

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 121

Cathy McClain

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Don Sherman: [00:00:00] welcome to another exciting edition of the WCBA Pirate, of course by Evergy. First, thank you for, Don't forget to like us. Love us Sheriffs. We truly appreciate you checking us out in [00:01:00] the house today, E dola leadership.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yes, that is correct. How are you doing, Kathy?

Cathy McClain: doing well. How about the two

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I think we're good. Hi. Yeah, I would agree.

Today is a good day because we're gonna be talking about leadership and coaching. Yay. So if you would please introduce yourself and tell us what you do.

Cathy McClain: Absolutely. I'm Cathy McClain, and I am an executive leadership coach. A lot of my career led me to this passion a lot of people think, well, what on earth leadership coaching?

And I'd love to say what it's not. First Okay. Okay. is not counseling or therapy because we assume the leader already. on the ball and we're just tweaking the edges.

It's also not consulting, consulting you're giving the person the answer, and coaching comes at it differently.

We work with a leader who strengths are and what their developmental areas happen and then it's the job of me [00:02:00] as the coach to help get them there by asking powerful questions and challenging their assumptions the nonverbals also that. Come up with that leadership growth themselves and see themselves in situations from other perspectives.

And that helps 'em decide, well, this person their skills that they already have.

Don Sherman: was actually kind of beautiful



Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: that, yeah, and I like starting with what it's not, you know, because Right.

I guess I won't sign Don up then.

Cathy McClain: Sorry, Don.

Don Sherman: Yeah, well won't be the first time kicked out before I started.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Oh my gosh. No, this is great. So you mentioned that it's your passion, but I'm really interested in the genesis. Like you said, a lot of the things that you did in the past kind of led you to this point.

Cathy McClain: It did. I spent 25 years in the Air Force, so leading people,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Thank Thank you your service.

Cathy McClain: It was my honor to serve with [00:03:00] some great americans.

Don Sherman: Cool. What, What city and state were you from.

Cathy McClain: I grew up in a small town called Orange, Texas. It's about 90 miles east of Houston.

Huh? Last Texas town on interstate 10 before you cross into louisiana.

Don Sherman: Gotcha.

Cathy McClain: So the great thing was wonderful Mexican food and Cajun food and was a German settlement so German food. A great place grow up.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah. That's great. I, my gosh,

no, I,

no.

Did you go running every day?

Cathy McClain: I worked it off, yeah.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Nice.

Cathy McClain: But growing up there in the sixties, near Houston. Space race was going on. The race to the moon. And that's what really interested me. I wanted to be engineer and be an astronaut and study science. Mom and Dad really encouraged me. Dad was Canadian we took long driving trips from southeast Texas to Calgary a one of them.

Oh my [00:04:00]

Don Sherman: goodness.

Cathy McClain: It takes two days to get out of Texas.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Cathy McClain: So I was about 13, 13, 14 years old and we were passing through Colorado and He says, Hey girls on the agenda today was to stop at the Air Force Academy out your left window there, but we're running a couple of hours behind do you still want to stop? And of course we go no, get to the hotel, we wanna swim in the pool,

But as we drive by I said so Dad, what's this Air Force Academy thing. He said, well, you've heard of West Point in Annapolis, this is the Air Force Academy. It's a four year accredited institution. You can get your engineering degree. And if you are medically qualified you can fly jets in the Air Force. I remember pondering that as we drove by. So then school starts after that, a couple of months later and I go into the school counselor and I asked for the book on the Air Force Academy.

Yes I know that greatly dates me.

They had a had a book, yes. And she handed it to me, and as she did she said [00:05:00] in a Texas accent, honey, you can't go there because you're a girl.

Oh. I was like, what? Well, why couldn't, it was against the law. So I went home and pulled out a sheet of lined notebook paper. I kid you not, and I wrote my congressman about how indignant I was, that I could have a part-time job, pay federal taxes and not be allowed to go there. He did not answer me.

Don Sherman: Okay.

Cathy McClain: Couple of years later, they open all of the academies to women.

