

2023 EDITION

THE FORT



**LEE GARLACH'S ENTREPRENEURIAL
EVOLUTION: FROM BEER
BUSINESS TO BANKING**

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**COLORFORGE:
AN ENTREPRENEUR YOU MIGHT
NOT KNOW, BUT SHOULD!**

pg. 7

*An exclusive magazine designed to
connect business leaders with the next
generation of entrepreneurs and a
chance to **PAY IT FORWARD***



FORTRESS
BANK



WHAT'S
YOUR
VISION?

The Sights & Stories of
Midwestern Entrepreneurs

WE LOVE A GREAT
ENTREPRENEURIAL
STORY. AND WE HAVE A
PODCAST TO PROVE IT.



CHECK OUT THIS INSPIRING
STORY AND MORE...

JAKE GERVASE

NFL, Stay Tiny TX, & Rally for Reid -
Big Vision Edition

In this edition of Big Vision we sat down with Jake Gervase of Stay Tiny Texas. Jake's NFL career may have led him to the Superbowl and his brother Sam may have led him into a real estate adventure, but a sweet little boy named Reid led him into a rally. With a family business, a football team, and a philanthropic goal on his plate he had a lot to share about the ups and downs along the way. Find out how Jake, Sam and Hailey have created a big vision out of tiny homes.



To listen to this episode and others,
scan the code or visit
WhatsYourVisionPodcast.com.

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Welcome to the inaugural edition of *The Fort*,
proudly presented by *Fortress Bank*.

In this premier issue, we introduce a magazine that's more than just a publication; it's a powerful network of accomplished business leaders coming together to support and uplift the next generation of entrepreneurs in our communities. A "Fort" represents a strategic stronghold, and through *The Fort*, we aim to provide rising entrepreneurs with the strategic advantage of exposure to the best in the business—our readers. Join us in building a strong foundation for the future of entrepreneurship.

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HUSTLERS

FROM BEER TO BANKING

Lee Garlach's Mentorship-Fueled Triumph

In the expansive landscapes of Wyoming, Lee Garlach's journey was transformed by mentorship, sparking a chain of inspiration that altered his life. Lee, a horse rancher, financial wiz, and visionary entrepreneur, epitomizes the impact of paying it forward. Explore his story for inspiration, and discover the profound growth that comes from guiding others along their entrepreneurial paths.

Born in Wyoming, Lee initially worked with his electrician father but sensed a different calling. He interned at a bank in Jackson Hole during college, thanks to his future father-in-law's encouragement. There, he crossed paths with Dick Scarlett, an alumnus of Lee's fraternity. Despite lacking experience, Lee's determination persuaded Dick to hire him as a summer intern.

That summer was transformative. Lee soaked up wisdom from Dick, who allowed him to attend high-level meetings and glean insights usually reserved for industry insiders. Dick's encouragement left an indelible mark on Lee: "If you don't mess up and be a complete dummy, someday you can be here." Their camaraderie was evident when Lee listed his job title as "Dick Scarlett's Little Helper Buddy" on a form, embodying their mentorship.

After graduating in 1987, Lee faced rejection letters in the midst of the savings and loan crisis. However, Dick Scarlett extended a helping hand, advising him to explore opportunities in larger cities. Despite a prior rejection, a chance call from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City Denver branch led to an interview. Inside, he spotted portraits of esteemed individuals,

including Dick Scarlett. Lee's former mentor had pulled strings, defying the odds when the bank wasn't hiring.

