0:28:45
Absolutely. You know, I mean, we paid actual money for these 8 buildings. Yeah. And so we had to bring something to fruition. And we, of course, had our pride on the line as well. And this was really meaningful work. I mean, we haven't talked yet why we did it, but really it was because it needed done and we were committed to make this happen. And so we were really undeterred and we said, okay, no problem. If other people don't want to bring the concepts, we'll just kind of seed the clouds a little bit here and we'll make our own weather. And we decided to open a few businesses ourselves or with some operating partners or some strategic folks and let's bring these concepts to fruition. So that was Topped Ice Cream and Eatery. We had a partner that came in with us on that and started that business, got it off the ground and actually You know, that, that partnership ended up being unsuccessful. That, that individual decided that this entrepreneurship, this, uh, particular flavor of, of entrepreneurship and ice cream was not for him.

J Jason Duff 0:29:50
Yep.

L Luke Henry 0:29:50
And so we had to, to come up with this.

J Jason Duff 0:29:54
This is when you and your wife quickly started selling ice cream.

L

Luke Henry 0:29:57

Yeah. So, so I asked my wife if she would, uh, she was, she used to be a kindergarten teacher, and so naturally she could run a restaurant.

J

Jason Duff 0:30:06

Honestly, all those skills, the patience, everything.

L

Luke Henry 0:30:09

Yeah, not really. But, uh, so she never worked at a restaurant before, and so I said, could you just like bridge a quick gap here while we kind of scramble here? Because we need to— we're going to buy out this partner, and you know, he wants to exit quickly, and could you just kind of step in real, real quickly and kind of bridge the gap? Um, and, and then we'll get somebody else in here. And so the day that she took over was the day that Governor DeWine closed restaurants to carryout only at the beginning of COVID Easy peasy. Wow. So the fire was there and she just got baptized. Day one. And so, and that short-term assignment is actually still ongoing now, nearly 3 years later. And so she's learned a lot through that process. We've learned a lot about kind of working together. And, uh, so again, we're just— we're in it. So we—

J

Jason Duff 0:31:04

and just the things from the outside that I've seen, and tell me if you agree, but it took you and Alex and your wife and the partners and collaborators that you brought in to get the engine and momentum going. People need to see that there were real active businesses, real renovations happening, and traffic and life that was starting to come back to a downtown that had not had it for a very long time.

L

Luke Henry 0:31:28

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. You know, it's— anybody can paint a pretty picture, anybody can talk a tall talk, and, and we did some of that. But eventually the time came that we had to back it up. So, you know, within the first year, we opened Top Ice Cream and Eatery. It was a destination place. We completed our first loft apartment projects and got people actually living downtown on the block that could be cheerleaders and advocates in the community for downtown living for this new up-and-coming area. Shortly thereafter, we did open the Brickyard, then the Union, which is a smaller events venue, a really great upscale hair salon that generates a ton of traffic. And we've got some wonderful ladies in there that are just constantly telling the story to the people that come through their chair. And then, and then once we kind of got that ball rolling, now we've started to see, you know, we've done some other projects as well. But then the recruitment started to get a little bit easier to bring, you know, a couple of retail stores, a couple of offices, realtors.

J

Jason Duff 0:32:45

And so we've been very strategic because then people want to be a part of that then, right? Exactly. Yeah. You're building a neighborhood or you're building a community.

L

Luke Henry 0:32:53

Yeah, yeah. And so this is something that, you know, we really have learned from you all at Small Nation over the years as well, watching and masterminding with you to, to say, how can we build this ecosystem where we can build daytime experiences and nighttime experiences that are positive and that give people more than one reason to come downtown? And so we try to craft these experiences where it's when someone comes to get their hair done, they also meet a friend for lunch at Topped, and they go to a couple of retail stores. And there's a date night experience where people come to the microbrewery that also opened on the block shortly after our project started. And then they'll go to dinner at one of the new restaurants, and then they'll go for ice cream. Maybe they'll shop a little bit while they're there as well, walk some of the streets and alleys that we've added lighting to and created experiences even through those public art projects that we've worked with people in the community or that they've brought to fruition. And so it's all these really small pieces that build that ecosystem and the experience for someone, whether local, whether somebody that's coming from out of town to experience this. And it has to be very carefully curated. And that's not easy to do.

