

Episode 51

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Rob Alexander, Ethan DeLeon

R

Rob Alexander 00:00

I, I tell people at the beginning of the class, I ask them what they want to get out of this. They tell me, but I tell them what I want you to get out of this is number one, that you understand the steps you need to take to start a business. That's probably why they're coming. Number two, that they know where to turn for help. They probably don't even realize they're gonna need a lot of help along the way.

J

Jason Duff 00:16

Yes. And even once you have a business, you continue to need help. Yeah.

R

Rob Alexander 00:20

You know, and then number three, and to me it's the most important one, I want them to walk away confident that they can do this.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:33

Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast, brought to you by Coverlink Insurance, where people are more important than policies. On this show, we unpack lessons from entrepreneurs, break down development strategies, and do deep dives on small town success. Our goal is to provide value to our listeners by hosting conversations that teach, inform, and inspire. Okay guys, welcome, uh, Man, this is great to be back in the studio today. I am super excited to have Rob here. Rob Alexander is the director, right?

R

Rob Alexander 01:01

Title?

J

Jason Duff 01:02

Executive director. That's right.

R

Rob Alexander 01:04

Don't forget about the executive.

J**Jason Duff** 01:06

I like that because he does have a lot of responsibilities. We're going to talk about that today. So the executive director for the Springfield SBDC.

R**Rob Alexander** 01:14

Yeah, Small Business Development Center.

J**Jason Duff** 01:16

Small Business Development Center. And that, I'm glad you clarified that because Uh, we are, you know, one of the reasons why I wanted to do on the show is we hosted a segment with Director Lydia Mihalik from the Ohio Department of Development, and she was kind of going through the laundry list of tools that are available to communities and small business owners, uh, and the SBDC came up. And so asking a few more clarifying questions, what does the SBDC do? She went through this list when it comes to training and coaching in loans and grants and all these things. And I was like, I want to really get to the nitty-gritty of all those things and some practical examples that can help business owners that are new and also existing, right? Stay strong. And so tell us a little bit more. First off, I'd like to tell us about you, how you like ended up in this role, and we'll dive in next. We'll talk a little bit more about the SBDC.

R**Rob Alexander** 02:14

Sure. Well, I actually think it's funny that I even ended up in this role because I myself have never run a small business. That has never been my J-O-B at all. Okay. Although that was the goal. That's what I went to college for. I wanted to get out and start my own baseball training facility.

J**Jason Duff** 02:31

I like that. I like that.

R**Rob Alexander** 02:32

But life happened and I find myself in nonprofit world, raising money for nonprofits and then running them. But I was always an entrepreneur at heart. So it's funny how life happens. I come full circle. Now I'm running a nonprofit helping other people start and run small businesses. So it's exciting to start a business. Yeah. I get to do that every single day, which is cool.

J**Jason Duff** 02:59

Wow. Well, and you mentioned that that wasn't what you originally thought you were doing. So tell us about, like, where you grew up, some of the roles that you've had, and then how that that what you've learned from those roles have prepared you for what you're doing now?

R**Rob Alexander** 03:13

Yeah. Well, I grew up near Lancaster, Ohio. Okay.

J

Jason Duff 03:18

Now say the name of your town. You and I were talking about this. Yeah.

R

Rob Alexander 03:20

Well, the actual town is called Lithopolis.

J

Jason Duff 03:23

Lithopolis. Yeah. Say that 5 times fast.

R

Rob Alexander 03:27

No thanks. If you know your Latin, that's rock city.

J

Jason Duff 03:30

Oh, okay.

R

Rob Alexander 03:31

And if you drive through Lithopolis, it's not a city that rocks.

J

Jason Duff 03:36

Well, is there rocks there? Like, how—

R

Rob Alexander 03:38

yeah, there's a lot of cliffs and stuff.

J

Jason Duff 03:40

Okay, okay, okay. Yeah, that's pretty cool. Yeah. So you grew up there?

R

Rob Alexander 03:44

Grew up there. I was, I was a total jock. My whole life was baseball. Didn't know anything other than it, um, until I got injured.

J

Jason Duff 03:50

What position do you play?

R

Rob Alexander 03:51

I was a catcher. Okay. Um, and it was just an unfortunate timing thing, and I didn't have a whole lot of backup plans other than going to this particular college and catching. And when that fell through, Wright State was my only other option. So ended up at Wright State in Dayton, Ohio.

J

Jason Duff 04:05

Yeah, sure.

R**Rob Alexander** 04:05

Where I met my wife, and then we kind of settled down in this area, and I never did move back to Columbus. And now Clark County, Springfield area is home, and we love it. I got 4 kids, very involved in the community, and busy. We're in a busy season.

J**Jason Duff** 04:20

Well, and for people that maybe haven't been to Springfield or know about Springfield, uh, there's a lot of, um, there's some celebrity, uh, folks that have come from, from, you know, born and raised and, and are now doing some big things in Springfield. There's great architecture and history. Do you want to share a little bit some of those highlights?

R**Rob Alexander** 04:39

Well, probably the biggest one is Springfield is where John Legend grew up.

J**Jason Duff** 04:42

Yeah, that's right.

R**Rob Alexander** 04:43

We have the John Legend Theater in the same building where my kids now go to STEM school. Wow, that's awesome. I'm not a Springfielder. I'm kind of now been in my role 7 years and I'm feeling more and more like a Springfielder. So there's probably a lot more that I don't know about John Legend.

J**Jason Duff** 04:59

It's the champion city, right? That's such a cool name, Champion City. I mean, wouldn't you want to live and start a business and do something in the Champion City?