I put my application in. I'm a junior in high school now. It's perfect timing and the way the academies work, all of them is to be fair and have equal opportunity for every single high schooler in our nation. Every senator and congressperson can have five in an academy at any one time. So he shows up at our small town for a town hall meeting and I sit through it and then

I get in line and you know, it's business person, 16 year old business person. And I get up to him and I shake his hand. It was [00:06:00] Representative Charlie Wilson my application for the academy is in your office. I would really like you to consider nominating me to go there. And I kid you not. He never released my hand. He kept shaking and he said did you write me a letter a couple of years ago? And I said, yes, sir, I did. And the next week he nominated me to the Air Force Academy. So, launched me into my dream, launched me into the opportunity to fly airplanes for for the Air Force and lead people. And I really loved the leading people aspect of it. How do you take people from different walks of life who all understand where they're headed for a mission and pull them together, put them in harm's way.

And have them motivated to do it. So that's what touched all 25 years of my career where I moved nine times in 25 years, three of them were right here at McConnell Air Force base. So very unusual to get stationed at the same base three times. [00:07:00] Then I retired out of the Pentagon. This is where I wanted to raise my kids. I loved this area.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Wow.

Cathy McClain: So we had, our church was here and the kids had friends in school, and I had friends and there are job opportunities. So settled here to raise middle school kids in Wichita, Kansas. I went to work for Boeing, loved working at Boeing Defense because I still served the warfighter even though I didn't have combat boots on anymore.

And I actually had to coordinate an outfit every day.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah. That's a big change, isn't it?

Right.

Cathy McClain: But was still serving the war fighter and it was rewarding how many came to talk to me about leadership and being more They wanted that one-on-one mentorship. When Boeing left Wichita, I went to Spirit AeroSystems and had the exact same experience with people really interested in wanting to be better at leading others and motivating.

So I had an opportunity to step out of aerospace [00:08:00] and use my GI bill. I went to Georgetown and got certified in executive leadership coaching and came back and started my business. A absolutely love what I get to do. Pre covid, traveled a lot post covid, everything's on Zoom, so I do all my work from home and at the end of the day it's just, I, I.

Because I've touched lives and helped people see that they're better than they think they are.

Don Sherman: Excellent.

And before, I know I'm jumping in here e but No, you're fine. I'm the The little inner Don wants to

talk about these airplanes. Okay. Yes. What airplanes did you fly?

Cathy McClain: Oh, so, primarily the KC 1 35

Don Sherman: Okay. here.

Okay.

Cathy McClain: Okay The Four engine Air Refuelers that were built from 1956 to 1964, half of the fleet are older than I am. I just wanna put that on record. Right. And of course now you know, we have the KC 46 Pegasus [00:09:00] mcConnell's, the first base in the nation to get the new Air Refueler, but most of my time I've got over 2,600 hours flying that KC 1 35 all over the world.

Don Sherman: Help us understand what kind of feeling that is. Fly something that

Cathy McClain: Oh.

Don Sherman: all across the country. I mean, she's got a, this is radio. She's got a big smile on her face. Tell us that experience before we get into the leadership.

Cathy McClain: certainly. So the KC 1 35 fully loaded, weighs 322,500 Oh.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: You

Cathy McClain: it carries 200,000 pounds of fuel. Pound of fuel, weighs about six and a half pounds. And you know, think of a commercial airliner. We've got the luggage compartment. Well the luggage compartment for us is full of fuel, right? So they're, the wing tips are full of fuel. The bell's full of fuel. We're flying gas station.

And there is nothing like pulling out into the runway, holding the brakes, pushing those four [00:10:00] powerful engines up, checking the engine instruments, looking at the crew, popping your feet off the brakes and screaming down the runway and pulling into the air. But the real magic happens because we know where we need to be at exactly what time at exactly what altitude to meet the aircraft that needs the fuel. So we fly to that point. We get there about eight minutes before they do and start a, a left hand turn. And they start about a hundred miles away from us. And we fly toward each other and then we turn right in front of them. So we roll out three miles in front of the aircraft that needs the fuel, and they come up to us.

The boom operator who's typically a pretty young person, drops the boom behind us as the airplane flies. The toggles open up and the boom slides into a receptacle, and the toggles grab it. And now we are two

Don Sherman: I know.

Cathy McClain: at 28,000 feet. You know, [00:11:00] 350 miles an hour connected by 20 to 30 feet. Boom.

That's connecting And we flip switches in the front. The pumps fuel directly from our aircraft It is an amazing capability in our dash one that. Our guidance on how to fly the airplane. There's a warning. It says Flying two aircraft in close proximity is

inherently end dangerous.

And we're like,

duh.

Don Sherman: Yeah.

