

Episode 89

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Jon Jon Wesolowski, Ethan DeLeon

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 00:00

I went to a dumpster in a construction site, pulled out some wood, made a guard— a handrail, put on a yellow vest, and put it in place. Now, I didn't want the city to get credit for it, but I also didn't want to get credit for it. So I created a fake organization, the Chattanooga Urbanist Society. I created a logo, a stencil, and I spray painted it all over the wooden guardrail. And then I made a video, a sort of POV, a point of view type video where you don't see me, you just see what I'm doing., and I posted it on an account with zero followers and it got 150,000 views in the first week.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:34

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're excited to be virtually hosting armchair urbanist and content creator JonJon Wisselowski. JonJon, welcome to the show.

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 01:09

Hey, thanks for having me, Ethan, Jason.

J

Jason Duff 01:11

Yeah, JonJon, I've been excited about this. Met JonJon at the Congress of New Urbanism and the Strong Towns Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Jon Jon happened to be one of the speakers there. And I have to say, I left that session so energized by the work that Jon Jon was doing and the way that he broke down ideas to put spotlights on needs that go unfulfilled in a community and how he chose to, in his style and his process, to take back his neighborhood and his town And I'm really excited to kind of unpack that today. But before we get into that, I have to understand your first name and your last name is pretty unique. What's the history and heritage with that?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 01:58

Yeah. So, uh, JonJon Wasilowski. The JonJon's actually not that unique. Uh, in the South, JonJon is, uh, a normal thing to call a kid named Jonathan, um, or John even. JFK Jr. went by JonJon.

J**Jason Duff** 02:13

I say, I remember that. That's a famous one. So yeah.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 02:15

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And, uh, actually Chattanooga just had a police chief, his name his name's Jonathan Chambers, and he came up to me and said, I want you to know I used to go by John John. So my first name's not weird. What's weird is that I kept it into adulthood, and that was because I was just rubbing elbows with too many Jonathans, and we all had to— we got to be different, different nicknames. So yeah, yeah, Waclawski is Polish, and I think I told Ethan earlier is that whenever I'm in Eastern Europe, they tell me I say my own name wrong. So, um, it's, uh, I think it's like a hard W, like a V sound. But, um, yeah, I just— Waclawski is fine.

J**Jason Duff** 02:48

Great. So speaking of that, tell us where you grew up, where's home for you and where you live today.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 02:54

Yeah. So I grew up in East Tennessee in a small town just north of Chattanooga called Dayton, Tennessee. And I currently live in Chattanooga, Tennessee. And Chattanooga was always this sort of city on a hill, a place that you went to, like when you live in a town of 30,000, then the town of 150,000 seemed like the big city. Huge, right? And it was beautiful, had parks. So I come from a small town and respect like small towns doing it right. And then right now I live in a normal size town of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

J**Jason Duff** 03:27

Great. What's special about Tennessee, but specifically Chattanooga?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 03:32

Yeah, so Chattanooga, what's great is one, it like, Gil Penalosa, the brother of Enrique Penalosa, who The Happy City is written about, which is a great book and where I get a lot of inspiration from. He said when he visited Chattanooga that God gave— did us a lot of favors, and a lot of that has to do with the landmass. And you have this beautiful mountain that was a sacred Cherokee mountain overlooking the winding Tennessee River, which brings in a lot of economy and commerce around freight and things like that. Super green, super lush, lots of great parks. And so that's what Chattanooga is today. And they call themselves a city in a park. Which is, you know, sort of their branding, what they want to do. And I think we're not quite there yet, but it's a good thing that we're aiming for.

J

Jason Duff 04:28

Well, you remember the Chattanooga Choo Choo, like, song? I guess by the— see, I think John John's shaking his head like about to get educated here. Trains were a big deal right there, right?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 04:40

So what's funny is like, one, yes, there is no active passenger rail to Chattanooga. Okay. There is a study under Biden's like infrastructure plan. Got to study. We will be considered to be a stop between Nashville and Atlanta if they do create a passenger rail between us. But what's funny about that is I remember we were in France and we saw our server had a Chattanooga Choo Choo shirt on and he didn't speak English very well. We're trying to like, we're like, we're from there, we're from there.

J

Jason Duff 05:09

Chattanooga Choo Choo. Come on. All right. That was all you. No, at the end, we are, we are. Well, we'll actually recount that. But no, it's a big deal. Your town. Has an iconic song that's tied to it, it's obviously there's history and culture there. So it's a great place to visit, it sounds like.

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 05:28

Yeah. Oh yeah, it's a great, it's a great place to visit. And they're really trying to cash in on that right now. It's really becoming a tourist and hospitality hotspot for people coming through.

J

Jason Duff 05:37

But it didn't used to be that, so something had to change. And so walk us through, like, when did you move there and when did you kind of start to get involved in this urbanist movement? Yeah.

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 05:48

So Walter Cronkite famously called Chattanooga the dirtiest city in America in 1960.

