

Episode 52

📅 Wed, Nov 15, 2023 10:00AM ● 1:00:28

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

legacy entrepreneurship, family business, small town Ohio, Huntsville Ohio, generational wealth, retail experience, Peachtree Books, collectibles retail, Queen of Hearts chocolates, Bellefontaine, work ethic, customer service, multigenerational connections, reinvention, gift shop

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Shary Duff, Ethan DeLeon

E

Ethan DeLeon 0:00:05

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 to 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. Thank you, Ethan. Welcome, guest. Uh, today is an exciting day on the Small Nation Podcast. Uh, I am going to be on my best because my mom, Sherry Duff, is in the studio today. So welcome, Mom, to the show. Thank you. Well, coming into this, I was thinking of all the tough questions. And for a lot of our listeners, you know, we've recorded 50+ episodes. And one of the popular episodes was people kind of hearing from my father, Scott, and providing a perspective of family business, which a lot of our guests that we've had on the show have shared that they either were exposed to small business growing up or they they were connected to a friend that maybe had a family business. So, um, I just, uh, I'm excited to have my mom because she has been a tremendous important part of my life growing up. And also, I'm gonna have her share a little bit about her background, uh, of how she became an entrepreneur and, uh, took some time off and then has started some new businesses today. But Mom, tell us a little bit about Before I was even thought of, uh, you grew up, um, your last name was Snap, and you grew up, uh, to parents that had how many brothers and sisters?

S

Shary Duff 0:01:43

I had one brother and once—

J

Jason Duff 0:01:45

oh no, your parents.

S

Shary Duff 0:01:46

Oh, my parents. Yeah, Dad had, um, 10 siblings, right? And Mom was an only child. Or no, and Gene.

J**Jason Duff** 0:01:54

Well, and the thing about it is, to your parents growing up, um, particularly our Grandpa Dick, having that many brothers and sisters That had to be tough growing up in a little town of Huntsville, Ohio.

S**Shary Duff** 0:02:07

And, and coming out of the Depression and Depression years, I mean, they knew what it was like to be cold. They knew hunger, and they knew what it was like to sleep 5 kids in a bed. And it was a completely different world than what we see today.

J**Jason Duff** 0:02:24

And, you know, give listeners some perspective. Huntsville, Ohio is the definition of small town. One stoplight, one gas station. And, you know, growing up there— because not only were— did your parents grow up there, but like generations of our family are from that town. And so you mentioned, uh, you know, your father Dick's, you know, family, and then your mother Evelyn, uh, she grew up on a farm, beautiful farm.

S**Shary Duff** 0:02:54

Grandma and Grandpa Beard were were big farmers, worked hard from sun— sun up to sunset.

J**Jason Duff** 0:03:01

The thing I remember most about grandparents and great-grandparents was gardening.

S**Shary Duff** 0:03:06

Gardening was big.

J**Jason Duff** 0:03:07

It— why is that? Why was that such a big thing growing up in a small town and having a garden?

S**Shary Duff** 0:03:14

Well, you're still looking at folks that came out of the Depression, good farmers that made money go far. You canned including meat. And it just was a way of life. You didn't think of anything else. You didn't go to the grocery store to buy those things. You didn't eat apples and fruit if they weren't in season. Even in my generation, I remember a friend of mine coming to the house saying, oh my gosh, you have grapes at your house! And, um, I can't believe you have grapes. And this wasn't somebody that was from a poor family. She was from the same kind of folks I had, but that was a luxury, and you didn't get fruit that was not in season. Our parents didn't buy it unless it was from the fruit trees or the garden, and that's when you saw a lot of canning and, um, preparing for the winter.

J**Jason Duff** 0:04:05

And, uh, you lived near Woods, and, uh, you know, at the time, um, your parents decided to chart out and start a business of their own. Right? So Grandpa sold cars, and then he charted out in the insurance business working for someone else, and then had the opportunity to buy the agency. And about the time that you were in, you know, middle school and high school, he took over his own insurance agency. What was that like?

S**Shary Duff** 0:04:37

Um, men during that period of time weren't real present in the household. Your mom was who handled everything. And, um, he was a great father, but he just wasn't real present. Um, and you understood that. Mom didn't work, didn't have a car till I was in first grade. And, um, they just did their best.

J**Jason Duff** 0:05:09

And you had, uh, two other siblings. Yeah, an older sibling and a younger sibling.

S**Shary Duff** 0:05:15

Yeah. And, um, who are deceased now. And we lived a great life in Huntsville, you know. You didn't hear anybody fight, cuss, or scream. Um, it was pure and wholesome. You played outside. There was a woods behind our Huntsville house in Huntsville Herb and Edna Hall were great folks, and they had a beautiful woods. We would walk through the woods to get to school. We walked to school every day.

J**Jason Duff** 0:05:43

And I think that's a perspective for people that have never visited Ohio, let alone a small town, when they're hearing some of this, it's like, how is that even possible? Yeah, right. But I think part of what shapes you in those experiences is the, the, the connection that you have, um, to your friends, your neighbors, your family, but also some of the hardships. I mean growing up, um, with Grandpa not being in the house a lot and the pressures of— and you've— I've had some of these conversations— the pressures of building a business. Every bit of money in the household was being reinvested in the business, right?

S

Shary Duff 0:06:24

Well, during those years, my brother had been burnt really bad by, um, a vaporizer at the age of 2, so 70% of his body were third-degree burns. So he had constant surgeries. And lots of pain with mom and dad, but they handled it well. I don't remember it as a child as a time of hardship because it was such a simpler world. You would walk down to get gas. I remember often walking to Earl Martz's grocery store to buy meat and supper and take it back. Mom would cook, and it was delightful experience. It was really like Mayberry. You know, when you watch Mayberry RFD, it was just like that where Tubby owned the gas station. And when you go by, you could get a Tootsie Roll for \$0.05. And, and everybody knew everybody. And it was powerful. We rode our bikes, we played with neighbors. And you're right, those connections. And I've got to revisit a lot of those folks again, being back in retail and the joy that I get and have it's amazing, the connection, because we still are so connected. Um, just this week, um, a little gal that came in— well, her grandma and I were majorettes together, and her mom and dad were best friends with my mom and dad. I mean, I got to tell this 19-year-old girl about her great-grandparents she had never met.

