

Wichita Chamber Business Accelerator

Episode 131

Jen Ray

Don and Ebony: [00:00:00] Welcome to another exciting edition of the WCBA powered, of course by Evergy. First, Thank you for listening. Don't forget to like us, love us, share us. We truly appreciate it. Today, we are excited to have in the studio, Jen Ray from the Monarch.

my girl, Jen Ray is in the house. How's it going?

Jen Ray: Good morning. It's good. It's really, really good.

Don and Ebony: It's the best day of your life.

Silence. Okay. Well, what'd they say and say, don't ask questions. You don't know the answer to that was one that was silent. well, good morning.

We're so happy to have you here. We have Jennifer Ray from the Monarch. Tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Jen Ray: Well, I think you summed it up pretty well. I'm Jennifer Ray from the Monarch. I have owned and operated that restaurant since December of 2012. So we're getting ready to come up on our next anniversary. born and raised here, moved away for a while, came back to be with my family. And yeah, just got really, really lucky with the restaurant and the location.

And I was able to parlay that into a really amazing. career in philanthropy here, get to spend a lot of time with the chamber, which I just adore. See, I'm happy to be here.

Don and Ebony: Well, let's, let's talk a little bit about, how lucky you've been with that location and with your dream. So you took over in 2012. Okay. And how did you get into this?

Jen Ray: I went to school for early childhood education and realized, quickly, that if I was going to start my own family, that I did not have, I did not have the ability to do children all day and all night. I was working at a restaurant in old town, moved around with them for a little bit and, realized once I started getting a bit older, that, that I was kind of outgrowing that environment.

And, had been lightly looking at, trying to buy an operation or figure out a way to start my own business. When the pieces fell together with the garage bar, it was The Garage bar back then. the current owner was ready to sell. So, I purchased it from her and. the space, a little remodel. I don't know if you guys remember that it was a sports bar back then.



so, a wildly different concept than we've got in there now, but you know, it was really, we did it on a shoe string budget. We did the entire renovation, and open the business in 60 days. Yeah. So we had 30 days of, you know, doing all the business side of things, all of the, you know, filing with the state and getting all my tax numbers and getting, all of my licensing done.

Jen Ray: And then 30 days, to flip the bill to get it repainted and reopened and restaffed. And so it's not probably. The typical way people go about opening businesses, especially in the restaurant industry, but somehow we made it work

Don and Ebony: Yeah,

Jen Ray: We're still here.

Don and Ebony: That's awesome. So 60 days, 30 days, to get your full bar, your full menu.

I mean like how is that even possible Did you, so in the previous restaurant did you run front of the house back of it? I mean, like, I'm trying to understand from early childhood. education to restaurateur

Jen Ray: I mean, it's really the same thing. I know you guys think it might be different, but it's really not. I was, I was the general manager, so I was, I did have experience in, all parts, the front of the house, back of the house, HR, everything, you know, everything that the, general manager has to take care of.

And I was also able to, I moved down to [00:05:00] Oklahoma city and opened up two stores for them down there. So I also had a little bit of an idea of, you know, how that was going to go. And what I was getting into going from management to ownership was a lot more complicated. There were parts that I didn't understand, like taxes.

I didn't pay our taxes at all for the first six months that we were open because I thought the state would send. bill for what I owed them. And next thing you know, I was in, I was in trouble. Luckily I got it paid off quickly. but I remember the, you know, I had to do this telephone, interview with people from the Department of Revenue.

And I said, you know, it was a mistake. I didn't know, I'm learning, I'll fix it. It won't happen again. And she said, well, this is going to be a very expensive mistake for you. And I never made the mistake again. I didn't, but yeah, I mean, I think it's pretty typical when you open a business, you, you just keep stumbling and you learn and you, you know, you learn how to walk better and walk faster and now we're running.

Don and Ebony: Yeah you are. It's one of my favorite locations love it. Absolutely love it. So, and I know it was 2012, but do you recall how many employees did you start with that?

Jen Ray: Oh man, that's a great question. I wish I knew that.

I w I bet we started with 25 right. About there. Wow. Which is really interesting now that you bring that up because the summer with the baseball stadium, we hit, we hit the highest. I think we were close to 60 this summer. Yeah,

Don and Ebony: That's huge. So that is that. I mean, that's what I wanted to hear. You know, where you started and where you are now. That's, that's tremendous. Excellent. So, he grew up here.