J

Jason Duff 05:54

Ouch.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 05:55

Okay. And with a mountain just adjacent to downtown, most days of the year you couldn't see it through the pollution. It was an industrial city. It's in a valley. My, my neighborhood is currently an EPA disaster site where the EPA is remediating people's yards due to the lead content in the ground. So do you glow at night or anything? Yeah, well, what's funny is when we came in and bought our old house, we had to sign all these waivers of like, there might be lead paint, there might be old electric— like electrical wires, but nobody told us about the ground. But our yard has been remediated. They took about 2 feet worth of soils. But here's the thing, I think that points to where Chattanooga came from. And then the late '80s, early '90s, they made some really brave decisions to try to revitalize downtown. And they put in a world-class aquarium and they pedestrianized some areas. They turned a car bridge into a full-time pedestrian bridge. I think it's the longest pedestrianized, fully pedestrianized bridge in America. It dumps people off into this neighborhood with this street with a lot of shops, and they invested a lot in parks in our downtown core. And we saw a ton of revitalization around that. We are the nation's first electric shuttle. It's a free electric shuttle service that still runs to this day. It's just running a little loop downtown. Our public transit is terrible besides that. And it worked. There was a pretty big bet that they placed on the downtown and it worked out. And so lots of music festivals. The Ironman holds events there. There's like regattas for rowing. It's just— it's got a lot of great natural features. And since the town's been cleaned up since the industrial era, it's just a wonderful place to visit. And that, that's really what happened there. Now, my story I come back to Chattanooga in 2020, and this is when I feel like there are two Chattanooga's. There's the one that's set up for you to visit and enjoy and then leave. And then there's a different Chattanooga that you have to live in once you're there full time. And it was sort of this dichotomy of two different identities that started me along this path of making content, explaining what I'm seeing, what are some of the challenges, because I feel like everyone understands what it feels like to be in a hostile environment or what it feels like to be in a good environment. They just lack the vocabulary to make that connection of why they feel that way. And that's really what I set out to do is help people, help translate the feelings that people are feeling that are a result of the built environment.

J**Jason Duff** 08:31

We oftentimes talk about brain types, and one of our podcast guests, Benji Raybhan, helped us break it down that some people have a same brain and some people have a difference brain, meaning that there are people that can walk throughout life that look at similarities and like connect them all, and then there are other people that all they see are what's not the same. Um, but, but along those lines, like another two kind of bodies in a lot of the urban planning are people that focus on preservation, in preserving historic details, architecture, Names, you name it, could be the type of native grass that is in the city. And then there's another brain type with the innovative mindset, the people that want to see change. And sometimes that's in zoning code and planning. But you spoke a little bit of like, like the, the two different Chattanooga's. Were those two brain types kind of conflicting in that neighborhood, or were there other types of things that were popping up that there were differences that you were seeing?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 09:36

Yeah, I think the theme of today, as you get to know me, is going to be a both/and mindset for myself, that in more than one way I'm ambidextrous. Like, I am—

J**Jason Duff** 09:47

for those people that don't know what that word is, can you break that down? That's amazing.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 09:51

So ambidextrous is just someone who can use both their right and their left hand, right? And so, um, like, when I say this, I mean, like, in some ways I am a hardcore preservationist. Yeah. Um, in my neighborhood there is a project where they're restoring an factory to become a brewery. That building helps the urban fabric. My neighborhood is a sort of streetcar neighborhood that is now just single-family or just homes, but they're bringing businesses back to the old business places. And so I am all about the change in my neighborhood, which is bringing businesses back online. I'm all for the— but one of the problems is these parking mandates were going to require them to have a quarter of a million dollar parking lot. And that parking lot was going to use the majority of their land that they wanted to use for outdoor seating and recreational areas and stuff like that. And so one, in order to preserve what was there, I had to advocate for radical change, which is let's get rid of some of these parking minimums. Let's find a way that we can make it a good investment to try to invest in these old buildings. So, um, With what you said, like, I don't know, this could seem kind of lame with me saying both, but I find myself identifying both. And I actually think that's important as someone who wants to be a sort of concept translator, is that I identify with the YIMBY movement, which says build housing at all costs because we are in a crisis. But I also identify with the preservationists that say, okay, let's also think about what we want our neighborhood to look and feel like, and what the long-term repercussions could be if we build cheap buildings that nobody likes and things like that.

J**Jason Duff** 11:39

And great, great way to say it. And the NIMBY initiative or movement is Not In My Backyard. So NIMBY is kind of that acronym for that. And I think you being a translator, if we can kind of just unpack for those listening, the old way to institute change in a community was going and filling out an application, sending notices to neighboring property owners, and maybe a sign posted that zoning is being changed or a conditional use is maybe being requested for a particular property. And then basically you would go to meetings and everyone would shout at each other. Is that not your experience of the old way of doing things?