Cathy McClain: And we're gonna go do it every

Don Sherman: Wow. That is so, so cool. That is cool. Thanks for sharing that.

That's just too cool. Goy,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I'm sorry. No. is perfect. We're both here just sitting intrigued, leaning in to hear the story. Yeah, no. you know, the fact that you said you've done all of these things from the pentagon back to Wichita,

Cathy McClain: Oh yes.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Right. So you did, you had a couple stints here in Wichita.

And you met some pretty amazing people, I would
imagine. And today you had an even more fabulous people.

Cathy McClain: you and Don. Yes,

Don Sherman: Oh,

cute.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Nice. So,

your [00:12:00] business, you

said, you know what I wanna

actually

go

into business

for myself, and

I think the

best place in the United States

America is

Wichita, Tell us about that.

Cathy McClain: people don't know what a wonderful gem we have here. So why is that? Kids are middle school. I told you we already had connections. It's the warmth of the community, the welcoming feeling for that. We had the three times we were stationed here.

There is so much to do here We've got. Amazing restaurants and the arts, and I'm a big fan of our symphony and music theater, Wichita. And recently I've been involved with the Wichita Grand Opera, who in April, they're teaming with WSU tech, culinary school niche to put on an opera about Julia Childs.

students are preparing a meal. We're gonna get the famous chocolate cake from one of her episodes and their upcoming 4th of July celebration is not to be missed. So [00:13:00] who can say no to something like that? And then you add in riverfest and interest and the live music the brew pubs that are popping up everywhere for gathering places.

And at its core, it's Midwesterners who believe in working hard and trusting each other and lending a hand So that's why Wichita. So I'm a Wichitan by choice.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Wonderful. We are so glad you're here. Thank you for making our community better.

Yes.

Cathy McClain: To be part of it

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: and our leaders.

So this business that you do, who, who would you say it's catered to.

Cathy McClain: I focus on high stress, high stakes leaders. That's my background.

Don Sherman: Yeah. For real.

Yeah.

Cathy McClain: those are the ones that I tend to work with the most. I work with CEOs and I'll even work with folks who are just new to leading new newly to their team.

There's a couple of ways to run a coaching business.

One of them is to go out and find your own clients, and that involves a lot of sales and [00:14:00] marketing, and that's just not my personality. I'm a bit.

So I actually coach for four different companies, so they bring the clients to me and I coach people all over the world. Two nights ago I was working with someone in Korea, an American in Korea.

I was talking with folks in Canada yesterday, that is where I draw a lot of my inspiration from and where I learn a lot because I meet these leaders who are working in very different areas, transforming the companies that we have to transform. Now, certainly post covid and the challenges they're dealing with have very high stakes.

Some of them life and death stakes, some of them high monetary stakes. So that's the focus.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: And I love this Now plan it that way, or?

Cathy McClain: I did. I knew that marketing was not my thing. And so I had my eye on a few [00:15:00] companies that I knew I wanted to work for.

And once I graduated from Georgetown with my certificate in hand, I started reaching out to them and interviewing one of their coaches now. Oh.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Oh, that is

ring, need Yes. Before we continue, but we'll hear from them and then we'll come right back to hear more of your story.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Welcome back friends. We are here with Dauntless Leadership and Cathy's telling us her story, which is so fascinating. So she's back here in Wichita and doing great things. But I wanna go back [00:16:00] to

your first introduction to Wichita, was McConnell.

Cathy McClain: It was indeed my very first assignment after pilot training.

So I went to pilot training in Enid, Oklahoma, and was assigned to the KC 135. Went to California to get trained in that for four months, and I show up in Wichita, Kansas in November of 1983. Oh, wow. Yeah. So my first introduction here was flying the KC 135 that we talked about already. So stepping back about McConnell.

I just want the folks to understand what is that thing that's on the southeast side of Wichita, what goes on there, and I want folks to think about it as a small city has a population of 7,000 people, right? It has an airport. It has 42 aircraft. It has pilots and maintainers and air traffic controllers and firemen and chefs and accountants and IT professionals.

Everything you need in a small city is right there. And I wonder how many people actually know the economic impact that McConnell has on our [00:17:00] community. It's 825 million per year.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Wait, say that number one more time.

Cathy McClain: 825 million per year is the economic impact.

Don Sherman: just round it up

Cathy McClain: Okay. We can do that.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Cathy McClain: But I'll tell you, that's actually not the most important part. It's the people. Every single military member at McConnell has raised their right hand and sworn to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, even if it means giving their life service to the nation.