R**Rob Alexander** 05:07

Yeah, I have, I have a cool story. So even though I didn't grow up in Springfield, my ancestors were from here, the Alexanders, if you go way back. And if you go back far enough, you find my great-great-great-great-grandfather, who was a farmhand at the farm where they had this exposition of all these mowing, cutting reaper machines. And it was this young man who was at that exposition who got the idea of creating what became the Champion City Reaper that basically made Springfield blow up as a city. So my grandpa was there just doing his J-O-B. This other guy's here being an entrepreneur. And I often think about the different paths that their lives took because of that.

J**Jason Duff** 05:51

That's awesome. And the Dayton area, so Springfield probably the closest metro is Dayton, Ohio. 100 years ago, it was the center for so much entrepreneurship, uh, engineers. Like, there was, there was a very strong guild of engineers that chose to live and, and learn and, and build Dayton, Ohio. And, uh, you know, Bellefontaine, where we're working at now, really benefited from a lot of that. Uh, we often have talked about the historic Cambie Building, which is a building that we're working to save and restore. And Edward Cambie— yeah, we— Ethan, you can't say anything. Edward Cambie, you know, down in Dayton, Ohio, owned the Dayton Computing Scale Company. And there were a lot— he invented basically this money weight scale that ended up getting acquired by the International Tabulating Computing Company, and that became IBM. Like, IBM, the, the origins of Dayton, Ohio, and these beautiful brass scales ended up, you know, being one of the largest, most powerful, you know, computer and technology companies in the world. And, and that's, that's the neat thing about history of, you know, towns like Springfield. It's getting into that DNA. And, you know, Rob, appreciate you sharing your family story. And some of that probably is in your DNA too, like in a way, you know, you're helping people and, and businesses today. But yeah, uh, tell us about like the SBDC, the Small Business Development Center.

R**Rob Alexander** 07:19

Sure. So our SBDC is not a unique invention. There are SBDCs all around the country. There's about 1,000 of them. Here in Ohio where we are, there's about 23.

J**Jason Duff** 07:31

Okay.

R**Rob Alexander** 07:31

So all SBDCs help people start and grow small businesses. They're usually housed within a university. We are not. We're kind of a unicorn because we've been around longer than almost every other SBDC. We were an SBDC before SBDCs became a real thing. Wow. So we don't have a host. We're not in a university. It allows us to be nimble. So we do, we do the same thing all SBDCs do because they have the same grant that we have. Okay. But then we also have this other side of what we do, which is a lot more economic development, making loans, being what we call a gap lender.

J**Jason Duff** 08:06

And is when you talk with a new business owner, some of the common questions that come up Financing is probably on that top 3 list or top 5 list. Yeah. And what are the kind of questions that you get? And then what are ways and tools that you can help people or refer them to others if you can't help them?

R**Rob Alexander** 08:27

Well, one thing I know is the 2 biggest reasons why so many people have this dream of being their own boss, but then they don't do it. Number 1 is they don't have the financing to do it. We as a nation are not good at saving. We've just been getting worse and worse and worse over the decades. That's right. The second reason is they just don't know where to turn for help. They've been doing whatever it is they do—welding, landscaping— their whole life, 10, 20 years, and they're good at that. But when you run a business, you wear a lot of hats.

J**Jason Duff** 08:56

That's right.

R**Rob Alexander** 08:57

So they don't, they don't know how to wear every one of those other hats. And that's what they come in here looking for help. And probably the main question that starts with is, how do I do this legally? They don't want to get in trouble.

J**Jason Duff** 09:07

Okay. Yeah. Interesting. So when you say like, How do you answer that question if they say, I, you know, how do you do it legally?

R**Rob Alexander** 09:15

Yeah, well, it's a, it's a lot simpler and cheaper than people assume. So we just walk them through their options in choosing a structure. You know, what's the difference between a sole proprietor and an LLC and a corporation? And, and how can you get in trouble if you're not an LLC if someone then sues your company? And there's not that many steps after that. And, and really, Ohio is a great place to start a business because it's \$99 to get your LLC.

J**Jason Duff** 09:39

\$99.

R**Rob Alexander** 09:40

Yep. Maybe \$25 if you need a vendor's license and go get some insurance. I mean, that, that's the cost. There's maybe one or two other steps if you don't have employees. It's, it's not hard. And people will pay a lot of money to attorneys or LegalZoom to go do something that we can do for free with them. That we don't charge at SBDC. We've never charged a dime to a business owner.

J**Jason Duff** 10:04

So you don't— they don't come in and have to write you a big check?

R**Rob Alexander** 10:07

No. Some ask. Some ask if they can pay me. Yeah, I have to tell them I'm not allowed. Yeah, that would be nice. Unfortunately, they've been paying for this their whole life. Their tax dollars have been what fills our coffers. The 20 different coaches that I have on my team, they're not volunteers. They get paid and they're good at what they do. But it's because of tax dollars that we do this.

J**Jason Duff** 10:31

So this is not some kind of cheap program, you know, like it's not just, you know, a lesser value program just because it's free to the user. These are, you know, professionals in their, in their work. But you, you mentioned coaches, you know, so that's, I assume that's one way you do, you know, coaching. But what are the other ways that you engage with those entrepreneurs that come to you?

R**Rob Alexander** 10:50

We really do 3 things. One-on-one coaching is the thing we want them to do because we can get very specific, very strategic based on their situation and what it is they're trying to create. A lot of people, the front door they choose though is to come to one of our group trainings, whether that's a marketing masterclass or mine, which I call BYOB, but it's not the fun BYOB. It's the be your own boss.

J**Jason Duff** 11:13

Oh, okay. But that could be fun. That could be fun too. Be your own boss. I'm like, I understand why everyone's coming to your group parties. Like, that's the secret right there.