 J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 12:20

Well, it's exactly right. It's that while there might be one or two decision makers with the power to say yes, three or four active citizens might have the power of veto to any change. That is to say, if you show up to a city council meeting and there's four or five people that show up to speak out against something, that's crazy because usually nobody is going to come to a city council meeting. So if someone comes to protest the building of new duplexes or apartments or a new business going on in the corner, it's very easy for the voices of less than half a dozen citizens to keep something from happening. And so I would say the old way of doing things where we get the term NIMBY, not in my backyard, is that of like stifling change. And it sort of created this reactionary movement which goes by YIMBY, yes, in my backyard. Yeah. And they're they're kind of like unquestioning build at all costs sort of things. And I can understand the fear of both. I can understand if I bought a house and everything the way I've set up my finances, I need this to appreciate and they're going to do something different in my neighborhood. I could feel how that would be nerve-wracking. But I also understand the Yimbis that come and say, well, we have a homeless crisis and we— our housing stock is going down and prices are going up. So what I want to do is I want to take from both crowds, and I want to show them where, one, the other, the other side isn't as scary as you think. They're just people with real fears like you. And then two, try to teach people like, um, what it might look like to incrementally change your neighborhood for the better.

 J

Jason Duff 14:07

I'm curious, uh, obviously content creation is a very, uh, big word right now, uh, but it could mean a million different things. So I'm kind of curious what kind of content, uh, what content creation looks like for you and how you kind of got into that. Obviously, as you're recognizing these things in your own community and wanting to be involved in stuff, what was that pathway for you?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 14:30

Yeah, for people who aren't familiar, my like first platform that I really got established on is TikTok, and it blows my mind whenever I look at my TikTok and I realize like there's 273,000 people that follow me on there. And it's not that accounts can't get that big, it's that there's 273,000 people who like to watch videos of me walking around filming videos on my phone, right? Talking about what I'm looking at. So, um, one, I think that points to sort of a need that, that there is. So when it comes to content creation, first and foremost, like, um, I'm not a professional YouTuber. I don't have a lot of kit. I've tried buying nicer cameras, but they— the learning curve keeps me from making videos. And I just feel like I got to be making videos. Um, I've always been sort of a storyteller and a teacher, so that's come natural to me. And, uh, I had a job where I had to use video a lot informally and formally. So I just, I am, I'm okay with looking at myself. And so, um, I just started filming a lot of videos. Most of them are under 3 to 4 minutes. Um, they're not super short for TikTok, but they're very short for something like YouTube. And I just found a niche sort of in, in that realm where it's just like If I can introduce an interesting concept that relates to everybody and then show how it applies to something they might see today, that's going to create an itch in the beginning of the video, and then it's going to scratch it by the end of the video, and that's going to be very satisfying. So what I found is that not only am I finding people whose interests are in urban planning and city design, I'm finding regular everyday people are becoming interested in it as a result. So, um, My process is a much— is as much about how I'm going to say what I'm going to say as it is what I'm going to say at the end.

J**Jason Duff** 16:23

When did you discover that this TikTok that you posted on something that you found was important, that other people also found was important too?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 16:35

So first and foremost, my foray into TikTok was by proxy. During the shutdown, I found myself on TikTok like a lot of people. Yeah, it sucks. Yeah. And my sister was living an interesting story. She had just sold her house, all her belongings. Her and her husband moved across the country to a city they've never lived in before, Charleston. They bought a laundromat. They were starting that business. The lockdown happened, the laundromat caught on fire. And oh my gosh, just a big question mark. And I was like, I told my sister, I was like, I was like, this is the type of thing that would suck someone in on TikTok. Like, make a— and she would, by profession, they were videographers before this. I was like, make a video about the last 60 days and then invite people to follow your story. And her first video got 7 million views. And the company that supplied the laundromat wanted to replace washing machines that got burned in a fire. Like, it was a great story. She got like 200,000 followers. From like her first video. And I was like, oh, this really seems to work. Um, and then I've helped other siblings and friends sort of do it on TikTok. So I was like, I feel like I understand kind of how the algorithm works. I really don't know what I want to talk about yet though. And I, I actually started building a channel for the company I worked for and then realized, okay, I do have the aptitude for this. And then when that company decided they were going to go full in on TikTok, um, and I could do whatever I wanted on my own personal channel, that's when I was like, okay, I'm just going to talk about what I like to talk about. So it was sort of the slow realization of helping others do it and then realizing like, well, why don't I just do this for what I care about? Um, and it's ironic because each person I talked to about TikTok, I had to convince them. I had to convince them that this was for them, that people will care about what happens to a laundromat. Um, and then I had to do it to myself and said, well, maybe people will care about cities and towns as well.

J**Jason Duff** 18:30

I love that. What was the first kind of project or TikTok that you did that like, I'm going to try this on my own, I'm going to share this story and see what happens?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 18:40

Yeah. So I started with like a 40-day concept. I said, I think it was like 40 concepts in 40 days to help you change your mind. And I was just coming up with all these interesting things. And when one of them took off, I started just talking, using them in the context of like cities and things like that. But my first video about urbanism that hit a million views was me just walking to the park with my kids from my house. We decided, I decided to walk to the closest park to my house. We don't usually walk to that park. And so I wanted to talk about how walkability was more than just sidewalks and proximity, because there's another, there's another park that's further away from our house, but we end up walking there instead. And so I just documented what I saw with my kids along the way. And that video got 1.7 million views. And that's when I started to realize like, oh, there's something big here. Now fast forward to earlier this year, 3 years after I started making videos, I did a very similar work, a very similar video, me walking to that park, except I was walking to the public pool at that park. That video got over 10 million views. It was on the front page of Reddit and people are just identifying with like me too, I thought I was the only one type of experiences. Like, oh, I felt this, but I didn't know how to say it. Or I was just telling someone about this the other day. And it's literally just me taking a 20-minute walk to a nearby public pool.

