

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 119

Ben Arnold

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Don Sherman: [00:00:00] welcome to another exciting edition of WCBA Powered, of course by Evergy. First, thank you for listening. Don't forget to like us, love us share, so we truly appreciate you checking us out in the house [00:01:00] today. Corporate Caterers. E.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That's right. We have Ben Arnold in the house. How's it going?

Ben Arnold: Very good, thank you.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Yes, it is going very well because he brought us some snacks. Everyone I, I know. Oh my gosh.

Don Sherman: Can you let him explain what he brought?

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Well, yeah, but first can you introduce yourself? Okay. Yeah. Tell us what you do.

Don Sherman: That's right there. I can see it. Go ahead

Ben Arnold: You're a man after my own heart. Give me the food. We'll talk later.

Don Sherman: Yeah, exactly.

I'm sorry, go ahead. I'll shut up.

Ben Arnold: So Ben Arnold owner operator of Corporate Caterers of Wichita for the past 23 years, A creator, and then also Avi Sea Bar and Chophouse across the street.

Took me a long time to drive here.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Nice.



We're welcome. You made it safely.

Ben Arnold: Yeah.

And then we also operate the Intrust Bank, executive dining room.

as well as the employee cafe that they have in the basement, which is open to employees only, or if you're escorted in by an employee, you can get in and go have one of my lunches. But

Don Sherman: How long you been at [00:02:00] Intrust?

Ben Arnold: We have been at Intrust since 2015, so that makes it seven years.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Okay. And is there a secret menu there in the employee cafe?

Ben Arnold: The best thing about the cafe is they do have a set menu, but I do specials every single day, both breakfast and lunch, and that's what they love. So, if I do quesadillas, for instance, I better bring 75 orders of quesadillas because they're gonna knock the door down just to get to 'em. So, this morning special breakfast was Banana Foster French Toast.

Don Sherman: Ooh, wow.

Ben Arnold: So it just moves a different special every single day for lunch. And then I run a weekly breakfast special as well as a small set menu for em.

Don Sherman: So does Charlie or Gary Schmidt have their own plate, their own meal?

Ben Arnold: Gary Schmidt actually eats the very same thing every single day.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That's really a Gary.

Ben Arnold: It's called the crispy chicken tender salad. Nice. And when I, when I see that order come across,

I know

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: know what, it's, you know it's Gary. You already know. That is funny. Excellent, excellent. So 23 years corporate cater. [00:03:00] Avi since what year did it open? 2011. 2011? Yeah. You've been in the Wichita game for some time.

Yes. You actually, you're not a native of Wichita, but you moved here like in the nineties, right?

Ben Arnold: Yes, 95.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: 95. What brought you to Wichita

Amarillo Grill.

Don Sherman: Oh wow. Oh yeah. That was my spot back in the day.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Oh, wow. So is that how you started in this business? How'd you get started?

Ben Arnold: I started in the business when I was 11 years old, which makes me 32 now.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: I'll go with that.

Ben Arnold: So 49 years I've been in the food service industry.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Ben Arnold: My very first job was my mother was breaking into the railroad in east Texas, Texarkana. So she would've to be on call all the time. She needed a flexible job around it. So she would either bartend at night, she was a breakfast waitress, lunch waitress doing anything. She was also going to college in the afternoon as well.

So she would have jobs at these places and they would need somebody to help. And I raised my hand and went to work with her. My very first spot was [00:04:00] actually in a nightclub, and I was the dishwasher. So the the staff would actually knock on the window raise the window up, push the tray of glasses through, I'd wash 'em, polish 'em, put 'em back on the tray.

And the, that was on a Friday night. On Saturday, I only worked during the summertime, but on Saturday night I came in and the window was painted. And I was going, why was the window painted? He felt subconscious about having an 11 year old in there Oh, I 2:00 AM in the morning washing dishes.