R**Rob Alexander** 11:21

And they're going to walk away with value from those seminars, but. But my goal is that we light this fire and get them to realize that if you had a coach walking with you through this journey, your chances of succeeding are a lot higher. So we got the coaching, we've got the group classes, and then we got the lending. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 11:40

In the types of group sessions, are there particular themes? Are they the same kind of training? I mean, how— if someone's just listening that maybe isn't comfortable getting that one-on-one yet, Um, what are some of the, the group trainings kind of called and, and how would they get involved?

R**Rob Alexander** 11:57

Yeah. Most SBDCs have certain ones that they do regularly. My BYOB, for example, I do that every single month. We do, um, a back office basics quarterly, a marketing masterclass quarterly, and, and a sales related one quarterly. And we've just been doing those for the last 2 years because we really wanted to hone those in, make them great. Prior to that, everything was these one-off things. We might do a LinkedIn one or a Facebook advertising one or a small business loan one. And they're all good, but I mean, you spend 10, 20 hours developing curriculum and after an hour and a half or 2 hours, it's done. So we wanted to have the good ones that are in high demand. But then once those are developed and now they are, we're going to go back to some of those niche ones that we might just do once or twice. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 12:46

That's cool. That makes sense.

R**Rob Alexander** 12:47

And every SBDC does these. I mean, they're all going to have bookkeeping ones and Startup 101 marketing classes, stuff like that.

J**Jason Duff** 12:55

Yeah. Now, after being there in Springfield for a little bit, have you seen any of those stories play out? Like, do you have any, like, success stories that you'd like to share?

R**Rob Alexander** 13:04

Oh, sure. We just put all these canvases on our walls of business owners who either got their start at SBDC, or, or we became part of their journey along the way. Um, it's tough because what everything we do is so confidential. So unless they've given me permission, I can't talk about a whole lot of stories. Yeah. Um, but they're out there. Uh, it's the wild, the wildest stuff. People can start businesses in all kinds of niches. So, you know, I can have someone come in who wants to start a pole dancing fitness business, which is a thing.

J**Jason Duff** 13:40

No, it is a thing right now. It's trending in fitness.

R**Rob Alexander** 13:43

And then right after that, someone comes in and wants to like crossbreed pythons. Sure. To want to make different, different colors and variations.

J**Jason Duff** 13:50

Yeah, sure. Probably see some crazy stuff.

R**Rob Alexander** 13:52

Yeah. And so somehow we've got to be the experts on all these things, but, but not really. Every business has the same fundamentals. We still have to market, we still have to make sales, we still have to understand human resources. So I don't need to be the expert on breeding pythons. That guy is.

J**Jason Duff** 14:06

Well, I'll share a success case that we have had at Small Nation. You know, we work to fill empty spaces. And here in town, about 2 years ago, we acquired a group of 5 storefronts and 7 apartments that the building was in really rough shape. And in fact, when we bought it, we had a problem with bugs. The worst, according to our pest control inspector, this building had the worst roach infestation that he had ever seen. And he came back to us and said he was actually smiling about it and happy about it.

R**Rob Alexander** 14:43

And I'm like, what?

J**Jason Duff** 14:44

Fun day at work. Yeah. Well, he said, this is the worst. I've been doing this for 20 or so years and this is the worst roach infestation I've ever seen. And he said, you have a really unique kind of roach. I'm like, well, tell me more about that. He's like, well, you're the roach that is in your buildings and there's lots of them. Is of the German varietal. And I'm like, well, why? What does that mean? He's like, well, they don't need a food source because they eat each other.

R**Rob Alexander** 15:10

Cannibal roaches.

J**Jason Duff** 15:11

Exactly. But my point is the building was really bad. You know, we luckily, you know, the roaches found a different home and moved on. But, uh, probably here down in the basement. Unfortunately, the guy did warn me they will move when I treat them. But like, uh, we, we wanted to see— we had this vision to remodel the building, to make it a unique destination experience in our town. And when I would talk to people about what other towns they love to travel to, Yellow Spring was— is always one of those towns on the top of the list. And I'm always like, well, what, what's magical about Yellow Springs? Well, it's the culture, it's the people, it's the diversity. And it's like, they're like, they're like fun and funky. And I wanted that for our town. And this building, working with architects, we re— you know, designed it and built a place called Rainbow Row Bell Fountain. And it's paying homage to Rainbow Row that's in Charleston, South Carolina. And if you've never been, like, it's this very bright and colorful display of row buildings. And, you know, it's one thing to create the rendering, but then you have to find the businesses that occupy it. And we had someone reach out once we posted a rendering and a for lease sign, and Tanisha McCrury, and I'll give her a shout out, she came to us really specific and said, I want to open up a candy shop. And, you know, when you're getting ready to enter a new business, you've never done this before. Yeah. You know, the— there's a big lease to potentially sign, and then it's all the things that you don't know, but you need to know. And one of the first questions that we always ask someone new is like, have you— have you been in business before? A lot of times you hear the word no. And then secondly, have you kind of put together a plan? A business plan. And she's like, I wouldn't even know where to start. Yeah. And that's where the Small Business Development Center, you know, Springfield— we're so lucky to have them in a short drive from Bellefontaine. And the work that Rob and his team is doing, um, we referred Tanisha there, and Tanisha went through one of Rob's programs. And, um, it was really surprisingly quick. Like, she— I think it was a period over about 3 to 6 months that she you know, attended a number of trainings and went through some modules, and you can maybe share more, but like she came back with confidence.

R**Rob Alexander** 17:25

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 17:26

With the capital that she was going to commit, she's going to leave her full-time job to start a business and use her hard-earned capital and her retirement savings to fund that. And, uh, what was so neat today of hosting Rob and his team in town, Tanisha at Candy Craze has been open up 3 months and it is now one of the most beloved businesses, not only in Rainbow Row, but the whole town. And just to see that and to see her be able to hire her first employees, to see her expand her hours. And then it had to be pretty cool for you, like walking in the shop today.

