

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 125

Darren McGilbray

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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 listening. Don't forget to like us. Love us share us. We truly appreciate you checking us out in the [00:01:00] house. Popeye's. E.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's what's up. We have Mr. Darren McGilbray with us.

How's it going?

It is going great.

Fantastic. We are happy to have you here and hear your story. So if you would please start by sharing who you are and what you do.

Darren McGilbray: Well, I am Darren McGilbray. I am the president of Popeye's A R J h. So, I am a native Wichitan and Wichita is my home. Love it.

Don Sherman: I didn't know you grew up here, so we gotta get this done.

All right. What high school?

Darren McGilbray: Heights, Hollywood heights

Don Sherman: See, I can't do anything. Interview over, I know Denise went to Heights, Bethany went to Heights. I can't say anything. Yeah. Okay. Oh, okay. Let's keep it moving.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So President of Popeye's. I'm curious, how did you get to this point? I mean, did you already, did you start as a, in the restaurant business?

Darren McGilbray: I did. I started [00:02:00] in the late. Well, the eighties, let's just say.



I started as a dishwasher at Pizza Hut. Okay. And as pizza Hut is their corporate office. It all began here for Pizza Hut. One of my goals was always to get into the ivory towers of Pizza Hut, every young person's dream. So that's where I started.

Don Sherman: Wow.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So from dishwashing to president, there's some things in between there, right?

Darren McGilbray: Yeah. a little bit happened, here or there. But, the short of it is that, you know, if you believe in something, you work hard, you really can achieve it. A lot of folks say, oh, well, you know, the restaurant industry, you know, they don't see it as a viable career.

But it really is, it's a very good, lucrative career. It's what you make out of it.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So can you walk us through what that looks like? So [00:03:00] you're a dishwasher and you like, I wanna get to the Ivy Towers. What was your path?

Darren McGilbray: My path? First of all, I come from a line of educators.

So my mom and dad, they taught, a long career in U S D 2 59 right here in town. Most people, I can go anywhere. Everyone knows my mom and dad. When you're a teacher in U S D 2 59, you become a rockstar. Because you touch so many lives.

And so,

Don Sherman: go ahead and, sorry to interrupt, but shout 'em out, your mom and dad and your grandpa.

De Lineage. Do it so folks

will

Darren McGilbray: now Delvin and Shirley McGilbray. So, my, they both retired. They're both retired now and enjoying retirement. My grandma, grandpa McGilbray, dove Mcgi Bray, and Tim McGilbray were all staples in this community. Yes.

And have done a lot of things, with helping youth pretty much grow up. I've met so many people that stop us in the grocery store. If I'm with [00:04:00] my mom or dad, they're like, is that you Mr. McGilbray? Yeah. You still look the same, 40, 50 years later, Uhhuh and it's really, amazing the lives that they've.

Yeah.

And growing up with them being educators, one of the things that, I did to help grow my restaurant career was, continuing my education. So even though I worked, in the restaurants and so forth Pizza Hut had a program to help you with education.

I also worked with Pepsi Cola, which was at one point had bought the restaurants which we called Yum Brands, and Pepsi. Basically owned all of the restaurants pizza Hut, kfc, and taco Bell, right. And so, big organization and so forth. You had opportunities to, do some things, growing up in that.

I went to school while I was a dishwasher and I went over to Butler County Community College where I was. I played tennis there at Butler. I [00:05:00] was the the number one tennis player over there. And,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Shout out for the number one tennis player.

Yeah, I think my backhand

Darren McGilbray: And I got,

I, I got a shout out, Heights as well because I played number one every year at Heights.

Wow. From ninth grade year, all the way up through 12th grade. Goose Dowdy was my coach over there.

And, uh, I traveled all over the United States with him, with tennis,

he was definitely a legend, not only in basketball, but tennis as well. So, as I was playing tennis over at Butler County, and I also have to shout out the school because we went to Nationals for the first time in school history which was amazing.

But I still worked for Pizza Hut at the time when I graduated. I then took on a a salary position with Pizza Hut as an assistant manager. And I had my associate's degree and I continued to go to school as I was progressing through pizza Hut, which later on got a shout out.

Friends University cuz I have my bachelor's in [00:06:00] Human Resource Management friends and then and then did my master's as well over at France. And human resource and organizational development. And then while I was doing that, I also got a bachelor's in business from Manhattan Christian College.