J

Jason Duff 0:07:53

Wow.

S

Shary Duff 0:07:53

And I had the whole story, from him singing in church to, um what great folks they, they were, what tremendous folks they were and how kind they were. And I mean, it was mesmerizing to both of us. And I remember so much ending that conversation. Thank you for giving me that back. And, you know, she came from good folks. So, and again, my classmates from kindergarten, they've all shown up, even the kids from Lakeview that we were so afraid to meet when we left Huntsville to go to Lakeview when we merged in 6th grade. It's been a powerful connection, and we get so busy in our lives that we forget those connections. And, um, it's fun to take pause just to say thank you. Thank you for coming in. Thank you.

J

Jason Duff 0:08:44

Yeah. So majorette— what it— what it— for people listening, what's a majorette?

S

Shary Duff 0:08:49

Well, we all went to Bell Center to Miss Cheryl Newman, who was like a Miss America, literally. She had carried some of those beauty pageant titles. And, um, she taught us all baton, and that was a big sacrifice for my parents and all of us to go get baton lessons. And so there were a crew of us from Huntsville that kind of stayed because it was all school districts, not Ben Logan, because it was in Bell Center. So we stayed with it, um, right down to Susie Buckenroth. And I recounted this story yesterday to this little gal because we were marching down this, this, this, the county road and being a parade, practicing for our parade, and a car just came over the hill and almost hit us. And, um, we didn't get in trouble because the, the gentleman had been drinking and we didn't get turned in, but we almost killed him.

J

Jason Duff 0:09:45

Well, there is a rumor that at some point you actually lit fire on your batons.

S

Shary Duff 0:09:52

Yeah, talk and make— talk about making your grandfather crazy.

J

Jason Duff 0:09:57

Yeah, who owned an insurance agency. Yeah. Well, the other thing, you were a drummer as well, right?

S

Shary Duff 0:10:02

I was a good drummer. Yeah, I was a good drummer.

J

Jason Duff 0:10:04

All right, I'm just waiting for the rock band to actually come back.

S

Shary Duff 0:10:06

Yeah, I would like to do that again. That's— I'm probably not finished with that yet.

J

Jason Duff 0:10:10

Yeah, well, uh, you know, we fast forward. So you met Dad, and of course you guys decided to have a family, and You know, you married into a family business. Uh, the time, uh, you know, we operated a sand and gravel operation, a stone quarry. And when my dad graduated high school, um, he shared on his podcast that they wanted to find a way to sell more stone, which our family mined. So they started a ready-mix concrete operation. And, um, at the time, like you mentioned what your dad went through of kind of being not, not really able to be as present. But that was probably similar in the earlier years of the marriage and also having children, was it not?

S

Shary Duff 0:10:53

Yes, but we were still, um, my generation of women, the first generation to really break out in entrepreneurship and business, still, um, we were used to conventional. So that wasn't, um—

J

Jason Duff 0:11:10

so you took a job at Farmers Bank, right? Was that easy? Was it easy for you to get that job and to, to work? You said breaking out— was that unusual?

S

Shary Duff 0:11:23

Yes, because I was probably the first woman in the Duff family to ever work outside the Duff businesses. And, um, no, we were young and fun and we were married. You know, we started— I started dating your dad at 14 and he was the love of my life in that respect. And No, no, I don't remember that. Um, we went to work and, and you learned, and it was a new way of thinking. But, um, everybody started to work then. Your dad made \$164 a week. We lived in the Bell Addition, which at the time was good money.

J**Jason Duff** 0:12:07

And, um, Yeah, so when you bought a home— we're watching the news today about interest rates, and you had a chance to, to build a new home in the Belle Edition, which is kind of a—

S**Shary Duff** 0:12:21

we didn't do that. We bought a home that a home ec teacher and her husband had built but never lived in. Things had changed for them, and we paid \$34,000 for our first home. It was a nice ranch, beautiful.

J**Jason Duff** 0:12:33

Your interest rates, weren't they really high at the time?

S**Shary Duff** 0:12:36

Yeah. Yeah, I worked at, um, at the time then you were looking at 18, 19% interest.

J**Jason Duff** 0:12:42

So we're talking about today, and that's, that's an— yeah, a perspective. Yeah, starting a family, and a lot of people that are listening are in that same boat. They want to buy their house and we're at 8% interest rates today, but there were families at the time that bought homes at 18% interest rates.

S**Shary Duff** 0:12:58

Right, right. And so, um, yeah. I mean, it was a modest, very sweet house. And, but we worked and your dad started working very young and he had a huge work ethic and the business came first. I mean, that's the way it was. And that was okay at the time. Maybe I didn't always understand that. And family businesses are horribly challenging, especially I think for in-laws or outlaws as I call them, because it's always kind of trying to figure out to find a place to fit and be, and maybe not understanding, um, the full aspects of a family-owned business. There's so much psychology to it. There should be a good, good book or a seminar that you can go to. And one of the things that I learned by starting my own business was learning complete compassion for maybe Scott and other men that put in a 50, 60, 70, 80-hour week, which is what he did. And that may not— that may be peculiar to this generation because I still want to do that. I'm still working at midnight because I love it, but I don't know how else to make my businesses work now. You know, starting from scratch and doing what I'm doing is a risk, and I'm aware of that, willing to take it, but I'm very passionate and very serious about the fact that these businesses matter. You know, you just can't throw money out there and not have it come back. But the great thing about entrepreneurs is we have that in kind. I was joking before I came here with Dan from Heirloom Cabinetry, and I looked at him and said, "Boy, everybody wants money. The money's going out, the money's going out." And we kind of sat and he said, "Yeah, you know, I never dreamed when I was, you know, doing this much business that the money would not be there." And there's just not a harder working young man. But it's true.