R**Rob Alexander** 18:01

It is. What she did is very visible because it's a retail store. It makes me wonder how many people were just sitting in a seminar of ours that are now living their best life, as they say. Yeah. And I don't, I don't even know about it.

J**Jason Duff** 18:15

Yeah.

R**Rob Alexander** 18:15

She, she came to my BYOB seminar and then after that she went to Back Office Basics to learn all the, the back office stuff. Um, and I, I tell people at the beginning of the class, I ask them what they want to get out of this. They tell me, but I tell them what I want you to get out of this is number one, that you understand the steps you need to take to start a business. That's probably why they're coming. Number two, that they know where to turn for help. They probably don't even realize they're gonna need a lot of help along the way.

J**Jason Duff** 18:41

Yes. And even once you have a business, you continue to, you know, yeah.

R**Rob Alexander** 18:44

You know, and then number 3, and to me it's the most important one, I want them to walk away confident that they can do this, motivated. So it's as much of a motivational seminar in my mind than it is an educational seminar.

J**Jason Duff** 18:57

And again, for listeners, this is free. Yeah. And so I think obviously, you know, this is beneficial for entrepreneurs to hear if you're thinking about getting started, you know, starting a business, you don't know how. Find your local SBDC, you know, near you and plug into those resources. But also, the conversation doesn't stop there. And, you know, at Small Nation, I think, I like to think that we take pride in helping entrepreneurs, you know, not only just fill our spaces, but helping them succeed, right? And so for developers listening and economic development professionals, you know, you don't just want to fill spaces with businesses that are going to close up shop. You have to fill them with businesses that are sustainable. And so, You know, plugging them into resources like this, I think it's a game changer.

R**Rob Alexander** 19:42

One of the things I said in, in Marketing Masterclass, and I think a lot of businesses know that it is a lot more expensive to acquire a brand new customer than it is to keep the ones you have. So why don't we invest more resources in keeping our customers? Well, isn't that true for a city or a village with their businesses? Yeah, it, it It is hard to attract brand new businesses to your town and it makes no sense if you're then not going to support them because if you can keep the ones you have and then add some sporadically, you're just going to keep growing. Otherwise you've got a hole in the dam and you're just pouring more and more water into it and it's just leaking out.

J**Jason Duff** 20:20

And you know, I think that speaks to, you know, Springfield as a city is to be able to support you in that way of making sure they're taking care of their entrepreneurs and people who want to start businesses there. But, you know, on our call, you mentioned that Springfield is a legacy manufacturing city. Yeah. And we know, you know, a lot of small towns in Ohio had their heyday at one point. We talked about it earlier, you know, famous people come from here. There's a lot of manufacturing and industry. And then at some point throughout history that has left and the status quo and the attitude has just been kind of mellow since then. So what are you, You know, how are you thinking about changing that, you know, that, that story and getting people excited again?

R**Rob Alexander** 21:04

I think for a city like Springfield or any legacy manufacturing city, that is not an easy thing to change. Yeah, because you've got people who have been raised by people who have been raised by people who have been raised by people who have always clocked in and out and had a boss and just showed up for a job. So, so the concept of being your own boss is a little foreign in a town that was built on factories where one employer employed so many people. At one time, Springfield had like the second largest factory in the entire world. There was only one bigger in, in the country of Prussia or something like that.

J**Jason Duff** 21:40

Wow.

R**Rob Alexander** 21:41

And so I think when manufacturing moved away, and it did, Springfield lost a ton of population, a ton of businesses. We were left looking for our identity. Bringing a big employer in, it's good. It brings tons of jobs in at one time. But the problem is when you lose one big employer, you're also losing a lot of jobs at one time. So I think what we need to do is figure out what is Springfield's identity? Does it need an identity? I've always felt like Springfield has this maker kind of feel. That we ought to lean into? How do we support people who want to make things?

J**Jason Duff** 22:19

Well, you look at the popularity of Etsy and people wanting to buy things that have a real legitimate story. Yeah. And it is right, there are people that are in the gig economy, they're, they're very talented makers designing art or furniture. And, uh, it is kind of how do we get into their homes to know that there is a path that they can grow and scale. How do you kind of think about that with the resources that you provide?

R**Rob Alexander** 22:51

When I first started, I know I was showing up in a shirt and tie, and I quickly realized that is not Springfield. It's a very blue-collar town.

J

Jason Duff 23:00

You may be— they probably don't trust you if you come in with a shirt and tie.

R

Rob Alexander 23:02

No, they definitely don't. Great.

J

Jason Duff 23:04

Because you're not authentic.

R

Rob Alexander 23:06

I make sure that when they're sitting across the desk, they know that we know what we're talking about, but they also don't think that we're looking down on them. So Part of this is understanding the culture you serve and becoming one of them. And that applies not only to blue collar, white collar, but more recently we're learning a lot more about how to be culturally sensitive and aware and to make sure that our team, they see people on our team who also look like them.

J

Jason Duff 23:34

Yep. Which is a big issue.

R

Rob Alexander 23:36

It creates trust.

J

Jason Duff 23:37

Well, we work in a lot of small towns and You know, we're trying to help those towns be able to provide big city amenities. And one of the conversations really has to be is like, how are we focusing to be more diverse and how are we focusing to be, you know, inclusive in conversations of people that may be different from you?