So, education kind of goes, in, in the family but I think it, was very helpful. And seeing a career and doing the things that you need to do to, realize that career and what was available out there. So as you said, there's a lot a lot in between, and I don't think we have Four decades to sit here and discuss it.

But, I've been in this game for about four decades now. Working in restaurants and at the end of the day, you know what I've learned, growing up through restaurants and so forth, it really is about people. You get nothing done without people. And so, really understanding how to connect and [00:07:00] get the best.

Done out of your people, support them in a way that helps them do their best work. Is the winning combination here. I've been able to do that, throughout my career. And when I first walked in there, you talked about the hot seat, but really it's spicy seat.

spicy, chicken with Popeye's, I've been in the Popeye's game, for a minute. Before I came back to Wichita, I was the regional director of franchise operations for the Popeye's brand. Which was P I K. And so my role in the organization, I ran a quarter of the company in operations.

There was four people like me and we're in charge of operations for the entire domestic.

Brands. we supported all of the franchise community out there. So I had about a hundred and 30 franchisees over 600 restaurants. And you know, it was a nice piece of the pie. Later on we Went through an acquisition merger, which happens [00:08:00] in big business and rbi, which is restaurant brand international.

They own Tim Horton's and Burger King, and now Popeye's bought the Popeye's brand. A lot of the members of the PI k, they brought in their own teams and so forth. And then that's how I ended up back in Wichita because of Willie Kendrick a long time business partner friend.

I just love that guy. I've known him for a long time and he's like, Hey, why don't you come back and let's grow Popeye's here in Wichita. And I said, well, yeah, let's do it. So that's what brought me. To to Wichita to work with Willie Kendrick. And he taught me a lot.

We had our times where, we would bump our heads together in times where, we were loving on each other. But, at the end of the day he was an awesome man and helped me get back to Wichita with my family and so forth and, it was that, that's why I'm back in Wichita.

And when I first got here, we were met with the [00:09:00] biggest challenge I've ever seen in my.

My four decade career of restaurants. And that was the pandemic, Oh my Right. That was that was a time that to not forget. I mean, it was a big challenge and it put us in a situation and, sometimes you don't see your blessing in a storm.

But I realized what that blessing was gonna be after it finally came. But, it was. Three, three and a half, four years in the making of just going through the whole pandemic. Sales were off the chain. We were running record sales and for, those that don't know Wichita, Popeye's stores run some of the highest volume stores in the country For Popeye's. So we definitely appreciate you

Wichita for supporting your restaurants. I know we're not always perfect, but thank you for supporting. And one of my goals and commitments to you as being the president of Popeye's here, we're gonna get service fixed for you. We're gonna get [00:10:00] that fixed and, one of the things you could do to help me get that fixed, we need people,

people. There you go. and back to that pandemic it was We didn't have people we were running restaurants on, on a, a breath. Yeah,

Don Sherman: Oh my

Darren McGilbray: man, I don't know how we got

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: through

it.

But you made it through.

Darren McGilbray: We did we made it through and our volume has held. Also, in fact, volume is continuing to climb.

But we find ourselves in the situation of, people and really that challenge of getting our store staff. So what I would tell, Wichita is that we do have opportunities, really good opportunities at Popeye's to grow a career. We're in a situation now with me being President of Popeye's is not just Popeye's Wichita, but we have stores in Wichita and outside of Wichita, which really gives us an ability to put more resources into Wichita.

Because [00:11:00] now we're a bigger part of the pie, so we have opportunities here for folks to grow. And also, grow themselves a prosperous career,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: does that look like for a person? Now we have young people listen to the podcast as well. So what does that look like as coming into Popeye's and saying, this is the career path that I wanna take. What are those opportunities look like?

Darren McGilbray: Well, the opportunities are, we have managerial opportunities at every level. So, you know, to work your way through the process. You know, assistant, Assistant, well shift manager, shift manager. Okay. Yeah. Assistant manager. We have store manager positions and then general manager positions.

We also

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: and that's Multiple stores when your general manager,

Darren McGilbray: or

is

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: it that like,

Darren McGilbray: well, Unfortunately right now we have some key, individuals out there helping in, in multiple stores, but primarily a general manager is of one location. Okay. Is it, and then we have area manager positions as well as [00:12:00] district manager positions.