J

Jason Duff 0:34:17

What do you see your role in that?

L

Luke Henry 0:34:20

Well, um, it's way more than what I ever expected. Even after talking to you, probably shortly after we embarked on this, and you were like, hey, this is not easy, by the way. I was like, how hard can it be? But you know, what we thought was just going to be fixing up old buildings has really turned into a full-time PR and marketing job. I've talked to every Rotary Club, you know, women's organization.

J

Jason Duff 0:34:49

How many downtown tours do you give a week?

L**Luke Henry** 0:34:51

Oh, I mean, at least, you know, one or two downtown tours, whether it's impromptu or whether it's something that's structured. You know, always giving downtown tours, politicking at the local level, state level, ongoing conversations that way. There's just way more of that than what we ever expected. Tenant recruitment, you're just telling the story of what's going on in downtown Marion, Ohio. And again, I know you guys are doing it all day, every day as well, but that's what it takes because something that we've seen is that especially with the tours, those have been really fun. I enjoy that. But also being able to see in real time people's perceptions change about their town or a town that's neighboring to them. Yeah. As you go around and say, this is new, this is new, here's what's coming, look at this. Here's an old picture of what this used to look like. It's powerful. It's really powerful. And what we found was that people's perceptions change much slower than reality. And so every time, every tour, almost every single person that walks away, they tell me at the end, they say, I had no idea that all this was going on. I had no idea that this place existed. And so I always end with a challenge of a few things. You know, one is to tell your friends, bring them back, support with your dollars, not just with your words. And two, before you leave town today, go to two places you've never been before and maybe even go a little farther and thank that business owner for being there. Yeah. Because they've taken a risk to be there, but they're investing in our community as well. And so it's really exciting to see those things come together, to see our community come together and support and see people who have maybe always dreamed of having their own store, own restaurant, whatever the case may be, to give them opportunity to do that in an affordable way in a market like Marion that is so much more affordable than going to a big city, but still having a great draw and to create something really special. You know, that's what gets us up in the morning even through all of the challenges that we've seen with doing all this and starting right before COVID which was the worst possible timing.

J**Jason Duff** 0:37:14

So earlier you mentioned how people have, you know, same or difference, you know, minded. Well, the sameness in me can't help but, you know, realize just how many similarities between our two stories are. And, you know, for people who are difference-minded, I don't mean to offend. Like, it's not— that is not like— and for me, it's a positive thing. And to me, there's something something in that strategy that's working, right? And I'll be honest with you, that's kind of where we hope to be taking our business to the next level, is that there is a small town success formula, right? And a lot of the pieces that Luke has mentioned is part of that, down to the business types that you decided to start, right? Well, and, and I— that's what I— people always say, what you've accomplished in Bellefontaine, there's no way this could be duplicated. And what I think is so great is to be able to point to examples like what Luke and Alex and their team is doing and Marian. And I could name 2 or 3 other people that I know that are like us. But it does take in the beginning someone that is willing to paint the vision of what is possible. It takes someone that's going to help get access to buying the real estate, and then there's someone that's going to find the money. And then even when you have those 3 elements, to be able to pull the trigger and to not feel like you're alone on an island. And I think that's the piece. The word that he used earlier is you've got to build a team. Yeah, this is not a one-off kind of thing. It could be started— the spark could be from one individual, but it starts to take getting all the players together, all the people on the bus so we can drive somewhere. Because when that partnership fails, right, You need someone to run the ice cream shop. But can I also say, the failure— and I think that's what you hear, whether it was the, the rental that Luke bought in Ada or the failed business partnership that, you know, there was plans and goals and those plans changed— just expect that every day there are going to be things that you didn't, didn't suspect. Yeah, some of them are awesome surprises. Some of them are not. But if you get your mindset aligned to say, you know, we will have to roll with the waves as they come in. Now, I'm going to keep charting this boat, and we're going to, you know, take— get new information, new data. Um, but that, that's part of this business, don't you think?

