Come join us, explore the impact of small business here in rural Arkansas. What challenges would you face? Who can help you meet those challenges? How do you get in touch with others like you? This is CREATE BRIDGES Arkansas and we invite you to come cross these bridges with us.

Welcome to another episode of the CREATE BRIDGES podcast series Small Business Big Real Impact. This is Hazelle Whited, program coordinator for the Ozark Foothills, and I am excited to be here today with my guest, the fabulous Brook Kaufman, CEO of Visit Casper in Wyoming and Commissioner of Natrona County.

We're going to have a fun conversation today about her visit to Arkansas, the places she visited while I fill her in on the effect of representation in those areas. Brook, it's so great to see you again. I'm delighted to be here and I can't believe when you're like, we're going to talk about the outcomes of your trip, I'm like, man, I just got back like four days ago. So if you guys are already getting some things implemented, talk about some go getters. So I can't wait to hear what's going on.

Well, it's just a testimony to the inspiration that you brought everyone when you presented to us what an eclipse is and what it could mean to our community and why we should be prepared. I mean, you brought some fabulous information. And just to recap for some of those people that maybe didn't get to hear your awesome presentation. There is an eclipse 30 months from now. We're looking at an eclipse on April 8, 2024 and why you are an expert about eclipses is because your community experienced it in 2017.

True. So I would say I am not an expert in an eclipse. I will leave that for NASA. But what we do have experienced with and I would loved to dive into at whatever degree you want to today is how do you get a rural community prepared for we say small town Super Bowl like event, right? So once in a lifetime, all those things. So yes, we did have it in Casper in 2017, and that's why it's so fun to get to share some of the things that we learned with your community is just to help prepare.

Well, and we're fortunate. You've talked about this many times, you know, you had the 2017 experience and we get to learn from you, but you didn't have an experience prior to 2017 because the last one was in ‘79.

Yeah. So I was a very small child when the last eclipse touched the United States, so we didn't have anybody to call and say, Do people really travel for this? What kind of people travel for this? What really happens in the sky, right? So there's all the science that says these are what you can expect, but you really have a lot to overcome as a community when people think no one travels for this.

No one's really heard of it, right? We all probably knew Haley's comet when that came over in the early eighties or whatever, but we probably know more about Halley's Comet than we know about the Eclipse. So, yeah, and I hope that you get to ask those questions because we had a lot of things that were very similar in Casper and on my wild road trip tour of Arkansas, so I would love to share my insights on that as well.

So and you you came in. So, a couple of Mondays ago was when you were here, and it does feel like it was just yesterday because you made such an impact among the communities, but

you started in Little Rock and then you got to travel to where I'm located, which is the Ozark foothills, which is Sharp, Fulton and Izard counties. So that was your first kind of taste of truly rural Arkansas. I would say, and as far north as you could get from where you ended up with in that journey, at least when I was with you. And so, you know, our community, well Casper's about 55,000 56,000 strong. I think if I remember the numbers and the county was about 80. And so Sharp County, for example, you're looking at 15,000 people. I think Hardy came in to right around 1000 people. So, some people may say, are we really going to experience something like what Casper did? Because to us, you seem really big compared to what our size towns are.

So my community might be bigger, but my state is certainly smaller. So I'm not sure what the population is of Arkansas, but two thirds of Arkansas is going to be hit by this thing. And we had maybe a third of our state impacted by the eclipse directly. But the entire state impacted indirectly. So I would say from a if we really had to go tit for tat on who's more rural.

I mean, the state of Wyoming has 500,000 people, period. So when you look at infrastructure available the day of or in the days leading up to, we're far we're probably far smaller right than maybe what we would appear being in this community. So I think the difference would be, you know, from all four, from any classification. We're considered a smaller rural community. So we're not Denver, we're not Atlanta, we're not Memphis.

And certainly some of those larger communities had this as well. So I think their approach would be different. And actually some of the discussions we had even in Hot Springs on my way out, that was my last presentation versus Hazelle, where you live were different, right? Because some of their some of their concerns are different and they've got plenty of events that are already on the calendar that are overlapping. So I agree. I can't tell you that everything's going to be the same, but overall, some of the challenges are going to be the same, whether you're rural or in a city. So those are some of the things that we got to dove into.

