

Episode 2: Lights, Camera, Crickets

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.

[Hazelle] Welcome again to the Arkansas Create Bridges podcast series, Small business, Big rural impact. This is Hazelle Whited, Program Coordinator for the Ozark Foothills and your host for this exciting episode titled Lights...Camera...Crickets. Ever wonder why someone would leave the limelight and bustle of big urban cities for the nearly silent and sparse towns of rural Arkansas? Well, today I am excited to have Jeff Penn, owner of Chow on the Square in Cherokee Village, and Marc Herring, owner of Ozark Classic Crafts Mall in Hardy, to talk about their journey of leaving big corporate positions to be small business owners here in rural Arkansas. Jeff and Marc, welcome to the show. So, Marc, you were already here when I moved in over 12 years ago. So let me start with you. Tell us about where you came from, what you did and how you found Hardy, Arkansas, to call home.

[Marc] It's a 13 year journey here in Hardy. And prior to moving to Hardy, Arkansas, I lived in Kennett, Missouri, and I was the marketing director with Time Warner Cable. And I did that for eight years. And prior to the Kennett operation, I worked for Time Warner Cable in Levittown, Pennsylvania. So right now, it would be 21 years since living west of the Mississippi. I've kind of been doing marketing and public relations, customer training and customer service representative trainings for a long time with Time Warner. And even before that, when I had my own business and before that when I didn't have my own business.

[Hazelle] And so they were major metropolitans. I mean, Kennett's a small town, but I mean, you know, yeah, I might my first gig out of college was with The Gap. And at that that was in 1982. And at that time, The Gap only had seven stores in Manhattan. Banana Republic was merely a thought process. And Old Navy wasn't even a thought process in 1982. So Banana Republic was the next phase of the Gap. And I was right there at the beginning of all of that. Then I got into some other things, a little bit more towards my education background, Marketing, Finance. Those are popular names that someone would actually really recognize. And Manhattan is not a small town.

[Marc] Surely, it is not. And in college, my dorm room was on the third floor of a sixth floor building and I had more people on my floor than there are businesses in Hardy.

[Hazelle] I really believe that. If anyone doesn't know where Manhattan is you need to go look, it's going to be amazing, kind of, what that town is. But New York City. Think of think of that. If you...

[Mark] New York City. The Big Apple.

[Hazelle] Yeah. Which speaking of apples. Let's go move over to Jeff. So, Jeff, you know, I've only more recently gotten to know each other, but I hear you were involved with fruit before the restaurant business. If you'd share a little bit about how you came to Cherokee Village.

[Jeff] Certainly. Certainly. Thank you, Hazelle. Yes, I did spend a few years working in the fruit industry you could say. I came to Cherokee Village about three years ago. But prior to that, for 18 years, I worked for Apple. Apple Retail. I started out working in in Austin, Texas, in tech, and then moved over into Apple

retail when they first started to open up Apple retail stores in New York City. So that was my first kind of move to the big city there. I'd never lived to see that large, which was amazing. And then moved over. I lived in San Francisco for many years with Apple. New York. And they had had the opportunity in talent acquisition to go over and help open up over 40 Apple retail stores in China during the time that I was there. I they spent most my time in Beijing and Shanghai, but also traveling around China. So there's pretty much 18 years. My sister lived here in Cherokee Village and I would always come to visit her when I was coming home and just really kind of fell in love with the town. And after that, after living in San Francisco, New York, Beijing and Shanghai, I was looking for trees and trees and fewer people. And it was time to make a change. And I thought Cherokee Village be a great place to do that. And so, you know, the past three has been fantastic. And I'm really happy I made that change.

[Hazelle] Now, as you know, one of my hopes with this podcast is to share with listeners what experience in our town may be like that's different than what they might expect in the city, especially from a retail perspective. So, for example, I think about like the closest famous corporate chain house maybe an hour away from us, but we have excellent local coffee places that make up for it. So, Marc, let me start with you. Name an expectation or two that you would say may be different when coming to our little community, either as a guest or a potential new resident.

[Marc] No bookstores.

[Hazelle] No bookstores?

[Marc] No bookstores here. There's no shoe stores and there's really no men's clothing stores here. So the fact that I worked in men's clothing for a lot of years, there's no place to go shopping.

[Hazelle] Well, that tells me there's opportunity.

[Marc] There is opportunity here. I wish some some really cool young entrepreneurs would come and open up a really great shop where we can go and purchase shirts and maybe some nice shoes and definitely something other than white socks.