R

Rob Alexander 23:56

Yeah, it's very easy to say that we'll serve anyone who comes to us. And I've been guilty of saying that all along. We don't turn anyone away, nor do we treat anyone different. However, like when I went and looked at our data, there was huge disparities between how much capital we were getting into the hands of our minority clients, how many jobs those clients were creating. And that part made me sick and it made me realize, oh, something is probably broken. We've got to change our approach. And that meant changing our team. It meant also changing how we work with people. We needed to go where they were. They're not comfortable coming to big institutions. They don't trust them. Yeah, but they, they have the same dreams that anyone else does and maybe even more so because it's not as easy for them to go out and get the job of their dreams.

J**Jason Duff** 24:47

Yeah. Well, I want to compliment Rob and, you know, a number of organizations and people that are working with businesses and economic development in Springfield. A few years ago, there was a news story that came out about Springfield that was not positive. The major grocery store chain, in the area closed. And when that happens to a community, especially a large, you know, large one, then you become a food desert. And what inspired me about— instead of the community just accepting that, you know, yeah, the business closed, but we're gonna do something about it— they organized a business pitch competition called Springfield Hustles. And I got introduced to that group, and number one, they were creating great promo videos of highlighting like Hey, like, come enter your business in this competition. We have all this free money and resources. And I think at one point it was almost like 6 figures worth of like prizes that were being offered. And sitting and listening, they were very intentional about like, hey, we've got this food desert. We want to encourage people that have good ideas around serving food and providing food to community. Please come. And they did. And like, I, you know, drank fresh-squeezed juice that was made by a food truck. And you you know, I heard these really creative ideas for home food delivery services and things that, like, it was seeing that how entrepreneurship was stepping up to solve the gap that a really large corporation just didn't see the, the potential there. But I think the community's rallied around, and, and that a lot of those things have been healed because the right leaders, investors, people said, we're going to take this community back.

R**Rob Alexander** 26:23

Yeah, we're on the right track. It's There's been disparities for so long that there's no way we can expect something to change in a few years. But I think that people appreciate good faith efforts. And if we keep doing the right things, trust will be regained. We will start to level the field, as we like to say, and it needs to happen. It's not okay in a country this prosperous that we're leaving entire groups of people behind. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 26:51

Fair. Wow. That's awesome. And tell me a little bit about, you know, your guys' branch, is that the right way to say it, SBDC? Sure. Branch of the SBDC getting creative with partnering with other local nonprofits to build that trust with community members. Can you talk about some of the things that you're doing there?

R**Rob Alexander** 27:10

Yeah. So part of this is based on us applying for this million-dollar grant that only 51 organizations around the country got. We took the approach that because we felt like we don't have the trust, They can't look across the desk and see someone like us, these minority groups we're trying to reach. Instead of us trying to lead from out front, let's actually partner with 8 different nonprofits who do have those relationships, who do have those trust. Yeah. Let's empower them to hire someone who is kind of a half coach, half caseworker who's pointing them to all the resources that are out there to help them. And they will go to those meetings with them as an advocate. That made all the difference in the world. It was the secret sauce that was missing was that representation, the trust factor. So it's worked out great, honestly.

J**Jason Duff** 28:05

Yeah, and that's great for, I don't know, I just think there's all kinds of good ideas that can come from that. I'm an ideas guy. So immediately as soon as I heard that, I was like, Oh, that's, you know, great for nonprofits to be able to plug into a resource like the SBDC and provide that for their clients. It's a good way for people to trust the government. You know, if they have a hard time trusting the government, you know, suddenly you become, you know, their neighbor rather than, you know, this big scary figure, I guess.

R**Rob Alexander** 28:32

It shouldn't have surprised me, but people came from out of the woodwork. I just assumed there weren't very many Hispanic people wanting to start businesses or We have a lot of Haitians in Springfield, but we've only seen 1 or 2 come into our office prior to this. Well, have a seminar and do it in Haitian Creole and see how many there are. Do one in Spanish and see how many there are. Those were the most popular seminars we've done in the last couple years because there's never been anything for them. And like I said, it's not like they don't have dreams. Immigrants start businesses at almost twice the rate of someone born in the United States.

J**Jason Duff** 29:07

Wow. Yeah.

R**Rob Alexander** 29:09

So maybe we ought to invest in people like that who actually are willing to take a risk.

J**Jason Duff** 29:13

Yeah, that's quite the perspective, which can be controversial.

R**Rob Alexander** 29:17

Like, sure, we wanted to be someone who kind of stirred the pot and said, this isn't working. You're part of the problem. Guess what? We were too. But we were honest enough to admit it. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 29:27

One of the, our brightest success stories is getting a chance to work with Laura and Humberto that have opened up the Flying Pepper in our town. And they have a kind of Springfield DNA connection is Humberto immigrated from Mexico about 15 years ago. And started working in culinary at Clark State University and saved up all of his money and bought a food truck. And when Mother Stewart's Brewery opened up, he was like the big food truck there and went down, ate his food, met his wife Laura, and they as a team, um, not only just really passionate about serving authentic Mexican cuisine but also hiring and retaining in building up the people that work in their restaurant. And that's probably the biggest compliment is people from the outside that come to the Flying Pepper, which now they've moved from food truck to full sit-down dining, beautiful patio, beautiful bar, catering. And they're anchored in our coworking facility, which is Build Coworking Space. But they are like that example that, you know, are just lit on fire with entrepreneurship, have the hustle, the drive, the passion, and now bringing their culture and their food and making so many people happy.

R**Rob Alexander** 30:45

Yeah, all true. And the other thing that they bring is jobs for those groups that need them the most. If we help someone who just got out of prison to start a business, they're going to be a lot more inclined to hire someone with criminal records. If you've got a criminal record, it's very hard to find a job. Same thing if you help a Black-owned business and they can become a job creator. Now you're helping a community that needs those jobs as well. So it— yes, you bring culture, you bring more variety, but now you're also bringing wealth to communities that need it.