You said What high school?

Jen Ray: Kapaunq

Don and Ebony: That's okay.

Jen Ray: I feel like that's spoken like either someone East or Bishop Carroll maybe.

Don and Ebony: Nah, I'm not even close. Oh yeah. that's it. High school. anyway, we truly appreciate you being here. and, and folks don't realize it is hard to hang up. your own shingle to start a business. And I appreciate you sharing about that story. I mean, there's other stories like that, but folks go in the business and they don't know everything. And She has shared an example what you should not do because she did not know it. And like the lady said, it's an expensive lesson. that's, why I say being a small business owner, the rock stars. I mean, you gotta do everything. I mean, all the education and experience you had in the previous, business, you didn't know that part because you didn't handle that part.

So, wow. Well, we want to hear your entrepreneurial story and I think you started telling it, but what made you say okay, that Garage Bar. I want to make that. to Monarch. What, ha what, how did that happen?

I mean, what was there a ding, I want to have a club or I'm sorry, a bar or a restaurant.

Jen Ray: I knew it was, I knew that this was going to be my career path.

I enjoy it. I enjoy, I feel like my, my favorite thing is when I can sit back and watch the machine run.

It's, it's a, it's a feeling. It's something in the air when I can sit there and watch the whole operation working the way it's supposed to work. And I really love that feeling. and it was something that I was good at.

the Garage Bar subsequently the Monarch came along at the right time. there were a lot, what's so funny to me is the biggest issue for people that were giving me business advice was the location that what people could not believe that I was moving to Deleno because back then it wasn't what it is now. The way that that neighborhood has grown up has been such a blessing. I don't know if we were any part of that. or if we're just riding that wave and benefiting from it. But, yeah, people thought I was crazy, crazy. They thought I was, there were all sorts of things.

Jen Ray: They said, how can you open a bar and not serve hamburgers? I still hear it that to this day, or how can you open a bar and not do football?

Don and Ebony: Yeah.

Jen Ray: So it's been fun to kind of creep out of the status quo a little bit and go over there and kind of do our own thing and do it in our own way and, and be successful at it.

Don and Ebony: And let me just unpack that. just a little bit more. I know that that was your passion, but what made you say, I want to invest my own money and put my everything on the [00:10:00] line to open up this restaurant. I mean, was there just a ding, I'm going to do it. and that was

Jen Ray: I don't think there was a ding that I was going to do it, but there was definitely a ding that I couldn't do what I was doing anymore. That was, that was the agent of change. I think I had gotten to the point with where I was in my career, that I knew that it was no longer serving me and that it was time to move on no matter what that looked like.

So it wasn't necessarily, you know, me looking towards the future, but me taking a really hard look at where I was at that point in my life and realizing that I wasn't happy and that I needed to be doing more.

Don and Ebony: Excellent. And I'm glad to share that Cause people need to know sometimes it's like you said, it's not a ding it's because you don't want to do what you're continually doing. You've been in business, nine years now.

How do you define success as an entrepreneur?

Jen Ray: Oh, that's a tough one because I feel like after the last year and a half that's really, really changed. I could easily define success by the fact that we're still open, but what I am starting to really focus on is my own, my own time and my own happiness there. And I'm not there's a, you know, a growing conversation that the grind doesn't have to be 24 7.

It doesn't have to be wake up, work, work all night, go back to sleep. I really value my personal time. I value my volunteering I've and being aware of that. And trying to, and I have to work at it. You know, it's not easy for anyone. That's a business owner to be okay with relaxing and enjoying their own time,

Don and Ebony: Right.

Jen Ray: But I've really tried to put more effort into it. And I think the level of burnout that I, and everybody that we're all feeling this point in the, you know, and COVID has really pushed me to have to really rethink I take care of myself and then subsequently how a better version of me can take care of my business

Don and Ebony: That's it I'm done. I mean, that's in right there. Right? You're every day you're taking care of others, you're in the service industry. Right. and trying to find the time and to actually take care of yourself so that you can continue to serve others. It's that's, I mean it seems so simple. Right. But

Jen Ray: It's not, and I'm very much like, peaks and valleys type of person where I will go, go, go, go, go until I've hit my limit. And then I will roll back down the mountain and I will crash all the way back to the bottom and have to reassess and take a look at how I'm living my life and spending my time with then as I start feeling comfortable and happy, then I over-commit, again.

