

Episode 105

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Sarah Stephens Krupp, Renee Smith, Ethan DeLeon

R Renee Smith 00:00

I have seen some communities that have gotten some very large grants that many people on the outside sit back and think, whoa, how did that happen? But they had everything lined up. They had their funding, they had their partnerships, they could tell the story. And then I have seen other communities that they just win, win, win. They constantly have new money rolling in.

E Ethan DeLeon 00:27

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J Jason Duff 00:47

Hey guys, it's Jason Duff. Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast. I am in the studio today with 2 amazing ladies, co-founders of Thrive Community Partners, Sarah Stevens Krupp and Renee Smith. Welcome to the show today.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 01:01

Thank you so much for having us.

J Jason Duff 01:03

Thank you. Yeah, I think we met probably around 10 years ago. We are super young, by the way. Everyone—

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 01:09

Of course we are.

J Jason Duff 01:10

Of course knows that. But we, I think, met touring Faustoria, Ohio, which I wanna hear a little bit about Faustoria, how you guys met, how everything got started with this friendship that turned into a business partnership?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 01:25

Sure.

R Renee Smith 01:27

Okay.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 01:28

Who wants to go first? I'll start. Okay.

R Renee Smith 01:31

So I started working in Faustoria in 2012, and I started as a part-time grants writer. Yeah. And I did that for about 2 years, and then there was an opening as running their economic development.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 01:48

Okay.

R Renee Smith 01:48

And so I applied for that. and they saw some potential in me. So I moved into that role in addition to the grants writing. And I had probably been in that role maybe a couple months, and they were looking for a new chamber director.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 02:06

Okay.

R Renee Smith 02:07

And Sarah's name came up because she had been in Faustoria previously, and they were talking about, do you think we could bring this Sarah Stevens Krupp back? And I thought, who is this woman? And, um, So a couple people reached out to her and she entertained the idea and came in and met with me to get the lay of the land. And that was the first time we met.

J Jason Duff 02:30

First impressions, what did you think?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 02:32

I was really impressed with Renee, to be honest. Like Renee had said, I had been the chamber director in the community prior to for about 3 years. Took a little hiatus. My life plan was very different than how my life actually went.

J Jason Duff 02:49

Tell me about it.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 02:51

In the best way possible. You know, we make plans, God laughs, and, you know, things happen. So I had never intended to go back into community work and to go back to the chamber. So when Renee said, you know, a couple people had reached out, I kind of laughed and thought, no. So I asked a series of questions about the state of the organization, leadership, you know, some things like that to do some due diligence. And they said, you should go meet with Renee. And so I went into the office and I had a conversation with Renee. And, you know, first impression was great. But really still had a lot of questions, wasn't sure, that kind of thing. But no, it was a great first impression. But there's a lot of stories that built the friendship on top of that working together.

J Jason Duff 03:34

So for people that maybe don't know, and they're hearing Fostoria, is it called Photon?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 03:39

It is.

J Jason Duff 03:40

As someone knows, like, as I spent some time up in Findlay and Hancock County. And, you know, Fostoria, it's got a long legacy and history. Tell us a little bit about like what, you know, what county is it in? Give us a little perspective, the size of the community and its history and what makes it unique.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 03:57

Sure. So the interesting thing about Fostoria is that it sits in 3 counties. So it's located in Seneca, Hancock, and Wood County. The bulk of it sits in Seneca County.

J Jason Duff 04:07

Okay.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 04:08

So that right there makes it a pretty unique community.

R Renee Smith 04:11

It is in 2 ODOT districts. They deal with 9 county commissioners, multiple—

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 04:17

Wow.

R Renee Smith 04:17

State representatives, state senators. It's a very unique community. It has a population of about 13,000, and it has a history of being very heavy industry, a lot of automotive and manufacturing. took some very big hits in the '80s and '90s, losing a lot of industry that really the community has struggled to bounce back from.

J Jason Duff 04:46

So when you guys met, what was happening in Fostoria at that time? So you became the chamber director and you were working in grant writing and economic development. Give us the lay of the land at that time. What was the state of affairs?

R Renee Smith 04:58

I have to say, I think the community was on the verge of a lot of changes at the time. They had a new mayor and a new administration, a new way of doing things. You had a lot of business people that were kind of coming back to the community to get involved in some of the family industry and some things of that nature. And so it was really the start of, I think, a small revitalization initiative there in Fostoria about that time.

J Jason Duff 05:28

What do you think when you met each other and you started working together, what did you realize what strengths complemented each other about how you work together?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 05:37

So I'll speak and I'll talk about Renee because she loves it when people talk about her. But I would say her superpower is being able to see big picture and develop strategy, always knowing the right next step and who you need to talk to in doing that. So that is definitely her strength. It's what I saw right away. But it's also her willingness to build partnerships. And to really understand that collaboration is key if you're really going to drive positive change and move communities forward.

J Jason Duff 06:08

And how about for Sarah?

R Renee Smith 06:10

So with Sarah, she is so good with people, and she truly listens to them. And she's not afraid to get in the trenches and do the work with somebody. So many times, you know, we see people that will come in and they'll talk a good talk, but they don't necessarily get down in the dirt with you. And Sarah will do that, and she makes it look effortless. And I always tell people this, she is good cop and I am bad cop.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 06:44

So we do say that a lot. Yeah, but when I get bad cop, people get really, really scared.

