

Episode 85

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Tony Collins, Ethan DeLeon

T

Tony Collins 00:00

We serve, uh, 5 generations any given day, right? Uh, whether you're celebrating your first birthday or your 100th birthday, you're gonna be welcomed and included at the Y. Uh, we're about connecting, uh, we're about belonging, feeling a place of belonging and having that sense of achievement.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:22

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. Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon, and I'm here in the studio with the founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Today we are excited to have the president and CEO of the YMCA of Central Ohio, Tony Collins, on the show. Welcome, Tony.

T

Tony Collins 00:53

Hey, hello. Thanks. Thanks for having me.

J

Jason Duff 00:55

Absolutely. I feel like we needed to have the theme song for the YMCA. Oh, no, no, no.

T

Tony Collins 01:01

No, that's only popular at weddings. Okay, leave that one for weddings.

J**Jason Duff** 01:07

Save the Village People for later. But, uh, no, Tony, just thanks for being a guest on our show today. Tony and I connected, it's probably been about a year ago. Time flies, we're having fun. But, um, he, uh, is doing some really incredible work, uh, here in the state and particularly in Columbus, um, and, and many, uh, places around Columbus, the Columbus region. With the YMCA. When you hear the YMCA, I imagine a lot of our listeners, there's emotions that pop up because peppered throughout towns and communities, the Y has had a deep history in providing services and allowing and giving back in a really big way. And I'm just excited to hear about— I was going through the annual report, just looking at the impact numbers that one organization is having in Columbus, and that is a rippling impact to many other organizations. So thanks for being in our studio today.

T**Tony Collins** 02:02

Oh, you know, I'm just blessed to be here. I appreciate your time, and, you know, it's been great to connect with you, and I love what you guys are doing. This work is amazing.

J**Jason Duff** 02:10

Well, we gotta hear your background. Tell us, where was home for you, and how did— did you wake up believing that you were gonna be YMCA director someday?

T**Tony Collins** 02:20

You know, that's a— I'll get to that second question last. But, you know, from a hometown's perspective, when people ask me that, I always tell them Central Ohio. And it's a funny thing to say because people want to hear a town. You know, I was born in Toledo. My mom's family is from Toledo, but she moved to Columbus, north part of Columbus. We lived in Columbus for a lot of years. And then in 6th grade, which I think are pretty formidable years, we ended up down in Lancaster, Ohio. So I can identify with small town Ohio. Grew up and graduated from Lancaster, Ohio.

J**Jason Duff** 02:51

So Lancaster, and then you mentioned we were talking earlier in the show, your wife and wife's family's got deep connections kind of in Northwest Ohio.

T**Tony Collins** 03:00

Yes, Allen County. They're all from Delphis. Real, just, I'm a huge fan of Delphis, Ohio and Delphis St. John's and the community there.

J**Jason Duff** 03:08

Well, one of our former team members, Zach Weber, gotta give him a shout out. He is like very famous as a Delphis football player. About broke every school record. And then he went off to where I met him at Ohio Northern and was, our star running back, but I know that the history of football in that town is pretty big.



Tony Collins 03:26

Huge. Their traditions in football and in basketball, very strong traditions.



Jason Duff 03:32

Love it. Well, I think most of our— as Jason alluded to, most of our audience is familiar with the YMCA as an organization or the community centers that I learned with talking with some of your team. But can you explain what the organization located in central Ohio that has, you know, several of these community centers? Can you tell us a little bit like how are How does the whole ecosystem work, I guess?

T**Tony Collins** 03:55

Yeah, no, I appreciate the question because so many people aren't aware of who we are. In fact, I'll lead with this. There was a survey done a couple of years ago by Saperstein that's 50— more than 50% of the residents of the state of Ohio thought that the YMCA was a private health club. Ah, wow. Which cracks me up because I have to tell you, back when I was growing up in Lancaster, Ohio, our Y was our community center. Yeah. And that's what I tell people when they ask me what a YMCA is. It's a community center. My Y didn't have a treadmill in it until 1988. It was a conference room and they took the table out and put 2 treadmills and 2 exercise bikes and we had a fitness center. Wow. And we were, yeah, we were big. Moving up. I mean, we were big. It was huge. So, you know, when I think about the Y, I think about a community center and I think about what those 2 words mean. And sometimes I like to reverse them and say we like to be the center of the community. And so whether that's in Gahanna, Ohio, Logan County, Bellefontaine, Ohio, Circleville, Pickaway, Ohio, or any of the counties in the state of Ohio, we have 160 YMCAs throughout the state of Ohio that are community centers. So the first and foremost thing I like to tell people is we're a community center, the community center that focuses on healthy living. So whether it's, you know, young people or our seniors in the community who want to be active, want to focus on their physical health as well as their mental well-being. The Y is the place to go. The second thing is youth development. We are a huge youth development center. This year, our Central Ohio Ys will serve over 30,000 young people in our programs. And I'll come back to that number you talked about, our impact numbers in Central Ohio. But here in Bellefontaine, even, you know, we are a youth development center, whether that's through early learning programs, school-aged childcare, swimming lessons, youth sports, we center on social-emotional learning, we insert some STEM-based curriculum in there, and get a chance to focus with teens on independence and leadership. And all of that comes together as a youth development agency. And then finally, the Y's always been about being the connection, the social responsibility in our community. And that looks different depending on the community you're in. So it could be in one neighborhood, we're doing produce shops and produce distribution, right? We'll have hundreds of families come through our Y and in partnership with the local food bank distributing food. In another community, it could be as simple as volunteerism. You know, I was a member of the Youth Teen Leaders Club, which is a national program in the Y where teens came in, volunteered, learned about leadership, gave back to the community. And, you know, that was our service. That was part of our volunteer. I would also say our Y is the center for a lot of that. The Rotary will meet there. The Kiwanis will meet there. You know, the different service agencies. So it's that community service. It also goes deeper and like more holistic in a larger community in Central Ohio. As you guys are aware, we are very intertwined in the housing and shelter space. Tonight, 1,200 people will be under a roof that's supported by a YMCA, the YMCA of Central Ohio. Wow. So youth development, healthy living, social responsibility, that's what a Y is.