J**Jason Duff** 31:17

Love that. That's awesome. And I think it's an important conversation to have, you know. So I'm glad that you guys are having it, having it and bringing it here to Bellefontaine as well. All right, at this time we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. Come check out 600 Downtown Pizzeria in downtown Bellefontaine, where they cherish the art of making the most authentic, unique, and delicious world-famous and award- award-winning pizzas. Their team hand spins each pizza the old-fashioned way and only uses the freshest of ingredients. Come see why they were featured on the Food Network. If you are looking for a dynamic workspace in the heart of Bellefontaine, look no further. Build Cowork and Space is your destination for creativity and collaboration. With state-of-the-art facilities and a thriving community, this is where innovation happens. Join them today for as low as \$99 a month and build your success at Build Cowork and Space. I want to kind of dive into another new show segment here called Tour Takeaways. Uh, a little dramatic build here. Uh, so, but before the show today, you took a tour of downtown Bellefontaine. What were a few takeaways from what you saw and experienced here today?

R**Rob Alexander** 32:21

It took me a while to catch on to this, but I felt like things were placed intentionally. Like there was almost these little districts you had the Salon District where they're all like bunched up and it starts to make sense. You have, you have this district where there's several businesses that target children. And I thought, you know what? That's smart. Now there's a reason to go down there because there's not just one place to visit, there's multiple. And I think that the typical city or whoever does development simply creates spaces that someone could move into and whoever can pay the rent, That's, we'll put them in there. Right. And that doesn't always help that business owner because it was not, location's everything, right? Location, location, location. Well, what if we were smart about creating spaces that would attract a certain kind of business and then having some synergy? That part I love. Yeah. And I couldn't tell you how intentional that was. It has to be somewhat intentional. Sure.

J**Jason Duff** 33:20

Great observation. I was gonna say, I'll let you speak to that. Well, I'll be honest with you. The, uh, it was hard to do that in the beginning because, you know, businesses are very protective. Their, their business — and I'm sure you see this— is like their child. So if you have one coffee shop and the thought of another coffee shop coming to town, or if there's one hair salon and another one's opening up, one of the first, like, immediate reactions with some people is that competition is going to put me out of business, they're going to steal my customers. Well, we've actually found, and this has replayed itself over and over, that when your town has multiple versions that's providing services in that industry, you can still be your, your differentiator, your how your brand is differentiating your product. But like, you'd be— you then become known as a destination for coffee, for desserts, for boutiques or shopping, and You know, I'll use Springfield as an example with antiques. So one of the largest— I think it might be the largest antique mall in the state is, you know, right there in Springfield, Ohio. And there's another one right across the street. And I'm sure maybe in the beginning those owners— I don't know this, but this is just the natural reaction. It's like, well, oh my gosh, that competitor is opening up across the street. Yeah, well, I'll tell you, I think probably Springfield gets double the traffic for antiques because now They're planting the flag in the state to say we are a destination for this. Yep. And it is intentional and we're trying to get better. In the early days of redeveloping a town that had 80% vacancy on the first floor, it was hard to some cases turn down that office tenant that wanted to go next to the busy restaurant because it was just high visibility. But when you get retail clustered in the right places, you know, pizza and ice cream, you know, Witt's and 600, with those two things being together, they benefit from the traffic from each other, and they in themselves become a destination there. So I, I think if we can work with our towns and communities in planning, um, looking at where we want the parks, looking at where we want to put the right infrastructure, and then zoning is another tool, uh, and then working with developers that have a vested interest to see the long-term success of a building, of a property, of a district, of a neighborhood. And, uh, that's, uh, that's kind of what we're, we advocate for. Um, but I appreciate your observation because I think that it's, you know, this is, they weren't about year 15 of this. So this has not been a, an overnight thing. It's been an iteration of, of learning through that.

R**Rob Alexander** 36:03

Yeah. One thing you said reminds me of what I think business owners have a really hard time understanding is that they can't be all things to all people. You, you've got to figure out what makes you different or better. And it doesn't have to be a bunch of things. It needs to be probably one thing. So you could have multiple coffee shops right in the same area, but you got to figure out what makes your coffee shop different from those others. Um, and that's all it takes. I like pizza, and I'll get pizza from probably 8 different places, each one for a different reason based on that situation that day. And they all sell pizza to someone who likes pizza. Yep.

J**Jason Duff** 36:39

Well, and my favorite story, and we— one of the first podcast episodes we recorded was with Brittany Saxton of 600 Downtown.

R**Rob Alexander** 36:48

So just ate there for the first time.

J**Jason Duff** 36:49

What'd you think?

R**Rob Alexander** 36:49

Oh my gosh, so good. Yeah, you put pickles on pizza, you got—

J**Jason Duff** 36:55

you win my heart. Big deal. Yeah, it is the big deal, and it's actually the very big deal. Well, the, the, the thing about Brittany and her story, she was really the first project that was the catalyst that really got momentum and people thinking differently about downtown Bellefontaine. But we already had 13 other pizza places in Bellefontaine. So you can imagine when she said, I know, we're opening up a pizza place downtown Bellefontaine. First off, the negatives of why downtown? There's no parking, it's vacant, it's empty. And then secondly, wow, that's a novel idea. There's 13 other pizza places in town. And I'm so proud of her. And I think we need to highlight more success examples of like her that you tune out the, the things that don't matter. And you're going to get criticism, you're going to get negativity anytime you step out and do something that's different. How do you coach and help entrepreneurs when they're like, I feel so lonely?

R**Rob Alexander** 37:56

I warn them that if they're going to— I warn them that when you share your dream with people, there's a — you're going to get one of two responses, and neither one is good usually. One, they're going to tell you exactly what they think you want to hear, which is great. It builds your ego, but sometimes that can make you make the wrong decision.

J**Jason Duff** 38:16

Great point.