J Jason Duff 06:49

Well, you need that yin and yang of the, you know, the complimenting things. And, and what maybe your strengths is maybe not something you enjoy doing, you could do it, but like it's finding those those connections. And can you speak a little bit of some of the projects in Fostoria that you were uniting those superpowers to get momentum on?

R **Renee Smith** 07:06

I would say CoStarters would be a good example for you to give.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 07:10

Really? One of the biggest things that we really embarked on together was trying to build an entrepreneurial ecosystem within Fostoria. Much like a lot of smaller communities, especially ones where industry had left, there's a lot of vacancies in downtown. And downtown really is kind of that thermometer for a community, whether we realize it or not. People look at the downtown and they gauge the community health based on a downtown. And ours had a lot of vacancy. We're not going to sit here and talk to you and pretend like there wasn't an internal community, an external community image problem. So we knew that we really had to build that ecosystem in a grassroots way because we were in 3 communities. We're not the county seat of any of them.

E **Ethan DeLeon** 07:56

Right.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 07:56

So we had to do a lot of things on our own. So we just really worked on a lot of creative ways to identify people in the community that were entrepreneurs that maybe didn't realize they were. And then we found just a wonderful resource in what's called CoStarters. And CoStarters is a wonderful organization. It's now FinCEN CoStarters, but it's a wonderful curriculum that helps people basically take an idea and put it into action in a 10-week span. So it's very, very applicable. I kind of like to say, in the best way possible, it's like getting an MBA in, in an 8th grade kind of digestible way. Everything's very simple. So in that, we teamed up, we brought co-starters to the community, and we really saw it make a dynamic positive change by infilling those vacant businesses, but also really spreading positive community image because people can see momentum.

J **Jason Duff** 08:51

How do you in a community build that entrepreneurship ecosystem when, like what you said, is some people don't look in the mirror and recognize that they're an entrepreneur? Maybe they have those limiting beliefs. It's like, I don't know where I'd have the courage to find a mentor, or I don't know how I would get access to funding for my project, or how would I even find a building to lease. How do you help nourish that and find those people in a town?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 09:19

Well, I think our struggle was we had to go back even further. We had to figure out who were kind of the makers and the people with that mindset that they didn't realize they had it. So we pretty much stalked the farmer's market. We worked the farmer's market because what's interesting is while not all of the people and the vendors at your farmer's market are the people that you're going to put into a brick and mortar. It's such a well-connected network of people. So we really did that. Then we started formulating events in the community where we were tactfully trying to check a couple different boxes. And so we would host events and bring people in. And then a lot of it was having those conversations, helping them understand that You are an entrepreneur. You do have the mindset. And, oh, hey, we have Co-Starters coming. You should come take Co-Starters. And Renee and I both were firm believers that we both co-facilitated every single Co-Starters cohort that we ran because we knew it was that valuable. And then it, it was just continuing planting those seeds. And with Co-Starters, there's 10 sessions. 8 of those 10 sessions, we bring in guest speakers.

J Jason Duff 10:31

Okay.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 10:32

So they are fellow entrepreneurs that can serve as mentors. There's an attorney and an accountant that we bring And so we're constantly building their network and then plugging them into the previous alumni of co-starters. So that helps answer some of those questions that you were talking about. We build a community.

J Jason Duff 10:48

So you're actually building capacity with those advisors, coaches, people that have actually done it.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 10:56

Yes.

J Jason Duff 10:56

And that then— those relationships and bonds when they form, I think when I look back in my life, it were those early mentors that maybe pushed me out of my comfort zone. And sometimes the limiting belief that I had is that I would be— they would be offended if I tried to call them or ask them for things. So like, it's just the courage to ask for help. When on the flip side, all they wanted to do was pour into me and see me be successful.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 11:23

Yes.

J Jason Duff 11:23

And, you know, now looking back and thinking of my younger version of myself and like what I coach young people today is don't be afraid to reach out You know, ask for help, ask for advice, take someone out to lunch, all those kind of things, because you'll probably find that those resources and those capacities exist in your community. You just have the courage to do it.

R **Renee Smith** 11:44

Correct. And the other thing we found is once we got through that first cohort, which was pretty large, they saw themselves as entrepreneurs. Then they were going out and identifying who they thought were entrepreneurs. And so they were talking about, Hey, I learned this. I think it would be valuable for you to do this. And so it just organically grew because I think once people see it in themselves, it makes it easier for them to see it in others.

J **Jason Duff** 12:12

Great. And as you were getting momentum on that, you're finding some business concepts that are ready to incubate and grow out into storefronts. You're building capacity with more entrepreneurs, and people are probably starting to notice and see changes in Faustoria. What were some of those early business types, examples of momentum and movement and projects that were happening there?

R **Renee Smith** 12:36

So I guess I should preface this with we kind of did 2 things simultaneously. We launched the co-starters, but then we did a launch business competition to help launch some of these small businesses. And so some of the initial ones we had, Beyond Laser Creations with Jenna Stearns. We had a candy store. We had, at the same time, they weren't a winner of the competition, but a coffee shop opened downtown.

J **Jason Duff** 13:08

Okay.

R **Renee Smith** 13:09

So you started to see 2 or 3 new businesses pop up each year, and then suddenly you see people investing in the buildings, and it's momentum building, and it's Kind of like capital stacking, just in a little different way. But you see an investment of this size, and the next one's a little bigger, and the next one's a little bigger.