Yeah. Wow.

the window. So he told me to duck somebody knocked on the window so he wouldn't see me.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That is and
funny.

Ben Arnold: I made 75 cents an hour.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That's big time. There you go. Big time from 75 cents an hour to

ownership. Yeah. Isn't something. Okay, so you started there. So I hear that there's something that I need to understand or that the listeners need to understand about a Dodge Intrepid.

Ben Arnold: Oh, yes. Yeah. So, fast forward, a lot of jobs ever from busing tables, waiting, bartending management area director, general manager. I just rose to the ranks. [00:05:00] I've worked for companies such as Lone Star, spaghetti Warehouse, Houston's Restaurant, California dreaming out on the East coast. So 13 cities and 11 years.

Wow.

Traveling with four kids. So in July 4th, 1999, I decided that I would become the worst boss I've ever worked for me. So I had a Dodge Intrepid. I put together a business plan and had a Dodge Intrepid with \$30,000 in the bank. I had four shaving dishes, two ice chests, and I started and I did my very first catering the second week of January.

Did very few between then and April, but once April hit, the lights were on and we took off.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: So did you have your own kitchen or was there a community kitchen or those testing kitchens, or how did that work?

Back

Ben Arnold: Yeah. In the beginning, I didn't have the income to lease a full kitchen.

So I had someone who was operating a restaurant and I sublease their kitchen based upon a percentage of my sales,

which was perfect because if. \$500 this [00:06:00] week, I could pay him 50 bucks. If I did 5,000, I could pay him 500 bucks. So the more I used his facility, the more I paid him. And that worked really, really well until August, until I was doing about 1700, \$2,000 a week in sales.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Oh, wow.

Ben Arnold: And said, yeah, it's rent's a little high now. I could afford my own.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That's big time.

So one intrepid now to multiple businesses.

Ben Arnold: Yes. So within three years we are, we were up to 250 employees and 10 delivery vehicles.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Wait, within three years.

Ben Arnold: Three years, yeah. We doubled our business every single year all the way up until 2006, and then we started leveling off with a 20 to 30% sales increase.

Don Sherman: Wow. And what company was that?

Ben Arnold: The Corporate Caterers. And the name Corporate Caterers came about because my research told me if you're going to get married or you're planning a company event, you don't talk to someone on Monday. About Saturday you talked to someone on Monday, about six months, seven months, nine months from now.

So I named it corporate caterers because I knew that the pharmaceutical [00:07:00] market was huge at that time. They could spend all the money they wanted to spend, and all the doctors and nurses have all these events. So I called it Corporate Caterers and I specifically attacked the entire pharmaceutical market in the Wichita area, all the way from Ark city to Salina.

And I was hitting every single. I knew every facility by their address after the second year. And it was immediate cash income that was flowing through the door because they would call you at 7:00 PM on Tuesday and say, I've got a breakfast in a city tomorrow morning at 8:00 AM Can you do it?

Mm-hmm. the answer's yes. What's the question?

Don Sherman: back on Houstons not like, was that the Houstons that was in Dallas?

Ben Arnold: Yeah, they were actually based outta Nashville,

Tennessee. Okay.

the, Houstons and Texas actually were the fifth and sixth restaurant of the chain.

Okay. The first restaurants were Nashville and surrounding area of Tennessee. George Bill, who was an old steak and nail guy from the seventies, partnered with another guy who was a steak and nail guy from the seventies and their heyday. And we had a steak nail here. It was gone before I got here.

But [00:08:00] that was a very, very strong concept and he created Houston's. well,

Don Sherman: Is it still around?

Ben Arnold: It is. Yep. Okay.

Yep. I don't know that much about 'em anymore. I don't, I used to follow up and chase the news about all the new things happening and all the new restaurants opening and the expansions and

so on, and I, as I got older, I realized that the grass in my yard's hard enough to mow right.

Why we're about what the neighbors grass is doing.