J**Jason Duff** 07:10

And all really important pillars. You know, a lot of the work that we do when we are focused on economic development is you can't recruit new businesses or keep existing businesses unless you're really healing and solving some of the significant problems in your, in your community. And you hit on a few really important points. Number one is nutrition, is getting people access to food and healthy food options. But the one that I probably— or the two that I probably hear the most that you mentioned is one is child care. You know, if we— if young families are looking to work or, you know, in some cases, unfortunately, have to have a second job. It's like, what are my options that my kids can be healthy and safe and do things? And then you mentioned the other one was housing. So how do you kind of approach as you're thinking about the why and working with the community, doing that listening for where those gaps are and what the community needs?

T**Tony Collins** 08:07

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, first off, back to the childcare piece, I just tell you, childcare, you know, we're in crisis in childcare. And I think sometimes we overuse the word crisis, but we'll call it at least a minimum of a challenge. It is a struggle in Ohio, across the country. The business formula doesn't work anymore. And you know as well as I do that families need affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare so that they can work, so that they can advance as a family and then give and, you know, be a part of the community, be successful. The Y is the largest childcare provider in the state of Ohio. And in most cases, the largest childcare provider.

J**Jason Duff** 08:42

Incredible. Well, and we, about every community we go in, it seems we need more. A lot of the churches in a lot of small towns served as kind of the first line of defense. And then unfortunately, that's right, because of state codes or because of the lack of volunteers or just there's more regulations to dealing with childcare today, the sophistication to operating that is hard. And so knowing that our local Ys and your organization statewide is advocating for that is huge. And YMCAs are everywhere too. Like we talk a lot about small town development. I feel like there's a YMCA within driving distance for just about every community, at least in the state of Ohio. So that's really encouraging that they would be the one to offer a service like that.

T**Tony Collins** 09:25

You're exactly right. In fact, in Ohio, we have a Y that's driving accessible to all 88 counties. We don't have a Y in every county, but we have a Y that's within driving accessibility to all 88 counties. Wow.

J**Jason Duff** 09:37

That's huge.

T**Tony Collins** 09:37

For that reason. You know, so I'll answer your first question with that example in terms of how do we hear what's going on and then how do we respond to that? And I'm gonna use the example of here in Logan County and childcare. There was a call out in the community that came to us. In this case, it was from community leaders. Sometimes it'll come from our members, sometimes it'll come from families, but in this case, community leaders identified a need for childcare, early learning specifically, spaces here in Logan County. So we worked with the United Way, the chamber here, and our organization came together to establish the Logan County Early Learning Center. And we now have two class— actually, four classrooms here in Logan County that we're serving the young people in our community and the families, of course, with high-quality, accessible childcare that's right down the street. And it came because community leaders came to us. The, one of the other tools we use, every Y, so our Y, we call it the Central Ohio Y because we have 13 community centers in 5 counties and those Ys are set up to serve locally. And the way they do that is each Y has its own advisory board and it's made up of community members in that community. So here in Bellefontaine, for example, I'll go back to that, we've got a group of folks who come together at least once a month, contributing their mindset and their talents and oftentimes even their treasure. But they're also the voice of the community, the eyes in the community to say, where can the Y help today in those veins of healthy living, youth development, and social responsibility? So just a couple of examples.

J**Jason Duff** 11:25

It's a great example. And we know how important large employers are in our region. And especially, you know, in that 33 corridor from here in Bellefontaine all the way to Dublin, you've got major employers like Honda that really depend on keeping their plants, you know, fully occupied with people. So I imagine knowing that right on that corridor you've got two YMCAs, you've got Fountain and then also Marysville, that having that as a— if the executives from Honda are sitting around the table, I imagine they'd be saying, And we really appreciate the YMCA.

T**Tony Collins** 12:01

Well, and you know, it's funny, as many parents that come to us looking for affordable, high-quality, accessible childcare, which of course is a lot, we also get businesses. The other one besides the major employers, which I guess this would be a major employer, is health systems with nurses, hospitals, right? Nurses and doctors needing childcare for their team members. So coming in and working with us to try to find a way to collaborate and making sure there's accessible childcare in community for them as well. But you're right, it's, and actually I've seen a real uptick in that aspect. Employers coming to us trying to find and trying to solve for. Just got an email 2 days ago from another colleague of mine around the country who got an email from a 3-shift employer looking for 24-hour childcare. Now that's a much harder challenge to solve for, but just to your point that that is definitely in demand in our communities.