J **Jason Duff** 13:29

At what point, as you were accomplishing and working together and seeing this transformation that was happening in Faustoria, at what point did you realize that these challenges that you were solving there were challenges that other communities in Ohio were facing?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 13:45

I think it became very visible. as we, you know, you travel throughout the state, you see it, you see those visible things. But we were also having communities come to us and asking questions. How did you build this entrepreneurial pipeline? How did you launch this business competition? How did this all come together? So we started to see that and realize it was fairly universal.

R **Renee Smith** 14:06

And at the same time, you know, the city of Faustoria was winning some pretty sizable grants and some things like that. And so They were coming to us and saying, well, how did you pull these partnerships together? How did you get this kind of funding? And it really made us step back. And I think we really started talking about opportunities we were seeing during COVID because everything kind of got so wonky. And then it was, you know, between the two of us, we bring different things to the table. And we are very passionate about rural communities. And they're often the communities that are underserved. They struggle with capacity. They struggle with funding. And so we continued to talk about it for a couple of years. And then, you know, we launched.

J **Jason Duff** 14:57

You launched as in creating your own company, your own consulting firm called Thrive Community Partners, leaving your careers, that probably were very good, very stable. Sounds like an easy decision to do.

R **Renee Smith** 15:12

No.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 15:13

Sure.

R **Renee Smith** 15:14

No.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 15:15

Sure.

J **Jason Duff** 15:15

Bold decision, right?

R **Renee Smith** 15:17

I have to say, we, like, opened our official business in December of 2023, and we were very transparent about it with our executive team. And they were very supportive and said, We support you. We agree with what you're doing and what you can bring to other communities. And so then they structured it so we could stay in our current roles and do this as something on the side. And it grew bigger than we anticipated. Great problem to have.

E **Ethan DeLeon** 15:53

Yes.

R **Renee Smith** 15:54

And so last year we went to them and said, we have to make a decision. And we've decided to go full-time with Thrive Community Partners. Again, incredibly supportive, continue to be supportive to this day. And so yes, January 1st of this year, this is our full-time.

J **Jason Duff** 16:13

Congratulations.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 16:14

Thank you.

J **Jason Duff** 16:14

And it's been exciting to get to know you better, work with you on projects, see how you started in Fostoria and have accomplished some great things there. But now you're branching out all around the state and even outside of state doing that meaningful work, which, Kind of brings me to the next area of the segment today is like, why do some communities thrive? 'Cause not all communities really are figuring out that secret sauce of the right mix of people and projects and buildings and coordination and collaboration. So there are some that really do stand out. What characteristics consistently show up in communities that thrive?

R **Renee Smith** 16:53

I think one of the things is recognizing the fact that you don't always have all the answers internally. Sometimes you need that third-party outside person to come in and take a look around, offer some suggestions. But the flip side of that is that community needs to be open to that feedback and those suggestions.

J **Jason Duff** 17:13

Being coachable is a key quality, I think, for any professional. Like, we hire employees at our company, and one of the things, a part of our hiring process, is finding out and really assessing how coachable someone is. Are they willing to learn and innovate and create, and can they absorb lessons and knowledge? I think the same is true of communities.

R **Renee Smith** 17:36

I agree.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 17:37

I agree.

R **Renee Smith** 17:37

I would also say that development is a slow process, and I think there are a lot of communities that they struggle with that. You know, something— we're going to move forward with this, we're going to do this, and they expect in 3 to 6 months, it's in place. No.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 17:55

It usually doesn't happen.

J Jason Duff 17:56

Things worth doing are hard.

R Renee Smith 17:58

Yes, they are.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 17:59

And they take time.

J Jason Duff 18:00

They take time.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 18:01

They take time, yes.

J Jason Duff 18:01

And planning and organization. And sometimes, do you ever feel it is like 2 steps forward, 1 step back?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 18:06

Sometimes, sometimes.

J Jason Duff 18:08

But that learning, and this is the thing I think about bringing outside people in that have experience and knowledge and wisdom, you can either learn by going through things on your own, Or you can lock arms with someone and do it together. And I don't know about you, but I have made a lot of mistakes in my life, both in my businesses and my professional career. And I really try to share as honestly and transparently of like, this is what I went through.

R Renee Smith 18:35

Yep.

J Jason Duff 18:36

You can learn from this. And I probably would avoid doing what I did here. But these things I learned and I got all this good out of that learning experience that I can benefit Or you're going to take the benefit from that experience going forward.

R Renee Smith 18:50

We're big advocates for work smarter, not harder. And so if you can bring somebody in alongside of you that can save you some time and save you some energy, why not do that?

J Jason Duff 19:03

Love it. How important is leadership in a town?

R Renee Smith 19:07

It's vital.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 19:08

Yes, it's key. It's key. And that leader that understands that they may not have all the answers, and builds a team around themselves and people aren't siloed.

R Renee Smith 19:19

And a leader is never going to be liked by everybody.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 19:24

Correct.

R Renee Smith 19:25

And so you really need to understand that going in. And the buck always stops with somebody and you have to own the good and the bad.

J Jason Duff 19:32

If someone's listening around that leadership role and title and they say, well, we have a really great mayor or we have a really great chamber director or We did have a great person that was leading city council, but we have a new council member. Like, the leadership equation— do you ever find that there is a community you go into that has the perfect leaders in their business community, their chamber, their tourism, their mayor? It's all perfect. Everyone gets along, and they've got great leadership skills.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 20:06

Have you seen that?