J**Jason Duff** 0:15:02

Well, and for those that are listening, you know, after, um, at some point you decided that you wanted to create your first business. Yeah. And you were working as a paralegal. You actually had some time where you got a legal education.

S**Shary Duff** 0:15:16

I worked, um, for Legal Aid, which was the armpit of law, and pretty much a social worker paralegal. And I loved it. And upon the death of one of the children, I won't go into the details because of confidentiality, a 3-year-old little girl, I just walked out and said, I can't do this anymore. I'm not making a difference. I'm not changing anything. And I walked past 3 buildings. Jeff Zell owned them at the time. And I went back to your dad and said, this community needs a bookstore.

J**Jason Duff** 0:15:49

And why a bookstore?

S**Shary Duff** 0:15:51

Marty Varian had started a lovely bookstore and she had passed. And it's like the same business as I do now. Books are culture. At the time, we didn't have a lot of that here. And bringing in books are magic, romance, joy, and fun. And we had 3 buildings. And I talked to her. I remember when I ordered the 30 2-foot neon rainbow. And your dad got to— and your dad got to Bill, and he did say to me, what the hell are you creating down there at Disney World? I should kind of—

J**Jason Duff** 0:16:33

well, and at the time, I don't think we knew— I don't think we knew how this business was going to evolve. But I think the period of time was in early 1990s, like maybe 1991. Um, you know, they acquired us 3 storefronts, uh, in downtown Bellefontaine, which, as Mom shared, just about 2 or 3 doors down from where Legal Aid, where she was working. So the, the vision, as I remember as a young person, was I would— you were going to lease out one of the storefronts to a finance company, and two of the storefronts, the other one was a dancing company. Yep. So, so really one out of the three was going to be your store, and then the other two were going to be leased tenants to pay for the acquisition price of the building. Well, I remember starting out like You know, mom hired a manager and then they went to a convention to learn about, um, how the book industry works. And you got introduced to a supplier called Ingram, which Ingram supplies, you know, bookstores all across the country. And then the box and shipments start arriving. So it was kind of fun opening up as a kid. There was the architecture section, there was the cooking section, there was the nonfiction. And so we were, you know, setting up the displays, getting everything ready that you're starting as a new entrepreneur. And from people on the outside, they think it's really easy.

S**Shary Duff** 0:17:53

What—

J

Jason Duff 0:17:53

oh my gosh, what are like all the stressors and the things that go—

S

Shary Duff 0:17:57

oh my gosh, I think, um, first of all, you know, at 65, when I go back and I, I realize what I'm recreating I have to find the balance of investment because at 65 you don't want to go into huge debt. I don't really want to work at Bob Evans at 70. Um, and, um, it's 90-hour work weeks, and I don't know how else to say that to anybody because I don't think you can make it work any other way.

J

Jason Duff 0:18:36

And to give some perspective, what is involved in that time? What are you doing?

S

Shary Duff 0:18:42

Um, the first thing you do is you present the ideas quite differently than you did. You, you young folks do with your education training. Your dad and I shot from the hip, and I'm very grateful to the family because it gave me capital and that capital came from family-owned businesses. I am so thankful and grateful for that opportunity that I could have capital in a small community and go in and hit every big hitter. I was no genius. The only difference between me and the average person at the time was I was very hardworking, but greater than that, I had capital. And I didn't have to work on secured loans, or, or, you know, because I had capital.

J

Jason Duff 0:19:34

And that is the gift of the, the entrepreneurship of businesses and the sacrifice that previous generations —

S

Shary Duff 0:19:45

absolutely.

J

Jason Duff 0:19:45

I think that there's a, a misunderstanding that family wealth is just given. Uh, oh my gosh, it is earned with blood, sweat, and tears, and a tremendous amount of pain. I mean, oh my gosh, it's just, um, and I do think that's, that's awesome that, that— and I agree, I benefited from the same things in building my companies, from the sacrifices that family has made.

S

Shary Duff 0:20:11

But nobody gave us anything.

J**Jason Duff** 0:20:14

Well, you, you definitely— it almost comes with more strings attached because then you have to prove that the money that you're using, you're actually doing good with it. And it's not being wasteful. Because like, you can go out and buy fancy cars and, you know, vacations and jewelry, or you can find a way to reinvest in your town, um, or your business, right, your community, and hiring people. So there's a very big difference about how people view— there's probably expectations that come with that money as well about how you're going to handle it, things like that. So I mean, to keep walking us through the story a little bit, you, you open your first business, you got your, your store up and running, you're obviously working really hard in it. How did— how was it going for you? What change? Yeah, what changed from the bookstore and how that evolved from one storefront to three storefronts? Walk us over a period of about 15 years about how the store evolved.

S**Shary Duff** 0:21:04

You saw it and it became magic. And then we went from to Waterford Crystal, seeing that the tremendous support from this community— I can never never thank the folks in this community from Kenton to Sidney, Indian Lake, Ben Logan, West Liberty, DeGraaff. Those folks were so supportive. I was open 7 days a week till 9 every night. Those folks were incredibly supportive. Never did I dream we could hit, you know, over \$1 million in sales and repeatedly. Wow.

J**Jason Duff** 0:21:47

And I think the thing that evolved is those were the years that people collected things. Yeah, they cherished gifts. And so the things that I remember as the store was evolving from a bookshop is it started moving into collectibles. So things like Cherished Teddies and Precious Moments and Department 56 Villages. And so if you think back to your parents and grandparents that had those curio cabinets they collected and cherished things, and it was an experience to travel to towns and communities to find the collectible figurines or pieces that you didn't have. And, um, the thing that customer service and the things that Peachtree Books and Company— was the name of the business— that it offered is that it was a destination for shopping that you would not normally get in a small town but in a much larger city experience. And then if you can share some of the specializations that you had to accomplish to, uh, bring people to the store. I mean, you mentioned hours was one differentiator, right? What were some of the other kind of specialized services?