That's who is in our community temporarily because every two to five years they're gonna pack up their lives, their belongings, their families, and move somewhere.

And they crave normalcy when they get to that place. And that's what I found here at McConnell, was a community that gave us normalcy, that talked to us about, Hey, join our

church or shop here. This is where you can get your haircut, or, here are the job opportunities. And [00:18:00] welcomed my kids into the schools.

That's what I think. Need to give back to those amazing Americans out there at McConnell Air Force Base. Their duty is to our nation and to us. I think our duty is to give them as much normalcy and welcoming and roots as we can while they're here. Because we really hope they come back and put roots down.

We want that work ethic and that sense of service and that education level that they have. In fact, there are 16,000 retirees that have come back here to Wichita Derby, Goddard, Andover community to settle because of what we offer right here.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Wow. Right here.

that is powerful. That's beautiful.

So what can we do? Uh, because you know, of times, . As you know, we think of it as you said, it But how can Engage more and be more welcoming? Or what are [00:19:00] some some tips that

Cathy McClain: Oh, great. Great question. One of them is the organization that's sponsored right here by the Chamber.

It's called Friends of McConnell. It has been in existence for years and it started as a small group of people that went, what's that thing on the southeast side? Let's get to know them right and let's welcome 'em into the community. And it has grown and it's a group of all ages of people that care about.

Opening the doors for the folks there at McConnell. They do fundraisers, they do events for the young airmen who are living in the dorms. They form connections. The, those people have the airmen into their homes and welcome them to dinner. So that's one formal way is to get connected right here through the chamber with the Friends of McConnell.

How else do you.

When you run into 'em, the grocery store, say hi. It's pretty . Obvious, especially with the guys who's in the military.

Don Sherman: Right, right. That's true.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: true.

Cathy McClain: Let's say hi and welcome and how long have you been here and what do you

do? And just [00:20:00] start the conversation. That's the key to those of us who moved every two to five years feeling welcome.

Don Sherman: Is . There anything, if I can if there's a, I mean, when I see especially in uniform, you know, I say thank you for your service. there anything else they would want to hear from us little civilian folks besides, thank you for your service. Is there, I mean, does that, I'm sure they, I hope they hear it a lot.

there anything else relevant and compelling we can. To show our appreciation service.

Cathy McClain: Yeah.

ask where they're from, just like you did with me. are you from? What do you.

do? Again, that's the starting the conversation. And yes, that means the world to all of us. When someone says thanks for your service,

Don Sherman: Okay.

Cathy McClain: does the world. I I know a lot of

Don Sherman: people say that. I try to say it when I can.

It's gotta be I'm sure they hear that all the time. What else can be relevant and that I can ask?

Cathy McClain: where are you from? What do you [00:21:00] do? How long have you been here?

Don Sherman: you been, okay? Cool. Cool, cool. sorry. You great.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: that, that's awesome.

So I'm interested to know, you know, you are very seamless as and love the What about wichita

Cathy McClain: I, you know, I'm gonna have to say no.

I think we have it right in Wichita.

I really do.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I love love

Don Sherman: yeah, that's pretty cool.

Um, when I was on the Metropolitan Area Planning people would come what, that's one thing I got exposed to is that we had to make. You wasn't building was too high in the flight path Of McConnell and they would get close.

Cathy McClain: Well,

Don Sherman: No, we're not doing that.

No. But, you

And but yeah, that's when you realize how important McConnell [00:22:00] Wichita. yeah, that's when I first got a taste of it.

Cuz I'm not a, a military person, but I do admire them. Mil, this is military appreciation

Is there anything you want to share about this month? What can we do to make it a better military

Cathy McClain: Well, I'd actually like to share a story about who they. Okay. Up there, we've talked kind of a generalities, but I'd like to bring it home and add a personal touch to it.

Please. You know, after nine 11, we were deployed all the time. In fact, an average of 270 days, people right here at McConnell were gone away from their families and their homes overseas. And we were responding to a threat. And I wanna share an air fueling story that really highlights who is living in our.

midst So

I am, I'm deployed. I am commanding all of the air, all of the flying operations from a certain location. And that particular night I'm going in to fly a special operations mission. The Air Force [00:23:00] actually has eight special operations, KC 135s, and they were all at my location. Normally we refuel up at 28,000 feet special ops missions.