J Jason Duff 20:08

Because I've not seen that. Well, and I think so many communities wait, because they're hoping they're going to say, we've got to get everyone on the same team.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 20:16

Someday it's going to come together. Someday we're going to get that feeling. Well, if you follow the feeling, you're never going to have the courage to take the next step. You have to just continually try to make progress, whether it might be small. You just have to continue to drive because no one's perfect.

J Jason Duff 20:33

That's right.

R **Renee Smith** 20:33

Well, and the other component of this is the sustainability factor. If you have a great mayor and you know this is their last time running, okay, who are you tapping— Oh, this is a good opportunity. To come alongside in those last couple of years to help groom and help train? The same thing if your chamber director is leaving. You know, this succession planning is so critical, whether it's in government, business, nonprofit, and I think sometimes it's overlooked. And so then we are reactive instead of proactive.

J **Jason Duff** 21:07

I like that. Does size matter?

R **Renee Smith** 21:09

No.

J **Jason Duff** 21:12

Which I know we— and I say we, like, the word small is in my company's name. And, you know, knowing that Fostoria probably is deemed just similar to Bellefontaine, a lot of communities, it's a small town, small community. But some people may be listening and say, well, my village is only 300 people. Can you help me?

R **Renee Smith** 21:32

Yes.

J **Jason Duff** 21:33

Yeah. And I think that's going to be, as we dive into some of those examples in the show, I'd like to really kind of unpack ways that you guys can plug in and are plugging in to help those villages and those communities go. So you're going to want to listen to hear some of those ideas later in the segment. But you're kind of moving into this, like, recapping what we heard, like, being that community that's willing to adapt, listen to that coaching, providing and thinking about long-term thinking. I know the other thing that I heard you mention, I've seen you do in Faustoria, are these public-private partnerships.

R **Renee Smith** 22:09

They're critical.

J **Jason Duff** 22:10

They're critical. And so finding those examples within your investors and business community, and then also with city council, village council, all the chamber.

R **Renee Smith** 22:20

Well, and you're building it out because what is a great public-private partnership today. If there's a change in leadership, it may not be as strong next year at this time. So what other partnerships have you already cultivated? And there are things that nonprofits can do that government cannot and vice versa. And so to have those in good working order, it's vital.

J **Jason Duff** 22:44

Have you ever walked into a community where within an hour you had a really good sense that it's really moving forward and there's momentum or it's standing still?

R **Renee Smith** 22:56

Yes.

J **Jason Duff** 22:56

What are those qualities for the communities that you see that are moving forward?

R **Renee Smith** 23:02

I would say one is enthusiasm.

J **Jason Duff** 23:08

That community pride, you cannot replicate that.

R **Renee Smith** 23:12

No.

J **Jason Duff** 23:12

It is either there or it is not there.

R **Renee Smith** 23:14

If you don't believe in your community, then how can you bring somebody else in and expect them to?

J **Jason Duff** 23:20

Yeah. How do we, you know, for people listening, if they're saying, yeah, I have community pride, I want more people in my community, or maybe we used to have community pride, how do we build it? What are any strategies or techniques that you've seen help build that community pride?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 23:34

I think it's engaging groups within the community. Just kind of an example. I mean, we touched on it earlier in the show when we talked about, you know, Foster as an example and having a community image problem. And it wasn't just an external view, it was also internal. And so we just found there were a couple groups that really had a heart for service in the community and were willing to get involved. But full disclosure, it was the garden club.

J Jason Duff 24:04

Ah, okay.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 24:05

It was the Foster Eye Garden Club. So when you looked at the demographic of the garden club, there were a lot of older retired ladies, wonderful, did a ton of work in the community, but talked to everyone. And so we found that really just engaging with them and helping them to understand what was happening in the community and sharing the good news with that group and a couple other key people, it was very interesting how we turned what were some of maybe the most negative people, this is not the garden club, but some of the most negative people that they were interacting with, into some of the biggest community cheerleaders. So I think some of it, I think there's, a multifaceted approach to that, but some of it's just very simple communication and sharing the good with people that are very active and engaged in the community and will be your biggest cheerleader because they know.

E Ethan DeLeon 24:56

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J Jason Duff 25:09

One thing I hear a lot is, from community leaders is we have good ideas, we just don't have enough people, time, or resources. Capacity is like, what is that solution to solve those capacity issues in towns and communities?

R Renee Smith 25:26

It's bringing outside people in. To bring somebody in to help you with a specific project is going to be probably less expensive than hiring a full-time person that once that project's complete, what do you do with that person? Capacity is the number one issue we hear across the board because frankly, you're being pulled in a million different directions. And a lot of communities, they have limited finances.

J Jason Duff 25:57

Yes.

R Renee Smith 25:57

And so what can you do to move the needle forward on a project? Who can you bring in to help with that initiative? And then go from there. But I think so many times people think, well, if we're going to do this, we're going to have to hire somebody new. Not necessarily. You don't have to hire somebody new that you have to keep long-term. And so we consider ourselves at Thrive capacity builders.

E Ethan DeLeon 26:26

Mm-hmm.

R **Renee Smith** 26:26

We're not interested in being the face of anything. We want to be that backend support that helps you move from point A to point B and get some things done. And then you build on that.

J **Jason Duff** 26:38

Well, the key is that what I know of you is you're really big about implementation.

R **Renee Smith** 26:43

Yes.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 26:44

Yes.