R**Rob Alexander** 38:16

The other one is, is they, they rip on it, like, and I think it's because so many people wish that they had the guts to take that risk and they just never have, and so they live with regret. And they don't want to see other people taking risks. Right. Neither one of those is good. You really, I think if you've got that dream, you ought to share it with someone, but make sure you share it with someone who understands what it's like to dream and to go after those dreams. And that's, you can find that at an SBDC. You're probably going to find that among other business owners. You just have to find your tribe of entrepreneurs because they're the only ones that are going to understand the journey you're about to take. And it's not an easy journey. It is lonely.

J**Jason Duff** 38:55

That's awesome. It's a great point. And you mentioned, you know, the early days of helping someone that's new and kind of getting started this, that the getting the legal structure, right? We talked a little bit about access to capital, and I just want to put a button on that because particularly at the SBDC, you have some unique resources that are different from traditional banks. Can you maybe highlight some of those funding partners and ways that people can get access to capital working with the SBDC?

R**Rob Alexander** 39:27

Yeah, I think what might be useful to listeners is that there probably are some programs out there that were designed to, to get capital into the hands of people who aren't going to get it through traditional means. The way we go about it in Springfield is if you go to a bank and let's say you need \$100,000, well, if the bank likes your idea, there's, They're not going to give you \$100,000. They're going to give you \$80,000 and you got to come up with \$20,000. Well, maybe you don't have \$20,000 or maybe you go to the bank and you've got a 650 credit score and the bank's like, well, that's just, it's too low. It has to be a 700. Well, does your dream die at that point? We get involved then because we don't want to see that venture not happen. That doesn't mean we're going to make a loan to someone with a 400 credit score. But in that case, a bank is only doing 60% of the deal. We're now doing 30% of the deal and, and the owner only has to come up with 10%, not 20%. And it's a low rate, low fixed rate. So we want them to succeed. We don't want to burden them with a lot of debt. So we're not like a bank in that our motive isn't profit. Our motive is prosperity in Springfield. So we're willing to take on more risk. And I would imagine probably a lot of other cities either have this or they you could have programs that are gap lenders. You need gap lending. Otherwise, you're only getting people who are already wealthy starting businesses.

J**Jason Duff** 40:55

And let's just say if I'm, you know, working on a business plan, and that's probably another thing that I just want to, you know, also emphasize that you guys do. You help people plan and develop and improve their business plans.

R**Rob Alexander** 41:09

Oh, yeah. I think it's one of those bread and butter things we do. We could probably have a conversation about the value of business plans. What are they good for? What maybe they aren't. But yes, we definitely do help.

J**Jason Duff** 41:21

So there's that piece of it and then getting access to capital. Can you speak just specifically because that's usually one of the top questions I get is, you know, if I'm an existing business or a new business right now, cost of capital, we're, you know, 20-year high for a lot of folks. And so the concern with that is that that's going to slow down entrepreneurship. What are some, some tools that you have if someone's listening or like, I'm looking to start a business or I'm looking to grow my business, it's been existing and I'm looking to get more capital?

R**Rob Alexander** 41:53

The answer may not be one people want to hear a lot of times, if I'm being really honest. So many people come in asking about, well, how do I get grants that help women or veterans or minorities start businesses? And we always have to tell them like, you're probably not.

J**Jason Duff** 42:06

They That's a misnomer. A lot of people think like there's just this free— sorry, I'm bumping this out. There's this free stuff. It's not really free.

R**Rob Alexander** 42:15

Well, it's like lottery. Somebody does win the lottery, but 99.9% of people who play it don't. So yeah, you could get a grant, but you probably won't. And for a lot of people, if they haven't saved money, it's going to be hard to get a loan as well. It's going to be hard to get investors if you're not a kind of a business that's going to scale really quickly. So where does that leave you? In most cases, honestly, we're talking to people about how to start a business on a small scale and grow it organically, do it the safe way rather than trying to be big right from the get-go. It doesn't work for every kind of business. And that's just the tough reality. But what I've learned is that almost by far how businesses are funded are just your own personal savings and credit cards. Right after that is family, friends. And if you want to throw in fools, you can. Banks are way lower on that list. Way lower. It shocks people how low they are.

J**Jason Duff** 43:12

And it's harder. It's harder to get a bank loan.

R**Rob Alexander** 43:14

They're not in the business of taking risks. And banks understand that half of all businesses fail in the first 5 years. So why would you want to make a 10-year loan or a 5-year loan when it's a 50-50 chance they were not even going to be there?

J**Jason Duff** 43:26

Yeah. And that's something we've talked about on the podcast before with Richwood Bank. You know, we had him in here just talking about just the reality of, of lending from a bank's perspective. You know, they're going to look to see that you're successful somewhere else before they're, they're safe. So that's where you have to, to learn about those other, other sources of capital.

R**Rob Alexander** 43:44

Yeah, I mean, it's the great part of what we're doing because we had a client come in whose credit score, it was in the 400s, but he, he knew— we knew that he knew the business inside out. He's grown up in that business. And we got, we worked with him, we got his credit score up into the almost 600. And then we took a huge risk because we believed in him. Yeah. And he went, so that allowed him to purchase a food truck. I'm talking about Cheetos Tacos. I can actually talk about him. I got permission. Cheetos Tacos food truck took off so fast that within a year, he's now in a bricks and mortar location in our coworking space in downtown Springfield. And he is, he is living his dream now. And it all happened in one year because he spent a lot of time with SBDC coaches and because we took a chance on him when banks would have never touched it.

J**Jason Duff** 44:36

Yeah, I love that. And we've got to replicate more of those examples.

