

Episode 4: Not a Jonas Brother, but Still a Rock Star Transcript

Come join us, explore the impact of small business here in rural Arkansas.

[Hazelle] 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 Arkansas Create Bridges podcast series, Small Business Big Real Impact. This is Hazelle Whited hosting for you this episode titled Not a Jonas Brother, but still a rock star. With me today is none other than Mayor Jonas Anderson, mayor of Cave City, Arkansas, located on the southern end of Sharp County and a small part of Independence County. Now, if you've never heard of Cave City, then you've missed out on some of the best watermelon around. But before we get to all that, Jonas thank you for coming on the show to share with us your stories on the things you do as mayor to bring success to the tourism, small businesses and lifeblood of your community.

[Jonas] Thank you so much. It is so exciting to be here. And I'm... It's a pleasure. Thank you.

[Hazelle] So I did a little snooping online and you have a personal Facebook page, a mayor Facebook page, as well as manage the city Facebook and City Web site, which I understand didn't exist before you became mayor. So why all this city online presence? And why is it such an important investment?

[Jonas] Yeah, well, when you said we didn't really have an online presence, per say when I became mayor, so that was one of the first things I decided to do, because as you know, especially during this Covid-19 time, communication is key. And so I just saw social media as a really good tool. I originally started to use it when I was running for city council. You know, I formed a Facebook group there just to kind of let people know, hey, this is why I'm running for city council. These are some of the ideas that I think are important for Cave City. And so that's that's kind of where it started and just kind of taken off from there. Yeah. Like you said, I manage everything for the city and just try to use that as a tool to let people know what's going on.

[Hazelle] So this helps Cave City as a small city. But, you know, what can businesses glean from what you're doing with social media?

[Jonas] Yeah. That's one thing I've actually tried to talk to small business owners about is, you know, making sure that they do have some sort of presence, whether it's a website or social media or something like that, because just like the city, it just gives them another outlet to communicate with customers and let them know what's going on with the business. So hopefully, you know, we've kind of set the example from the city perspective for something that small business owners can use.

[Hazelle] Well, great. So let's kind of go back and talk about your public life and your entry into public life. So I again, in the snooping, saw that in 2010 you were actually appointed as a Cave City council member. And then in 2017, your predecessor appointed you to Mayor and then you were actually elected in 2018. Right. So and then in 2020, you were named District One Vice President of the Arkansas Municipal League. And by the way, we are so proud of you on that. But, so I always think of the time constraints being involved in this way because you have a full time job, right? Yeah. And so. And you have a family. Yes. So, I mean, it is a lot of time. So why do you feel involvement in state leadership roles and other professional organizations and just being engaged outside of your normal life is important to you as the city mayor of Cave City?

[Jonas] Yeah, Like I said, there's definitely a time constraints. But, you know, when I first joined the city council in 2010, one of the first things that someone recommended was that I get in touch with the Arkansas Municipal League. You know, we had had a couple of council members before that. It attended a few of their conferences and workshops but we didn't really have a huge presence there. And so a fellow council member and I decided that we were gonna go to the winter conference that year and really try to get involved. And it's just really taken off from there. I mean, the municipality as a whole has just become, you know, like I told someone just today, not only is it an organization that helps the city, but for me personally, it just became a group of friends and mentors. And it's just led to a lot of great things, whether it's, you know, their legal defense program or property insurance that we can take advantage of. It's it's really just a great tool for the city. So that's why it's important. It just gives even small towns like Cave City, you know, a literal seat at the table when a lot of these big important decisions are being made.

[Hazelle] So having you as this you know, the district one vice president, I mean, that means a lot to us here in our community to have that voice. And so, you know, it is because, as you said, you know, without having that seat at the table, sometimes we get forgotten. And certainly our businesses, you know, can kind of be forgotten as well. So I always akin that type of activity as something business owners really should consider as part of their business plans. What do you think about, you know, kind of what you do for the city and how business owners take that to be involved in something, whether it's a chamber or a volunteer group? How important is it?

