

Episode 2: Light, Camera, Crickets

[Intro with music] Come join us, explore the impact of small business here in rural Arkansas.

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What challenges would you face? Who can help you meet those challenges? How do you get in touch with others like you?

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This is Create Bridges, Arkansas, and we invite you to come cross these bridges with us.

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[Hazelle] Welcome again to the Arkansas Create Bridges podcast series, Small business, Big rural impact.

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This is Hazelle Whited, Program Coordinator for the Ozark Foothills and your host for this exciting episode titled Lights...Camera...Crickets.

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Ever wonder why someone would leave the limelight and bustle of big urban cities for the nearly silent and sparse towns of rural Arkansas?

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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,

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to talk about their journey of leaving big corporate positions to be small business owners here in rural Arkansas.

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Jeff and Marc, welcome to the show. So, Marc, you were already here when I moved in over 12 years ago.

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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.

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[Marc] It's a 13 year journey here in Hardy.

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And prior to moving to Hardy, Arkansas, I lived in Kennett, Missouri, and I was the marketing director with Time Warner Cable.

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And I did that for eight years. And prior to the Kennett operation, I worked for Time Warner Cable in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

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So right now, it would be 21 years since living west of the Mississippi. I've kind of been doing marketing and public relations,

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customer training and customer service representative trainings for a long time with Time Warner.

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And even before that, when I had my own business and before that when I didn't have my own business.

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[Hazelle] And so they were major metropolitans.

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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.

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And at that that was in 1982. And at that time, The Gap only had seven stores in Manhattan.

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Banana Republic was merely a thought process. And Old Navy wasn't even a thought process in 1982.

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So Banana Republic was the next phase of the Gap. And I was right there at the beginning of all of that.

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Then I got into some other things, a little bit more towards my education background, Marketing, Finance.

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[Hazelle] Those are popular names that someone would actually really recognize. And Manhattan is not a small town.

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[Marc] Surely, it is not.

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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 and hardy.

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[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.

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But New York City. Think of think of that. If you... [Mark] New York City. The Big Apple.

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[Hazelle] Yeah. Which speaking of apples. Let's go move over to Jeff.

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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.

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If you'd share a little bit about how you came to Cherokee Village. [Jeff] Certainly. Certainly. Thank you, Hazelle.

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Yes, I did spend a few years working in the fruit industry

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you could say. I came to Cherokee Village about three years ago.

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But prior to that, for 18 years, I worked for Apple. Apple Retail.

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I started out working in in Austin, Texas, in tech, and then moved over into Apple retail

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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.

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I'd never lived to see that large, which was amazing. And then moved over..

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I lived in San Francisco for many years with Apple. New York.

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And they had had the opportunity in talent acquisition to go over and help

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open up over 40 Apple retail stores in China during the time that I was
there.

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I they spent most my time in Beijing and Shanghai, but also traveling
around China. So there's pretty much 18 years.

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My sister lived here in Cherokee Village and I would always come to visit
her

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when I was coming home and just really kind of fell in love with the town.

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And after that, after living in San Francisco, New York, Beijing and Shanghai,
I was looking for trees and trees and fewer people.

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And it was time to make a change. And I thought Cherokee Village be a
great place to do that.

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And so, you know, the past three has been fantastic. And I'm really happy I
made that change.

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[Hazelle] Now, as you know, one of my hopes with this podcast is to share
with listeners what experience in

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our town may be like that's different than what they might expect in the
city,

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especially from a retail perspective. So, for example, I think about like the closest famous corporate chain house maybe an hour away from us,

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but we have excellent local coffee places that make up for it.

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So, Marc, let me start with you.

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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.

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[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.

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So the fact that I worked in men's clothing for a lot of years, there's no place to go shopping.

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[Hazelle] Well, that tells me there's opportunity. [Marc] There is opportunity here.

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I wish some some really cool young entrepreneurs would come and open up a really great shop where we can go

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and purchase shirts and maybe some nice shoes and definitely something other than white socks.

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[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.

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We could use fashion. [Hazelle] That's right. That's right. All right, Jeff. So what about you?

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What what would you tell someone about? You know, if they were about to go into the restaurant, for example,

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like how their experience could be different than when it could be in the big city, for example.

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[Jeff] Well, I think one of the things that really attracted me to move to Cherokee Village was that it has

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a very small town feel where people really get to know each other very well.

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And, you know, even if you live in New York, if you live in San Francisco, Beijing,

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you do get to know people in your immediate area because you frequent the same stores, the same restaurants.

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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.

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Soon as they call I know who they are, they know who I am.

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And it's nice being able to have that kind of connection with customers, you know, and, you know, you're impacting their lives.

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You know, you're doing very special things for them. They're you know, they're taking care of you.

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And that is I think that connection is different than the connection you could probably have at a very high volume,

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fast paced location in in a larger city.

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You know, certainly a restaurant in New York City is going to be much more volume than a restaurant in Cherokee Village.