So as you're leading up to, and I love the story, and if you don't mind sharing, it's just so fascinating to me how you learned about the eclipse and then just kind of the aha moment of, I guess, we really need to do something and kind of like the thought process of we need certain infrastructure, things in place just for our own ability to facilitate this. So if you would start with five years prior to the eclipse

I said that when I was down with you guys, it was really nice to have somebody walk into a room and just say, Hey, this is coming. So for us, it was. The Astronomical League wanted to host their 2017 convention in Casper because we were on the center line and I wasn't in the meeting. But from what I understand, everybody looked around and thought, well, what the hell is this?

And is this must be a joke? But anyways, the hotelier sold out of the hotel all 220 rooms for $99 a night, five years in advance. So over time, though, the Astronomical League kept showing up in the community and started bringing people together. And that's when people started realizing, I can't tell you that they believed that people would come, but they started realizing, well, at some level, this is going to be a thing. I mean, somebody just sold out a hotel and then another hotel sold out and then groups started calling up my office.

And that's when the Convention Visitors Bureau, thought, oh my gosh, like this is really going to this is really going to happen. So took our community a long time to figure out who was going to run it. And that's what we spent a lot of time talking about in Arkansas is who needs to be on first to start getting some of these efforts off the ground because you can do nothing. And we say that a lot, you can do nothing, but they're going to come anyway.

So you guys are well-poised. And well in advanced to start talking about who do you need at the table to make sure that you have fire and P.D. and trash removal and that you have traffic control that day and know safe places for people to view and activities to be held. So you guys have plenty of time to think about it, but it's good that you're thinking about it.

So I just did a blog about your visit that kind of ties into this podcast, referenced to the championship of the BCS bowl, right? So because we're big college, so instead of like the NFL, we're talking college football and it gives our Arkansas rural communities, a chance to really embrace that feeling of having a large event like a BCS bowl into our area.

And what does that mean? And because, like you’ve said, and this was the closing on that blog, I said they’re going to come whether or not we decided to prepare for it or not. And so I think that thought process of let's embrace that this is going to be an event that we didn't have to pitch for that we didn't have to try to win over. It's just going to happen. And so let's take that out, the understanding that's going to happen and do something that will really benefit our communities.

And so you had a chance to travel like from Sharp County, got to talk to Quorum Court, which, I guess, let's talk about the elected officials for a second so we can reach out to them about some of the things that they should be considering. Since you're also an elected official, just kind of speak to them in that group about maybe what some of the things we should be considering as we start getting closer to the eclipse.

There's not a body of government that wants to be responsible for this. So. And if I'm wrong about Arkansas, maybe I am. But really, I think it's any of your any of your judges aren't going to be to interested or your council members on necessarily taking the lead on it.

But there is going to be an element of support in this. So whether that's financial, certainly from a service perspective, they're set up to do trash removal, security, all the things that perhaps, you know, other event organizers wouldn't have the infrastructure to do.

So I would say one, they really are coming. Two, start looking at your budget or your fiscal notes to say, how are we going to support this? And three, one of the things that was really pushing in my time down there is you do have smaller communities that are very close to each other.

So in Wyoming, my nearest town is two hours. You guys are ten minutes down the road where in the next community. And instead of having individual efforts for each community or each county or each city, you know, is there an opportunity to collaborate so that visitors don't know like who, where the lines are of a county, right? So how do we work together to answer their questions and make their experience seamless, right? In a way that maybe we wouldn't normally? So I would say it's on the support and service side. Obviously, safety ,traffic we've talked about trash sanitation was a was a topic of conversation when I was there.

But these things, I think Hazelle, the thing I want to stress is they're not free. So people just saying we're just going to have a concert in the park and it's not going to cost any money. I don't know what communities are going to end up doing, but it will cost you money and it takes it takes a team of people to get that done. So I would hope that your judges and your council members across those across those areas would really start thinking about how do we work together and how do we get some money behind these things?