J**Jason Duff** 20:08

And for listeners that haven't— have yet to visit your TikTok channel, first off, make sure you do. But for me, what I found that was so simple, yet so profound, is that as Jon Jon is on that walk to the park with his kids, he is visually describing and showing significant barriers for people interacting in that neighborhood, in that town. So a few things that could pop up would be broken sidewalks. You know, sidewalks that are uneven, uneven, or a safety hazard, or landscaping that is literally encroaching over top that would prevent someone if they were handicap accessible on how to actually navigate a sidewalk. And for those of us that, you know, are in city building work, sometimes we get stuck with developing a strategic plan when the simple thing is, have you ever walked from a neighborhood to the park? Right.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 21:07

Yeah. Yeah. Just noticing that. And then the other thing is just pointing out interesting bits of infrastructure design choices, like not just the neglect, which is what you're touching on right there, which is a huge part of it, but just like, hey, where do we place our telephone poles? We could place them in the verge, which is the spot closest to the road, or we could place them on the other side of the sidewalk. And our design guides put them on the other side of the sidewalk. Well, why do we do that? Well, because they know that cars crash and they want to give cars an area to recover before they hit something solid like a telephone pole or a building. But what's ironic is that that recovery zone is where people are expected to walk. And so you can go and walk and see where they place a guardrail, and if they place it on the far side of the sidewalk, what they're saying is, um, whatever's what's beyond this barrier is worth protecting, right? But what is in front of it is, you know, collateral damage. Yeah. And so you're like, man, a mom pushing a stroller is expected to be on the bad side of a guardrail. And I think cities have like a lot of them have changed their code or have updated where they place guardrails. A lot have not. But definitely those legacy sort of guardrails, you can see exactly where they put them and it shows you sort of the society's intentions in those places. And those things kind of blow people's minds too. It's just like, Oh, it's designed this way. This isn't a, you know, a good design that's been neglected, or this wasn't a bad idea we've learned from. This is like what we're actively designing our streets to look like in these cases.

J**Jason Duff** 22:39

Yeah, I love that. Talk to us a little bit about the Chattanooga Urbanist Society. How was it born? I know this is kind of a big part of your story here. And as you're talking about, you know, change and inflicting that change, I'd like, I'd like our audience to hear more about that.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 22:55

Yeah, as I started making the videos, it was at a time where I was becoming more involved politically. I would show up to city council, I would speak at any time there was a mic or an opportunity. I was taking city officials out to lunch or coffee, trying to learn more and get more involved. And I think it was the frustration of the slow pace of change that is, that happens in government that led me to just see needs around my town that could probably be fulfilled right away. And the first one that sparked this was a guardrail that had been knocked out on a bridge, an overpass in my neighborhood. And though there's probably a work order, the State Department of Transportation, the City Department of Transportation has to figure out whose jurisdiction it is. That takes weeks. And so this guardrail was missing for weeks. And not only was it a liability for cars going through that missing section, it was on a sidewalk where people could walk and fall there. They just put up a piece of caution tape, basically. Um, yikes. And so I remember thinking, okay, it's hard to put up— to fix a concrete barrier in a quick time, but they could have put something up temporary for pedestrians, like a wooden rail or something like that. And then I remember thinking, well, if they did that and it failed, they'd be liable. And then I think, well, I could do that, but if I did it and it failed, I'd be liable. But then something a flip switched where I essentially realized if I don't do something and someone falls, I will know that I'm liable. If I can do something, I should do something. So I decided that I didn't have money. I didn't have bandwidth for, you know, like financial bandwidth for this. So I went to a dumpster and a construction site, pulled out some wood, made a guard, a handrail, put on a yellow vest and put it in place. Now, I didn't want the city to get credit for it, but I also didn't want to get credit for it. So I created a fake organization, the Chattanooga Urban This Society. I created a logo, a stencil, and I spray-painted it all over the wooden guardrail. And then I made a video, a sort of POV, a point-of-view type video where you don't see me, you just see what I'm doing. And I posted it on an account with zero followers and it got 150,000 views in the first week.

J**Jason Duff** 24:59

I love that. That's one of my favorite stories that you shared, like, the way to take things into your hands, but then also like building an audience and a movement around other ideas and projects that, that could be happening in your town or need to happen in your town. All right, at this time we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. 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! Come check out 600 Downtown Pizzeria in downtown Bellefontaine, where they cherish the art of making the most authentic, unique, and delicious world-famous and award-winning pizzas. Their team hand-spins each pizza the old-fashioned way and only uses the freshest of ingredients. Come see why they were featured on the Food Network.