[Hazelle] Okay. So men out there, if you are an entrepreneur that wants to bring fashion and that's something that we could have here.

[Marc] We could use that. We could use fashion.

[Hazelle] That's right. That's right. All right, Jeff. So what about you? What what would you tell someone about? You know, if they were about to go into the restaurant, for example, like how their experience could be different than when it could be in the big city, for example.

[Jeff] Well, I think one of the things that really attracted me to move to Cherokee Village was that it has a very small town feel where people really get to know each other very well. And, you know, even if you live in New York, if you live in San Francisco, Beijing, you do get to know people in your immediate area because you frequent the same stores, the same restaurants. But it's very different here. You know, owning a restaurant here, I know all of my customers by name, recognize them all by face. Soon as they call I know who they are, they know who I am. And it's nice being able to have that kind of connection with customers, you know, and, you know, you're impacting their lives. You know, you're doing very special things for them. They're you know, they're taking care of you. And that is I think that connection is different than the connection you could probably have at a very high volume, fast paced location in in

a larger city. You know, certainly a restaurant in New York City is going to be much more volume than a restaurant in Cherokee Village. But that's not exactly the reason I moved here. The reason I moved here was more for the connections, the small town feel, and then really kind of knowing that I'm making an impact on people's lives.

[Hazelle] Well, and that's what I wanted to touch on. So as business owners there, some of the things that I encounter are people from big cities come to our little community. There's an expectation they have when they cross the border, they think they're going to have the same experience they would in Manhattan larger volume, more clerks, you know, quick technology, things like that. So as business owners of your businesses that don't necessarily have those elements, I guess, what would you tell some of these issues like as an expectation? Because one of the things I'm trying to do is help them understand that even though it's not the same experience you're going to have out there, our experience is a good experience.

[Jeff] It's a better experience.

[Marc] I believe so. And just to kind of play on what Jeff said. What's nice about here is we're not anonymous. In a big city, yeah, you're going to get to know certain groups of people, but you still have that large, almost uncontrolled anonymity. And here you can't hide and you're not anonymous. When I come to your restaurant, Jeff, it's first name when people come into my store, I'm lucky if I can remember anybody. But, you know, we're not anonymous here. And when we go to Wal-Mart or to Artisans or someplace else, it's, you know, from across the room, it's "Hey Marc." So, you know, we get to visit with people and and you build that rapport with folks and then that rapport becomes friendships. And that's what I have here more than any other place I've ever lived is friendships.

[Jeff] Yeah. I mean, I would agree. I think that, you know, working, I was the senior manager at Apple Retail in both New York and Shanghai. And, you know, thousands of people would come through our stores every day and focus on the on the customer experience was the number one thing. And you tried your best to get to know them and, you know, make sure that they had a fantastic experience because that's that's what you wanted them to have. But it's still there are thousands of people every day. And so there's a limit to what you can do. There's a limit to how close you can get. There's a limit to how much you can get to know or understand their needs or them personally. And I think that here, just understanding our customers and understanding their needs and being able on that first name basis and building that rapport is so incredible. It does make a difference and makes a difference in my life and our employees lives. And it makes a difference in our customers lives as well.

[Hazelle] And being able to have that time to develop that is something that's...

[Marc] You know, one of one of the things that I like to tell people is that here in this in this community in rural Arkansas, time is not the enemy. And when time ceases to be your enemy, all you have left is time to enjoy things. So there's that little bit of a conundrum. Something called time. It's less important here. Yes, we have deadlines. Yes, we have things to do. But it's not the end all. Be all. [Hazelle No. Absolutely. No, I. I like that. Time is not our enemy.

[Jeff] And it is slower. It is slower. But that's a good thing.

[Hazelle] Yeah. Well that's good...

[Marc] The slower you go... According to Einstein physics, the slower you go, the more time you have to do more things.

[Hazelle] That's good. That is, you're right. Absolutely. Because we're not focused on beating time, we're able to focus on other things out here. Absolutely. Jeff, let me throw this question at you. The mandates really hit the restaurant industry hard, and you had to make some tough choices on shutting down for a little bit and changing the way you do things, yet you're remodeling right now or going through that process. And so I was wondering, what is it about right now that's making you won't actually invest in your business?