[Jonas] Right. Yeah, well, it just, you know, with the Municipal League in my role there, again, it just shows the power that, you know, a small community can have. So you take that and apply to small business, you know, like you said, if your small business can get involved in the chamber or get involved in, you know, some sort of representative group for small businesses, whether it's in the local community or in the region or county or even at the state level. It just, you know, it gives you that power and gives you a seat at the table. And it's not that, you know, someone forgets about Cave City on purpose. It's just that's just what happens, you know, when you have cities that are much bigger than you and you have businesses that are much bigger than you. It's just kind of a natural process to where if you're not, you know, at the table or your business name is not continually on the minds of these people making these decisions, you do just get left behind. And so it's a way to keep that from happening, hopefully.

[Hazelle] I mean, I think of that similar to maybe their branding or I mean, that's a way of marketing you, right? I mean, if you're constantly out there and people are seeing you and hearing your name, then they remember you. But if you're out of sight, you get out of mind. And so, you know, your business can also, you know, kind of fall victim to that as well. So, you know, I'm glad to hear that you encourage your business owners to kind of be as active as they can. I'm sure you invite them to that to even come to city council meetings because, you know, to hear what's going on locally and throughout the state, you know, could impact their business. And they they should be a part of that process.

[Jonas] Right. And that's one thing, actually, I'm glad you brought that up. You know, when I first became mayor, one of the things I did was reach out to all the small business owners. And I said, you know, we want to have kind of just like a roundtable discussion. You know, I had a lot of different ideas for things that we wanted to work on in Cave City. And so pretty quickly, I've tried to bring in, you know, kind of a roomful of of our small business owners And I said, look, you know, here's the here's the thing

that I think are important for Cave City. Here are the things that I think we should be doing. And then I wanted to hear from them, you know, what they felt about not only those ideas, but maybe bring some of their own ideas to the table and and see if we couldn't find kind of a common approach to take. And so that was really eye opening. And I'd like to do more of a much more. I wanted to do more of them. But, you know, like you said, the time constraints, so. But I do communicate with with our business owners a lot, and I try to keep in touch with them.

[Hazelle] So our listeners tend to know that we talk about food on our podcast. So, of course, I am going to talk about something totally sweet. And it's a vegetable and a fruit, actually. So. But let's talk about Cave City Watermelon Festival. And so this is an annual festival. And this year would have been the.. I'm not really sure.. would have been the forty-first annual, something in that ballpark, but you actually had some difficult decisions this year or at least your committee did. And I know you supported them. Would you talk about that. What Covid did for the annual watermelon festival and kind of what you had to do as mayor to get your city through that?

[Jonas] Yes, sure. So, you know, in a nutshell, it canceled it and, you know. The watermelon festival you know, it's managed by a committee of volunteers. And actually, you know, what a lot of people don't realize the city actually is totally independent of the festival and always has been. So, you know, I think a lot of people kind of feel like the city, you know, directs the festival or, you know, puts on the festival. But really, it's this it's this really dedicated group of volunteers that do that. And I was actually really lucky to get to serve on that committee for two or three years. This is prior to becoming mayor. So, you know, they had to look at it this year and decide. I mean, you know, is it safe to I'm responsible to have a festival where, you know, you're going to bring 15000 people to town over a two or three day, four day period. And it was you know, it was really tough. But they ultimately they looked at it and they, you know, based on the facts that they had of the time, they made the absolute best decision they could. So I just try to use my role as mayor of whatever influence, you know, you might have there to basically just kind of get out after that announcement and just reassure people and say, look, you know, this they made the best decision they could. And now the only thing left to do is go and buy up all the watermelons you can and look forward to next year. And so I you know, I'm very happy to say that, you know, that's really what Cave City did. I mean, we just said, OK, you know, obviously we don't love the idea of no festival, but we understand it and we support the committee and we're going to carry on. And we had a great watermelon season and everybody was happy.