S**Shary Duff** 0:22:54

Our customer service was impeccable. Um, our events were fun. We had a Muffy Vanderbeers style show and sold \$10,000 in Muffy Vanderbeers in one day.

J**Jason Duff** 0:23:03

You probably want to buy a Muffy Vanderbeer. And they would be like, yeah, yeah.

S**Shary Duff** 0:23:08

10 to 12-inch Muffy Vander Bears. And we had a style show that made the front page of the Columbus Dispatch. All right, Louis Vuitton was in it, and we went out and you dressed like your bear.

J**Jason Duff** 0:23:20

Your bear.

S**Shary Duff** 0:23:21

I see. And so we had a big-time style show. It made the front page of the Examiner too, because these kids— and they were little, we're talking 5 and 6-year-olds— dressed like their bear.

J**Jason Duff** 0:23:32

Yeah. Well, and the thing about when you'd walk into the store, and this is part of creating the theater of the experience, which we do a lot of coaching with retailers about doing is you enter a space that has soaring high ceilings, beautiful lighting, the smells and the aromas of Yankee Candle, which is a major line, and Root Candle and all these other candle lines would hit you when you first walk in the store. And then the sparkly glittery elements of all the Swarovski crystal, the— it was part of— people would describe walking into it like out of this world. And then the other aspect, when Mom would hire people, she would hire artists and people that some other folks may judge harshly, but she would recognize that they had a gift and worked to plug in their gift into her eclectic retail experience. So the kids' room had a real 32-foot neon rainbow, and that was the expense that she mentioned that you know, my dad had a little tough time with. But then the real Yellow Brick Road got incorporated, the hot air balloons. So you felt like you were being transported into The Wizard of Oz. And, and I think that all of those kind of elements carried the store along with custom gift wrapping.

S**Shary Duff** 0:24:54

Oh, our gift wrapping would have rivaled any Neiman Marcus or any gift wrapping in the country. A quick Quick footnote on the hot air balloon basket. I bought that for \$350, went to Lima, load it in the truck, um, and, um, it was a mess. And there's a great footnote. Jennifer, that owns the One-Eyed Cookie Lab, grandmother Mary Wagner was an expert basket weaver. So I called her to come fix it. She made it Perfect.

J**Jason Duff** 0:25:29

Again, wow, it's involving people in your community that have a unique gift. Yeah. And you know, you ran that for how many years?

S**Shary Duff** 0:25:38

16.

J**Jason Duff** 0:25:38

16 years. And then, um, like life changes, hits, you decided to sell the business. Um, and also I think that confronted for, for you and Dad, um, after my sister and I have a younger sister moved out of the house you confronted your, your marriage, and the two of you decided that it did not make sense to continue that. Um, that was painful, that was hard, but, um, you took some time off.

S**Shary Duff** 0:26:03

It's never a good idea.

J**Jason Duff** 0:26:06

Well, we, we figure it out right as we go.

S**Shary Duff** 0:26:09

It's just never a good idea. And, um, I think one of the things that if I could pass on to you kids is that our biggest downfall was exhaustion. We weren't bad people, we were good people. But you get so tired and you, you take so many hits from the community. It's never peaceful unless you want to live in a shoebox, and that would have never been my choice. And those hits hurt you. As you age, you realize they're irrelevant and they mean nothing, that the earth is a school of knowledge, and we learn that none of those things have value, because to take them to heart and to, to process them to harm your life is so silly. It means nothing.

J**Jason Duff** 0:27:12

And I think that you heard earlier in the segment where we talk about the community is very supportive and is very loving, and you, you, it's kind of almost some days you leave on cloud nine, right? And other days you, like you said, you're exhausted and your fuel tank is on empty.

S**Shary Duff** 0:27:30

And people can be cruel. Yeah, I think it's a much crueler world now Um, and I don't think maybe people are crueler. I think social media amplifies it.

J**Jason Duff** 0:27:42

Amplifies it. Yeah, you know, well, and, and I, I think you, you know, you had that kind of rough transition. Um, it happens to families. I mean, more than 50%. And then you kind of said, hey, I'm, I'm gonna refocus on life. You know, my sister, um, now has 3 children, but she started having grandchildren. And so part of your mission became being a grandmother. As you look through life and those lenses, anything that surprised you?

S**Shary Duff** 0:28:13

Um, yes. The, the other side of that is we were not just taking care of grandchildren, we were taking care of parents. True. We were kind of the generation that had committed that we were not going to put our parents in nursing homes, and if my mom called 18 times a day, I answered 18 times a day. And my whole life, during about an 8, 9 year period, were my mom and dad and grandparents and grandchildren. And I was so blessed to be able to bring those grandkids to mom. And my mother lived for that. And to see her and spend time with her 3 days a week was the best time I've ever spent. My mom and I were very best friends, and there is not a day that I wake up that I don't miss her. You know, I lost my brother and sister and dog in the same weekend, and mom died a few months later. And the pain when you have that much loss so quick and so fast, no one can comprehend until you live through it. I'm blessed that I had training in meditation and stress management because I think I probably would have died too. Um, you know, about 8 o'clock at night, I would go into terror anxiety thinking, they're all gone. How did they all leave? I'm alone. How can this be? And then you'd go over, pop some wine, and the anxiety would go away for a couple hours anyway. And the realization that this was not the way I was going to spend my life— I was healthy and strong, and by all indicators, I'm going to be on the earth a long time— that's what brought me to the comfortable space and level to, to choices. Where I would have left and gone on one of the Mercy Ships. I called, but it was during COVID They train you 3 weeks. It's like the Peace Corps. The stints are 1 year. And, um, I was— could have easily gone in administration. They needed help. They have 3 ships. 2 were out, or 2 were working, one was out off the coast of Texas. And I really did contemplate that. And, and got close to doing it. Then COVID hit, and Ebola, and, and other things. And I just— I'm not a medical person, but I would be good in administration, and that's where I would have fit the best and could have worked. And I wanted to be off the coast of Africa. And then, you know, the, the thing comes up with grandkids and what And then what happened to me— and this is a true story, I actually told it at Kiwanis, and it's the truth— I was sitting in the basement really mourning the loss of my family and my mom the most because we were inseparable. And a caramel, hard caramel, weren't there—