 J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 25:56

So there's actually an update to that story that, um, you haven't even heard yet, probably, but essentially that made me realize this fake organization I was creating was very much going to become a real organization because people were hungry for this type of action. So we started just looking for needs and fulfilling them. And we're not a 501. We're just a mutual aid group. We're just people who respond and show up. And people have donated money, donated resources. There's a construction company that gives us space in their warehouse to work from, their tools to use. And we've built about 90-plus bus benches around town. Downtown for bus stops that don't— aren't provided with seating. And what's funny about this is, uh, our next project would make a video that spawned— that got over 3 million views, that got us 100,000 followers on the Chattanooga Urbanist Society, um, TikTok. And it was being very critical of the mayor and a decision the mayor made to remove benches from downtown. And the bench that they had removed, once we had called attention to it, they replaced within 72 hours. So like our objective was completed, and we haven't pulled any punches. And the following State of the City address, the mayor mentioned us by name as an organization that is often critical of his administration, but he still respects our work. And then just 2 weeks ago, um, at the State of the City address where he gives out awards that he calls One Chattanooga Awards, he gave one out to the Chattanooga Urbanist Society, one of 4 awards given out citywide was given to a group which is often critical of policies that are put in place that are hostile towards pedestrians and homeowners and things like that. And so, um, this really just came full circle a couple of weeks ago where we realized you don't have to pull punches. Um, you can be respected and bring about change without having to wait till you have all the resources, have everything figured out, or, or land even a huge grant or anything like that. So far we've just done this with private funding and individual volunteers. And it's really been inspiring. It's really been exciting to be a part of it.

 J

Jason Duff 28:09

That's really cool. And I think I knew you would appreciate that story because I feel like Small Nation definitely has a bent towards action. So I'm curious to ask you this. How do you activate people to start getting involved in making a difference in their community? I feel like that's one of the biggest feedback we get from other communities.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 28:27

So I think people discount storytelling and then inviting people to be a part of it. So the first thing is like the presence of social media for people to think like like, look at these people out here being, you know, pretending to be Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, like gathering in a warehouse with leaky roofs, using power tools and building stuff. Like, it has this real anarchist vibe to it. Like, we're just doing stuff. By telling a good story, you can then invite other people to it. So that's the first step is like, document what you're doing and show people doing it. And It doesn't have to be flashy. You don't have to pretend that 30 people showed up when no one did. Tell the story that you have, which is there was a log crossing a road and the city freed up the roadway but left the tree crossing the sidewalk. We found someone who had a chainsaw, watched them cut up this tree, and we took care of the next 6 feet of the log. And now the sidewalk's open again. That's 2 people doing something like you could do something like that once a weekend, and then eventually you'll sort of see these little wins. The second thing is to lower the barrier of entry for participation. We have events that involve power tools and experience and stuff like that. Painting.

J**Jason Duff** 29:44

You did a lot of painting, like of the benches.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 29:46

Yep. Yeah. So yeah. So, so then you have like the power tools and the benches. And then we have the painting of the benches. And then you have even the lowest barrier, which is just trash pickup, where we'll do these things called Trash Talks, where we'll meet meet in a part of town, we'll pick up trash, we'll talk about what we see. It's sort of like a trash and learn, like you pick up trash, you learn about the environment. Well, we'll even say in those trash talks, hey, show up, and even if you're unable to pick up trash or fully navigate the area that we're going into, show up to just be a visible presence that increases the, the visibility of the group that's there. Just you showing up. And it was one of these trash talks that one of our most influential members, showed up to and got activated in. He came to pick up trash and then he never left. And he's led some of our, some of our, our biggest projects. We recently just helped put on one of the biggest parking days in Chattanooga and he helped close that down and did a lot of work there. And it was basically because he saw this thing that was like, yeah, I can pick up trash, I'll show up. And then he was like, okay, I'm not going to stop showing up. And he had present.

J**Jason Duff** 30:55

You've made the tent very big. And, um, how do you handle too that the adversity— I mean, you've achieved some success of making these changes in the neighborhood. Change sometimes ruffles feathers. I know you use the example, um, in the beginning of the bench, you know, disappearing, and now that's come full circle. But for other, other listeners that are kind of hitting brick walls Any advice for how you overcome those?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 31:24

This is another sort of benefit of, of being good on social media. If you do something and it works, then it works. If you do something and the city opposes it and removes your work, you now have a story. There's this group out of Southern California called Crosswalks LA., and they just paint crosswalks to, like, design guide, which is the design guide for cities is called MUTCD. They make MUTCD-compliant crosswalks, but they do so without permission and therefore illegally. And what happens is if the city doesn't react to their work, that neighborhood now has a crosswalk. If the city does react to their work and goes and removes that crosswalk, now they have a story which then ends up creating headlines across the country, which is the city that doesn't have the resources to paint a crosswalk has the resources to come and remove crosswalks. And, and I sort of love that for people, which is just like, you're going to face adversity, but you're, you're just going to start making lemonade out of it. You're starting to realize like it's a better story when there's opposition. Yeah. And what you'll start to find if you, if you play it right is that But the opposition is just humans doing their job. And over time, they'll become much more amenable to it. And that's something that I'm working on right now. There's some active projects that are going to be in concert with the city. There are plans to bring in a sort of tactical urbanism nonprofit that will do official city projects in a sort of experimental level. And so, yeah. Now with that being said, you will also have to grow a thick skin. Anything you put out in public will never be good enough, will never satisfy everyone. And you'll also get comments where people are like, well, why didn't you think of this angle? Or why don't you talk about this? And it'll even be something you talked about in another video. But if you don't talk about it in every single video, people will be upset that you didn't bring it up. So there will be some thick skin you might have to develop. But the other thing is just like a lot of these challenges are just new opportunities presenting themselves in different, in different forms.