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But that's not exactly the reason I moved here. The reason I moved here was more for the connections, the small town feel,

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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.

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So as business owners there, some of the things that I encounter are people from big cities come to our little community.

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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,

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larger volume, more clerks, you know, quick technology, things like that.

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So as business owners of your businesses that don't necessarily have those elements,

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I guess, what would you tell some of these issues like as an expectation?

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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

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there, our experience is a good experience. [Jeff] It's a better experience. [Marc] I believe so.

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And just to kind of play on what Jeff said.

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What's nice about here is we're not anonymous. In a big city,

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yeah, you're going to get to know certain groups of people, but you still have that large, almost uncontrolled anonymity.

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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,

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I'm lucky if I can remember anybody. But, you know, we're not anonymous here.

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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."

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So, you know, we get to visit with people and

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and you build that rapport with folks and then that rapport becomes friendships.

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And that's what I have here more than any other place I've ever lived

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is friendships. [Jeff] Yeah. I mean, I would agree. I think that, you know, working,

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I was the senior manager at Apple Retail in both New York and Shanghai.

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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.

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And you tried your best to get to know them and, you know,

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make sure that they had a fantastic experience because that's that's what you wanted them to have.

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But it's still there are thousands of people every day. And so there's a limit to what you can do.

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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.

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And I think that here,

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just understanding our customers and understanding their needs and being able on that first name basis and building that rapport is so incredible.

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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.

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

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one of one of the things that I like to tell people is that here in this in this community in rural Arkansas,

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time is not the enemy. And when time ceases to be your enemy, all you have left is time to enjoy things.

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So there's that little bit of a conundrum. Something called time.

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It's less important here. Yes, we have deadlines. Yes, we have things to do.

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But it's not the end all. Be all. [Hazelle No. Absolutely.

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No, I. I like that. Time is not our enemy. [Jeff] And it is slower. It is slower.

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But that's a good thing. [Hazelle] Yeah. Well that's good... [Marc] The slower you go...

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According to Einstein physics, the slower you go, the more time you have to do more things.

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[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.

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Absolutely. Jeff, let me throw this question at you. The mandates really hit the restaurant industry hard,

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and you had to make some tough choices on shutting down for a little bit and changing the way you do things,

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yet you're remodeling right now or going through that process. And so I was wondering, what is it about

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about right now that's making you won't actually invest in your business?

[Jeff] Yes, certainly.

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I mean, right now it's challenging. It's challenging for everyone, especially those in retail, in the hospitality industry.

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You know, the business looks very different today than it did last year at this time.

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It has caused us to look at our business, certainly how we take care of our customers,

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how we take care of our employees, ensuring the safety and their well-being is number one priority.

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But we will get through this as a community. We're gonna get through this as a nation.

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And once that happens, I think there's a very bright future in Cherokee Village.

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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. 10:25

You know how to spend their time. And, you know, that's very encouraging. So I think the future looks bright for Cherokee Village. 10:32

And I think, you know, now is the as good a time as any to start planning for that future. 10:39

Certainly, it's it's certainly changed the way we changed our business model as it has 10:44

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. 10:48

[Jeff] And that's great to hear because I think that could be something detrimental, as if the fear sets in. 10:54

And we don't plan. And, you know, I look at this and [Jeff] This too will end. 10:59

[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. 11:03

So I actually have time because, as you know, we get really busy [Jeff] And that's exactly what we're doing. 11:08

I mean, basically the limitations on the business, rightfully so folks are you know, they're not going out as much. 11:14

I mean, that's completely understandable. 11:20

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. 11:22

So when we come out of this, we'll be well well positioned to better take care of our customers and the business

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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.

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Yes. So there'll be a new normal. I mean, we've talked about this I've mentioned this a couple of times.

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It's not going to look like it did before. But whatever that new normal is, we we need to it'll still be progressing forward.

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So we need to to be ready for that. So I'm going to go with Marc. Marc's got a fabulous story.

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So and I'm going to start with. I remember seeing you right in the beginning

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of Covid being really like uncharacteristic of Marc.

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And if you know knew Marc, you would understand what I mean.

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But he was outside the front of his store with the machine making a wooden sign of some sort.

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And I will tell you it was weird for me because I've always known you to be upbeat, positive.

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And you were you were absolutely opposite of that that day. And yet something amazing happened.

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No no professional person has ever said, "Oh, look at you.

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You go off mood swings left and right." But I'll tell you what,
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back in March, when when I decided to shut my store down, we closed the
store to the public.
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But through the grace of the government, I received a little PPP money to
keep my payroll going.
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And I kept my staff on board. So we kept working, even though the doors
were closed and nobody had come into the shop.
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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.
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And I was not happy at all. Not by any stretch of the imagination.
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I was I was frightened. I had enough money in the bank to probably get me
through the first of May.
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So after the first of May, I had no idea what was going to happen beyond
that.
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And again, through the grace of the government,
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I received some some finances and we put that money to very good use
and reopened the store on May 1st.
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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.
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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,
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which is a new addition to what we're doing. We're about maybe 45 days into making full sized bats.