J**Jason Duff** 0:31:40

were there—

S**Shary Duff** 0:31:40

caramel commercial came on. And there was a chocolate store, and this big fat fun chocolatier walks out with an apron and a chef's hat on. And this little boy ran up, um, to a storefront— interesting enough, not any different than the one I'm in. This little boy looked exactly like my grandson Tyson. And I said to myself, I want to do this. I got on my knees and said to my Father in Heaven, give me one more run, one more time. This is what I know, it's what I'm best at. I would rather go to prison than go to The Villages in Florida.

J**Jason Duff** 0:32:34

Not a snowbird. We've heard stories of The Villages. I'm glad you're not there. But no, I appreciate you opening up and sharing that. And so, you know, where we've ended up today, um, is a little over about a year ago, um, you charted out to open up a new retail store after being out of the game for 15 or 20— which I remember the pitch like it was yesterday. He came in, sat the whole Small Nation team down, did it just like any other, other client would. And we were tasting chocolate. Yes.

S**Shary Duff** 0:33:04

Oh my gosh.

J**Jason Duff** 0:33:05

And I'll be honest, I, I had, I had a lot of hesitations, not because I knew she couldn't do it, but how different the world is today. Yeah. And no longer collectibles. It's no longer in a lot of the same principles. And we'll maybe talk through a little bit of that, of, um, there's a lot that we would do back then that actually offends some people today. And it's, it's just a different environment, but The good news is, is that she, um, you know, Sherry, my mom, has started up the Queen of Hearts Fine Chocolates and Gifts, and it's located on Court Street, which is this beautiful— it's one of the, the oldest concrete streets in America in downtown Bellefontaine, right on the square where the historic Opera Block— I've been to Opera Block where the courthouse is, and it is magical. She's got some samples here today if you're going to hold those up, Mom. We've got some cameras here, but she's got, um, she carries like hundreds of chocolate options. But these are DeBrand chocolates, which are made in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Um, they've got, you know, amazing truffles. And when you walk inside the Queen of Hearts, um, tell us a bit about what's special about the Queen of Hearts.

S**Shary Duff** 0:34:15

Well, um, one, I still don't believe it's real. It, it's the most magical experience.

J**Jason Duff** 0:34:28

All right, at this time we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. If you are looking for a dynamic workspace in the heart of Bellefontaine, look no further. Build Coworking 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 Coworking Space. Brew Fountain's voted best beer bar in Ohio. Come visit their award-winning team in downtown Bellefontaine for fresh local craft beer, soups, salads, sandwiches, wine on tap, and handcrafted cocktails. And they're always available to cater your next event with their box lunches and platters. Cheers to Small Nation. You call it the grandma store. Why?

S**Shary Duff** 0:35:10

Well, when I started, Jason, you kept continuing to tell me that you had some serious concerns about my communication skills. That perhaps I would offend everyone I met.

J**Jason Duff** 0:35:21

This is true.

S**Shary Duff** 0:35:23

And, and that the work ethic was different and I wouldn't deal well with that.

J**Jason Duff** 0:35:28

Um, and people with their phones are everywhere.

S**Shary Duff** 0:35:31

And, um, shorty shorts, um, where there are parts of women's bodies hanging out. Um, and I did have some trouble with that. My underpants were bigger and I'm like, you can't wear that. And, and, and, um So I hired women 70 and up, women I knew, and, um, we did okay. Our technology skills were real bad. We, we kind of, um, Nick and, and, uh, Bo were, were amazing, and we leaned on Small Nation a lot. We had to clean up our language because our language is different than your language. And if I heard the word one more time, you disrespected me, and my eyes were rolling back in my head, and all I could think is, thank God you don't know what's— what I want to say to you, because I don't know folks that couldn't put in an 8 or 10 hour workday.

J**Jason Duff** 0:36:38

And I think that's the big shift that's changed is It's just, you know, being able to understand how to communicate with people and the speed, uh, expectation of speed, the expectation of quality. And the goal of what, you know, Sherry and her team want to create at Queen of Hearts is when the door opens and people walk in, you make them feel welcome. Now, to some folks that have never been trained or experienced that, when she asked them to step outside of the counter to go greet someone That makes a lot of typically younger people feel very uncomfortable because they've never been taught those skills. So there's a lot of translation between the expectations of customer service. Yeah. Of, you know, what was 20, 30, 40 years ago to what, you know, we're striving to teach the next generation of people.

S**Shary Duff** 0:37:28

Answering the phone. Yeah. If I did not pick up by the third ring at Farmer's Bank, I would've been reprimanded and then fired. If I continued. We don't answer the phone if there's a customer in the store. I'm like, you can't do both. Um, multitasking and knowing that your payroll— you know, I, I struggled with this in the last month. I had some folks in there undoing some boxes, and there were 15 boxes. What Peachtree— I got semis in, and I walked into these great folks And I said, it's 15 boxes, it's a 30-minute job. 30 minutes. 30 minutes. Now, someone my age did point out to me that I do act like a rabid dog sometimes, and that my, my level and work ethic of knocking folks down and getting stuff done may not always be appropriate, but I can't do it another way. Yeah, I don't know how.