J**Jason Duff** 12:55

Well, we do a lot of surveying of when we're looking at downtowns about the types of businesses that the community— where there are gaps of types of businesses we want to recruit or the needs that are there. And what comes up a lot are we need more things for youth to be able to do. And what's hard about the business model of youth is there aren't a lot of business types that are targeting how to build a sustainable business model for profit, specifically targeted youth. And so a lot of times we need and to lean on social service organizations or municipal governments or schools to provide those services. Can you speak a little bit about those afterschool programs and the types of things that the YMCA does to support youth?

T**Tony Collins** 13:46

Yeah, I— you know what, that's one of my favorite subjects, what you just brought up. I say this to people all the time. And one of the reasons why I love your podcast is because you do have that hint on that entrepreneurship, not a hint, but a thread. And I always tell people we're the original social entrepreneur, right? The YMCA has been around for 178 years, 168 years in central Ohio, not, not in the United States, but 168 years in Columbus. And, well, and I know Bellefontaine's got the one of the original railroad-wise.

J**Jason Duff** 14:16

Well, when we were having coffee about a year ago, we'd look up in the coffee shop and there's a large canvas print of a historic postcard of the original YMCA that was here. Yeah. And it was a 4-story building on West Columbus Avenue, and it happened to be right across from the train depot. And why that was significant is Bellefontaine was the headquarters for the Columbus-Cleveland-Indianapolis Railroad. And there were so many people coming in by rail, there was not enough hotels for them to stay.. And so the YMCA, and I think Cleveland, Ohio was the first, I think 1870, I may be butchering that by about 10 years, but it was about that time that Cleveland had its first railroad YMCA. And I happen to believe that Bellefontaine wasn't that far after that. So that history of having those overnight housing and lodging to solve the need that the community had at that time ties to that history.

T**Tony Collins** 15:15

And what, you know, the focus of the Y has always been, even back when we started, was to have that holistic approach to, you know, yes, you're going to come stay with us, but while you're here, we're going to use Christian-based principles to focus on the building of your spirit, mind, and body. It's still the same mission since the early times of the Y. But going back to that social entrepreneur piece of it is, it is, you know, a lot of our small towns want to have those youth development programs, want to have those childcare services. But how do you do it? Where do you do it? The schools have so much of a responsibility already. The private business sector, it's— there's— it's— to be honest, the economic model doesn't always work. And so you— what, what's worked for the why is it's not one thing. It's not the one thing that we do. It's the combination of things that we do that help make it possible for us to provide the all. So, you know, for— and I think the best example is in our small towns like Bellefontaine or Pickaway in Circleville, Pickaway County, Circleville, is where When you look at what we— so you talk about the wellness space and the wellness programming. So whether it's a treadmill, you know, maybe you want to go run a little bit or maybe you want to lift the free weights, which, by the way, our younger generation is now more interested in fitness than any of the other generations before them. So, you know, you want to work on your physical well-being or you want to learn how to swim or you want to swim laps, right? Those types of things. You join, you buy a membership for you, your family. There's some other benefits. There's probably like a basketball class, or maybe you want to play pickleball. You can do those.

J**Jason Duff** 16:48

I did judo growing up at the Y.

T**Tony Collins** 16:49

Oh nice, see, I love that. Yeah, everybody has that Y story, right? For me it was learning how to swim. Um, but you— but it— so you buy the membership. Well, every, every time you buy a membership, a few of those dollars helps us to provide those other programs, right? That child care program, that social service programming. So, so I say this all the time, Our economic engine, our hedgehog is our community center. It's also our greatest impact. And so when you look at the data for Central Ohio, we serve 113,000 people, 113,000 people in our Ys. They come to our Ys over 2 million times a year. Wow. Every one of those 113,000 people, when they buy their membership, a little bit of their membership helps to make sure that we can make sure childcare is affordable and accessible. Helps to make sure that we're in the housing and shelter business, that we can help somebody stay under a roof that's safe tonight. So it's that economic model. Now, in a smaller town, membership doesn't— there's only a certain amount of people, right? You have, I think, over 40,000 people here in Logan County, right? Well, you think a percentage of those are going to join a Y or a community center, right? It's a percentage, not all 100%. I would love all 100%, right? Please join. Yeah, I would. But But the reality is it's usually, in most communities, it's usually around 8% to 9% will be a part of a center. We, thankfully, in Central Ohio have averaged around 12% in our communities that join. And that's the fact here in Bellefontaine. But even then, the membership isn't just enough. But if you sign up for that week of camp or if you sign up separately for a swimming lesson, It's all of those pieces that bring that pot together to make that engine turn and keep that flywheel going, I guess, is a better way to say it.

J**Jason Duff** 18:43

It is that whole theme of community partnerships. I know you mentioned about swimming, and, you know, it happens to be here in Ohio, there's only about 4 months out of the year that your outdoor pools are available. And, you know, swimming amongst high school athletes has become a pretty competitive program.. And I know that there are many schools that happen to be able to train and to use our local Belfountain Hilliker YMCA, had the opportunity to use that pool to train and better themselves, which if that did not exist, those schools wouldn't have a swim team.