And my growth vision is that we're gonna get our Popeyes in our company, A R J H up to triple digits. In restaurant count. So when you get up that high in restaurant count, I mean that's when you can start building other parts of the business. Having training departments and HR teams and marketing

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So that's your specialty then, right? It's.

Darren McGilbray: that is my specialty to grow.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: It's, is the growth.

Darren McGilbray: Yes. It's the growth.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So You've seen you, you take it from different aspects. You've done the working, through your education and your training and all your years of experience, you try to find a way to figure out profit and loss and how to grow

Darren McGilbray: Yes, absolutely. Because the key thing to, any general manager is to help them understand their p and l, just like you said, the profit and loss, because that's what keeps the engine moving. We want [00:13:00] to, number one, make sure that we have good people within our restaurants that are gonna take care of our guests.

Which then, puts money down into the top line. And then they have to then figure out, how do I get the money to the bottom line that we can take and reinvest. And with, our company, my goal is reinvestment. And to reinvest into the Wichita community. Making sure that, over the winter and, I hate to really talk about these type of things, but, people have to, understand it, to know how we want to connect.

During the winter, I mean, we provided. Socks and hats and blankets for the homeless people that are out on the street. And, believe it or not, we have, people that are regulars at Popeye's, they live out on the street and, the city really did a good job this year of helping get them off of the streets.

So, thumbs up for Wichita for doing that. But, we get involved like that. We get involved [00:14:00] with providing fundraiser opportunities to our school systems and stuff to be able to raise money for things that they might need for books. And

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I didn't know that.

Darren McGilbray: Oh yes, book, sports equipment whatever a school needs we get involved that way.

And then we also, at the end of this school year, once we get to the end, I'm gonna talk to the different schools and the administrations to find out, how many open lunch meal tickets are open out there that people couldn't pay for, and I'm gonna pay for them.

That's one of the things that we want to make sure that, people are not going hungry and they don't have bills lingering over their heads at the end of the year. We're gonna get involved that way. And the way that we can continue to give back to the Wichita community is, keeping these stores in Wichita with cells in ' all you gotta do is come out.

And continue to, buy your two piece dark meat with fries or red beans and rice

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: and back this,

Uhuh, since you you're giving [00:15:00] back to the community in a, in various ways. I'm wondering could bring back that

Darren McGilbray: 99

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: cent wing fling.

Okay. Know what, if you can do that, then I think we can find a way Wow. To continue to

help help you.

Darren McGilbray: You, you know that Ebony you bring up a good idea. We are gonna be doing a grand reopening for Wichita for our stores. We're gonna do it in May, and that might be something that you see we might. For three days. We might bring back that wing fling just for you for three

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: I please

Darren McGilbray: days for our

Grand

reopening.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Be there all three days.

That was, know self-serving.

Don Sherman: It was, I know that was self-serving and it was circa 1992.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Well, friends, it's time to hear a word from our sponsors. We'll be right back to hear from Popeye's. A R J

Darren McGilbray: H.

[00:16:00]

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Welcome back, friends. We're here with Darren McGilbray, and we're hearing about historian four decades worth of experience in the restaurant business.

So, Darren, you've given us a lot of information about just your journey.

But out of all of that, how would you define success?

Darren McGilbray: To me, success is defined by how many people you're able to help see and act on a dream within themselves. Where they believe that they too can achieve what they set their mind out to.

And it, it's unbelievable. At times how many people are [00:17:00] out there, they don't, if they don't see it, they can't achieve it. So the more you show them, the more they realize, wow, I can do this. I can do this.

Wow.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: So giving them that encouragement and the resources right, to show them that they can do it.

And I think, and tell me if I'm, wrong. As you were talking about those career paths. I think you guys send and you may have something in house, but you send your managers and your leadership like through business school of sorts or restaurant school to do, the kitchen math,

Darren McGilbray: understand

p

and

I and things

like

that.

Is

that

true?

Yes. We have a training program called Academy and we take all of our people. During academy from being a team member all the way up through multi-unit management it really is a good program and I was on the ground at a lot of this stuff at its inception helping create these programs in my corporate life [00:18:00] at Popeye's.

And so, they're still using, the programs and the systems and they really are good. Good.

systems. Wonderful.

Anything used Right. Can be good. And this is really good if it's used right.

Perfect,

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Don.

Don Sherman: Excellent. Popeye's, did I hear you say that you have more than, I think Willie had five Popeye's here.

You have

Darren McGilbray: a

bigger

footprint

print than

that?