J**Jason Duff** 0:38:31

I, I love you, you know, coming back into business and, and you're sharing your experience with all that because you're providing, you know, perspective to maybe my generation about work ethic, about, you know, expectations just in, in the workplace and things like that. But then also, you know, we're also teaching, uh, maybe technology or— oh, someone's phone. It's probably a business call. You can turn it off real quick.

S**Shary Duff** 0:38:54

Yeah, that's fine.

J**Jason Duff** 0:38:56

If it's a sale, she might end up taking it right now.

S**Shary Duff** 0:39:01

It's a Lifeline. They want to scan me.

J**Jason Duff** 0:39:05

Yeah, we'll see.

S**Shary Duff** 0:39:07

Oh boy, I don't need Lifeline now. I'm fine.

J**Jason Duff** 0:39:09

Okay, okay, quit it. That's good. But you know, okay, I think your music's playing now. Oh, that's your voicemail. Okay, good. So the Queen of Hearts, it's now been open and You know, you've learned a lot. Um, what, what are some of the other products and things that you're most excited about?

S**Shary Duff** 0:39:29

I brought in chocolate, um, from our baseline brand is, is DeBrand's, and it's one of the top chocolates in the country, and these folks are tremendous. They ship, their customer service is impeccable. And I've gone out a little bit, bought beautiful gourmet foods. Many are rated first and second at the New York and Paris food shows. They're tremendous. My pasta is all made in Italy. We're quick, we're fast. Now that I have some— Mark has come down, we're going to do a lot of cooking, cooking events. But it was my goal to bring things to a small town that you can't see here. We brought— normally see here. We've got chocolates from all over. With the economy the way that it is, I have brought in some lines with some better \$30 retails for serving dishes. I've been wise, I've just brought in Stonewall, which is a great food line. Again, Stonewall is top-notch. You can get a beautiful gift for \$25 already packaged. So I'm watching with this economy, with my love for McKenzie-Childs, and we do sell McKenzie.

J**Jason Duff** 0:40:41

And just to share, like, what's, you know, amongst the stuff that's up here We've got lots of different price points. So this designer look, Mackenzie-Childs. What is Mackenzie-Childs?

S**Shary Duff** 0:40:51

Mackenzie-Childs is an all hand-painted line. They branched out into home decor huge. Started out in the '70s by a couple in upstate New York and, and clay and everything is hand-painted and beautiful. Now since then, a lot of their items are no longer made in the United States. They're, they're, you know, like everything else in different countries, right? Outsourced. But the pottery itself is still made here. Um, you either understand it or you don't. It's not an in-between. And it's pricey because it's hand done. It's very specialized, you know.

J**Jason Duff** 0:41:32

Um, you go to a price point, that's more of a luxury item.

S**Shary Duff** 0:41:35

It's a luxury item.

J**Jason Duff** 0:41:36

But you know, you've got things up here such as Shirley's Gourmet Popcorn, which is a local item, right? Made in Bluffton, Ohio.

S**Shary Duff** 0:41:43

Exactly.

J**Jason Duff** 0:41:43

Now what I love about Shirley's brand is the Suter family. You know, Shirley was the ticket taker at the theater in Bluffton. Bluffton Theater. There's nostalgia for you. And, you know, they came back to, you know, cherish her legacy and now make all these delicious caramel corns and flavored corn. So that's now available here in Belfountain. And as we kind of go down the line, you've got more affordable options that are holiday themed.

S**Shary Duff** 0:42:10

Right. We brought in a line called Mud Pies Heavy. Because it's, you know, \$15 to \$40, and they're beautiful. The problem is when you deal with those companies, you get massive amounts. You can't control it. So having a small store has been a disadvantage because Peachtree was so large. We were looking at, what, 18,000 square feet versus 850. You kind of got to learn to balance that because you can't just buy one. So when I have sales, they're great because it's just the way it works. But we've developed, uh, it's a great price point. People can afford it. The next is Louis Chéri chocolates. These are amazing. This is quite a story. Louis Chéri moved to the United States in the late 1800s, and he was the first man to actually bring chocolate from Paris to New York. And these tins are absolutely gorgeous, and they're all themed, and they match all the designer bags. So Louis Sherry's Premier, very affordable. I think that's \$12.50. Really a nice line of chocolate, some of the best, again, in the world. Just fun, just a really fun line. And there's nostalgic. If we try to tell our story, not all folks wanna hear a story. We have to learn our customers. I thought I did such a good job a couple Saturdays ago. A man and a woman walked in and she was lovely and he seemed okay. I mean, I'm just in there telling my stories. Just, you know, yeah, just wonderful. And, and, you know, asking them questions, where are you from, where you — and, and he walks out and one of my, one of my employees was sitting there, boy, they sure are pushy. Like, I was, you know, it was like, yeah, you have to learn perspective because no one is used to being spoke to anymore. If my employees do not greet — it's the psychology, it goes back to Hug Your Customer, a book written in 19 — in the '80s where the psychology is greet that customer within 60 seconds. Yeah, you know, I mean, that's the psychology.

J**Jason Duff** 0:44:11

And when I walk into Queen of Hearts now, I can tell a difference of, of, of the customer service. You know, someone comes right up to you and shares everything. I mean, I know you know me, so you obviously take that time with me as well, but I've seen you do it with other customers as well. In fact, I think your, your episode of the documentary, I have some of that in there too. It's just like, that's the expectation for your store, and I love it.

S**Shary Duff** 0:44:30

You know, everybody and I, I go through, I've hired some really great young folks that have tremendous skills and ability, but they don't understand what that means. And no matter how many times you tell them they want to be behind the counter, they can't work for me. They may be great in technology, they may be great. And these are some folks with 4-year college degrees.