L**Luke Henry** 0:39:38

Yeah, absolutely. There's been many failures along the way, many curveballs. Again, we mentioned COVID. I mean, that was completely unexpected. But even Outside of that, there's so many things that come inherently with fixing up old buildings when you just don't know what you're going to get into when you start peeling away the layers and layers that have been scabbed together over the years. And so, uh, yeah, you've got to have an iron stomach to, to do some of this stuff, and you've really got to be committed. I think that that's where, you know, we've just not wavered on The process has had to change. Even some of the people have had to change, but we are committed to making it happen and we just keep going deeper into it, frankly, to— Yeah. To bring—

J**Jason Duff** 0:40:28

I also think that there's the leadership element too, where oftentimes in the work that happens in revitalizing towns, you're kind of like a lightning rod, meaning that as you ask for feedback and ideas, you get that, but you also get a lot of criticism. You also get, um, you know, the, the term that he mentioned, they, like, well, why aren't you creating something for the skate park? Yeah, everything becomes your fault. You're not doing enough for the kids, you know, or whatever the— pick any segment or demographic. Like, they think that you just have this magic wand that you should have to fix all of those things. And so you hear a lot of criticizing, condemning, and complaining. Now you have to find a way to cope, to, to let that roll right off of you. How do you deal with that?

L**Luke Henry** 0:41:20

Oh, I think that I've just come to accept that criticism is the price of leadership, and that's just what I tell myself. That's what I remind some of our team members. You know, I've been taking Flaming Arrows for a lot of years. Some of our newer team members are new to this, and it kind of stings them a little bit more. And we just have to know and be so committed to believing that what we're doing is the right thing, and that we're doing meaningful work for our community and in the world. And that we're not perfect. We certainly want people's feedback, and we learn a lot from that feedback that we get as we bring different concepts and and get feedback along the way. But at the same time, we have to know that we can't be all things to all people. There are going to be— there's going to be the critics. There's going to be the Karens and the haters. Yeah, the trolls. But it's just— it goes with the territory.

J**Jason Duff** 0:42:25

Yeah, that's awesome. One thing that you called out in our call— I wish I could take credit for this— but, you know, in this conversation about revitalization is you know, the types of projects— I know I mentioned this a couple of times, but I keep coming back to it— that you decided to start in these buildings that you were renovating. And you said that there was kind of like driven by 3 things. It's either a passion project, like for the wedding business was kind of like, you know, from the DJ, your partner's perspective, you saw the need, right, for it in the community. And the third one was opportunity arose from your momentum. So You know, after— and it's encouraging because after facing rejection when trying to recruit businesses to come in, after you get some momentum going, then they'll be coming to you. And then that's like, you know, potentially something to fill the space. And from what I could see, you know, you can speak to this as well, but like, that's pretty consistent with how, you know, it is here. Like, I have just a few more years on Luke. I'm not— we're about the same age. He looks a lot older, but no, zing, no zing. Um, in the beginning, and I think you'll agree, it is so lonely and so hard. And then this kind of after— for us it was like year 5, like where you've kind of could like catch your breath a little bit and be like, I actually think this might work. Yeah. And then where we've seen kind of in the last few years, you've got critical mass, you've got proof of concept, and you've got other people that want to belong to something that's really special. And I, I see what's happening for you guys right now. You're kind of that— you're, you're making that, that jump. And that doesn't mean that all the pressure is released, but you kind of can wake up in the morning and be like, you know, I, I think this is going to work.