[Hazelle] I will tell you, we still got lots of calls up here up at Cherokee Village. I know Hardy and your others surrounding Sharp County communities really pitched in. I'm sure Batesville did, too, you know, and really kind of said, OK, we're going to the farmers are important to us, that retail part. And so, you know, we we tried to help take up the slack as much as it can. But you know what? Your farmers were busy. I was passing by their retail stores and the store fronts and I mean, you couldn't get parking in some of those places. I don't think they really needed our help too much.

[Jonas] I actually told one of our growers is that if it gets much busier, you're gonna have to put in a stoplight on the highway up there. But, yeah, it was great. I mean, it's you know, it's just like every year people love the watermelons. They love the community aspect of it. Just getting to get out and meet people and talk to people, so. Yeah. It was great.

[Hazelle] Yeah. And talking about, you know, supporting the Cave City Watermelon Festival and at least, you know, supporting it with a T-shirt or something. So, I mean, the outpouring of our communities, I

think that's one of the things that small business owners and communities can find is that we take care of each other. You know, this is a theme that we have tried to stress to people who may not know what small rural communities are like. Bigger cities, I know they do. They try to do that, too. But because we're more intimately put together, we do band together like family members. So it was really cool to see on your Facebook site. I know you talked about that a lot. And I have to say, you have this hashtag on your on a lot of posts, which I love, because this whole idea of being able to search Cave City. So it's #CaveCityArkansas. And I am curious, like so out of that, have you been able to generate like some out of like people from outside Cave City maybe just kind of said, hey, you know, I found you because of the search or I found you because of a watermelon or you know, or just or who does does your social media presence, like has helped push people, you know, to Cave City?

[Jonas] Yeah, I mean, I think so. You know, of course, you know, on the back side of Facebook, you know, you have all the analytics and things that you can look at and you can see where people are clicking on this and what you know, where they're coming from. And it's definitely in the last few years, you know, since we did launch the city Facebook page and now we're on Instagram and Twitter and things like that, too. But. But, yeah, it's definitely put us out there with a broader audience. And, you know, like I said, the #CaveCityArkansas is definitely something I try to include because, you know, that's just how it works. So so that's just one more, you know, tool that I can use to promote Cave City which is what this is all about.

[Hazelle] And if you don't know what the purpose of that hashtag is, so if you type in the little number sign and CaveCityArkansas all one word after it, it will, and put it in a browser, it will actually look for all those pages and postings that have that included. So it's a neat and easy way for businesses, for example, for you to kind of get your name out there and then to promote that so the more people see it. Because I'm telling you that hashtag stuff works, Mayor, Right?

[Jonas] I mean, I know that that's you know, I do encourage our businesses anything anything that we've posted, you know, business. I've always tried to tell them, you know, make sure and use a hashtag, you know, Cave City Arkansas or Cave City or Watermelon Festival, you know, anything you can use to hashtag your post is, like you said, it's just going to help tie it all together. So it's great. One of the posts that you had on Facebook also was on a donut shop. I guess they were some donut place in Little Rock was doing this for my sense of like coming out to park their trailer.

[Jonas] Yes, there's donut. Food truck. Yeah, there was a huge thing. So some actually resident had clued me in on that. I didn't see it right away. But once I saw yeah. There I was. I mean, I sent a personal message and, you know, hashtagged them to death probably. But, you know, ultimately they still haven't brought their donut truck yet. But I'm still holding out.

[Hazelle] Maybe they'll come during the next watermelon festival. So, you know, donuts and watermelons. Yeah. Just sounds like a great combination. One of the other things you do, Mayor, that I've noticed is that you also include things like hashtag get hired, Cave City. So you are helping promote jobs that are within your community. And I love that because I think that mayors especially as active as you are on your Facebook site, that you help encourage people and connect them to businesses that have job openings.

[Jonas] Yeah, yeah. That did #HireCaveCity hashtag. So just a little interesting side note on that. Not long after I became mayor, we were sitting in the offices of city hall with our chief of police, actually, who is a

good friend, going back to high school, actually. And we were just talking about, you know, how can we, you know, promote small business and how can we kind of connect people, you know, that need jobs with local employers and local businesses and stuff? And so we kind of started throwing things around like that, you know, and I said we need a hashtag of some kind. And so we just kind of came up with #GetHiredCaveCity. And so, yeah, since, you know, for the past two years, I've been using that. Every time I hear about a local businesses hiring, you know, either encourage them to use it or I just kind of take it upon myself and copy their job posting and repost it on the city side and always, you know, #GetHiredCaveCity. And honestly, that's that's been gaining a lot of traction. I've been noticing whenever we use that, it seems to get a lot of attention on Facebook and Instagram.