Don Sherman: Yeah, exactly. Houston's was really, really good. I went when I was in Dallas all the time. So you've been in business a while.

What kind of culture are you trying to establish at Corporate Caterers slash Avi?

Ben Arnold: Well, one is I want it to be an easy work environment.

So what I mean by that specifically is as an employee, it shouldn't be a hassle to have to go to work. So when we started on Corporate Caterer side, we actually set up a Facebook page. A Facebook page is just what we call weekend warriors. So it's people who have everyday real jobs students. College students, high [00:09:00] school students stay home moms and dads, somebody who's looking for just a little extra income from time to time.

And we post this information out on Facebook and they can literally sign up when they want to sign up. So if I say I have 180 employees, I probably only have 40 to 60 of them that'll continuously work for me on a week to week out basis. The majority of 'em will just pick up shifts. So if I'm a college student and I go away to college, I come back in the summertime or during the holiday season.

They'll come to work for me during that time period, and then they'll disappear again. And so they can, they, it's basically a part-time job that you only show up to when you say, I wanna work that day.

Yeah.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Don, can we do that?

Don Sherman: I think you started, I think you're asking after you d started that, but that's okay. I'm down with it. Are you successful?

Ben Arnold: Oh yeah.

Don Sherman: Okay. How do you define that?

Ben Arnold: despite I have finally reached that point.

Where I understood then because I was gonna go to Baker University. Okay. So, started

Corporate Caterers. I signed on to Baker University, and I tell [00:10:00] everyone that it's a lot more fun when you pay for it outta your own pocket than when it's given to you for free.

Mm-hmm.

Unfortunately, that's the lesson I had learned the hard way.

But the, I went to school for two years and then at that point realize that I'm in a sandbox every single day. I get up, get dressed, and I go play in a sand. I don't work eight hours a day or 10 hours a day and go, wow, I just work 10 hours a day. I'm having fun. And it's a passion and it's a love. And so I try to express that and show that to anyone who meets me or works for me is that this is something more than just a job that puts money in the bank for us to pay our home mortgage, electric bill, rent, car payments and so on.

So I'm doing something that I've knew at that moment I would be doing for the rest of my life.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That's awesome.

Don Sherman: What made you think that you would be successful when you decided to put up your own shingle. When you rolling around and intrepid and all that? how did think you was gonna be successful?

Ben Arnold: Earlier I [00:11:00] mentioned, I literally only had \$30,000 start this company, so it wasn't a lot of money. So I couldn't afford brick and mortar per se. I couldn't go out and buy a \$45,000 van 20, \$30,000 equipment. So I managed what I had.

There were weeks where I literally made two, \$300 in income in a week, and I could have been a bartender or server in any restaurant town and have done that in a day. But I knew that my desire and my. Was going to get me there every single day, step by step.

Don Sherman: did you think it would be like it is today?

Ben Arnold: No.

No, not at all. I didn't think it would be like, it was five years after I started, 10 years after I started.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Wow.

Ben Arnold: So I've continued to surprise myself.

And then, of course, COVID hit and that was probably one of the most challenging things I've ever experienced in my life. In any aspect of working for someone or working for.

Don Sherman: And that's a good, yeah, I was gonna ask that. Explain, I mean, cuz you got the catering part, and you got brick and mortar.

How did Covid affect both. Did they affect them [00:12:00] both equally or did one go , I guess, for lack of a better word, go down farther than the other when comes to sales.

Ben Arnold: They both did.

It was, it was catastrophic on all levels. I mean, we, the catering business obviously we were coming out of 2019 with a record year trying to slow the business down.

Don Sherman: Everybody says that.

Ben Arnold: So we were actually in that. time period for about three years before that, trying to get the business to move slower, increasing our minimums, and then cherry picking the events that we want to do.

Not being everywhere, but being somewhere. And so, when that hit, it was just literally as if the light switch went on and the room was empty.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Ben Arnold: And the phone, and it was, there was a stack on my office manager's desk about two inches, and it took only a week for all the cancellations to come through. And it was from all of the events we do at the Drury hotel, which are a lot of conferences.