L**Luke Henry** 0:44:14

I'm hoping that we're, we're getting there. Yeah, yeah. I always use the kind of word picture that we're pushing a snowball uphill, and the snowball is getting bigger as we go, but it's just still so much work because it's going uphill. Eventually, I hope that we'll crest over the top of the hill and the snowball will start rolling down on its own a little bit and picking up some of that snow. But I think that we're getting there and we've been so intentional about the way that we've built these things. There's been opportunities that have arose and we've tried to just seize those opportunities. And really just, I look at it as making the next right decision and the next right decision after that and the next right decision after that, whether that's acquiring another property that's in distress or, you know, is it a good opportunity that's close to some of our other things or that might complement or that we think has a higher and better use to the way that we're specifically outfitting these different buildings and if we're doing loft apartments or if we're doing this type of business or that type of business. But yeah, it's really just been as the doors open stepping through and we had a lot of conversations early in the process when it didn't seem like things were going well or, you know, we hadn't even finished the buildings we had. And we were like, we need to buy some more of these buildings because they're going to fall into the wrong hands again, or, you know, there's a unique opportunity to take it, uh, to make it something special, or that it could be added on to one of— one we already own or whatever. And so it just— we, we looked as like, well, we got to go deeper in the hole before we can come out of the hole. But, uh, that's, that's just the way that these things go sometimes. You've got to take the opportunity when it comes, and it's not convenient, honestly, oftentimes. But, you know, when we, when we can really begin with the end in mind, and we can keep that vision out on the horizon of what we want this community to look like when we're done, and when there's things that come up that align with that, we've got to, we've got to seize that opportunity.

J**Jason Duff** 0:46:23

Yeah, that's really good. Who has been some of the most important people to have along you, along with you on this journey?

L**Luke Henry** 0:46:31

Well, certainly, you know, big shout out to, to Alex for, for our partnership. And, you know, we, we joke that we're, you know, coming up on 5 years of marriage here, basically because—

J**Jason Duff** 0:46:42

you guys are doing great. Happy anniversary.

L

Luke Henry 0:46:44

That's what it's been. You know, it is, it is a challenge. We are very different people. And, you know, similar to how marriages, you know, opposites attract and that creates friction sometimes, and we've worked through a lot of those situations, but we've really tried to lean into one another's strengths. So, I think that that works well. You know, the things that you hear oftentimes with any new business, you know, you need an attorney, a banker, and an accountant. And those are certainly folks that we have as part of our team that we're working with to make sure that we're doing things in the right way. And, and, um, so we've, we've now really, as, as you alluded to, now that we're 4 years into this or so, we're getting to the point where we are building a team. And it's really gratifying to have people who are really specialists in some of these different areas. We have a gal on our team, Courtney, that's our senior property manager, and she's doing a fantastic job helping take care of the tenants that we have and helping with leasing and those sorts of things. We have our construction manager now who is heading up a lot of our larger projects, and, uh, Ed, he's, uh, he's a godsend. And so we've just started building this team to where we really can have specialists that are doing the things that need to be done, and it's not Alex and I wearing, you know, 24 hats apiece. To get some of these things done.

J

Jason Duff 0:48:14

So your wife— yes, she is a very patient, kind person. She is. So a lot of times in relationships, it's hard to find people that will tolerate entrepreneurs because I imagine that you're always in growth mentality, and that puts a lot of stressor— pressure and stress on the people who are around entrepreneurs like you and I. I'd like you to talk a little about that relationship. I want to talk about— you're a dad. Yeah. And you've got two amazing kids and how you think about what you're doing impacting your family as well. Yeah.

L

Luke Henry 0:48:53

Well, we spend a lot of time talking about that, my wife Lindsay and I, and, uh, she has been so long-suffering and such a cheerleader through many, many years. You know, if you think back, she we got married while we were still in college. She was going to be a kindergarten teacher and I was going to be a pharmacist. She thought she was marrying a pharmacist. Nice, nice white collar, you know, we could have 2.5 kids, a white picket fence, and things would be nice and easy. Well, then I was, you know, I, I love to surprise her. I think she loves to get surprised as well, you know, whether it's, hey honey, we're starting a new business, or hey honey, we bought a new building, or whatever the case. She just takes it in stride anymore. But, um, no, really, we— up until we kind of started working together with Topt and her becoming more involved with some of the downtown, uh, projects during COVID the Brickyard, our, our event venue— because all the weddings got canceled, all the corporate events got canceled that we'd pre-booked—

J

Jason Duff 0:49:53

and your mortgage payment, did it get canceled? Oh darn.