J **Jason Duff** 26:44

We can do the research, we can develop the plan, we can get the ideas, get people around the table, but we need to delegate and we need to implement. Why is that important to you?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 26:54

Because a plan is great, ideas are great, but if they sit on the shelf, you're not that nothing is happening.

J **Jason Duff** 27:03

Yes.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 27:04

It's implementation is where it really comes into play. And that's where you build that momentum. And that's where you change communities.

R **Renee Smith** 27:10

And for us too, it's working alongside the leadership, whether your community's 300 people or 30,000 people, because we're not gonna be there forever. So how can we work alongside of you on that implementation? So when the next project comes up, you have all the tools to do it yourself. It's an empowerment component as well, not just implementation.

J **Jason Duff** 27:32

Is there any quick win idea, example of that in real life that you have seen work?

R **Renee Smith** 27:39

I would say, I'm going to look at this from a funding standpoint. We talk to a lot of different communities that talk about their infrastructure needs. I understand infrastructure is big when we're talking water lines, sewer lines, things like, I understand. If you're going to try and identify funding for infrastructure, those are big ticket items. You're looking at state and federal funding. If your first attempt as a community at a grant on your own is a federal grant, you are setting yourself up for failure.

J **Jason Duff** 28:11

You're out of business before you even started.

R **Renee Smith** 28:13

So what is something smaller? Is there a mural project, a small park project that you can get something from maybe your local community foundation? It's a win for you, it's visible to the community, and then you build on it. Sometimes you have to look at the smaller ticket items first and build up to the bigger ticket items.

J **Jason Duff** 28:35

Perfect segue, because the mo— one of the most common questions I get when I work with mayors and economic development professionals, or even citizens within a town wanting to see their town be better, is how do I get grants?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 28:52

That is— That's the million-dollar question.

R **Renee Smith** 28:54

Very large question. Well, first you have to know, this is where you can get yourself backwards. If you see a funding opportunity and think, oh, we need to identify a project for that.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 29:07

Don't do that.

R **Renee Smith** 29:08

No.

J **Jason Duff** 29:08

Don't do that.

R **Renee Smith** 29:09

Okay. No. And this is where having, maybe it's not a, you know, in-depth 200-page plan, But maybe it's some kind of just an internal action plan where you've identified 5 to 10 key things for your community that you wanna see accomplished in the next 2 to 3 years. And then you find the funding that— for those projects, the ones that you already have maybe some design work for, or the ones that you already have partnerships that will help with implementation. You need to look at grant funding. As supplemental as well. If you are looking at grants to be your be-all end-all, you're— it's not going to work because—

J **Jason Duff** 29:54

Which, what is one of the biggest misconceptions that people have about grants?

R **Renee Smith** 29:57

Well, first of all, grants are not free money.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 30:01

They are not free money.

J **Jason Duff** 30:02

Grants are not free money.

R **Renee Smith** 30:03

They appear that way, but then when you have to do the reporting or things that— there's always something that comes with them.

J **Jason Duff** 30:10

They say strings attached, right?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 30:12

There are always strings attached. Yes.

R **Renee Smith** 30:14

Some of those strings are pretty loose strings. Those are great. But there is really no such thing as free money.

J **Jason Duff** 30:20

Is there any examples of funding today that for development or small towns that you get really excited about?

R **Renee Smith** 30:29

Oh, there's so many.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 30:30

Oh, she loves the hunt. She's excited about going after any money.

R Renee Smith 30:33

I live in— there's a Jerry Maguire, show me the money.

J Jason Duff 30:36

I love it. Yes.

R Renee Smith 30:39

No, I like funding that you can see the results. When you look at like the Ohio Arts Council, they have all kinds of funding.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 30:49

If you're not familiar with those, look into those.

J Jason Duff 30:51

Yes.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 30:52

There's so many good ones.

R Renee Smith 30:53

And they're great for smaller communities. Some of them don't even require a match. You can look at, you know, there's funding out there for your libraries. There's funding out there. We did a parkette project that I thought was gonna be \$12,000. It was \$120,000. But that then became a music park that then became, you know, we did a mosaic mural in it. And, you know, these things build, but there's funding out there, but you have to be strategic about how you go about getting it.

J Jason Duff 31:29

So I love that you mentioned the Ohio Arts Council. Are there any other funding opportunities that you think a lot of communities are overlooking?

R Renee Smith 31:36

I'm surprised at how many communities don't look at state capital funding, which comes around every 2 years. And the other one that I think is federal direct spending. I mean, we all have our representatives in Washington, D.C., and if you've got a sizable project, especially some of those big infrastructure projects, and they don't have to be done immediately, Be talking to your elected officials.

J Jason Duff 32:03

Great suggestion. What projects tend to attract funding?

R **Renee Smith** 32:07

Catalytic projects.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 32:10

Yes, catalytic is the buzzword.

J **Jason Duff** 32:12

Okay.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 32:13

With partnerships and with built-in sustainability. What is going to happen when the funding ends? How do you demonstrate that you can continue the program or whatever it is that that grant is funding?

R **Renee Smith** 32:24

And what I would say is, Data is critical. If you have a need in your community, you need to be able to quantify that need, whether it be numbers, stories, facts, whatever that is, you need to be able to quantify why that need exists.

J **Jason Duff** 32:44

What do you think in the whole grantmaking process that helps an application stand out?

R **Renee Smith** 32:54

First of all, don't lie.

J **Jason Duff** 32:56

Okay, that's a good answer. No, it's a good answer. I mean, that's just a good general rule. Maybe.