[Jeff] Yes, certainly. I mean, right now it's challenging. It's challenging for everyone, especially those in retail, in the hospitality industry. You know, the business looks very different today than it did last year at this time. It has caused us to look at our business, certainly how we take care of our customers, how we take care of our employees, ensuring the safety and their well-being is number one priority. But we will get through this as a community. We're gonna get through this as a nation. And once that happens, I think there's a very bright future in Cherokee Village. I see a lot of positive things happening. I see a lot of new faces, folks coming in and just inquiring about great places to eat, great place to shop. You know how to spend their time. And, you know, that's very encouraging. So I think the future looks bright for Cherokee Village. And I think, you know, now is the as good a time as any to start planning for that future. Certainly, it's certainly changed the way we changed our business model as it has you know, most folks out there, but it hasn't stopped us from planning for the future and what we want to look like at this time next year.

[Jeff] And that's great to hear because I think that could be something detrimental, as if the fear sets in. And we don't plan. And, you know, I look at this and -

[Jeff] This too will end.

[Hazelle] Yes. Some businesses who are investing in their businesses right now, it's kind of like well it's a little slower right now. So I actually have time because, as you know, we get really busy.

[Jeff] And that's exactly what we're doing. I mean, basically the limitations on the business, rightfully so folks are you know, they're not going out as much. I mean, that's completely understandable. And so we're taking this time that we have and putting it to good use and really kind of starting to plan for the future. So when we come out of this, we'll be well well positioned to better take care of our customers and the business so we're gonna have it.

[Hazelle] No, that sounds like a smart plan. And also, you know, kind of optimistic about what's going to happen when this end. Yes. So there'll be a new normal. I mean, we've talked about this I've mentioned this a couple of times. It's not going to look like it did before. But whatever that new normal is, we need to it'll still be progressing forward. So we need to to be ready for that. So I'm going to go with Marc. Marc's got a fabulous story. So and I'm going to start with. I remember seeing you right in the beginning of Covid being really like uncharacteristic of Marc. And if you know knew Marc, you would understand what I mean. But he was outside the front of his store with the machine making a wooden sign of some sort. And I will tell you it was weird for me because I've always known you to be upbeat, positive. And you were you were absolutely opposite of that that day. And yet something amazing happened. No no professional person has ever said, "Oh, look at you. You go off mood swings left and

right." But I'll tell you what, back in March, when when I decided to shut my store down, we closed the store to the public. But through the grace of the government, I received a little PPP money to keep my payroll going. And I kept my staff on board. So we kept working, even though the doors were closed and nobody had come into the shop. And, yeah, Hazelle, I remember that day, out front I pulled my my C&C out front to do a big sign project for a customer. And I was not happy at all. Not by any stretch of the imagination. I was I was frightened. I had enough money in the bank to probably get me through the first of May. So after the first of May, I had no idea what was going to happen beyond that. And again, through the grace of the government, I received some some finances and we put that money to very good use and reopened the store on May 1st. Much to my surprise, on May 12th, I received an email from a group that wishing to take my little "Keepsake Bat" and go national with it. And so from May the 12th to current day, we've done probably close to 4000 of my mini bats and we're closing in on 400 of my full sized bats, which is a new addition to what we're doing. We're about maybe 45 days into making full sized bats. I was able to purchase two new laser engravers to allow me to expand, grow the business, and prepare for what's coming with the new normal.

[Hazelle] I mean, I think your problem right now is keeping up with which bat you have to take up and put which, you know, new piece of wood in there. I mean, it is amazing operation to see.

[Marc] Beauty is is that yesterday I got caught up. So I'm caught up yesterday. And as of today, I'm like, okay, we need to do that I haven't done already. And I have been reminded that there are projects that I kind of pushed off the burners and I need to bring them back and finish them up now that I'm all caught up with the with the keepsake bat program, I can go back in time a little bit and pull out some of those projects that have been not completed and get them completed this week and then truly be caught.

[Hazelle] Well, it is an amazing story. And, you know, we are thrilled that, you know, it just kind of one of those things where you never know what's going to happen next, you know, to get that email from that marketing group and to tell you that, "hey, we saw your product, which was posted" which I understand it was posted online and then they found you.

[Marc] Oh yeah, they found me. I was actually on a conference call that the Chamber of Commerce had put together. So there it was like May 10th, May 12, something like that. And got this text. I'm like, who are these while I'm on the call is like, OK, I can't take this call now, but boy, don't I want to. And so I called them back. Thirty fourty, you know, 30, 40 minutes later. And the rest isthe rest is workshop history.