L**Luke Henry** 0:49:57

Okay, it did not. And so we started doing, um pop-up events. We basically, similar to how you pivoted here in, in Bellefontaine with The Syndicate, we sort of had a similar situation where we couldn't do large events, but we had space, we had facilities, we had a restaurant two doors down from an event venue. So we basically, uh, both of them were capacity limited, but together they were something. And so we basically ran The Brickyard kind of like a pop-up restaurant and a music venue during COVID and my wife and kids, uh, got involved during those. And so we were doing food from Topped and, uh, running it down. My, my kids, they were, you know, 7 and 9 at the time, and they were running food down and serving customers. And my wife was taking orders and taking them back to Topped, and they were preparing it and bringing it down. And, and, you know, we were just kind of making it work.

J**Jason Duff** 0:50:55

Definition of a family business.

L**Luke Henry** 0:50:56

Yeah, yeah. So they got really involved at that point, and my wife has now went on to open a specialty toy store, Lulu's Toy Co. She opened in early November of this last year, so right before Christmas. Great timing. But we worked together on that venture, and that actually was aligned a little better with her passions and background with being a kindergarten teacher and what she's able to bring to learning toys and games and puzzles and how she can teach parents how to have learning play with their child or grandchild. And so, that's been really exciting to see, but it definitely puts stress on the relationship because we're both small business owners. We're always on. We go on vacation and we still have to do payroll for 3 or 4 businesses while we're gone. And we still get texts late in the evening when we're out on a date. That the cooler stopped working at the store and all the food's going to spoil or whatever infinity problem could come up. And so we have to figure out how to navigate that. And it's very challenging. We constantly work on how we can separate relationship from our work as business people. And my wife reminds me, we don't just want to be business partners. We were partners in life first. And that's, if all of this goes away, that's still what we're going to be. And so we've got to work on that relationship very hard. And then at the same time, as you mentioned, I'm a dad. And so we have 2 kids, they're now 12 and 10, and they've been raised in family business. And, uh, so they have learned the ropes and they work the cash register. My daughter's 10, and when my wife opened her toy store, she was like one—she was the main register runner on during the busy, busy Christmas rush time. And people were so amazed that she could count back change, she could, you know, smile, she greeted people, she could point out which gifts would be good for a 4-year-old girl versus a 9-year-old boy. And it's just part of, you know, what they learn living in our home. You know, around the dinner table, we're talking about leadership challenges and, and recruiting and, and, uh, team member problems and all of those sorts of things. And they just learn that as, as we go. So we've said it's either going to do two things. You know, I didn't grow up in an entrepreneurial family. Both My parents worked for the government. And so, I didn't really get that growing up, but our kids are either going to lean into this and really enjoy it and have a passion for it, or they may say, "I don't want that for my life and my family." And hopefully, we're going to make sure that they have a well-rounded understanding of what it means to be an entrepreneur. But obviously, that choice is going to be theirs. Right now, when we work, we all work. And so, you know, some of those events and stuff, they're setting up tables and moving chairs, and that's just part of what we do.

J**Jason Duff** 0:54:17

Luke, when you think of the body of the work that you're doing, what are you most proud of?

L

Luke Henry 0:54:24

I think that it's bringing pride back to the community, bringing a sense of community pride back to Marion.. And for many years, I think that it was kind of the desire for people to move away, you know, they kind of had the mindset of can't wait to get out of town. And, you know, they weren't proud of where they grew up. And so I hope that we're really changing that. And we are seeing a lot of those attitudes change. Again, it's slow. And it takes time. But it's exciting to see. There's people that have moved away from Marion, and then they've come back to visit on holidays or whatever. And they're like, wow, this is really actually something to be proud of. Or young parents, they have kids, and then they move back to Marion because they're like, you know, honestly, this is not so bad a place, you know, now especially we have, we have date night options and entertainment options. And it's a great place to raise a family. It's safe, and there's good schools, and my family's close and You know, it's something that's really gratifying to see that again.

J

Jason Duff 0:55:33

Yeah, that's great. Well, you've dropped so many good golden nuggets on us, so I appreciate your time today and just storytelling. You know, it's, it's really nice to hear that people are running the same race and it sounds like, you know, doing a great job up there. What are some of the professional development resources that have helped you along your journey?