R**Rob Alexander** 44:41

Yeah. Yeah. If half, half of, more than half of everyone, everyone has thought about owning a business. Wow. Why for 40 years have we seen entrepreneurship actually declining? It's gone up since COVID but for 40 years it declined when so many people want to do it. What's the disconnect?

J**Jason Duff** 45:04

Hmm. Yeah. Interesting thought. If someone wanted to take advantage of the SBDC in their area, how might one go about doing so? Where can I find you?

R**Rob Alexander** 45:13

Search engine optimization is usually pretty good for SBDCs. Like, if you type Springfield in business, we're the number one result. Probably if you say SBDC near me, you're going to find a location that's probably within driving distance no matter where you're at in the country. That's probably the easiest way. There's a national association, America's SBDC. There's directories of all SBDCs on that kind of a website as well.

J**Jason Duff** 45:38

Cool. Yeah, thanks. And that's what, you know, I would encourage entrepreneurs who, you know, are resonating with these first steps and like, yeah, That's me. I need to, I need some help in this area. You know, go and actually take advantage of some of those, you know, get a group training, get some, some one-on-one coaching. That's a, that's an amazing resource, you know, that's available.

R**Rob Alexander** 45:56

And I would say it is not just for startups either, which is a misconception I think everywhere. It actually works best for existing business owners. They're the ones who create the most jobs, access capital. That's where economic development primarily happens. And I think that a lot of business owners feel that if, if I need to go to an SBDC, if I need to have a business coach, that makes me a weak business owner. I think just the opposite. I mean, Tiger Woods still had a golf coach, but he was the best golfer in the world. You need someone who helps make sure you're working on your game, on your business.

J**Jason Duff** 46:32

Well, and that we've talked about that before with a number of entrepreneurs that you get stuck in the trenches working in your business. And it's hard until you have a coach or you dedicate a time within your calendar to work on your business. But probably the best investment is, is when you're getting new knowledge and meeting new people and even just having others that are filling up your fuel tank. Because this, this is not easy. This is really, really hard. Uh, that they— the, the SBDC and the kind of people that are connected They're like what you said earlier, Rob, like find your tribe. It's find other people that will listen, that will build you up when you are struggling, and they'll also give you honest, direct advice when you need it.

R**Rob Alexander** 47:17

Yeah, I have people who will call me to celebrate successes with them because it's not something they want to blast out on social media. It's not something they want to necessarily tell their employees about, or they call me when it's really tough too. Again, who do you talk to about that stuff? I'm sometimes that person for them. It may be other business owners they've met at a seminar, but you do need that person.

J**Jason Duff** 47:39

Yeah, that's awesome. Well, thanks so much for just sharing and highlighting the SBDC. You know, there's a lot of great content in there for, like I said, not only entrepreneurs, but also developers and just economic development professionals anyway. But what is one professional development resource that has been impactful to you?

R**Rob Alexander** 47:59

I, uh, I watch a lot of YouTube videos. All right. I've learned how, how to use YouTube. It was different from how my kids used it. I, so I subscribed to certain, uh, channels. Um, there's a particular podcast that I listen to a ton. It's Amy Porterfield's, um, I want to say Marketing Made Easy. Maybe that's what it was called. Amy Porterfield, though, she taught me how to do email marketing. She taught me about marketing funnels. And then I, I listened to that podcast. I heard all these other experts, and so I could tune into them. I had an hour-long commute, so I feel like I got a master's degree in email marketing. I love that. Before I started this job at SBDC. And, and so if you have not discovered podcasts as a way of growing as an entrepreneur, yeah, find one in an area where you're not strong and just listen to that for a year. Yeah, you'll become an expert.

J**Jason Duff** 48:53

My dad calls it redeeming his time in the car. Oh, I like that.

R**Rob Alexander** 48:56

Yeah, I miss my hour-long commute. Honestly, sometimes I'm like, I'm not consuming as much content because I have now a 12-minute commute.

J**Jason Duff** 49:03

Yeah, I was driving out here to Bellefontaine every day. I was doing the same exact thing, just furthering my education. So thanks for sharing that. And then where can people find you, follow you, keep up what's, what's happening with the Springfield SBDC?

R**Rob Alexander** 49:15

Yep. Again, search engine optimization is good. Springfield Business, you'll find us, but SpringfieldSBDC.com is our website. We have a great website and it can get you connected. If you happen to be in our area and want to work with us, there's an easy way to just fill out a short form and request a meeting. It never hurts to just have a meeting. Why not try and get free resources at your local SBDC before you go pay someone else to help you.

J**Jason Duff** 49:43

Yeah, that's awesome. And if you head down, if you've not been to Springfield recently, you've got to get down and check out lots of, uh, new things. Of course, Cohatch in the marketplace has been a great addition in the community. Uh, there are two Winans Chocolates and Coffee in Springfield. So Winans, we've had, uh, Wilson on the podcast before, and, you know, 5th generation family business that continues to do some great things in the region. But Um, yeah, it's on the move, and, and it is one of those things people like Rob and, uh, a lot of artists and entrepreneurs and, and people— and I always love that term with Springfield Hustles— people that are hustling and doing good stuff. So, uh, thank you again for— today was a day of sharing lots of resources. There's a lot of clips that I hope we can break down into some nuggets that a lot of people ask that Rob just provided some great advice and tools of how to get plugged in and how to, you know, really be resourced correctly. So thank you for that today, Rob.

R**Rob Alexander** 50:45

This was fun. Thanks for having me.

J**Jason Duff** 50:46

Yeah, thanks, Rob.

E

Ethan DeLeon 50:46

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation Podcast. We hope that conversation proved valuable to you. And if you enjoyed it, be sure to share the episode and follow the show on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or your favorite podcasting platform. You can also subscribe to the Small Nation YouTube channel if you prefer to watch your episodes. Follow Small Nation on social media and we'll see you in the next episode.