Meetings all gone.

God.

Don Sherman: So that, and that was a

Ben Arnold: Yes, catering, by the restaurant. course, all the restaurants closed. All [00:13:00] the business closed. But we did not, because we were deemed necessary because the jury hotel would house all of the flight crews that came through. the flight crews needed someplace to eat. So we we stood open, but.

Could only seat 10 people at a time. So it started off hanging on as many employee as I can, hanging on to managers. Got to the point to where financially I said, okay, if we're gonna survive this, I'm gonna have to unlock the door in the morning and lock it at night. And I had two cooks

that were still on the schedule and I had three servers that were still on the schedule.

At that point. So a staff that would normally be 17 servers and 12 cooks, dishwashers just completely wiped out.

And one more question before we go to break. that happened, it looked like a double dose or double bearer, however you wanna say. How did you feel at that time? I mean, can you give the listeners an idea as an owner of two businesses that, for lack of a better word, are tanking. How did you feel? [00:14:00] What, and it anxiety

It was, it was a lot of anxiety, but it was also I was resolved that I wasn't gonna.

By the time I was done, the losses calculated close to a million dollars over two and a half years. But in the beginning I said, here's what I'm gonna do. And so my daughter lives in Oklahoma City and she said, Hey, I just got this email from this caterer.

I look what they're doing, a survival kit.

And so I looked at what they were putting in there and I said, I can do better than that. So I put survival kits together that if, remember we didn't have toilet. So my travel kid had toilet paper, had hand towels, had sanitizer, had chicken, hamburger, eggs, the things you couldn't get in the store.

The food supply companies were in the same boat I am at. I'm no longer buying groceries from them. They had warehouses full of grocery. They were just trying to give away. and so I was taking whatever I could get from them and then reselling it to the public. I almost created a store where you could walk in and buy 10 pounds, five pounds of hamburger, 10 pounds of chicken.

I was doing everything I could. We delivered [00:15:00] over \$40,000 of survival kits over a two week period in the beginning.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Excellent.

Ben Arnold: Yeah. So there's anything it took to, to keep kicking and keep running? I was gonna do, I was not gonna let it gonna bring me down.

Don Sherman: Entrepreneurship 1 0 1.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Yeah, that right there is a story within itself.

My gosh. Whoa, that's pretty awesome. Well, friends, we're gonna go hear a word from our

sponsors, but we'll be back to hear more from Ben Arnold.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Welcome back friends. We're here with Ben Arnold, the wonderful, wonderful [00:16:00] chef and owner of corporate caterers and Avi. So Ben, tell us, how did you even begin, Avi? Like you were already doing a catering company and then you decide, you know what, I missed the restaurant business.

Ben Arnold: I miss the restaurant business. Like I miss a hole in my head. Yeah. Yeah.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: So how did that happen?

Ben Arnold: Well, I was already the catering business. I was working for the Broadview Drury Hotel, which was actually the operation before the Drury leased the property from the city of Wichita.

Took over, spent 27 million renovating the property. So when the Drury came in, they asked me to continue to stay with the stipulation of, we need you to have a restaurant.

You can have all the banquets and all the food and beverage business in the hotel but you have to put in a restaurant. And I went, no, I'm not gonna do it.

And two weeks go by. Cause I started thinking about it, thinking about it. So I think I can do this. So, I signed on with them and we put the restaurant in. So the name per se, and actually where the restaurant sets used [00:17:00] to be part of the banquet hall. So for those of us who are old enough, young enough to remember, that banquet hall used to be L-shaped and it set up to 700 people could be divided into four separate rooms.

So my restaurant actually sets in the L shape, the bottom of the L. The good news is they decided to put the swimming pool above my kitchen. So every day I'm in there cooking. I have about 80,000 gallons of chlorine water on top of my head. Hopefully it stays there.