T**Tony Collins** 19:24

Yeah. What— so youth sports can be so much for a kid, right? And, and, uh, I don't— if it's swimming, if it's basketball, whatever it be, it can help a kid figure out who they are, which then helps them academically, which helps them with their confidence. I mean, there's just— I won't go into all the pieces around the social-emotional learning, but you're right, aquatics is a piece of that. And the Y, of course, does bring that to a community. Uh, proud to say there was, I think, 6 Olympic swimmers this past Olympics, this one that just finished up, that were all had started in their YMCA background. That's really cool. Yeah, I, I just heard a story this morning, just this morning before I got here, about a gentleman who saw one of our team members in a Y shirt, and he was a 72-year-old retired gentleman. He said, "Hey, the Y paid for my college." And she said, "Well, really? How did that happen?" And he said, "Because I went to the Y and learned how to swim, and I got excited about swimming, and the coaches there got me into it and asked me to stay on the swim team and got me involved, and I got a scholarship to go to college to swim, and so the Y helped me pay for college." But that swimming thing, you reminded me of something that I should have mentioned in the partnership piece, or the social entrepreneur piece, is the partnership capacity of how this happens as well. We count on and depend on partnerships. We couldn't do our work without partners in the community coming together. I mentioned earlier the early learning center that we started here in Logan County. The United Way and the chamber helped us do that. They contributed, they helped lead, they were at the table to make sure that that worked. We wouldn't be here in Logan County had it not been for those. Every community is like that. Even in Columbus, Ohio, we're not able to provide the shelter for women and families without the partnership of the community shelter board and the partnership of the private sector coming to the table to contribute to that. Then that eventually evolves in the partnerships, like you said, the high schools coming to us. We have 17 pools, and I've lost count on exactly how many swim teams we host. But I know it's over 12 swim teams that are school swim teams that come into our pools and swim, not to mention our own swim teams, our YMCA swim teams where the kids swim year round. So yeah, partnerships help that piece that I mentioned earlier, that economic impact as well as the mission impact of those programs.

J**Jason Duff** 21:45

And I think for a lot of our listeners that maybe are hearing about this mission and the various pillars that the Y the values of the why and the impact that's having. I imagine that running these facilities and hiring smart, you know, capable, talented people, that's a big investment and it takes a lot of resources to do that. So like, can you speak a little bit about what are ways that people that may be hearing this can plug in in terms of supporting their why? I'd like to hear about that. And then secondly, there may be some people here that says our community doesn't have a Y and we dream like we'd love to figure out what's that process to, to actually try to get a steering committee or a group of people together to maybe charter out to, to, to look at an expansion for a new Y.

T**Tony Collins** 22:33

Boy, those are two big questions. Yeah. I, you know, first and foremost, from getting engaged with the Y and connecting, you know, there are multiple ways. Of course, I'll use an old tried and It may be tired and, uh, time, treasure, talent, right? First off is the time, right? You get involved, volunteer. We are a volunteer-led organization. We're the second largest volunteer organization in the country behind the Red Cross. I mentioned our advisory committees, which help policy and strategic direction and help us with tactical challenges. We'll have, you know, local attorneys or local healthcare professionals that help guide us in the work. And how we can best serve our community, help us solve problems. We have hands-on program volunteers coaching your youth soccer team, helping out in the pool, volunteering even at the front desk just to welcome people in. Those types of opportunities are there. And then of course, we have folks who believe in what we do and want to pull alongside us and support us. We do not turn anyone away. So anybody who has an economic challenge, We raise money every year, whether it's here in Logan County or down in Pickaway County or in Franklin County. We're raising dollars to help make sure that no child, no family is ever turned away from a program or a Y membership. So people, sometimes that's through an individual member contributing \$25, and sometimes it's through a corporate partner that comes in and, you know, makes a \$100,000 gift and to make sure that kids and families are never turned away. So there's all types of opportunities to get involved in it, and it can be focused on what you love and what you're passionate about. If you're focused about working with children, then let's, let's do that. If you want to work with seniors, we've got that ability. So there's a lot of opportunities to get engaged with the Y to help support. We do count on highly skilled professionals. You know, we used to be all volunteer-driven, like volunteer-run back in the 1800s, 19— early 1900s. We have developed into a professional staff as exhibited by my time here and the staff that we have here in Bellefontaine and across Ohio. But we, we, we, we, you, every person starts with that first interaction, whether it's, you know, judo, which, yeah, that's a new one for me, swimming lessons, right? Then they usually evolve into some type of volunteer. And I can't tell you the number of professional staff we have that have evolved into full-time staff at the Y. And so yeah, getting a great team in place is absolutely critical. We're blessed to have an incredible team throughout Central Ohio, 1,800 part-time and full-time team members that do everything from social work to teaching swimming lessons to helping take care of our buildings to leading camp programming, you know, across the board.

J

Jason Duff 25:19

So if you have an existing why, those are really great key strategies of why those investments matter and how listeners, as we as volunteers or business owners, you need people that will contribute that time, talent, and treasure. Yeah. But I imagine there's a lot of people, and we're doing a lot of work right now in Southeast Ohio, so the Appalachian region, and there are a lot of really big things that are starting to take place down there because historically that part of our state has been underserved and underdeveloped in a lot of different ways., but there's incredible people and entrepreneurs and communities that are there. So let's just say one of those communities are listening and they're hearing about what's happened up here in, in the Columbus region, but they want to see their community explore the possibilities to maybe get a presence of additional YMCAs in that region.