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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.

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[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.

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I mean, it is amazing operation to see. [Marc] Beauty is is that yesterday I got caught up.

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So I'm caught up yesterday. And as of today, I'm like, okay, we need to do that

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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

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to bring them back and finish them up now that I'm all caught up with the with the keepsake

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bat program, I can go back in time a little bit and pull out some of those projects that have

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been not completed and get them completed this week and then truly be caught.

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[Hazelle] Well, it is an amazing story.

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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,

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you know, to get that email from that marketing group and to tell you that, "hey, we saw your product, which was posted" which

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I understand it was posted online and then they found you.

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[Marc] Oh yeah, they found me. I was actually on a conference call that the Chamber of Commerce had put together.

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So there it was like May 10th, May 12, something like that. And got this text.

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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.

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And so I called them back. Thirty fourty, you know, 30, 40 minutes later. And the rest is

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the rest is workshop history. [Hazelle] That's amazing. And it just kind of that, you know, sticking with it.

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I mean, we're entrepreneurs, right? So we we have to we have to believe that there's an other side to things.

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We have to believe that there's something else.

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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.

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But at the same token, we we will push through things. And that's what I love about entrepreneurs and certainly your story.

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[Marc] We had Jeff and I both are probably.

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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. 15:45

And it's a pleasure to know you and have you in our community. [Jeff] Thank you, Marc. 15:52

You tell us a lot of love in this room. So let's talk about that. 15:57

(laughter and banter) [Hazelle] Well, 16:02

we are going to talk about is how the community has responded to the challenges you faced and how do 16:05

you think being involved on local boards and with the community has helped with the support? 16:10

Jeff, I'll start with you. [Jeff] Oh, my gosh, I'm 16:14

I'm just as I said before, the last the last six months or so has been very challenging for everyone, 16:17

you know, especially for small businesses, the hospitality industry, the retail industry. 16:21

There's a lot of not knowing. There's things have changed the way we service our customers, our business models have changed. 16:26

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. 16:33

We've changed the way we've done business several times just to to accommodate different regulations or kind of phases of this pandemic. 16:41

But our customer base has been amazing and that's
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And I think that's a testament to small town versus large city.
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They are there. There's a there's loyalty. There's that familiarity. There's those friendships.
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There's that rapport. All of those things help create a support system and a base manage through this.
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And we will be managed through with our same customers. And they're they've been incredibly supportive.
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[Hazelle] Well, and I know both of you would definitely help new businesses and other people through the blessings in your business,
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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.
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So I wanted to kind of wrap this up with a question for each of you.
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So, Marc, if someone were getting ready to relocate and we have a lot of that going on now,
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we have seen an influx of larger cities deciding to move in to Hardy, Arkansas,
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Cherokee Village, et cetera. What would you tell them? [Marc] Welcome to the community. Welcome to the family.
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This is a family. You know, I know so many people and more people know me than I know them.
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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,

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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.

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I would have I would advise them to visit. Talk to folks just to make sure.

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Just to put them at ease and make sure that the decision that they're making, because it's a huge life changing decision.

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But I would advise anyone that was looking to do it. Just do your research, ask the right questions.

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We've got a lot of resources here, including the Hub. You know, we could provide a lot of insight,

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as well as some direct contacts to local business leaders that can share their insights to help

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those folks better understand if they were making the right decision for them and their family.

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

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[Jeff] It is. [Marc] It's, you know, it's a long walk off of a short pier.

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You've got a support group and you've got a universe that you knew behind you.

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And now coming here is a new universe and it's different here. It is.

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And it is very, very different. [Jeff] And I would also like if you were if you were looking to plan to come here,

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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.

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Talk to folks, kind of get their perspectives.

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Spending time in the community will help you better understand who are the folks that you're going to be seeing every day.

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And also help you better understand it's a place where you can see yourself and your family.

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[Hazelle] Absolutely. Well, we could talk all night, but I promised,

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you know, we keep this around 20 minutes, so pretty good time to end this.

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But, you know, I really appreciate your perspectives. Marc, gain, we've known each other for a while.

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Jeff, I'm just getting to know you,

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but you both have some great insights for people that we have here that are maybe going through their businesses and struggling a little

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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

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also, our other sharp county locations, as you know. [Marc] Yeah, the Chamber.

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You know, Kari Hollis at the Chamber would be willing to talk and work out anything, with anyone.

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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.

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I welcome anybody that wants to walk in and chitchat and sit down and pick what little there is left of my brain.

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And and make a determination of whether this is right.

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[Hazelle] Our doors are open. We definitely would love to talk with you.

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So appreciate the listeners for this episode of the Create Bridges Small Business, Big Real Impact and look forward to our next episode.

20:25
Thanks.

20:34
[Outro with music] For more information about this or any Create Bridges podcast or more about Create Bridges Arkansas, visit uaex.edu/createbridges.

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