J**Jason Duff** 33:51

And adding to new opportunities, you mentioned comments. How have you leveraged or used comments to grow the work that you're doing or to support your organization?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 34:02

Yeah, so one, if, if there is a comment, and this is just true of me across the board, but whether it's for the Urbanist Society or my personal accounts, if there's a comment that like I haven't considered, I will literally respond with that. And that's so disarming to be like, hey, actually haven't considered that. Thanks for pushing the conversation forward. Here's what I'm thinking right now, but what do you think? And one, that just, that's just helpful. Two, a lot of these platforms have the ability to respond to a comment with a video. So there's a reply and you hit a button that creates a video that shows that comment at the beginning as you talk to it. And people appreciate that. It shows up, it makes it more visible when people are going through the comments that there was a video reply to it. That person feels responded to. Or if the person's saying something that's incendiary and you want to defend yourself, anyone that sees their comment also gets to check in on your reply. So I just see it as like, in a world of bifurcation and black and white thinking, nuance is a superpower. And the ability to live in the gray and to challenge people's presuppositions makes you so much more unexpected and gives you many more opportunities to, to, to actually influence and be present and have a conversation.

J**Jason Duff** 35:24

One thing that you're really direct with as you present and speak and share is that you want people to rip and duplicate what you have seen work in Chattanooga and take it to other places. Do you have any examples where that's happening or anything that you're excited about seeing how some of those early projects and success is impacting other towns and communities?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 35:47

Yeah, so there was, um, there is a person who helped us with our website that said, hey, we want to make a website for you, we want to make branding, tell us what to do, how can we help?

J**Jason Duff** 35:59

And one of the things— awesome, by the way, I checked it out before the podcast. I love the website.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 36:03

Yeah, yeah, it's like the great— like the first logo logo was like some clip art of a brick that I found and just the words Chattanooga Urbanist Society. They really took it to the next level and they said one of the ideas of the brand overhaul that they pitched to us was you could take any city and put it in the font but keep the logo the exact same. So Kansas City Urbanist Society, Mobile, Alabama Urbanist Society, and a few people have done that. We've also seen people building benches and sending us their examples or people just doing stuff in their there. We also have this like unofficial motto of like doing it our damn selves. And then like people will like use that as a hashtag or tag us in it. And all of that's really flattering. And I think also just a great example of like when you are committed to getting stuff done and not getting the credit for it, you can just hold it loosely and let people run with it. So that's what the Urbanist Society — on my side of things, I 100% want people to take what I'm doing and run with it. In fact, I even have this like open offer. If anyone ever like reposts me in Spanish or French, I tell them, I was like, if you find a spot in your video, in your town that makes sense for a similar video, literally take what I wrote down word for word, translate it in Spanish, repost the whole thing as if it's your original content, and then just tag me in it so that I can see it. Um, I am so happy for this word to get out there that I love the idea of people replicating this in other languages and countries and things like that.

J**Jason Duff** 37:36

And you hear that, and then number one, that shows your humility, but also your passion behind what you want to do is you want to make what you have built and started like a fire that's going to impact positive changes in neighborhoods all around the country and all around the world, which I think is super awesome. Yeah. So I got to ask, the Happy Urbanist, it's a title that you've been, you've been given and are known by. So where did that come from? And tell me some of the thought process behind that.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 38:07

Yeah. So I started making content in part as a response to the fact that everything that I could find online was sort of negative bent and California focused. So it sort of had this like left coast progressive vocabulary, which is fine, but I knew it wasn't going to fly in East Tennessee. And so I was like, so one thing, I've got to change how I position things, that instead of looking at it as like affordable housing or progressive housing policy, I could look at something similar and say, you know what, this is actually increasing, you know, property rights or something like that, something that just made sense in the American South. And so as I was thinking about this, the other thing I didn't like was not just like the vocabulary that didn't work where I was, but also the tone and the posture, which was just like, yeah, as someone who agrees with these people, I can get fired up by all of their negativity and the attacking and all of that. And it's very easy to fall into that. But I noticed that the more and more I learned about urbanism, the more esoteric it became and the smaller my group of peers became. And so I was like, how can I flip this on its head? How can I bring more people into this conversation? And I realized, like, I've got to use simpler language. I've got to define my terms as I'm talking, and I've also got to be approachable. And that's how I feel in real life. And it was actually reading the book *The Happy City* by Charles Montgomery, which I mentioned earlier, which is about the city of Bogotá, Colombia, and Enrique Peñalosa, who in just a 2-year term turned the city around to make it more pedestrian-friendly and safe and less congested, with, um, and better air quality. And I realized when I saw the *Happy City*, I was like, okay, that's what I want to do. I'm going to brand myself as the Happy Urbanist. That way, uh, it'll feel unnatural for me to record videos without a smile or for me to pile on the negativity too thick. Now, obviously, I'm sometimes posting on really sensitive subject matter, and I, I don't want to be I don't know. I don't want to be offensive in how I portray that. So I am a real human being. But for the most part, like I'm guided by positivity and the idea that like change is happening. Change is only going to accelerate and it's going to be for the better.