T**Tony Collins** 26:15

Yeah, great question. So there's a couple of directions to go. First off, we are blessed in Ohio to have an incredible organization called the Ohio Alliance of YMCA. So we all work together collaboratively to support the Y movement across the state. So there are some smaller Ys that have, uh, limited resources, so we chime, you know, chime in and help support them. And then there are, uh, larger Ys that like to work and collaborate together to make sure that we're, you know, constantly sharpening that blade. So, uh, reaching out to the Ohio Alliance of YMCAs is one option. Uh, folks, uh, in small communities can reach out and we will connect them with the resource person available closest to them to help them where they are. The other is look to your neighboring communities. Southeast Ohio, very familiar, you know, growing up in Lancaster, graduated from Ohio University in Athens, did some work in Meigs County and had family in Logan County, or sorry, Hocking County. Logan, that's where I was going. You can reach out to your adjacent Ys. So the Lancaster Family YMCA, Lancaster-Fairfield County YMCA down there, it's an independent Y. The CEO there has— is very interested in partnering, working with some of those southeastern Ohio communities. And then I think what I also tell folks is, I'm pretty upfront about this, but it does at one point become a numbers game. There is a math formula, just like any business. There's initial capital investment and then there's operating, right? And both math formulas have to work. You can get them there, but you have to be creative and you have to bring in investors. You have to bring in partners. If, if you're an entrepreneur and you're looking to start your business, starting a Y is very similar. Start at that mindset, right? So the Lancaster Y can come down and talk with you, but you have to start thinking about partners. Other partners— school districts are phenomenal partners, health centers are phenomenal partners, uh, local community businesses. There is a Y in Ohio— I won't name the Y— but there is a Y Ohio that is independently supported by one private company. Wow. Yeah, independent, because they wanted to make sure that that benefit was there for their employees and that community that they, that they're so much a part of. It's absolutely incredible. That's huge, right? Um, but there are Ys in Ohio— check this out— that are built onto schools. So you'll have the high school, there'll be a high school gym, then there'll be the Y gym, and then the Y facility, and then on the other side of the Y facility will be the county senior center. So that the idea is you have the synergy of the businesses working together. You have a community center, almost a campus for people to come into. The kids have an immediate place to walk to every day. The pool— you mentioned earlier the swim team— you have an immediate pool right there, and the school's not taxed and burdened with trying to operate a pool year-round when they only need it for one season. Now you've got a whole community that can help support it. So there's some great examples out there around the state. And I know any of us would be willing to help.

J**Jason Duff** 29:07

That, that, those are great, great tips there. Yeah. Thanks for sharing that, Tony. All right, at this time we're gonna 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 Cowork and Space is your destination for creativity and collaboration with state-of-the-art facilities in 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. Big city dining in a small town. Now that's The Syndicate. Join them for fresh steaks, pasta, or seafood for dinner, or stop in for Sunday brunch to experience one of their signature dishes such as chicken and waffles, and maybe even pair it with a mimosa flight. Located at 213 South Main Street in downtown Bellefontaine. You mentioned the thread of, in your facilities, involving multi-generations of people in the same space or in the same community. Can you speak to a little bit of the research of the benefits of that?

T**Tony Collins** 30:07

You know, I tell you what, absolutely. We serve 5 generations any given day, right? Whether you're celebrating your first birthday or your 100th birthday, you're going to be welcomed and included at the Y. We're about connecting. We're about belonging, feeling a place of belonging and having that sense of achievement. But I tell people all the time, I'll walk into the Bellefontaine the Hilliker Y here in Bellefontaine. And the first people I see every morning is our coffee club. Yep. And if you walk in there—

J**Jason Duff** 30:36

I happen to know some of the people in the coffee club.

T**Tony Collins** 30:37

You know those gentlemen? They're in there every morning. There's 6 to 8 of them depending on the morning, having their cup of coffee, talking about all the challenges in the world.

J**Jason Duff** 30:45

And generally more senior, right? Statesman.

T**Tony Collins** 30:47

Absolutely. They've experienced life a little bit more than others. Some of them will come in to work out. Some of them are just there for a cup of coffee and being a part of their social group. Right.

J**Jason Duff** 30:56

And that's the mental health piece of this, right? So there's the physical health, but there's also the mental health of that belonging. Yeah, that you mentioned.

T**Tony Collins** 31:04

So our Grove City Y, same thing. I walk in there any day and I'll see the coffee club. I'll see no less than 80 to 100 people in a chair yoga class in the gym. And then around the corner we have bridge club in another room, and it's a wonderful visual. And then inter— interceded on the fitness floor, you might have Just happened to me the other day. I was at one of our Ys. Gentleman who was well into his 80s, jeans and a golf shirt on an exercise bike, getting his exercise in because he's wanted to keep moving, wanted to exercise next to a 14-year-old who was just kicking off her workout routine for, you know, it looked like she was prepping for a school sport of some type on the same, you know, right next to each other on the exercise bike.

J**Jason Duff** 31:50

It's great.

T**Tony Collins** 31:50

Everybody's welcome. Everybody's included. Everybody has that sense of belonging and sense of achievement.

J**Jason Duff** 31:55

What are some of the challenges you face with having that wide of a spectrum of, you know, people that you're serving? I'm sure, you know, it's not the same for everybody. So like, what are the things that you're doing to make sure that there's something there for everybody?