I did want to find out from you, Brook, is what other infrastructure type things should the communities be thinking of. The neat things that made our festival so successful as we created the 501c3, we hired a director and there was a degree of separation there.

So there is not a person in these communities, and man, you guys have generous people who live in your area. And everybody's volunteering everything. This effort is heroic, so I know that it's going to be really tempting to say, well, who can volunteer to help with this?

But I really think having a dedicated resource that can help with communication, organization helping with education for your residents perspective, making sure that they're bringing businesses together, critical. So when you talk about infrastructure, to me, that's far more than trash right or sewer systems.

That's how are we going to survive the infrastructure of what we're going to do with these people while they're here. The second thing from an infrastructure, quote unquote perspective, is create an A-Team, and I talk to every one of your groups about this.

Have the right people at the table, have your medical facilities, have your county health department, your PD right emergency response game and fish state parks, whoever you have in your area that is going to somehow touch people while they're in your market, have them at the table talking about, here's what we're planning for. Here's the table-top exercises we’re running. And then the last thing and you'll find this.

And I know he's I've said this in presentations. The people who come, I think that's what we didn't know from 1979 to 2017 so we were hugely concerned about, you know, deaths or chaos or crime or whatever it was going to be. And I, I happily told everyone on the circuit last week the only tickets that were written during that time period was to locals.

So the visitors are astoundingly amazing. They're super respectful, really into sustainability. They respect private property rights. They were a true delight. If you ever had a visitor to your area, you would want them to be like the eclipse chaser because they're just delightful people.

Yeah, I mean, it was amazing to hear you talk about the people that came. And also if a landowner saw someone that wasn't supposed to be there, how they, you know, visitors immediately moved. I didn't know. You know, they were they were so responsive and respectful, and that's great to hear.

I'm going to travel us down now from Hardy and Sharp County down to the 3Cs area, which is Sevier, Little River and Howard. We actually started in Sevier County and did some awesome radio shows with those guys, and I wanted to fill you in. Ed88, which was that first radio show we did in the

morning. He had actually, the video I think you did in the evening, actually, I think over 1100 views from that video then taken, which we were also there, had somewhere around 500 or 600 people that had viewed that evening.

So I know that the impact of your presentation has touched well into, you know, 1500, 1600 people, let alone the people that came in person. It seems to me that the communities were already interested or at least wanted to know, why are we even talking about the eclipse so early?

But I felt like after we left, I surely know that they reached out and they were really excited. You, you sparked for us this excitement of this event to come when I think some people walked into the room, Brook, and they thought, gosh, why am I here?

I came home and people said, How was your trip to Arkansas, which is really and I said, God, the people are great. Everybody has great manners. I said it was so funny to walk into a room and have so many people be skeptical about why they were there.

And they're like, Here's this gal from Wyoming who gives a rip, who knows what's going to come out of her mouth? Why am I here? My boss made me come. Whatever it was, right? I mean, and by the end, when you start showing the traffic pictures and what happened in the state of Wyoming after the eclipse, all of a sudden, you know, people that were talking they stopped talking, right? And then they transition to the end of the presentation and then you can hear a pin drop. But that's what I love is that we fought the same thing here.

It wasn't like it was new to walk into a room and have people wonder why I'm standing up there and why are we caring about this? And then as you share information, you know, you can start to see eyes get a little bit bigger and jaws get a little bit dropped.

And you're, you know, they're like, Oh, shoot. So that delighted me probably the most as we went through that in Casper, too, only we didn't know the outcome at the time. Right. And now we do so that it was a joy to be in rooms and watch that happen where eyes got real big, like, Oh, we should probably get on this. And like, probably, probably.

Well, and I do want to talk about so again, we have a choice of and we've heard that there is a state that may just not do anything right. So which seems implausible to me. But hey, you know, right now, there's no plans on their docket, which is fine for Arkansas because that is a neighboring state. So it's but, you know, we talk about the impact of why wouldn't you plan? And if you wouldn't mind sharing some of the economic factors that came from it, from having the eclipse and then even after the eclipse?