R **Renee Smith** 33:04

It's a life lesson, really. But sometimes we get in it and we think, well, if I say I can serve X number of people with this program, it's going to look much better than the number that I can really do. And I'll just go back later and say I didn't quite meet that metric.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 33:20

That's going to hurt you moving forward.

R **Renee Smith** 33:21

Just be realistic. And again, have the data to back it up. A lot of funding does require some match components. And so, you know, what is your match capabilities? And I could go on and on about this. I'm trying to be concise in my thought process, but it's—

J **Jason Duff** 33:43

This is why she's an expert, by the way.

R **Renee Smith** 33:46

I would just say you need to be realistic in the stories that you tell. Have the data to back it up. If a match is required, make sure you have that funding available. And then be able to truly explain your project. I always tell people, nonprofits specifically, you know, if you were at a dinner party and somebody asked you, you know, what's the mission of your organization, you should be able to condense that and make them understand in 2 to 3 sentences. And I think the same can be said for a project.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 34:15

Yes.

R **Renee Smith** 34:15

And grant writing, at the end of the day, it's sales and marketing. You are trying to convince a bunch of people that don't know you and have no vested interest in your community or your project to invest in you. And so how are you marketing the project to the community? What does that look like?

J **Jason Duff** 34:32

Great advice. And if I'm a mayor, a nonprofit leader, or an economic development professional and listening today, Where do I start?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 34:41

I think it goes back to what Renee already said. It's identifying what your priorities are and what those projects are and then getting yourself ready. And by ready, we mean getting the project cost, having the drawings, or know what the cost of those drawings is going to be. Have all of your documents in a row. I think that's one of the key pieces that we see oftentimes when we have conversations. A grant is identified, but they don't— there's money, but we don't know what the project is. So that's just a reiteration of what we said earlier. I think that's huge.

J **Jason Duff** 35:16

So do successful communities attract grants, or do grants create successful communities? I asked the good trick question here.

R **Renee Smith** 35:28

I think it can be both ways.

J **Jason Duff** 35:30

Yeah, okay.

R **Renee Smith** 35:31

I really do. Because I have seen some communities that have gotten some very large grants that many people on the outside sit back and think, whoa, how did that happen? But they had everything lined up. They had their funding, they had their partnerships, they could tell the story. And then I have seen other communities that, you know, they just win, win, win. They constantly have new money rolling in, but it's all about being prepared and the implementation.

J **Jason Duff** 36:10

Well, let's just take a segue to talk about some of those stories and examples of projects that you're most proud of where you've united your superpowers. You've kind of taken some of the principles that you have unpacked on the episode today And are maybe examples of success that you can point to?

R **Renee Smith** 36:29

So one of the projects I am most proud of is also one of the projects that I never thought would get off the ground.

J **Jason Duff** 36:37

Okay.

R **Renee Smith** 36:37

So it's, yeah. So when we were working in Faustoria, we launched something called the Faustoria Learning Center. And I will never forget, it was my second day on the job as a part-time grants writer. And they told me about this idea. And of course, I'd been in the community 2 days and I just thought, yeah, no, okay.

J **Jason Duff** 36:59

Gonna be tough to pull it.

R **Renee Smith** 37:00

And it floundered for a while, but we ended up pulling it off and we took an old Kroger grocery store and turned it into a workforce training facility. And it was a \$3.8 million project.

J **Jason Duff** 37:18

Wow.

R **Renee Smith** 37:18

And we got capital budget funding, we got some grant funding, and then the community stepped up, the business community stepped up. And I know we last year served over 3,000 people through that facility. And we have a medical lab, a welding lab. We thought it would serve the Fostoria community, and it was serving like a 5-county radius. There were about 40-plus businesses that were utilizing it. And it was one of my proudest projects.

J Jason Duff 37:50

I've been there. I've seen it. That's when we met, kind of, we were getting, I think it was just opening and right off the ground. And it is, if you've not been to Faustoria, definitely this is a state-level catalytic project.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 38:05

Yes.

J Jason Duff 38:05

That has had a big legacy making an impact— a positive impact in the community. And as you're now working and building your client list, are there any client examples that kind of stand out? That's, I love, we recently did as a team, the Rose, Bud, Thorn exercise. So the rose is something just like you mentioned, this successful project that was cultivated and is, is, is perfect. It's, it's, it's doing its job. The bud is something that you've worked on for some time and you're developing. And the thorn is that continuing challenge that we still got more work to do. But I'm curious, like, is with these new client relationships, are there any buds that you're really excited to be helping working with a community to advance into a success story in the future?

E Ethan DeLeon 38:57

Yes.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 39:01

I think there's— that's, I think, part of the really exciting thing about what we're currently doing is we're in a number of different communities in a number of different capacities. So I think that there are a lot of stories where it's in that bud stage. One of our longest clients that we did start working with back in 2022, partway through the year, still a client, started with one client in a community. We now have multiple others within that community, but it's really working with that private-public partnership to help drive their change. They have great vision, they have great ideas, but they lack capacity. And so through that partnership, we are seeing, we were really working with one element of the community that really focused around rural health, which is interesting with our background. It was a learning curve, but that's really how we got started. Now we're working with a nonprofit and a county entity, and we've just picked up another, but it's really spun into helping them leverage both local, state, and federal dollars to drive community change in a community that was really decimated by a shift in economy. So it's pivoted to downtown revitalization. And, you know, just, it's that one I think is the most rewarding because we can really see the impact that is possible there.