[Hazelle] That's amazing. And it just kind of that, you know, sticking with it. I mean, we're entrepreneurs, right? So we we have to we have to believe that there's an other side to things. We have to believe that there's something else. And I'm not saying that sometimes a decision to make an about face or close your business isn't something that we might have to consider. But at the same token, we we will push through things. And that's what I love about entrepreneurs and certainly your story.

[Marc] We had Jeff and I both are probably. And I'll put you on the back as you've done so many of my Christmas parties, a very creative individual in the food business. And it's a pleasure to know you and have you in our community.

[Jeff] Thank you, Marc. You tell us a lot of love in this room. So let's talk about that. (laughter and banter)

[Hazelle] Well, we are going to talk about is how the community has responded to the challenges you faced and how do you think being involved on local boards and with the community has helped with the support? Jeff, I'll start with you.

[Jeff] Oh, my gosh, I'm just as I said before, the last the last six months or so has been very challenging for everyone, you know, especially for small businesses, the hospitality industry, the retail industry. There's a lot of not knowing. There's things have changed the way we service our customers, our business models have changed. And I can only speak for me, but our customer base has been amazing. They have been so understanding and supportive through each of the phases. We've changed the way we've done business several times just to to accommodate different regulations or kind of phases of this pandemic. But our customer base has been amazing and that's - And I think that's a testament to small town versus large city. They are there. There's a there's loyalty. There's that familiarity. There's those friendships. There's that rapport. All of those things help create a support system and a base manage through this. And we will be managed through with our same customers. And they're they've been incredibly supportive.

[Hazelle] Well, and I know both of you would definitely help new businesses and other people through the blessings in your business, which we're that kind of community. You know, if someone is blessed with good fortune, we pass it on , you know, pay it forward. So I wanted to kind of wrap this up with a question for each of you. So, Marc, if someone were getting ready to relocate and we have a lot of that going on now, we have seen an influx of larger cities deciding to move in to Hardy, Arkansas, Cherokee Village, et cetera. What would you tell them? [Marc] Welcome to the community. Welcome to the family. This is a family. You know, I know so many people and more people know me than I know them. Now, Jeff, what would you tell someone, especially if they're getting ready to open a business? [Jeff] I would say it's a very big change. For me personally, it was the right move, you know. But if someone was looking to make that change, you know, and open a small business, do the research. I would have I would advise them to visit. Talk to folks just to make sure. Just to put them at ease and make sure that the decision that they're making, because it's a huge life changing decision. But I would advise anyone that was looking to do it. Just do your research, ask the right questions. We've got a lot of resources here, including the Hub. You know, we could provide a lot of insight, as well as some direct contacts to local business leaders that can share their insights to help those folks better understand if they were making the right decision for them and their family.

[Hazelle] Now, that's sage advice for someone making the plunge because it is a plunge.

[Jeff] It is.

[Marc] It's, you know, it's a long walk off of a short pier. You've got a support group and you've got a universe that you knew behind you. And now coming here is a new universe and it's different here. It is. And it is very, very different.

[Jeff] And I would also like if you were if you were looking to plan to come here, whether it's open a business or just to move to Cherokee Village or or a smaller town, go and spend some time visit the local businesses. Talk to folks, kind of get their perspectives. Spending time in the community will help you better understand who are the folks that you're going to be seeing every day. And also help you better understand it's a place where you can see yourself and your family.

[Hazelle] Absolutely. Well, we could talk all night, but I promised, you know, we keep this around 20 minutes, so pretty good time to end this. But, you know, I really appreciate your perspectives. Marc, gain, we've known each other for a while. Jeff, I'm just getting to know you, but you both have some great insights for people that we have here that are maybe going through their businesses and struggling a little bit and need a glimmer of hope, or people that are looking to come to Cherokee Village and Hardy and Ash Flat, and Highland, Cave City also, our other sharp county locations, as you know.

[Marc] Yeah, the Chamber. You know, Kari Hollis at the Chamber would be willing to talk and work out anything, with anyone. And Kari is also an import from California. So we've got a lot of people that are from other places and they have great expertise. I welcome anybody that wants to walk in and chitchat and sit down and pick what little there is left of my brain. And and make a determination of whether this is right.

[Hazelle] Our doors are open. We definitely would love to talk with you. So appreciate the listeners for this episode of the Create Bridges Small Business, Big Real Impact and look forward to our next episode. Thanks.

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