J**Jason Duff** 0:44:57

We have to— it's our responsibility to pass on and teach those skills. And it depends on— I need people like Sherry and other retail veterans to teach those skills, which a lot of times starts with the way that you present yourself. It starts with the, the eye contact, the body language, um, you know, and there's a difference between being pushy and being helpful and warm and friendly. And so I think it's finding that, and I think you guys do a really nice job of that. Um, the other thing that I, you know, want to, to compliment you on is, um, you now have just started your second business. Uh, it is not open yet, but by the time this podcast drops, it will be open, and it's called The Naked Goat Bath and Body. So this was the pitch that she made to me: I want to open a bath and body shop. I'm going to put a bejeweled bathtub in the window of this storefront and there's probably going to be goats that'll be out on the sidewalk.

S**Shary Duff** 0:46:01

All is true. It worked.

J**Jason Duff** 0:46:05

There's a lot of nos. There are a lot of nos. And I will tell you, just walked by the storefront today. It's been completely repainted. The bejeweled bathtub is in the store. It exists.

S**Shary Duff** 0:46:14

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 0:46:14

The goats have not arrived, but I think they may.

S**Shary Duff** 0:46:16

They're here and we've got them outfits.

J**Jason Duff** 0:46:18

This is why you get so many nos yourself from other people. It's because you get requests to put sidewalk. But hey, if it works, it works. Well, tell us about this store. What's special about it? This is number 2, store number 2.

S**Shary Duff** 0:46:30

Yes, it's store number 2. Um, this is one of my most exciting ventures in life. We have been working, um, Mark and I have been working diligently. I normally hit bed about 1:30 or 2, not because of anxiety. I don't touch alcohol anymore. Um, because I research things I love, which is the chocolate store and the food.

J**Jason Duff** 0:47:02

And are you on Instagram or Faire? What, what's— where do you like to get some of your inspiration and ideas?

S

Shary Duff 0:47:07

Faire is, is average. It's, it's your everyday average. So, um, I get a few—

J

Jason Duff 0:47:14

Faire is a, a website that a lot of small business retailers go to buy small amounts of minimums of, of high quality.

S

Shary Duff 0:47:22

Exactly. Like Grandpa comes in and he wants chocolate-covered peanuts, okay? I— none of my lines will waste time on chocolate-covered peanuts or a special mint. So I use Koblenz chocolates to cover those areas that my chocolatiers won't use, you know, because they're unfair, they're easy to get to. They ship nice, and it's lovely because Grandpa is not happy and does not think I'm a real store without chocolate-covered peanuts. He didn't want a gourmet chocolate-covered— he ain't gonna pay \$12 for it, you know. He wants chocolate. So I know that some of those items, which is, you know, they're made here in Ohio and they're nice folks, they're Amish, that I need items like that, that he picks up a \$6 bag. Why I am selling his wife you know, things she enjoys, because those things are important. He wants truck, so you know that.

J

Jason Duff 0:48:26

Where else do you get your inspiration? So—

S

Shary Duff 0:48:28

oh, thank you. Um, I go to the top lines in the world, things that—

J

Jason Duff 0:48:38

on the internet? Are you traveling? Okay.

S

Shary Duff 0:48:41

Um, I want you, you guys to feel this because you gotta feel it to believe it.

J

Jason Duff 0:48:48

Okay, you're showing us now. Oh, all right, I'm gonna put this on. Ethan, we should have put these on at the beginning of the episode and all just sat around in these. Was this a robe? Is that what this is? This is a robe. It's like a— so what are these?

S

Shary Duff 0:49:03

That line is one of the top lines in the country. QVC has made it a household word. It's called Barefoot Dreams. I have ordered 500 of these socks at \$15 each. They tell me that that will not be enough.

J**Jason Duff** 0:49:21

So the Naked Goat Bath and Body, when you walk in, it has a huge selection of bath and body products, which is anchored with, uh, Beekman 1803, which is a wonderful line of of bath and body products, and then you have candles. And then in the back there's a boutique pajama room that you offer a lot of very comfortable pajama items, right? Am I saying that right?

S**Shary Duff** 0:49:50

I offer two lines, and those two lines are the top two lines in the industry. They wash beautiful. This is a Lifetime robe. They're made incredible. And, um, That is called Softies, which is probably the second greatest line. They're not inexpensive because the fabrics are incredible. They wash beautiful. They're incredible. Um, along with the gift of getting Beekman, um, I couldn't be more pleased. We run about 98% clean, which means that when you hit some of the box bath and body stores A lot of, uh, that we used and heavy scent, the powders, we now know that they're a strong carcinogen, cause fertility issues and cancer. Nothing in my store, in my bath and body store, is poison, or my chocolate store. I watch very close. None of my food and my chocolates come from China. Now that's not true with the decor because, you know, that's just not the way it works. But none of my foods come from a country that is not regulated, along with my— right down to my fabrics. I'm not going to sell you product that is not good for you. Now, that— in case— retail of a bathrobe is \$109, but that's the— that bathrobe will last you forever.

J**Jason Duff** 0:51:28

Yeah, it's a very intentional, high-quality product.

S**Shary Duff** 0:51:31

Very high quality.

J**Jason Duff** 0:51:32

And you're opening, you know, right in time for the holiday season. And what we know about independent retail is you really depend on the last 3 months to make your hay.

S**Shary Duff** 0:51:42

That's right.

J**Jason Duff** 0:51:43

So for any people that are, are listening and you kind of deduce down advice that you would have for retailers today, how do you compete against Amazon and the internet? Like, what What are the differentiators today?

S**Shary Duff** 0:51:58

Well, it's a whole new world. At Peachtree, I was supported by the banks, the hospital, local folks were in there on a constant basis. I'm not seeing that so much here, and I'm going after it where I'm making phone calls, even folks I do business with saying, you know, what's it going to do to bring in? Would you please, would you please come in and let me share with you. Because one thing that I do want to point out to your generation, when people did business— when I— when we did business with them, they did business with us. You've seen practically none of that anymore. I wish I could give a seminar on it because it works. You, you take care of each other, and, um there's no issue. What I've heard the last 2 weeks continually, because we have so many people coming down and we let them in, you know, to the new look, new shop, to the new store, open yet, but you're right, you're getting them in. And the comments are like, we don't have to go to Columbus anymore, I want to smell, touch, and see it. You touch that robe and those pajamas and you tell me that you've ever touched a robe or pajamas of those qualities.