J**Jason Duff** 40:37

Yeah. I love that. You're giving some great tips for small communities or small towns out there and engaging people behind, you know, some, some efforts here, but I do want to kind of circle back to something we talked about at the very beginning. You mentioned, Jason, that you ran into each other at a Strongtowns event. I know we've talked about Strongtowns a little bit in previous episodes, but I want to hear maybe, Jon Jon, if you can explain what it is and maybe some of the, you know, the value you've gotten from being a part of an organization like that.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 41:08

Yeah, Strongtowns is a nonprofit that talks about cities getting things right and tells that story and creates a lot of content around it. But what separates Strongtowns from other organizations is that they're bottom-up. Type people. They're not overlooking the small cities and just focusing on the big stories. But they're also not going to the big cities and saying like, okay, you need to create these policies to tell people how to live their lives. Instead, they're trying to activate people from the grassroots up. And I think that's very peculiar in this day and age when people are trying to figure out, okay, what side are you on before I figure out whether I like you or not? And Strong Towns is one of those weird organizations where everyone is accusing it of being something else. People either look at it and they're like, this is a conservative organization that is displaying itself as a progressive organization. But then other people will say, oh, it's just a bunch of commies pretending to be conservative. And you feel like people don't know what they're getting with it. And so I'd say Strongtowns is an organization that wants to make cities and towns better places and do so from the bottom up.

J**Jason Duff** 42:13

Up. Great. Yeah, no, I appreciate that. What about you, Jason? Do you have any, uh, what's your experience with Strongtowns? Well, I, I'm newer to Strongtowns, and in fact, the Cincinnati event was, um, one of the first that I've attended in terms of a national gathering. But I've met a lot of people over the years and read a lot of their materials about this idea of incremental development. And, uh, it's just like John John said, is like, you're not— it's very rare you're going to go in with a strategic plan or a master plan or a downtown development plan plan and follow that exactly as the planner's intended. In fact, development is actually very messy. It's, you know, where there is entrepreneurial spark and energy and ideas. And sometimes, you know, an entrepreneur will start out and open up, and we've seen this in Bellefontaine a number of times, like they want to start out with a tea shop and then you literally 3 months later it becomes a boutique or becomes, you know, a craft beer bar. Like it's just it's just the evolution of ideas and what customers will support, what's needed in the neighborhood, and I think what I love about Strongtowns and a lot of the thought leaders and the content they produce is things are always evolving incrementally. You're seeing things evolve over time. I've met some, just like John did, I've met some really wonderful people in their own lane or their geographic region or the part of their country that are literally rock stars. And so, just like hearing the content today, like when I heard him speak, I'm like, I love what you're doing. We're not doing enough of this tactical urbanism, happy urbanism in our town. I want to learn from you. And I think he's a great wealth of knowledge. And on the flip side, because I'm a for-profit private developer, there's a lot of things that I think we can share because we've been doing this for 20 years. And so, we, we can exchange our playbook that maybe helps his town or his neighborhood or his community too. Yeah. Yeah. That's good stuff. Thanks for sharing that, both of you. Um, before we kind of move us on to, uh, the next part of this, uh, show here is, John John, I just wanted to ask you what's next on the horizon for you and your, your business and content creation. What are you thinking?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 44:23

Yeah. So I actually just announced that I am running for city council in Chattanooga. Congrats. Um, yeah. I have a campaign website, jonjon.community. That's the whole website, jonjon.community. You can go on there to learn more or participate in any way that you see fit. But for me, it's just about answering the call for my city. I feel like the urgency I'm working with is based on the idea that I would love my kids to have the autonomy to explore my wonderful city before they're 16. That means safe, reliable transit. That means streets that they can walk along. I don't want the car to be their first experience with independence and autonomy. And so that's what I'm— that's what I'm— that's my aim right now. Chattanooga, like everywhere, has a housing crisis. We more so than some areas because of how much we're growing. We have a pedestrian safety crisis. And we have a lot of money coming in on big projects. And I'm afraid the little things are going to be overlooked. And so that's really what I'm focusing on now.

J

Jason Duff 45:33

Yeah, great. Thanks for sharing that. Really exciting. I'm going to move us into our rapid-fire Q&A here. First question is, are you right or left-handed?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 45:44

I'm ambidextrous. We heard that.

J

Jason Duff 45:46

You're actually— are you that in life and in brain?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 45:50

Yes. So let me actually—

J

Jason Duff 45:52

first, that's impressive.

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 45:54

Let me back up. I no longer can write with both hands, but I'm dominant in each hand in different things. So, so if you were to— if I were to throw football or baseball with you, right-handed. If I were to write you a letter, left-handed.