Yeah, the new company, A R J H and Abdul Hamida is the owner of it. And we have, development agreements across several different states, to bill. We're gonna do some things in Wichita where we have over 30 restaurant development agreement for Oklahoma.

So we're gonna be building a lot out there. We're always talking about different acquisitions, which I can't, mention of course mention or talk about now, but we have a lot of acquisitions that we're going through right now. So, been busy. Yeah, he's been busy. [00:19:00] Yeah.

Don Sherman: That's, so any anymore in Kansas or

Darren McGilbray: you confirm

or

denied. We we

love,

we

I

Love

Kansas.

Don Sherman: That's what she do

Darren McGilbray: I love Kansas, so if that means anything, Thank you. you. Love

Don Sherman: Kansas.

Okay, that sounds good. Wow, you've been busy. So what's next on the frontier for Popeye's? What you got going on that's proprietary far as your growth.

What do you see on the horizon far as difference in Popeye's versus the way it is now in Wichita area?

Yeah,

Darren McGilbray: We do probably 35 to 40% more than we ever have done at Popeye's. In Wichita. Since I've come to Wichita, our business has grown about 30 to 40%.

Wow.

Which is

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: phenomenal. That because of the,

Darren McGilbray: some

of the

service model

changes

or,

well, I like to see, it's because I'm here. Yeah.[00:20:00] I'm here. So we're growing and, I gotta give a shout out to some of my team that have been just pillars for us out there. And were also pillars and very helpful to Willie Kendrick as well.

But Jody Rutledge she's like my right hand, you know, in Wichita. Phenomenal lady, and I've just watched her grow over the last, three, four years. She's amazing. Also Dennis Walker, one of the guys that you know, you probably know in the community, he's always been the face of the hillside location.

You go in there, everybody knows, Dennis Walker and Dontrell Cherry. Who, runs one of the highest volume stores in the country. Over at our Seneca location believe it or not, I mean, that store is rocking right. And then Carl Collins one of our guys and they've just been really helpful, to me since, I've been here in Wichita and I want to, just thank them cause Excellent.

They really. you know, Helped [00:21:00] out a lot.

Well,

Don Sherman: that's a good segue. You got look like a good rockstar team there. What kind of culture are you trying to create at

Darren McGilbray: Popeye? Is that the

new

Popeye's,

We're trying to create a culture where, people grow and they see, Popeye's more than just, I come and work two weeks and then I move on to the next thing.

You really can make this a career. There's no reason why you can't. Restaurants have fed, me and my family for over four decades. We've never missed a meal, never had any problems, doing anything that, we wanted to do. Restaurant is a viable, career.

And, at this point I definitely want to thank my wife. Jacqueline McGilbray, she's her maiden name is Davis, but my wife is put up with restaurants for a long time.

Don Sherman: did she, is she from here?

Darren McGilbray: She's from Wichita as well.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: an entrepreneur as

Darren McGilbray: yeah, she's

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: not? Oh, yeah,

Darren McGilbray: that's right.

Yeah. Yes. She's [00:22:00] a fantastic entrepreneur. She owns jewel Angels Boutique, which is at Douglas and Hillside, across from the Crown

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Uptown.

Darren McGilbray: Yeah.

she'll

get

your

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: wardrobe

popping,

ladies. Oh.

Darren McGilbray: Oh.

Yeah she's fantastic. She's done a great job, with the place. And

I

Don Sherman: is a

Darren McGilbray: appreciate. school

did

she

go

to?

Hollywood.

Don Sherman: Lord.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Yeah. Look, don't ask anymore.

Darren McGilbray: Yeah.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: That's too many times we've heard Heights in one interview.

Darren McGilbray: There's a lot of good things that came outta Hollywood. I love our whole school system and a lot of, my family have taught at these different schools and so forth. My whole family. Been educators and they've taught all through this school system.

Matter of fact, the young lady that was at the met me at the front, she was talking about she went to school at Roosevelt, and I'm like, oh, my uncle, Randy taught over there. She said, oh, you was a coach? Yeah. You was a coach. Coach Jackson, so Coach coach Jackson.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Oh, good lord. Here we go. What.

Darren McGilbray: That's my uncle.

Yeah. Coach. Randy [00:23:00] Jackson. His wife, Gil Jackson. She taught over at.

East and

The degrees

Don Sherman: of separation in here, it's something. Yeah. Yeah.