Yeah. So it's I think the full report on how it impacted the entire state of Wyoming is probably available at visitcasper.com/eclipse. But for Natrona counties we’re 80,000 people in the county, we saw just over 20,000 people in that five day period. It was a seven and a half million dollar impact. Half million dollars in sales tax collections. And it talks about how the average eclipse traveler spent $931 in market.

The things that they spent money on. Our hotels, which normally sell for between 180 bucks a night, depending on what where you stay, the most expensive hotel room during the eclipse was 1300 dollars for one night or a five night minimum 750 bucks a night.

So I think a lot of that stuff is available and the economic impact is huge. Now granted, I want to I want to really stress this because I think we really stressed people, you don't have to have a five days. Best of all, you just you don't need to. You know, we did 45 events, five days, well, organized, you know, dispersed the effort. If you're a community whose small and you just want to do a music in the park on Saturday. Great. Right. It doesn't have to be this crazy thing.

They're going to be looking for places to stay, places to eat, things to do, right. They're going to bring telescopes. They'll have some entertainment of their own. But I just I don't want people to feel overwhelmed, like, oh no, I'm charged with this festival. It just happened to be what we were able to create in our community, but do something that feels on brand or very authentic where you are right?

And we talked about, I mean, there's some communities that are going to be spillover communities from, you know, larger. So I think about in the southwest, we were near Texarkana and those guys we're hearing, they're already starting to sell through their hotels. And so what's going to happen is they'll be full and there are still going to be people who want to see the eclipse. And Arkansas is going to be a beautiful place, less pollution, et cetera, to have that observation, and so maybe it's just even being welcoming, making sure your stores are open, making maybe some farmers want to have some dry camping areas and just some extra place for people to park themselves to watch this eclipse.

It doesn't have to be grandiose, right? But it surely whatever that means for that community, Brook, I think, is what I'm hearing is that, you know, just be prepared for it. So you're not taken by surprise and you can take advantage of, you know, 500 extra people in your community over that weekend or a couple of thousand extra people. And that's bottom-line dollars to your businesses and to your tax base. Right. So why not take advantage of it?

I agree. And the other thing I want to stress, too, is that you're two-thirds of your state is on the line or in the line, which is great, of total totality. But every community in your state will be impacted because people have to get to the center line. So even if they're tucking right into that 120 miles, which that width, which is fine, they have to get there, which means that every person like your whole state is going to be impacted.

So for us, I shared, Cheyenne, Wyoming, almost had the same occupancy and same rates, right? They were out of the line two and a half, two and a half hours south on I-25, and they still saw the impact. We saw that across the state. So everybody, like if you're sitting there thinking this isn't going to impact my community, it is, because people have to get to where they're going to be able to experience the eclipse.

I wanted to fill you in like I told you, I told you briefly already, but I will tell you that Hardy, which is where we were, where we were able to do the first presentation in Ozark foothills. Some of the other groups have now reached out, and they are going to take advantage of a 501c3 that has already been established, and they're looking to do a Spring River Festival like team to look at events that are local here.

And then the folks to the south of us who are not part of the CREATE BRIDGES, but they're in the adjoining county, they've reached out. I'll be presenting to them next week about the same presentation. I’m basically going to mirror you and, you know, try to do you justice.

I was speaking to what your impact was or what you experienced, but they're looking at how do we help now from a regional perspective, like who can take that leap and kind of do if the 40 festivals underneath one umbrella doing with the single marketing campaign? Does that make sense for all of us? And you know, what does that look like from a cost perspective? How do we get that paid for and to have those conversations now 30 months into it, my hope is that within two years of the eclipse that we already know what that skeleton looks like and all we're now doing is starting to fill in the pieces.

And so you have actually brought together this opportunity across the board. And if you would also talk about, as I'm thinking about this, you know, some of the early development that some of your your communities took advantage of to be ready for the eclipse, or maybe some of the rural areas that talked about know these are infrastructure that we can kind of implement now. These were on the back burner, but now they're a little bit more immediate. So. And how important that would be to our communities.