J Jason Duff 40:31

Well, recently I referred someone to you that in the Indian Lake community, which is nearby there, 2 years ago had an EF3 tornado. that came through and devastated the village of Lakeview. They lost their village office. It also took large parts of the Indian Lake community that depends on the tourism economy, and many of those buildings and structures were destroyed. And, you know, I have met, interacted with a number of business owners that have big dreams and ideas of like wanting to see the, the, you know, more restaurants, wanting to see, you know, coworking, wanting to see more space for businesses to pop up, a farmer's market. You know, you mentioned that earlier in the segment. Could that— those spaces then turn from a temporary market into a permanent business? And just to give a testimonial for people that are listening, not only did I give you a quick call and lay the land of the challenges that the Indian Lake region was doing. I introduced you to a business owner that had a conversation with me of like, hey, I am short some capital and financing to get this project done. And the question, the million-dollar question we mentioned earlier is like, how do I get a grant? And I just want to share that you took the time, you did a strategy session, Dived in with this client and immediately I got a call and thank you. It was like, thank you for this introduction. We have more homework to do. But instead of me saying no, that I can't proceed with this project, no is I've got some homework, but I've got a path. And I think that's the thing about Thrive Community Partners that I really love. And, and you're solving and doing such meaningful work in towns throughout Ohio. I think people listening to this episode, you've been able to unpack some of those examples and some of those stories. So, like, what I wanna pivot now is moving, you know, let's look towards the future. What, what are you most excited about, and what are you kinda seeing in trends around Ohio right now?

R Renee Smith 42:44

So, Sarah said it earlier, and you as well, implementation is big for us. Because we want to see the impact. We want our clients to see the ROI on their investment in working with us. And we're seeing more and more communities that are taking a look at, you know, what are our top priorities? What should we be focusing our energy on? And I love that. And it's pulling the different groups into a room together and having that conversation. You know, a lot of communities, you could have 6 different groups or 6 different organizations going in 6 different directions. So how do you pull them all together and have those hard conversations and prioritize some of those things? And I think the other thing that I would say, um, social media is fantastic. I'm a big advocate for it. but it can be a detriment as well. And so use social media as a tool, use it to get word out and messaging out, but you can't take to heart the things that you're reading on social media.

J Jason Duff 43:57

Well, let's just double-click on that because it has been a theme that I'm talking with a lot of folks working in economic development right now. You know, economic developers historically have been the biggest cheerleaders and champions for communities, but it is certainly a trying time when new developments, housing developments, wind farms, solar farms, data centers. I mean, you name, there is a lot of friction points out there because we're going through a lot of massive change. And so the, the point about the social media for a lot of us, and I know, you know, Facebook was my primary tool that built my company and helped grow my community. Um, but I would also say that the spin or the focus of that, uh, media was positive. I mean, 95% positive. There's always the 5%, but it is true. You know, today, we call them Facebook terrorists. There is a lot of noise and misinformation. And I do think it's, it's really maybe, like you say, moving a little bit offline. And let's get people talking to people again and connecting and compromising and working on good solutions.

R Renee Smith 45:04

Emails, text messages, social media, all fabulous.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 45:08

Yeah.

R Renee Smith 45:08

But I am a firm believer in a face-to-face conversation.

J Jason Duff 45:12

Yeah.

R Renee Smith 45:13

And I think that it goes such a long way. And the other thing I have to say is, not all of these conversations are going to be easy. And if you're going to go into some of this work, you have to recognize you're not going to be beloved.

J Jason Duff 45:31

Correct.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 45:31

Well, if you've ever made a hard decision, not everyone is going to like you.

J Jason Duff 45:35

You're a lightning rod as a leader sometimes. And I think the point is like, sometimes the digital age makes us more divided. And I think the pendulum is swinging back that, you know, when that happens, go more analog. Yes, let's go old school. Let's come together. Let's meet up. And I do like this whole kind of town hall. Let's bring people together, have conversations.

R **Renee Smith** 45:57

You—

J **Jason Duff** 45:57

we have to teach people not— you're not gonna walk out of that meeting being like, we are all agreeing on this.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 46:02

Well, that's very unrealistic.

J **Jason Duff** 46:04

That's right.

R **Renee Smith** 46:04

But how many times have you called somebody back, and when you go to hang up the phone, they say, thank you so much for calling me back?

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 46:09

And it's a simple courtesy, but it's been lost along the way where people don't return calls.

R **Renee Smith** 46:14

A lot of times people just want to be heard.

J **Jason Duff** 46:16

That is so true. Well, this is one of my favorite parts of the show. We're moving to lightning round.

R **Renee Smith** 46:22

Yes.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 46:23

All right, here we go.

J **Jason Duff** 46:24

Lightning round, uh, let's do this. So every community needs more blank.

R **Renee Smith** 46:30

Workers.

J **Jason Duff** 46:33

Oh boy, that's—

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 46:35

I was gonna say money.

J Jason Duff 46:36

Hey, those are both, those are both really good ones. So Workers and money and capacity. We talked about that earlier, so that's a big one. The biggest grant myth is blank.

R Renee Smith 46:49

It's free money.

E Ethan DeLeon 46:50

It's free.

R Renee Smith 46:50

Yeah, it's not.