T**Tony Collins** 32:09

You know, that's the biggest case is like, can we make sure there's something for everybody, right? We can't be all things to all people all the time. So it's it's developing a facility and a program base that meets the most people where they are, right? So for example, the one I joke about all the time is lap swimming, right? We would, if it were up to our passionate swimmers, have giant 50-meter pools at all of our Ys. But if you've been around our aquatics world and know anything about it, pools are very, very expensive. And 50-meter pools are super expensive. And so you have to do things in a— number one, you have to build a smaller pool, but, but you also have to let seniors in, you have to let kids in for swimming lessons, you have to let aquatics exercise in, you might offer the occasional canoeing class, you know, you're gonna do lifeguarding, right? All the things. And so our lap swimmers are dismayed that our pool is not open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for lap swimming.

J**Jason Duff** 33:07

Yeah.

T**Tony Collins** 33:08

So you have to just work with the community to to develop programming and then facilities that can meet the most, most of the time. We can't do it for everyone all the time. And that's hard for me because I want everybody to be included.

J**Jason Duff** 33:21

Of course. Yeah. You, is thinking of your organization another hallmark quality that I imagine a lot of our listeners may have heard of, but I'd love you to share more, is the YMCA and particularly the YMCA here in Central Ohio has a history with camps. Yeah. Tell us about the, the camps. And I know particularly Camp Wilson is, is a YMCA-affiliated camp and 100-plus years of history there. So tell us more about the camps.

T**Tony Collins** 33:54

Yeah, YMCA camping has been around for more than 100 years all across the country. We have camps throughout the state of Ohio. Here in Central Ohio, our our flagship is YMCA Camp Wilson. I want to mention we have 15 day camps too throughout Central Ohio where kids can come in, get their first camp experience during the day, go home at night, right? But we encourage all of our families to consider resident camp out here at Camp Wilson. Uh, incredible opportunity, beautiful 600 acres. Uh, uh, it's on a beautiful lake. Uh, we're able to offer all the traditional camp things that you think about, you know, fishing, canoeing. We do some kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding here too. Campfires, singing, ropes courses, horses, archery, all the things that we think about when it comes to camping. And it's not just summer camp, which is a lot of folks think about just the resident summer camp, which is of course the flagship of camp. You, you know, you center around that, but we bookend that with family camp, right? So you can go out on Memorial Day weekend, Labor Day weekend, spend time with your family. We bring church groups in and have church camps. We bring high school bands in and have band camp. And we even do some leadership and youth development work throughout the year. One of my favorite things that I used to be really heavily involved with, and Jason, I think you know this, I started my career in camping, YMCA camping. I was— my first professional job, I was the camp director for the Akron Rotary Camp for Children with Disabilities and then went on to be the director at YMCA Camp Wainoa.

J**Jason Duff** 35:21

So this is especially important. To you.

T**Tony Collins** 35:23

Well, and I'll go a step further than that. Yeah, my camping background, one of my first experiences was at Camp Wilson.

J**Jason Duff** 35:29

Was it really?

T**Tony Collins** 35:30

As a YMCA teen leader, I stayed at, uh, Camp Wilson in the 7th grade for the Ohio Rally, which used to bring hundreds of teenagers from all around Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and we would come together for a weekend and spend together in fellowship. We'd work on our spiritual strength, mental strength, physical, all the things and just really focus on leadership. And it was a lot of what helped me figure out who I was as a teenager, gave me that place to be. But yeah, learning about camping and staying out and the value and the impact of camping at Camp Wilson was one of the things that I could say helped me start me on my journey. So huge, incredible impact on kids, on families, teaches so many skills again with that social and emotional learning as a focus. Combined with STEM-based learning, environmental education, all the things, with all the fun activities, adventure, and exploration that comes along with it. So yeah, camping is a huge part of what we do. We will serve over 1,200 kids this summer at Wilson and thousands of kids in camp altogether in Central Ohio.

J**Jason Duff** 36:38

It's such an important mission. We talk to a lot of parents and even employers about the young people today. And one of the things is just the accessibility of technology. But we also know the dark side of some of the accessibility of the technology is just, you know, people being on their devices all the time. And so what a neat mission to show and teach and demonstrate those really important life skills, life sciences, all those kind of things that you mentioned in one of your camps.

T**Tony Collins** 37:10

100%. The exploration and the, the fun that the kids have and learn that they don't need that device, it's pretty exciting.

J**Jason Duff** 37:19

Yeah, that's super cool. Well, we've highlighted a lot of different programs that the Y offers, and we're so thankful for them. But we talked, you know, there are a lot of community leaders that listen to this podcast, and if there were some of them who wanted to get involved with some of the programming, say they're seeing a need immediately in their community, how would the best way for them to approach the YMCA about get maybe partnering with them to get something like that started? What would that conversation look like?

T**Tony Collins** 37:42

Yeah, you know what, I'd encourage them to reach out to the local Y in their community. Here it's Jeff, right, our executive director. You know, no matter where you are, you reach out to that staff person, or you might reach out to a volunteer that you know on the advisory board or the board of trustees and talk to them about the need. Bring them in, share the story. My guess is, if I know most YMCA employees and YMCA leaders, is they want to be a part of the solution. They want to get connected and they want to find out how can do it. Chances are they might already have a solution in-house without creating something new. Yeah. But in some cases they will. They'll, they'll sit down and then, you know, they'll even sit down and figure out who— what other partners need to be at the table to help solve that problem. Yeah. Right. And in the same case with, you know, um, early learning, right, we, we brought— we, we asked other partners to come in and help us solve that challenge here.