So one, what I want to say is that whoever is going to hear Hazelle talk about the eclipse, I promise you she can give my presentations probably 22 times better than I can. Every time that I talk now, she's like, hey, hey, remember, don't forget to say this, so I want you to know you're in good hands with Hazelle for the rest of the time. So don't even worry about it. Like she will be the woman to call the meeting.

And we don't talk about this very often is that the eclipse was a catalyst in $38 million of development, private development in my downtown area. So we brought online an outdoor plaza now called the David Street Station. We saw a lot of building renovation restaurants come online. I mean, it really just- if somebody had something in the wings, it it popped because they thought, Well, I've got 18 months, and then we were going to have tens of thousands of people here.

I will tell you, though, after so everybody made money, right? And that that is an enormous amount of investment and private dollars, which is wonderful. After the eclipse, I would say with that, maybe a year later, there's always going to be a shakeout. And that's just the nature of starting a new business. So maybe the rest. Strong concept changed or something close and something else went in the building. So I'm not going to tell you that everything was sustained in the way that it looked on me on the day of the eclipse.

But I will tell you if somebody sitting on a project and they think, Wow, I'm going to have an opportunity to capture some new revenue, you're going to see some potential development in the community. And that was that was such a neat experience for us because our downtown hadn't seen that kind of investment in decades, right? And I'm guessing some of the communities do that. We'll listen to the same things, so absolutely use it as a catalyst as appropriate.

Yeah, especially when I think of the numbers posted, right? So Casper did some post surveying about visitors in the return of visitors or their interested in coming back to see you. Remind me? So it's about 36%, I think is what you were like, 32% of the visitors said that they would like to come back. And so I think about if you make those $32 million investment, they're going to be able to see that again when they return.

And so it's not like a one time investment it's going to sustain now.

Even even more importantly, though, this is a real opportunity for these areas in the state of Arkansas to roll out the red carpet. So 76% of people who watched the eclipse in Wyoming had never been.

Folks like that is the one opportunity to get people in your community that would never choose Arkansas. They would have never chose Wyoming if it wasn't for the eclipse. So this really is, I've said, very seriously. Ours was the largest tourism event that we will ever see in the state of Wyoming in my lifetime, and I guarantee you it's probably going to be the largest that Arkansas is going to see as well. I mean, could a college bowl game there? That's fine, but that's going to be a direct impact to a certain area. This is your entire state. It will. There is not a life it will not touch in 2024. So what a huge opportunity you guys have and you're way ahead of the curve, which is awesome.

I am tickled that you say that because you don't know how many people have asked me if we could steal you away from Casper, Wyoming. And I said, no, now she may come here and watch the eclipse, so she's going to be just enjoying it with everybody else said. But you have definitely made an impact for us. And folks, I don't know if you can hear just how energetic Brook has been for us, but she just was an inspiration and folks that were really scratching their heads, listen to her, say I was in your shoes, I thought for sure no one was going to come. And why are we putting in all this effort and had some painstaking days where you felt like it was not worth it anymore?

But at the end of it, Brook, you said that you wish you could. I mean, there's some people who wish you could make an eclipse happen in Casper again and do it one more time.

You got it. Every year, my city manager says, What are you going to do about bringing another eclipse, right? And at first that was what we were super scared of. And now just from. And it's the one time that every community or our entire community and all the municipalities in the county worked towards the same goal. And it's not very often that you everybody has competing agendas or projects they want funded or it was, I sayit feels like you went to war together to get it over the finish line, and we're all marching in the same direction. So it's like you're going to win on so many levels. And yes, when you see the eclipse, you're like, it was worth it.

It really was. So some people, it's very spiritual. Some people you're like, Hey, that's cool. I won't be a chaser. But wherever you fall on that spectrum, it sincerely is something that you're probably once in a lifetime. Right? I mean, it's just unbelievable. And the cool part about Arkansas is all you have to do is walk outside and look up. It's not even like you have to get on an airplane, right? So I mean, enjoy that because there's millions of people around the world who would love the opportunity that you're about to have. Just show up in your backyard.