And I work too much, again, my stress too much again. And I build my, you know, I get myself built back up and then fall down. So it's an, it's a never ending struggle to try to maintain, maintain some balance.

Don and Ebony: I would agree. So, you know, you I kind of want to go back to your earlier discussion of seeing how the neighborhood has grown since you've been there. You know, you said, you don't know if it's, you've contributed to that, or if you're just riding the wave, but I personally think that you. have contributed greatly to that.

but What are some of the things that you think have really enhanced that neighborhood that's really helped your business? The scooters?

Jen Ray: The scooters 100. Oh, can't tell you. I can't. No, I can't tell you how many scooter riders I've almost run over. you know, really a turning point truthfully was Hutton construction. Moving. Yes. Good old Ben. Ben comes in there and put a, didn't just build a building, built a world-class facility across the street from us.

And I think that put a huge spotlight on the neighborhood that, and the EPC development that whole, I mean that whole section north of town. Is gorgeous. And I think that there is the trickle out effect. The baseball stadium, as highly contentious as that has been, has been wonderful. I think it's been wonderful for the whole neighborhood.

and it's been nice to see it. We're getting more retail businesses moving in down the block. Now that section from [00:15:00] McLean. To Seneca is a hub for truly small business. And it's been wonderful to watch it become more populated over the last four or five years.

Don and Ebony: I enjoy spending my time on the patio out there. So

Jen Ray: is. You know, my favorite thing to do is sit on the patio and watch people attempt to navigate that roundabout. One day. The answers go always, just go. Don't worry about what other cars are in that round about. Don't worry about the right of way. blow through and see how it works out for you.

Don and Ebony: Yeah. So w tell me what scares you the most? What, what, scares you at night? Like what do you fear?

Jen Ray: Ultimately, I mean, ultimately like every other business owner, I fear my business closing. I think what keeps me up at night, I'm a thinker and a planner. I don't have a plan B, I don't have one. I don't know what I would ever do. If this career path came to an end, I. Really suffered with depression when I was in college and ended up dropping out after two years.

So I don't have my degree at this point in my career, there was really no purpose to go back, but it does always weigh heavy on my mind that I don't have a backup plan. And I, I know I'm not alone in thinking that, but, it does, it does put a, another layer of pressure on me always to make sure I make really smart sound business decisions because I, I always joke that I will end up managing a Village Inn if this goes under, but what if that happens? But what if that's what I mean?

Don and Ebony: yeah,

Jen Ray: It's rough. It's raw. I mean, I know I took a path. I took a path that I know a lot of people take, but there are consequences to that. And while I was able to pay off my student debt a lot faster than I'm sure other people were, I still, worry that I have pigeonholed myself into a situation that would be hard to get out of if I needed.

Don and Ebony: That's deep. Yeah, there really

Jen Ray: Oh, you S did not know. I was lucky there wasn't any bourbon or we'd have real real talk.

Don and Ebony: Got to rename the podcast True Small Business story. I love that. Wow. Well, friends, we are going to take a break and hear a word from our sponsors. and We'll be back to hear more from Jen Ray.

Well, welcome back friends. We're here with Jennifer Ray of the Monarch and we're having some real conversations. So we just got done talking about some things that, you know, kind of scare you and keep you up at night. What are some things that you're excited about?

Jen Ray: Well, I'm excited that we're getting ready to celebrate our ninth anniversary on the 11th after 2020 in this. It feels like 15 years, but that's fine. I am, you know, every business owner is grateful every year that they are open, but after the last year and a half, and especially being in an industry that was forced to be shuttered and closed down.

I am beyond grateful that I am still able to be open, that I was able to weather the storm as well as we did. It was bizarre to say the least to sit there and watch my business clothes and not be able to help my employees and know that there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't put [00:20:00] that ball in motion.

I didn't think caused the problem. So I couldn't fix it was the way I looked at it and, So I am definitely thankful that we were able to, to make it through and continue to serve people

Don and Ebony: Yeah, and you are thriving.

Jen Ray: Thriving.

Don and Ebony: Thriving. and I think it's because of that chili, your chili is amazing.

Jen Ray: With the Frito's every Friday, it's not, I wouldn't recommend it as a diet plan.