In, right? Yes.

But

We started the chosen name course, AVI.

Which a lot of people will say, oh, I love Avi French restaurant.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Yeah. Nope.

Ben Arnold: Arkansas Valley Interurban is the freight station that was actually on this property from 1910, 1911, all the way until 1941. And when you look up from Waco, the white arch is

still there with initials AVI in it, where everyone would enter into the freight station.

So it was actually in the beginning it was a, a.[00:18:00] Rail system and they had over 30,000 rider a month. But this was, again, in the early, 19 10, 19 13. By the time the automobiles began to take over by the 1920s, the ridership plummeted and they went strictly to freight, went into bankruptcy once, came back out as only a freight company, and then finally disappeared in 1941.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Wow. Little piece of history there. And so, no, that's very fascinating. Thank you for sharing that story. And so just so we are clear, so corporate caterers, you do plates from, what's the minimum up to, I mean, like a thousand or like

Ben Arnold: well bare, there's no such thing as a maximum.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Oh, okay. Well, , oh, there you go.

Ben Arnold: So we have, yeah, but over the years I've began to limit the number of caterings is also the size of catering.

So as I'm getting older, wiser.

The clothes that I once wore as a young man don't fit me anymore. So, I've started slowing that part of it down. But 75 is the minimum [00:19:00] for during the week, a hundred on the weekend. And of course we do a lot of events for a thousand. We actually do the the chamber event, that's usually around 600 to 800 people.

Plated meal. I've got a couple events each year. 1,012 hundred. And then I'm the food provider for the Wichita Open.

So on any given day, I'll feed between forty five hundred and sixty five hundred people from three stationary kitchens I have on site at Crestview Country

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: That's impressive.

It really, really Don,

Don Sherman: yes. He's been doing this for a minute and very successful. two gun approach going on here with the catering and. restaurant. What's next? What's Ben gonna be doing in five years.

Ben Arnold: I will be in a tiki hut off the coast. I was on my way to retirement before Covid hit, so I, yeah. Now retirement to some people mean I don't go to work anymore. Retirement to me is exactly what I'm doing. Where I slow it down to the point that I can drive to Oklahoma City and

see [00:20:00] a couple of grandkids, and not have to worry about work.

Take a weekend off. Take a small trip here, small trip there. So no longer working eight days a week. I'm gonna get it down to seven and a half.

Don Sherman: Nice. Seven and a half. So

Ben Arnold: that's my future.

Don Sherman: I hear you. So, if you can share what's your succession plan look like? Is it a family business or is it a corporation? How's it situated.

Ben Arnold: Yeah, it's a corporation, but my wife and actually who we met in the restaurant business has been with me in the business for 18 years. Okay. So she works in the office as well with our office manager. I have six children who, I've never allowed to work in the business because I know how hard the restaurant business can be.

So it, anytime they wanted to come to work for me, it was fine for a little bit of money, but if it looked like they was gonna get serious, I put 'em at a table polishing 3000 pieces of silverware and that usually. That took care of it.

Don Sherman: That took care.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Yep. That'll do it. . No thanks [00:21:00] dad.

Don Sherman: Excellent. And one last question. What's the best advice you've ever received?

Ben Arnold: The best advice I ever received is know what you don't know. Know Yep. If you're always asking yourself what you don't know about a situation, I don't If it's a recipe, if it's an employee situation business opportunity, you have to know what you don't know, cuz you have to, it's gonna change.

Everything in business is changing constantly. And as long as you're looking for the answers to the questions that you don't have the answer to, you'll be.

Don Sherman: Okay. I lied. One more question. What would you like to see different in Wichita? I mean, you've been successful here, but how can Wichita be better for the business person.

Ben Arnold: I think Wichita's been extremely good to me. I have often told people that I don't know if I could have succeeded the way I've succeeded here in another city. I think it was a perfect match for me. I think the community is a very, very strong business background, business [00:22:00] oriented.