J**Jason Duff** 38:36

Yeah, that's a great point. I appreciate you bringing that up because I'm sure— I mean, we as community leaders, you see a lot of the issues that the community may be facing, but something may be already being addressed. And, you know, it's a good way to get plugged in to an organization that's already doing a lot for the community. So I wanted to bring that up. I guess kind of closing out this segment here is looking forward. What are you most excited for with the direction of the organization?

T**Tony Collins** 39:03

You know what, we've it's been a challenging few couple years, right, for small business, I'm sure, for communities, I know, and the Y went through our challenges too, right, trying to rebuild and put our feet out underneath us in a strong way. And we're there and we're able to reach and look forward now and help be a part of the solution. When I think about the future in Central Ohio and what— our vision is strong communities where all people reach their full potential. And so what does a strong community look like? Well, a strong community looks like Kids and families who have affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare. We talked about that earlier. I think I may or may not have mentioned that in Franklin County, and I know Logan County's similar statistics, 60% of our early learning kids aren't ready for kindergarten. 60%. Wow. And that those numbers get worse in our communities of color and in our Spanish-speaking communities. I know that kids in our programs, 90% of those kids are ready for kindergarten. Kindergarten. So I know we have that successful, uh, that, that ability to help make those kids successful. And so, uh, a strong community is where kids can be successful and ready for kindergarten. A strong community is where teenagers have a place to be and be seen, a place that is safe for them, and, and team leaders, uh, who are willing to connect with them. And I know that's a challenge here in Logan County. I've read the study. I know that people want a place for our teens to be, and I know our Y is one of those places. So, so a place where teens know that they can go and, and, and grow. That's why I'm here today, because I had my Y to go to, uh, and, and to grow, to grow at. A strong community is where, uh, people have a space where they can work on their physical health and their mental health, that connection and that belonging, uh, and that achievement, frankly, uh, whether it's their. It could be their weight journey, it could be their cardio journey, whatever it be, but a place for them to go and feel welcomed. That's a big piece.

J**Jason Duff** 41:05

So important. And I know you have been a volunteer in a number of organizations. You, of course, are a leader for not only this organization, but others. One of the things that we hear a lot is that volunteer or leader fatigue. Yeah. And, and just kind of sharing maybe from your personal background or story, what do you do, um, to combat that? Not only for yourself, but also, uh, maybe other volunteers in, in your organization.

T**Tony Collins** 41:33

You know, that, that's a huge question. Um, you know, from a volunteer perspective, obviously, um, I always ask our team to make sure we understand where the volunteer wants and has the capacity to have an impact. Right? We all have seen it. There's a core group of people who give, and then we as organizations have those people and we get excited and then we ask them to do it all.

J**Jason Duff** 41:58

And they're the yes people. Like, they'll never say no. It's like, I would be happy to do that. And then that turns into they're serving 4 organizations and they have no life. Like, all they do is give.

T**Tony Collins** 42:08

Yeah. And so I think I ask our team to find out where that volunteer wants to be the most impactful. And to honor that, right? Because we want them to stay around. Now, when you think about them as volunteers, I think the same thing for our team. The nonprofits have a reputation for hiring people who wanna give, give, give, just like you said with volunteers. And those givers keep giving until they are fried, right? And we, you know, I don't know if there's anything such thing as work-life balance anymore, But there is this something that says, okay, let's stay within somebody's capacity. Let's give them the ability to be a whole human being. Yeah. Right? And so we have to— sometimes it means we can't do all the things for all the people. Sometimes we have to reduce what we do.

J**Jason Duff** 42:59

And prioritize.

T**Tony Collins** 43:00

Prioritize. Do the things we do well, and then make sure that our people continue to stay here so they're here for the long haul and continue to serve. That fatigue is a real thing. It's a real thing in nonprofit work. It's definitely a real thing in the YMCA. So we're really working hard. We invest in our team. Our whole— we have a strategic plan. A whole component of it is investing in our people and training and development, all those things, but making sure they have the capacity to stay in their role. We're working on retention right now. That's a priority, one of our key measurements we measure. We're at 75% retention year over year. Because of— because of making sure that people have that ability to keep it within their capacity.

J

Jason Duff 43:42

I love that. What do you do to fuel up?

T

Tony Collins 43:44

So I, number one, I draw lines. I draw lines so that I can, uh, being able to say no.

J

Jason Duff 43:50

It's only taken me the first 25, 30 years, maybe 40 years of my life to figure that out.

T

Tony Collins 43:56

I— what is today, Tuesday? Yeah, Monday.

J

Jason Duff 43:59

Yeah, every time you say yes to something, yeah, every time you say yes something, you're saying no to something else and you may not realize it.

T

Tony Collins 44:06

That's 100% right. That is one of the— I'll be honest, a little transparent. I— that's actually something I've been working on for the last 12 months, actually, that, that ability to draw lines, to say no, and to say, look, I'm going to focus here. And so that I'll be able to do that really well. That is a skill set that takes, I think, a long time for us all to pick up.

J

Jason Duff 44:27

Still practicing.

T

Tony Collins 44:27

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 44:28

And you mentioned that spiritual health is a really important part of your journey. Do you mind sharing a little bit about that?