J**Jason Duff** 0:53:17

Well, and I think that's where the pendulum is swinging back. And yeah, we're seeing— I agree with you — where you can't— there's certain things you just can't buy through the internet and, and have confidence in. So if I want to buy a gourmet chocolate, like, it can look pretty and I can look at reviews, but I don't know how it tastes, right? And I, I think one thing that your store does really well is you provide samples. I mean, there's not a better way to know if you like something than trying it. Yeah, I, I'm glad you said it that way because that's what I'm sensing a lot of themes here in this episode is the pendulum swinging back and forth. I mean, through— you've seen a couple different pendulum swings in different directions. But even your comment about the real estate, you know, the interest rates. Yeah, it's like we can learn from— everyone's freaking out, you know, what's going to happen and all that stuff. But then learn from history, having that perspective that, oh, it's been here before, we've been okay, you know, and I don't know, that along with some of the trends that we're seeing in the business, there's not a lot.

S**Shary Duff** 0:54:14

I mean, I've been in this field 40 years now. The faces change, the names change, but the basic principles in business do not change. Shopping local means if they do well, you do well.

J**Jason Duff** 0:54:35

And with that 40 years of experience, what— when you think of downtown Bellefontaine and your, your operating businesses that are here today. What's changed about it? What, where do— what do you think about Bellefontaine today versus what it used to be?

S**Shary Duff** 0:54:49

Well, it's a fairy tale. Um, I struggle, and this is no secret because I don't really struggle with much of anything. I struggle with hours that retailers are choosing to stay open or closed. It is unheard of to do a build-out on a beautiful building and have a lot of inventory and close. Mondays have been completely shut down in this community because choices of retailers who do not want to stay open. I refuse to close. I will not close. I can't spend several hundred thousand dollars on inventory, and I have, and build out some beautiful buildings and shut my doors during prime business hours. And you can like me or not like me for that, but I'm telling you, this is not working. And I hear it on a constant basis from customers, why? Well, we have booth rental, and booth rental, it may not matter to them, but when you're floating inventories and the downtown is shut down by I don't care who it is during an event or whatever, and you lose Friday and Saturday days, you can't pay bills. You can't do it. Now, if you have booth rental and it's light and it's a hobby, doesn't matter. But if you've got a storefront and you're seasonal and you've got \$100 grand or more to sell that's seasonal, when a community is shut down, you're finished.

J**Jason Duff** 0:56:27

And I do think that's more coaching that has to happen is it's kind of the chicken and the egg for a lot of downtowns. Their, they, they, their busiest times are the weekends. So you'll see a retailer that'll be open up just Friday and Saturday. Um, what's been really awesome is that we've got a really great group of retailers here that have been having expanding hours and more consistent hours. And I appreciate you being open on Mondays because you're seeing others see your success and also choosing to expand their hours too. But, you know, more retail roundtables need to happen. Sometimes it's happening with your downtown group or your Main Street group, or maybe it's just 2 or 3 retailers that you resonate with within your community that you get together and cross-promote each other. And that's the other thing I'll just compliment you on, you know, really trying to spend time in your neighboring businesses because there's incredible businesses that are neighbored around you. You do shopping in there and then you post about it and you you know, you do goodwill to help them be successful. Yes, I do.

S**Shary Duff** 0:57:27

Uh, speaking of the incredible new plant store—

J**Jason Duff** 0:57:32

yeah, Katie.

S**Shary Duff** 0:57:32

Yeah, I had Katie's power of attorney, or excuse me, medical power, when she was playing soccer because her mom worked at Honda. Katie, Katie is a valedictorian. She's a genius. To see her— I went down and had the best time with her She's a genius. That store will be the best plant store in this— you've ever walked into.

J**Jason Duff** 0:57:56

Yeah, you know, and I think we want to build on that. But, um, you know, thank you for, for helping set the pace with her and also giving a shout out to Katie and, and other entrepreneurs too. I, um, I'm gonna kind of ask a different question than we normally do. Yeah, um, it's more of a personal one to you, Mom. As you think about your legacy, what you hope to leave on this planet and the experiences in the business that you have? What, what does that mean for you?

S**Shary Duff** 0:58:27

I don't think about it. My, um, my spiritual beliefs are present. I don't spend much time thinking about afterwards. My time on Earth will be finished until I decide to come back again.

J**Jason Duff** 0:58:54

Yeah, I feel like she's coming back sooner than later.

S**Shary Duff** 0:58:57

Good. And I'm not going to sit in my basement and cry because my— I miss folks. Yeah, that is a disrespect to all. And I plan to open a store a year till I die.

J**Jason Duff** 0:59:15

She told me, buckle up and get ready.

S**Shary Duff** 0:59:19

Well, my next one is a wine store next to the Queen.

J**Jason Duff** 0:59:22

She's already previewed it.

S**Shary Duff** 0:59:24

I'm going to wine school soon. Okay.

J**Jason Duff** 0:59:28

Yeah. Well, Mom, I'm very proud of you, and, you know, thank you for sharing your story. Um, we, we say that we look in the mirror and we never want to wake up and become our parents. But I think for guests that have listened to the show is that, um, I'm really proud of both my parents and what they've taught me and the opportunities they've given me. But, um, you have to get to downtown Bellefontaine. Yeah. And check out the Naked Goat Bath and Body, which would be the newest store. And then do not miss stopping by the Queen of Hearts Fine Chocolates and Gifts.

S**Shary Duff** 0:59:58

Thanks, Jason.



Jason Duff 0:59:59

But, uh, thanks for being a guest on the show today.



Shary Duff 1:00:01

You're welcome.



Ethan DeLeon 1:00:02

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation Podcast.



Ethan DeLeon 1:00:04

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.