We are down about 4,000 feet above the ground. Night vision goggles are on. We go into fly and the Intel officer briefs that they are moving our air refueling track seven miles away because the firefight is so intense where we are going to refuel a C-130 gunship. We have army soldiers and Marines surrounded by the enemy and the gunship is flying over, firing, keeping the enemy away from them and needs our.

fuel So we go screaming down the runway, headed that direction. We're up at, you know, the 20,000 foot area going into the fight and the radio crackles to life and it's the pilot of the C-130 gun ship. And he says, I'm engaged, I need to fuel now. And the navigator says, say your

coordinates. And he gives his latitude and longitude.

And I turned around and said, Nav where is he? And he goes, right on top of where we've been ordered not to go.

We are a [00:24:00] flying gas.

station If someone's gonna fire at us from the ground, we'll see it before we become a fireball.

Well, I know my heart what we needed to do, and I have other crew members on board.

So I look at my co-pilot, 30 year old, married father of two, and I, I said, this is gonna be a crew decision if we're going to go in over the firefight. And he looks at me and he goes, well, yeah. And I turn around, I look at the 25 year old navigator, and I said, Nav And he gives me two thumbs up with a grin and I swivel around backwards and I look at the 20 year old boom operator and I said,

Boom And he grins and he stands up from his chair and he picks up the portable oxygen bottle that he's required to carry to the back of the airplane.

And he says, boom's checking off for the rear with oxygen.

And I said, Nav give him our ETA

and we. Blacked ourselves out, and we threw on the night vision goggles and we went screaming down to 4,000 feet and right on top of the firefight, and that 130 gun ship came in [00:25:00] behind us. We could see the infrared blinking light.

That was it. And as soon as they were plugged, we dumped fuel as fast as we could into his tanks. And then he pulled away and right back in the fight and the boom yelled, he's away. And we fire-walled those throttles and went screaming back up to 20,000 feet. And I think we breathed for the first time.

I tell that story to describe the selflessness and the pride I felt at these young servicemen said, without hesitation, we're going in. So that's who's in our community, so let's welcome 'em and let's entice 'em to come back when they're done with service.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: What a powerful story.

Yeah. I am.

I hope the listeners feel the emotion. Yeah. That we're feeling right now. That is Wow.

Don Sherman: I don't know what to say about that. Yeah.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: After that is just, woo,

Don Sherman: don't know if. I, now if you could see us, ebony and I were [00:26:00] just riveted looking Cathy waiting for what the next word was Yeah.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: It's just amazing. And just you and your leadership during that time. Yes. And even as you were telling the story, you have this

calm demeanor,

right. And just having a leader

In the midst of that type of action.

say,

Are you ready to do this? Do you want to do this? everyone's on board and say, all right, put your

night

goggles on and into it.

Don Sherman: Oxygen and everything. So is

that, oh my god, that,

that's amazing.

Wow, what a powerful story.

You know what, if you're interested in being a friend of McConnell, make sure you contact Mike Helstab right here at the Chamber. just a

powerful story. I'm still,

that's a beauti. I don't know whether to call it beautiful, compelling.

I don't know. It was just a great story. I mean, and so with that, I believe people would want to know based on that leadership what kinda leader you are.

When we give you a word association [00:27:00] test, it's a little test.

Cathy McClain: A test.

I worried?

Don Sherman: No. Not you.

You should not be worried. no, it's not a test, just a, we're gonna play a little game word association. I gave you one word. You gave one word back. It's not wrong cuz All right.

See that's, I knew she'd

be ready.

Yeah,

I Let's go

Leader.

Now.

Success.

College.

Air Force Academy

Failure

learning

entrepreneur,

risky

Wichita.

Love it.

Vacation

Family

hero.

Mom and dad

Chamber.

Ignitors.

Wow.

That's a good one.

Family

my heart.

Fun

laughter.

Last but not least, you gotta tell the truth about this one.

[00:28:00] Beverage

wine.

There you

go.

Wonderful.

Wow. Thank you so much for being on the show. Yes. I mean, oh my.

God.

I don't know what to do. I'm

turn it over to E. It was a pleasure to both of you.

Thank you for you do for the chamber. El eling.

Yes. E,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: here.

Cathy McClain: You're very welcome. Friends, if you would, please make certain that you like this and share it and let us know who you like to hear from next till next time.

Don Sherman: Peace.