J Jason Duff 46:52

You hit that earlier in the segment. That's a great point. The most overlooked opportunity in Ohio is the JobsOhio Pre-Planning Grant. Oh, they're gonna love that. Give our friends at JobsOhio a shout out. So The Vibrant Community Pre-Planning Grant is available on their website. You can see if your community qualifies. There's a listing of counties, cities, villages. So definitely check out the eligibility, but they've recently changed that eligibility and have added a number of new communities, right? So that is definitely — we'll put a little star and we'll give our friends at JobsOhio a shout out for that.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 47:32

Yes, and pre-planning is great because it can set you up for the Vibrancy grant, which is great for buildings.

J Jason Duff 47:37

There you go. Great point on that. Economic development is really about blank.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 47:43

Everything. It really has changed so dramatically. It's not what it once was. It's community development. It's housing. It's workforce. All-encompassing.

E Ethan DeLeon 47:54

I love it.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 47:55

There you go. All-encompassing.

J Jason Duff 47:56

Every mayor should focus on That's a tough one.

R Renee Smith 48:03

One, I've never been a mayor, so I don't want to speak for the elected officials.

J Jason Duff 48:07

So we've had, I think now I have to check, we probably had 8 or 9 mayors on the podcast.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 48:13

So, um, did you ask them this question?

J Jason Duff 48:15

That, so every mayor, I think you covered about the criticism, needs to be able to accept criticism.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 48:21

Yes. Have thick skin and be okay with it.

J Jason Duff 48:23

Yep. So that's a good, that's, that's a good one. The future of small towns is epic. Yes, I love that.

R Renee Smith 48:33

Epic.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 48:34

I was going to say bright, but now it seems very lame. Thank you for saying epic. Good job.

J Jason Duff 48:37

Well, truthfully, these tertiary markets outside of the bigger cities, a lot of the themes of guests we have on the show as they talk about the quality of life, the safety, and the affordability. So, uh, that, that I, I do think it is an epic time to be a small town developer. Small towns can consultants, and that's why you're on the show. So thanks for agreeing with that. The last one we'll wrap up here is the best community leader is always willing to listen, especially to differing viewpoints and opinions. I like that one. That's a really good one.

R Renee Smith 49:10

It is.

J Jason Duff 49:11

So closing question, ladies. Great episode. Appreciate you really sharing a lot of your knowledge. If someone is listening today from a 2,000-town community, maybe they say they're 5,000, or it could even be 20,000 people, someone who wants to create positive momentum in their community, what is one thing that they can start doing tomorrow that will make a meaningful difference 5 or 10 years from now?

R Renee Smith 49:36

I'm gonna just say get involved. I don't care if it's getting involved with a local service club or organization, but I think so many people have siloed over the last few years. And I think that is to their detriment and the detriment of communities. And the other piece I would say is support local.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 49:59

Yes.

J Jason Duff 50:00

Love that. And there's a difference between just saying supporting local, but actually showing up local.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 50:06

Be there, be supportive, go to community events.

J Jason Duff 50:09

100%. And you live it. I follow. So just to shout out, these ladies have an incredible podcast. The name of your podcast?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 50:17

Well, that the podcast isn't around anymore, but it was.

J Jason Duff 50:21

But it, what was called, it was called Shut Up and Listen. Shut up and listen. But listen, it is out there.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 50:27

It is still out there.

J Jason Duff 50:28

Some great content there.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 50:29

You can still listen. You can still find it. There is another podcast coming from Thrive.

J Jason Duff 50:36

Yes.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 50:37

Very different speed. So we'll just—

J Jason Duff 50:39

Please tell me why I get a chance to be a guest. Do I have to apply?

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 50:42

Well, it's a short form, but we're gonna do probably a couple long forms.

E Ethan DeLeon 50:46

Okay.

R **Renee Smith** 50:46

Let's do it.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 50:48

And you're there. You're willing. We will take it.

R **Renee Smith** 50:51

And I just want you to know our lightning round questions are very different.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 50:53

Yeah, they're probably gonna be off topic.

J **Jason Duff** 50:56

Okay, good. That'll be good. Bring 'em on.

R **Renee Smith** 50:58

Yeah.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 50:59

Yes.

J **Jason Duff** 50:59

I'm excited. Well, um, Sarah Renee, guys, thanks for joining on the show today. Um, a few themes just to kind of highlight, like in today's lessons, it's not just about thriving communities that have more money, larger staffs, or like perfect circumstances. And I think that's the thing. You kept reminding me, it's never going to be perfect. It is progress, not perfection.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 51:23

Exactly.

J **Jason Duff** 51:24

And like, you keep making those changes in those dials. What I learned today is like, you invest in leadership, you build partnerships, you support entrepreneurs, you create capacity. And most importantly, and this is the one, just put the star, you turn ideas into plans into action. They're not going to sit on that shelf. They're action. And communities just don't thrive because of a single grant or a single project. It is all of this together. But I think listening to this episode, I am excited to share this because I think you're going to help a lot more communities, a lot more people. And thank you for being such a great friend to Small Nation.

S **Sarah Stephens Krupp** 52:02

Well, thank you.

J Jason Duff 52:03

Thank you.

R Renee Smith 52:04

And we appreciate all the work that you guys do. It's amazing.

S Sarah Stephens Krupp 52:07

Yes. It's been so fun to watch.

J Jason Duff 52:09

Boom. Thanks, ladies.

E Ethan DeLeon 52:12

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Small Nation Podcast. Be sure to follow the show for future episodes on your favorite podcasting platform.