Don and Ebony: No, you're right about

Jen Ray: But it makes my days a little bit brighter. Okay.

Don and Ebony: So anything special going on for the anniversary should we it's December,

Jen Ray: December 11th? Yes. I think we're going to wait to do something big for a 10 year, but we'll do, we'll have we'll do a little on, it's a Saturday. I'll have a party. That'd be good.

Don and Ebony: Like it. I like it will be there. Is there anything that the business community can do for you?

What would you like to see from the Wichita, community to help your business?

Jen Ray: You know, that's, it's a very interesting question because usually I am the one serving the other people. It's not very often that I get asked what others can do to serve us. We're a small business and a good chunk of my revenue comes from other small businesses in town. So anything, you know,

I, especially being vice-chair of small business for the chamber of commerce.

I feel like I'm very in tune right now with how the health of our small business community. And I think if I was going to ask for one thing to help my business, it would be the continued support from other, you know, small businesses, small business. Any way that you can smart support our small business community.

Those people continue to give back the ripple effects are very lasting and very profound in our community. So, yeah, I mean, that was a long, weird answer, but,

Don and Ebony: That was good. That's exactly what, what I want it to know. So thank you. I wanna touch base on, you'd be in a restaurant. And how many employees do you have now?

Jen Ray: So we're closing the patio for. The seasons. So the number starting to trickle down, but I want to say we're still at right around 45 right now.

Don and Ebony: How, how do you do it? I mean, of, and I know you're not fast, food, but even a lot of restaurants they can't get their employees to come back, to work. I was in Topeka the other day, And I went to a Sonic and there was like tape all around the drive, the car hops. And so what happened here? And they just said we can, we can't get carhops all we got is drive through. So my question to you and I know it's not a Topeka thing but my question to you is how did you get your folks to come back? Or how were you able to hire more folks? When folks seem to be in that industry not coming back to work,

Jen Ray: It's been tough. I know it seems like we had a lot of employees. Having that baseball stadium open was fantastic because everyone wanted a little piece of that action. So that in itself was probably advertising for us. We opened up about as fast as we could. we reopened May 6th. I remember it was the day after Cinco de Mayo.

I did not make that mistake. So we were able, we were pulling people from other restaurants that were actually wanting to come back to work. And we were able to capitalize on that and grab those people and give them jobs when the places that they were working, had not made the decision to reopen. We have restructured our pay scale.

We pay significantly higher than most other restaurants in town for both front and back of the house staff and have put in some. Really nice bonus programs for all of our front of the house staff. we were able to offer, tele-health to the Kansas restaurant hospitality

Don and Ebony: Very nice.

Jen Ray: As a free added benefit, to all of our front of the house staff. I have just tried to find effective ways to be more. more appealing to my workforce. It's been tough. I know you would not. We, this week, since the patio is closed, have finally brought back almost all of our inside tables. This whole summer. We operated the patio with eight less tables than normal and six less tables inside the normal.

We never went back to our full capacity because we didn't have, we didn't have the staff for it [00:25:00] and we didn't have. I have no idea where all these customers have come from.

Don and Ebony: Wow.

Jen Ray: Restaurants and categorically. I mean, just restaurants are so, so busy right now. So we didn't have the space or the resources to even take care of everyone.

So it's just been through this last week that we've finally started bringing our indoor dining back to be able to serve more people inside and then subsequently keep more staff members on.

Don and Ebony: I guess I didn't even notice that I didn't notice that there were,

Jen Ray: inside. We're missing this whole

Don and Ebony: not know that.

Jen Ray: Go look at it now. It's weird. It's weird to see it. The way that it was at the beginning of 2020, I'd forgotten what the restaurant looked like with all the tables in it.

Don and Ebony: Wow. Excellent. So what's and thanks for sharing that. Cause I was wondering, how did you get to do that? I mean, it seemed like a thriving and other folks are, I went in one restaurant the other day and the bar is closed. We can't find a bartenders.

Okay. Anyway, I was wondering, now that you've gotten this down to a science, what's next, what's next on your frontier.

Even with Monarch going, what else you want to do?

Jen Ray: I very much enjoy volunteering. I currently see. Bend a good chunk of my time at the chamber, as vice-chair of small business and with John Rolfe coming on board, there have been, there's been a lot of opportunity to be here.