Unbelievable.

Wow. So, go

on and

on with

the

school

system.

So

do you feel, how do you define success and do you feel

Darren McGilbray: you're.

there?

I don't feel like I'm there.

I feel like I have a whole lot more to do, a whole lot more to do. I'd say, success is when, I look at, my son Jaren, he graduated a few years ago from the University of Houston. That's what I look at as far as success. My son was able to graduate. Okay. You know, He's, thinking about his studies next, he might go abroad and, finish his schooling.

But the pandemic kind of messed up a lot. That is [00:24:00] success, to me to see my wife, open up. Yeah. You know, She first started out in St. Louis, but we were able to come back to Wichita and open up, her shop here in Wichita, in the design district. But she did that at the heat of the pandemic.

And so to be able to do that and persevere through that. That's what, success looks like to me. Our team here in Wichita, Popeyes, being able to do what they did, through the pandemic. That's what, success looks like to me when you can weather a storm and come out of that storm stronger than when you

Don Sherman: went

in.

Wow, this has been, this is a great story. We truly appreciate you investing in Wichita.

Again. Yeah. And like I said, the degrees of separation. Ebony knows folks my folks and your grand folks. We were at y'all's house, at least one Sunday a month after church, going over [00:25:00] there. And like I said, your grandfather

had

the coolest fro of all time. It was gray, but it was still full.

It was too cool. So thank you for investing. And I'm, you're apparently a friend of

Darren McGilbray: Popeye Willie,

which

is

Don Sherman: friend of mine, so,

yep.

Thank you. I Love him

like a

dad.

Yeah, He's good.

You got anything else?

Darren McGilbray: I don't.

Don Sherman: Okay. I'm not gonna ask another high

school

question because I'm tired of hearing about heights right now.

It's all, it's almost bad as hearing about Southeast. I mean, it's really bad.

Darren McGilbray: There's

nothing

bad

about

that Yeah. I'll have to

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: tell

Darren McGilbray: you're

Don Sherman: talking

about in school Okay. Yep, exactly. We're gonna have some fun right now. You've dealt with Ebony long enough. We're gonna do word associa. I give you one word.

You gimme one word

back.

It's not

wrong

cuz it's

your

word. Are

you ready?

Oh

Lord.

Oh,

Darren McGilbray: I think so.

here

we

go.

My

man

leader.

Woo. Serve it.

Don Sherman: Nice

Darren McGilbray: success.

What you believe in.

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

Darren McGilbray: Friends.

Don Sherman: Failure.

Darren McGilbray: Get back up and try again.

Don Sherman: Entrepreneur.

Darren McGilbray: In the trenches.

Don Sherman: Wichita.

Darren McGilbray: Love it.

Don Sherman: Vacation.

Darren McGilbray: Relaxation.

Don Sherman: Hero.

Darren McGilbray: My father, my mother.

Don Sherman: Yeah. Chamber.

Darren McGilbray: Success of Wichita.

Don Sherman: Family.

Darren McGilbray: Delvin, Shirley, Jackie Jaren.

Don Sherman: Nice

fun.

Darren McGilbray: Tennis.

Don Sherman: Last but not least, and you gotta tell truth on this

Beverage.

Darren McGilbray: Oh my goodness.

Beverage.

Don Sherman: Yep.

Yep.

Darren McGilbray: Lemonade.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Lemonade.

You

can't have lemonade on the tennis court.

Darren McGilbray: Lemonade.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: We have Gatorade.

[00:27:00] Lemonade.

Don Sherman: Lemonade. He going, that's the story is sticking to it. He's sticking to it. Thank you, my man. It's good to see you. I think. I guess. Me

Darren McGilbray: you For

the first

time.

Yeah.

So,

Don Sherman: but I know your lineage,

so

you're

good

people. Thank you for

coming

in.

All

Darren McGilbray: right. Appreciate it. Thank you.

Thank you here.

And

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: that chicken from Popeye's.

Don Sherman: Oh

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: no, no, no, no,

Darren McGilbray: was,

Don Sherman: That was

awesome.

No, don't

do no feed

into that.

She'll be doing it. Uhuh.

Ebony Clemons-Ajibolade: Oh my gosh. Oh, no. Don't. No. But seriously, thank you for being here. Friends, if you would, please make certain that you like and share us, and let us know who you wanna hear from next Till next time,

Don Sherman: peace. [00:28:00]