I think there's some development that has been taking place over the last 15 years through downtown. I know Century Twos on the. Over the horizon to, for all of us to do something with that. But I, I've, there's nothing that I could say I would want Wichita or the people of Wichita surrounding area to do any different.

I've been very, very lucky and very fortunate to have moved here in 95.

Don Sherman: Excellent. Do you have another question?

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: I do not. I think it's time. No Uhuh. I think it's time for some word association.

Don Sherman: Excellent. Okay. Well, you dealt with Ebony long enough, so it's time to have some fun. Be rewarded for it. It's word association.

Give you one word to give one word back. It's not wrong cuz it's your word.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: There goes a corporate caterers truck.

Don Sherman: What did you, how you time that? Yeah. He have texted them. Come by now.

Ben Arnold: I had him drive down three times.

Don Sherman: That's too funny. You ready?

Ben Arnold: Yeah.

Don Sherman: Leader.

Ben Arnold: Everyone.[00:23:00]

Don Sherman: Success.

Ben Arnold: Um hmm. Happiness

Don Sherman: College

Ben Arnold: Important.

Don Sherman: Failure.

Ben Arnold: Not an option.

Don Sherman: Entrepreneur.

Ben Arnold: it's in all of us.

Don Sherman: Wichita

Ben Arnold: love it.

Don Sherman: vacation.

Ben Arnold: love it even more.

Don Sherman: Hero.

Ben Arnold: Ooh, my grandfather

Don Sherman: chamber

Ben Arnold: chamber Boy, that's a tough one. The chamber to me is, Very strong organization. I couldn't give you one answer,

one Answer. that very

Don Sherman: You're allowed. If it's chamber, you're allowed on that cuz that's why we're here.

Family.

Ben Arnold: Family

the most supportive thing in the world.

Don Sherman: Fun.

Ben Arnold: Going to work every day.

Don Sherman: Last but not least, you gotta tell the truth about it.

Beverage.

Ben Arnold: Beverage a day without vodka is a day I'll never know.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Ah, that's a good one.

Don Sherman: I finally got a non coffee answer. Thanks a lot, [00:24:00] Ben, for showing up.

Appreciate you. Thank you.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Yes, it's been a pleasure. Can't wait to have some vodka with you one day. We got treats. We got treats. We're gonna hit it.

Don Sherman: Can, can you describe what those treats are?

Ben Arnold: Yep. So I brought you the new and the old is a chicken salad taco, which apparently there's something in there that people have to wake up in the middle of the night and figure out how they're gonna get more chicken salad

They are delicious.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Wow. Okay.

Ben Arnold: just a little dish with a wonton chicken salad, little tomato. And Put spinach on top, does have cashews in it if anybody has a nut issue. And then the recent thing that it's been on the menu for a little over a week is a pork belly. That's my, so I'm doing grilled pineapple chip pork belly.

Don Sherman: favorite.

Ben Arnold: It's marinated, and an Asian chili pineapple sauce.

Ooh, ooh.

a little bit of sauce on the side for the dipping. So,

Don Sherman: Thank you.

I'm sorry. Digress.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: He's so excited. Ladies and gentlemen, he is like jumping up and down, like literally.

Don Sherman: I love pork belly.

Ben Arnold: You and me both.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: Well, Ben, we are very appreciative [00:25:00] of you and your time and all that you're doing for the Wichita community. All the events that you have catered and all

of the weight that you have made me gain . Oh, wow. No, thank you so very much for being here.

Ben Arnold: Well, you, I lost 40 pounds two years ago. You know how I did that? I quit eating my own food.

Ebony Clemons Ajibolade: You see that makes a difference, doesn't it? nice. Well, friends, if you would please make certain that you like this and share it and let us know who you wanna hear from next till next time.

Don Sherman: Peace. [00:26:00]