[Hazelle] That's that is awesome, because I'm hearing that traditional methods that people used to use to post jobs are not necessarily working anymore. And so I keep getting asked here at the Hub, you know, are there any job boards or are there any places that we can put an ad in the paper? And I refer them to Facebook sites that have job postings. But it's great to see that as the city mayor, you know that your city is active and trying to help promote that as well. I mean, obviously, a job for one of your employers helps. It helps everybody.

[Jonas] Oh yeah. I mean, even if it's just one job. I mean, that's. Yeah.

[Hazelle] Absolutely. So anything that I might have missed?

[Jonas] Let's see. Well, one thing I might pick up on this just a little bit, if you don't mind. So, you know, another connection that I made through the Arkansas Municipal League. They have "Be local. Be Heard." initiative. And really, in a nutshell, what that is, is just trying to stress to legislators and, you know, other people involved in the decision making process that it's really important for cities to have, you know, that local control. And so, you know, if a city needs to make a decision, you know, we want to make sure that we have the authority and the ability to actually make the decision. So that's another thing that I've kind of taken on, is trying to help the Municipal League promote that because, you know, that ties in directly to economic development and making sure that mayors and council members have the, not only the knowledge to make those decisions, but also the, you know, the actual legal authority to to do that. And without, you know, having to go through a state or a federal agency all the time, you know, there's there's a good place for that. But there's also a good place for just allowing cities to decide, hey, this is what's best for us. And so we're going to go with it because, as you know, time is of the essence on a lot of economic development projects. So the Be Local. Be Heard. initiative is a is a big part of that. And hopefully that'll keep gaining traction across the state.

[Hazelle] So final words for your businesses or for any small business in rural communities?

[Jonas] Well, you know, the businesses is my community, you know. I mean, we have an open door at City Hall. I'm 100 percent there to promote them, to help them do anything we can to make sure that they're successful. And one thing I might point out, you know, it's kind of been interesting to me since I became mayor. You know, you hear a lot of people posting on social media and things, you know, talking about I wish the city would, you know, put in this business or I wish the city would do this or do that. And so I think sometimes maybe there's a little bit of a misunderstanding about, you know, the relationship between a city and a business. So by that, I mean with us, you know, it's not so much that we're creating a business or we're going to, you know, just check a box or snap our fingers and there's a new business. But what I'm really focused on is just trying to make Cave City an environment where

businesses want to come. You know, if there's if there's no incentive for a business to come to your community, well, then obviously they're not going to. So really, with everything that we do, you know, myself and the city council and even our city employees, you know, they've really taken this on to taking it to heart. We're just trying to make a place where businesses want to come. You know, where I think I said the other day, maybe paraphrasing a little bit, that we want to make Cave City a place where people come to, you know, make a make a life and not just a living. And so, you know, that goes into parks and the quality of life and streets and just everything. So it really all just kind of ties it up together in a package and that hopefully we can run with and bring more businesses with them.

[Hazelle] Well, excellent. So if you haven't figured out yet why I refer to Mayor as a rock star, go check out their Facebook page. The Cave City Facebook page.

[Jonas] That's just Cave City, Arkansas, on Facebook.

[Hazelle] OK. And also, you can #CaveCityArkansas. So, Mayor Anderson. Thank you again for taking time out of your extremely busy schedule to join me today on this episode of Small Business Big Real Impact. My name is Hazelle Whited and thank you for joining us. For more information about this or any Create Bridges podcast or more about Create Bridges, Arkansas, visit uaex.uada.edu/business-communities/strategic-planning/create-bridges. The Create Bridges Arkansas 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 with the cooperation of Spring River Innovation Hub and White River Now productions.