T

Tony Collins 44:34

Yeah, I mean, I think every person's spiritual health is their own, right? Whatever journey they have. For me, it's learning more about my faith. And I do that personally. I have some friends. Thankfully, my children are very much into their faith. And so we do some talking, we do some studying. I have some personal pieces that I do, podcasts. And so, so help grow that for me, that helps me. I also believe that my physical wellness helps me in my spiritual journey. It helps me. Be ready to grow spiritually. So I spend some time in the morning and at night on that as well.

J**Jason Duff** 45:08

I love that. Yeah, very cool. Well, thank you so much. You brought a lot of great insight there. I feel like I want to replay everything right away, but I'm going to move us here to a new show segment here, just a rapid-fire Q&A. Well, here we go. So just some fun questions here. First one is, are you right or left-handed? Left. Left-handed. All right, uh, we have a lot of interesting, uh, guests on the show. So people read your handwriting? People can't read my handwriting.

T**Tony Collins** 45:34

I think people can still read mine. Okay, not my signature, but not my hand.

J**Jason Duff** 45:38

That's good, that's acceptable, acceptable for a signature.

T**Tony Collins** 45:42

Um, next question is, what is your favorite restaurant in Central Ohio?

J**Jason Duff** 45:45

I know that's very vague, but I— you're all over the place, so I wanted you to give the opportunity to answer here.

T**Tony Collins** 45:50

You know what, that is so hard because I am all about local restaurants and local communities. I love the Syndicate. I love Brewfontaine. I always call it Brewfontaine.

J**Jason Duff** 45:58

I know that's not— no, yeah, probably about 80% of our guests pronounce it that way. It's actually in our local twang is Brew Fountain, but we— it, it goes by Brewfontaine a lot.

T**Tony Collins** 46:10

So I know it's Brew Fountain, but I like to call it Brewfontaine. I don't know why.

J**Jason Duff** 46:14

We actually have a team member, and I, I won't call him out, that is pronounced it. He's on our team here in Bill Fountain. Still pronounces it Brew Fountain.

T**Tony Collins** 46:23

Yeah. I don't know why I love that. It's just a thing for me. But I, I, I, I, if I'm going to give you a quick answer, I'm going to tell you I love the turkey Reuben melt at Cranberries on Indian Lake. Ah, wow. Sitting out over the water.

J**Jason Duff** 46:37

Ray is a listener. The owner of Cranberries is a listener and he deserves that shout out because it is really good.

T**Tony Collins** 46:41

I mean, what a better atmosphere in the world. They've always got great live music. You're sitting out looking out over the water and that turkey Reuben. They took it off the menu once and I about went— I think a lot of people did. I almost stopped going. I love it. Great, great choice there.

J**Jason Duff** 46:57

Last question here is, what is your favorite activity to do at the YMCA community centers?

T**Tony Collins** 47:03

For me, it's just— it's going to sound silly, but just talking, just being there and connecting with community. I love going to the coffee talk table at Hiliker. I love doing it at Grove City. Um, my why growing up, that was the thing. I love just sitting in and talking to people as they're coming in and connecting with the community. It's my favorite part. I leave charged up with lots of energy every time.

J**Jason Duff** 47:27

Yeah, I mean, you're engaging your community, right? Um, and then just a couple closing questions here that we ask every, every, uh, guest. And what is one professional development resource that was impactful for you along your professional journey?

T**Tony Collins** 47:41

Wow, one. Geez. Um, you know what, development planning. I, I would say a development plan. I put a development plan together, uh, that incorporated how I was going to educate myself for future learning, how I was going, who I needed to meet, and then what rooms I needed to be in. Wow. Um, and, and frankly, that tool that I, that I used, um, is the reason why I have an MBA. It's the reason why I've, uh, been able to serve in so many great roles, whether it's the Rec and Parks Director or now as the CEO here in Central Ohio. And really my favorite thing, when I get to meet great people and learn about what they're doing, that's what's charged me.

J**Jason Duff** 48:21

I love that, putting some intention behind your development.

T**Tony Collins** 48:23

That's exactly what it was.

J**Jason Duff** 48:25

Love it. And then last thing is, where can people learn more about you and follow the organization?

T**Tony Collins** 48:29

Yeah, I mean, YMCACentralOhio.org. Love to have you, you know, you can pull up our social media. Of course, we have a website, we have our Facebook, we have our Instagram accounts, please follow them. Each Y has its own, so the Hilliker Y has it. We have ymca columbus.org, which you can come and follow, and we'll keep you up to date on everything going on.

J**Jason Duff** 48:50

Great, thank you so much. Thanks for, for sharing your story. It's, it's really inspiring to hear from the point that the Y impact you as a young person and all the different ways that you have served and now being at the helm of that organization, just Thanks for making it possible for future generations. And I know I'm energized and excited to want to get more engaged in our local Y. It's kind of one of those things where you mentioned about you get busy and you have certain organizations and focus that you have. But I think the timing of focusing on childcare and then also right now the affordability of everything, families are really crunched. And so this is the time where I think our Y can lead and we in the business community must, must and should find ways to plug in and give back more. So thanks for— thanks for sharing the show today.

T**Tony Collins** 49:45

Well, I just appreciate being here. Thanks for having me.

E**Ethan DeLeon** 49:47

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

E**Ethan DeLeon** 49:49

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