I'm working on this. I also volunteer with the downtown YMCA I'm on that board and I am on the operations team for Wichita Festivals. So I do Autumn and Art and River Fest. The Monarch has given me. The chance to give back to the community. And that has become one of the cornerstones of our business model.

And truthfully, I think one of the reasons why we've been so successful and, so through the last nine years, I've really been able to see the importance of reinvesting my time and energy back into the parts of our community that need it most. So that's. know, circling back around to, you know, taking care of myself.

That's one of the things no one ever wants to get too overloaded on their, on the boards that they're on and the volunteering that they're doing. But I also feel like it's so important to be a leader there and to put my money where my mouth is and give back to the community and to the people that have supported us

Don and Ebony: I think that's awesome. you know, as you were speaking, I'm just curious, and you didn't mention this, but do you mentor, other young women or a young kids who might want to be entrepreneurs?

Jen Ray: You know, I have not. and that probably speaks a little bit more to me and my, I feel like probably I doubt myself a little bit too much. I look at that and say, well, I can't teach anybody anything. I don't know when you, I don't know anything. that may be a. Wasted opportunity. But I feel like while I don't have any formal set people that I mentor, I do try to live my life as a good example to other people and hope that people take notice of that.

Don and Ebony: Yeah, And I mean, your story, is a true American story, And I think that has great Value and people can really, you know, learn a lot. And I know you don't think of yourself in that way, but that's really where the, you know, your passion comes from and understanding your story and how you've overcome. I think it would be great inspiration.

So just keep that, you know, Yeah, you, and you could probably mentor Don a little bit too.

Jen Ray: Let's do it

you know, but no, in all seriousness, who are some people that you draw your inspiration from?

Jen Ray: Lately. And I think it's because of how much time I've spent with them. I've really, really been inspired by Ben Hutton and Damon young. I was just talking with, Ryan Baty from, Mattress Hub. I was talking with him last week about how I listened to Ben and I listened to Damon and the way that they lead.

And inspire their employees and want to build a better culture. And I, I have a hard time, translating that into my specific industry and I get frustrated with that, but I look at those two men and I am so impressed by their commitment to their employees, their commitment to the city. And I've been really pulling off that energy lately.

Don and Ebony: Yeah, I think we all are. I mean, they're [00:30:00] not just their commitment to their employees, but I mean, they inspire people who just, they come in contact with. right It's just their being, that's just who they are. so I would agree. 100%. So as I wrap up question for you, your biography, what would the title of that book be? Bourbon for everyone?

Jen Ray: Can I Just Have a Nap. To take a nap.

Don and Ebony: That's awesome. Can I

Jen Ray: Have made a sport out of napping. Naps are it's my favorite thing to do. I wake up in the morning. I'm like, when today am I going to be able to take a nap? I don't get a nap every day. I don't want you to think that I have that kind of time on my hands.

Don and Ebony: Now. It's time to Have some fun. We're going to do some word association. Oh yeah. We go from that to word association.

So I'll give you one word. to give me one word back. It's not wrong cause it's your word. Ready? Leader.

Jen Ray: Womenq

Don and Ebony: Oh, okay. College.

Jen Ray: I'm gonna say anxiety,

Don and Ebony: Okay. entrepreneur

Jen Ray: hard work

Don and Ebony: Wichita.

Jen Ray: Amazing.

Don and Ebony: Hero.

Jen Ray: My mom,

Don and Ebony: The chamber.

Jen Ray: It's like a lot of words. Respect.

Don and Ebony: Okay. Family.

Jen Ray: Oh my heart.

Don and Ebony: Fun

Jen Ray: Wine

Don and Ebony: Vacation,

Jen Ray: Tropical

Don and Ebony: Last but not least beverage.

Jen Ray: Wine again.

Don and Ebony: Thanks for coming through.

Jen Ray: I would say bourbon, but. You can't drink bourbon all night. It's a disaster.

Don and Ebony: Let's go ahead and close this segment out. Well, friends we've come to the end of our show today. We've had a lovely conversation with Jen Ray from the Monarch, and we appreciate you being here, Jen. Thank you so very

Jen Ray: Thank you guys.

Don and Ebony: And to all our listeners, make certain that you like us make certain that you share with your circle of influence and make sure you leave us a note and let us know who you want to hear from next. Until next time.