L

Luke Henry 0:55:53

Well, I would certainly be remiss if I didn't mention the, the support both directly and indirectly that, that Jason and the Small Nation team have, have helped us with through the years.

J

Jason Duff 0:56:06

I'm still pretty proud of that ProScape Lawn and Landscaping logo. If you remember that, the logo factory, like, yes, thinking back the, the good old days, the vintage days.

L

Luke Henry 0:56:15

This is, again, this is, uh, this is circa 2004. Yeah, um, 2005, early 2005. Uh, yeah, Jason encouraged me. He said, you need, you need to get a logo, you need to get an LLC.

J

Jason Duff 0:56:28

Jason with his branding over here.

L**Luke Henry** 0:56:30

Yeah, yeah. And so he linked me up with the Logo Factory. I'd forgotten that. And so, uh, yeah, so, so much that I've learned, uh, from, from you and from our, our friendship over the years and just watching, you know, what you're doing here. It's, it's been great. Um, I also own every book that's on Amazon from — that is related to restoring historic buildings or incremental development. So, you know, there's a couple of great groups out there. You mentioned Heritage Ohio. There's a couple others that I follow and have looked at going to some of their conferences. Their names are escaping me right offhand, but just finding our tribe has been so helpful. Because as you mentioned, it feels really lonely. It feels really daunting. And sometimes it's like, I was crazy for thinking this is ever going to work. And so, being able to lean on people that are doing this type of work that are crazy visionaries like us and also finding some of those resources out there. Again, I talk about some of these books. Some of them are a little more academic than others, but I've read them all just to learn the blocking, the tackling, the the tax credits, the, you know, all of the different things that are available.

J**Jason Duff** 0:57:45

Yeah.

L**Luke Henry** 0:57:45

And we've got to make sure that we're taking advantage of because, um, um, it's, it's all necessary.

J**Jason Duff** 0:57:53

Yeah, that's great. Thanks, Luke. And, and honestly, what makes me so proud is to see what Luke and his whole team is accomplishing in Marion, because it is a reason everyone listening needs to take a trip there. You've got to see it to believe it. And today we spent, you know, over 2 hours together, Luke coming here to mentor us in the events and wedding business because, you know, with what they've accomplished in the Brickyard is what we have yet to really fully accomplish here in Bellefontaine. Yeah. So there's that neat masterminding exchange that's happening. So thank you for that. Being keeper of the keys, what a heavy duty and responsibility. But what an important and rewarding one. So high five on being the keeper of the keys. And for all those that are listening out there that are also that, thank you. Yeah, that's awesome. Where can people follow you or keep up with what's happening with your business? Is—

L**Luke Henry** 0:58:50

yeah, so, um, I would probably point them to henrydevelopmentgroup.com, mainstreetreimagined.com. Got some information on our websites there. Link to some of them, the other websites of some of the kind of subsidiary businesses that, that we're involved with. Um, Main Street Reimagined and Henry Development Group on social media, can follow us there to, to keep up on some of the different projects. Um, lots going on. This is like our sprint year. We are tackling a ton of projects, new restaurants, a bunch of new loft apartments, short-term rentals. Coworking space. There's all kinds of things going on. So, um, we're really excited. Again, we're, uh, we're learning a lot from the Small Nation team. We're trying to, to catch up. We're trying to get over that 5-year hump. And, and, uh, they're more than catching up after this.

J**Jason Duff** 0:59:42

Oh, it's— yeah, just sit back, just relax.

L**Luke Henry** 0:59:44

All right, we'll be great then.

J**Jason Duff** 0:59:46

All right, well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 0:59:47

thank you everyone for tuning in and checking out the Small Nation podcast. You can find us anywhere that you listen to your podcast, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even on the Small Nation YouTube channel. I hope you're 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 a 5-star review to help more people to discover this podcast. And stay tuned to Small Nation on social media to keep up with all the cool projects that are happening here. Until next time, this is Ethan with the Small Nation podcast signing off. Thanks everyone.