J

Jason Duff 46:07

Really?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 46:07

Um, and so, uh, if I were musical and played guitar, I think I would be right-handed. Like, it just— at some point I had to choose which side side. And, um, with, with sports like baseball, I inherited a right-handed glove, so I throw right-handed. And then, um, things like writing, it didn't— like, there is no right or left-handed pen. I just use my dominant left hand.

J

Jason Duff 46:28

Yeah. Wow. So I'm gonna— I, I love that. I'm gonna take the next question. Sure. Is what hobbies do you have? So when you're not out, like, doing all your TikToks and helping your community, what are things that you have hobbies that you doing?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 46:42

Great question. I don't know anymore. I feel like at this point, like making content and on different, different platforms or whatever has sort of become my hobby. I love being outdoor. I love riding my bike. I go on as many community bike rides as I can. I love going on hikes. I don't do as much of that as I used to, but yeah, love that.

J

Jason Duff 47:02

I feel that your interest becomes your business and that's all you do. Yeah. Cool. What is one community or city that has helped— that has done urbanism well, in your opinion, or someplace that inspires you as you're doing your work?

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 47:17

Yeah, if you're watching my content recently, it's gonna feel like I'm beating a dead horse. But Durham, North Carolina has actually inspired me lately. Not in part because it's the best city I've ever been to, or that it has everything done right. It's actually because because it has made changes despite inheriting some pretty, like, I mean, the same things all cities have inherited recently. And they begin to flatten the curve on some of the housing crisis issues. And so beginning in 2019, and then some sweeping changes that they did last year, they're really addressing things like housing and transit. And I think it's wonderful.

J

Jason Duff 47:57

Yeah, that's a great city. Good examples. Let's check it out. And then last question I have here for you for this segment is, when are you coming to visit Ohio. It's on his list. I have been, been bending his ear with that.

J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 48:10

So I would be happy to come. The challenge right now is this election is in March. And every, every weekend, it seems between now and then is completely booked. I would love to come beginning of next year, or middle of next year, second quarter next year.

J

Jason Duff 48:27

We're excited to host you. So we'll, we'll keep working on that. Great. And these are just a couple questions we ask every guest. And the first one is, what is one professional development resource was impactful for you. I know you already mentioned a couple books, but just something that you can point people, our listeners, to, to continue to glean information.

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 48:43

It's a platform. It's called Libby, or sometimes it's called OverDrive. It's an audiobook platform through your local library. So, um, fun fact, I am a little bit dyslexic. I love reading but would always read less than 10 books a year because it just was that much work. Once I started telling myself that reading with my ears was a real thing. I started listening to upwards of 70 to 100 books a year, and I could do it free through my library. So look up Libby. In some places it's called the OverDrive app. And you might listen at different paces. That is to say, the bestseller book might have a long wait, but a 5-year-old book like Walkable Cities or The Happy City, they could have the audio or the Kindle version on Libby, and you get books for free.

J**Jason Duff** 49:32

Yeah, and just to follow up, your maybe few favorite books— you mentioned a few of them about people that are interested in the stuff that we talked about today. What are some of your favorites to listen to?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 49:44

Yeah, great question. So a sort of like you can't miss this book, uh, on your pathway to city design and urbanism is The Life and Death of Great American Cities by, uh, Jane Jacobs. Walkable City by Jeff Speck is probably one of the best just intro video, intro primers on urbanism. And then Strongtown has put out 3 great books, but the one that surprised me the most is Confessions of a Recovering Engineer, which is just about the transit side of cities, like the roads and pathways. Some other not book resources, if I just— Sure. While I have the mic. Not Just Bikes on YouTube. That does have some of that negative bit to it. And then Street Craft on YouTube. He's really new to the scene. I met him in person for the first time, but he's doing brilliant work. It's this guy named Noah. He's— I count him as a friend of mine now. And Street Craft is who I wish I was so much of the time. I see that, I'm like, man, that's cool. I wish I could—

J**Jason Duff** 50:50

Check that out. Yeah, sounds like a new good one. Sharing multiple resources. There. Something for everybody. Last question is, where can people follow you, all your accounts and the work that you're doing?

J**Jon Jon Wesolowski** 51:02

Yeah, great question. So my website for now, for all intents and purposes, it's just going to be my campaign website, jonjon.community. If you're interested in getting involved there, I am on both TikTok and Instagram, jonjon.jpeg for Instagram and jonjon.mp4 for TikTok.

J**Jason Duff** 51:20

I love it. I love those.

 J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 51:22

If you just type in the Happy Urbanist on either of those platforms, one of my videos will come up and then you can follow me from there.

 J

Jason Duff 51:28

Very cool. Thank you, Jon Jon. Thanks for sharing so many good resources today. You know, again, if you've not followed any of Jon Jon's channels, they are a beam of positivity, good ideas, and really things that you can take back home and rip and duplicate in your town and neighborhood. Thanks for being a guest on our show. Saturday.

 J

Jon Jon Wesolowski 51:49

Yeah, thanks for having me. This was a blast.

 E

Ethan DeLeon 51:52

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

 E

Ethan DeLeon 51:54

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