Yes, we're very fortunate. We really need to take advantage of that. And we have you to thank for kind of kickstarting our journey because without that presentation, I mean, there's those of us who were excited about it, but we didn't know how to communicate what this really could mean.

And also some of the misses that you shared with us, you know, lets us look and say, OK, how can we maybe do it just a little bit better? Or let's just face it, Arkansas is, you know, we're all the regions are different. How do we tailor this to make sense in our region? It is not a cookie cutter solution or one festival fits all. It is going to be what it should be for each community. But let's do something in each community, whatever that looks like, right? So I think that's the takeaway for me that we must just be prepared. And I guess let's just have fun with it, right?

Oh yeah. I'm dead serious. I welcome all the people who would never choose Arkansas, right? That's what we did. And it was well worth it. And then we've had a lot of people fall in love with a great place of Wyoming, and a lot of people fall in love with Arkansas, too.

So I have an update since I've been back. So I don't I don't know if your listeners will find this interesting, but I ended up getting the Arkansas Travel Award from your Governor. Oh, fantastic. So, my update is that it's the first thing I've had custom framed in my adult life, so I marched it over to the frame shop and they're going to spend six weeks framing it up. But I am very proud. I saw a deep affection for your state and the people, and I just was treated so well and people are like, What's the difference between Wyoming? In Arkansas? I'm like, Well, you're super friendly.

But what I really noticed and Hazelle, I said this to you a million times, everyone has great, manners. Just impeccable manners, and it was it was just such a delight, and I really do feel like they're probably sister states at some level, but what an honor. One for that certificate, but two, what an honor, to just spend a week with the people and get to see their challenges and opportunities and really get to know some people. It was an amazing trip.

Well, Brook, we so enjoyed having you and I was blessed enough to be able to spend, gosh, three days of the five days that you were in Arkansas, which I know was like a whirlwind trip for you. We actually covered quite a span from one end of the state to the other. And for you, certainly, you got to see a whole lot more of just what we have to offer in Arkansas.

And so you are now also an ambassador to be able to talk about why people should visit Arkansas. And we, of course, have extended several of us have please come stay with us during the eclipse. We would love to have you and we'll put you on a boat somewhere, maybe and do what the Governor did.

And then I want a helicopter to get out, so .You and you have to listen to her presentation to understand the reference to that, folks. But Brooke, thank you so much for taking the time with me on this podcast. I really enjoyed being able to talk about it, and I think people are going to be tired of me being so rah rah about this. But you know, it is an opportunity that we have, and let's embrace it.

And as you said, we'll have people from all over the globe who never have thought to come to Arkansas think maybe that is a place I need to go visit and let's open up and show them the wonderful hospitality that Brook experienced to them. So with that being said, Brook, is there any last parting thoughts that you have for our folks on the podcast?

So Hazelle, I know you're going to take great care of people. What we tried to do is just be a resource for communities across the line this time. So visitcasper.com/eclipse. All the affiliation forms how we handle things. Final reports on what happened to state agencies and local emergency response agencies. We just I mean, it's our pleasure to just give people access to that information.

So if you're curious or how much we spent, so the budget's posted on there very clearly, everything's transparent. Anything that we can do to be a resource, we want to do it. So know, with that we just we want to help any way we can or cheering. And I will definitely be in Arkansas in 2020 for to view not to organize, but to view the eclipse.

Oh, we're so excited. So again, that is visit visitcasper.com/eclipse, and I'll have that on the program notes. But also you can see it on the UADA website. And thank you so much for listening. So this is another episode of the CREATE BRIDGES Small Business, Big Rural Impact. My name is Hazelle Whited. Thank you.

For more information about this or any CREATE BRIDGES podcast or more about CREATE BRIDGES in Arkansas visit uaex.uada.edu/createbridges. The CREATE BRIDGES Small Business Big Rural Impact podcast is made possible by a Walmart grant to the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension, Community Professional and Economic Development Unit and White River Now Productions.