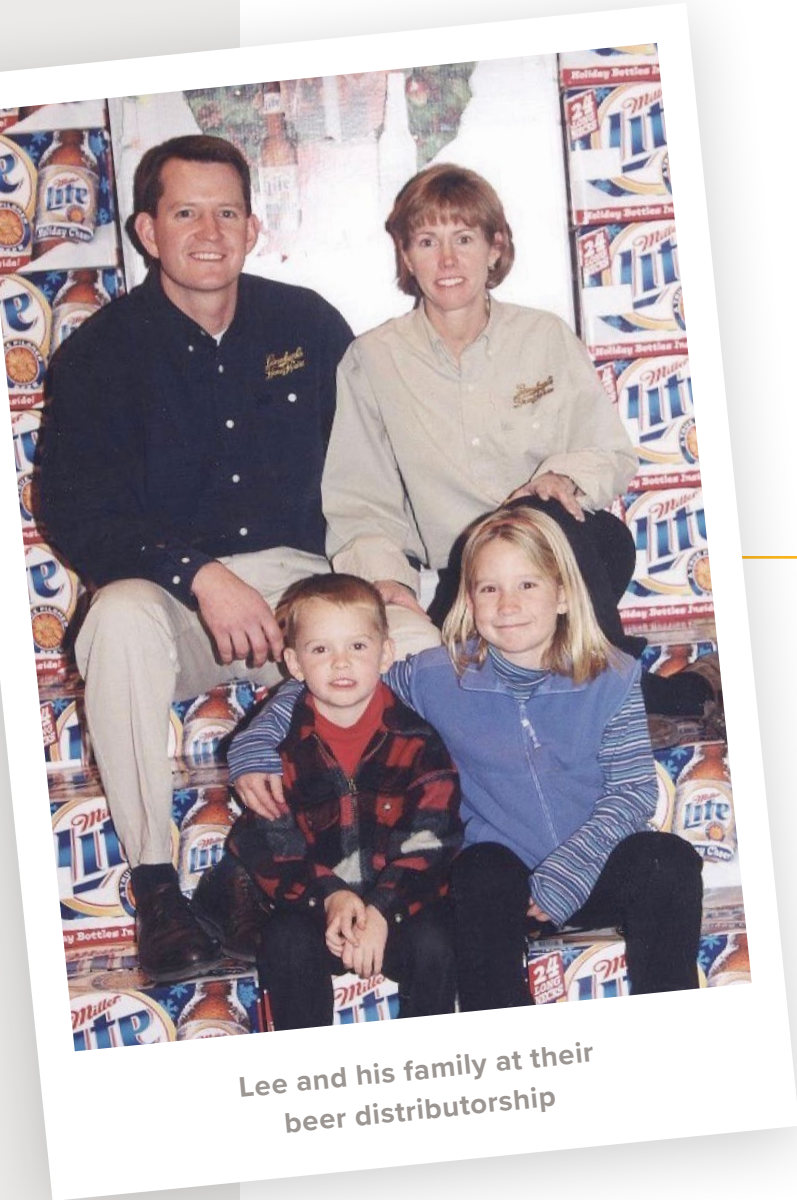
Lee's success continued when he started his loan review practice, supported by Dick Scarlett and other industry experts. Dick even became his first client, attracting more clients to Lee's growing portfolio. Despite his success, Lee realized the toll on his family due to his demanding career. An offer from his father-in-law to run, then buy a beer distributorship in Jackson Hole provided a fresh start. Supported by Dick Scarlett's financial backing, Lee embraced this new challenge, building the distributorship's success.

After two years and eventual sale of the beer distributorship in Jackson Hole, Lee Garlach made a bold decision, to embark on a new venture. His sights were set on acquiring a larger distributorship located in Moline, Illinois, an opportunity that held immense potential for growth and success.

With unwavering determination, Lee set out to consolidate the beer distribution market in the area. Through strategic acquisitions and shrewd business maneuvers, he successfully brought together all major players, establishing a dominant presence in the region. His vision was clear—to build a business so extraordinarily prosperous that it



would attract the attention of everyone in the industry. Lee aspired to create a legacy, a business that thrived and generated substantial profits, leaving him with the ultimate question: “Why would I sell when it’s yielding such great financial returns?” Lee eventually did receive an offer he couldn’t refuse and sold the business to an Illinois buyer. Having achieved remarkable success with the distributorship, he contemplated retirement. But a fire burned within him, yearning for new challenges and fresh opportunities to make a difference. Exploring his passions,



Lee and his family at their beer distributorship

Lee immersed himself in horse and cattle ranching. Yet, the allure of the business world beckoned him once more, igniting his entrepreneurial spirit. This time, Lee embarked on a journey with a distinct purpose—to create a banking model that would empower entrepreneurs to fulfill their visions. Drawing from his experiences, he understood the multifaceted nature of running a small business, the hats one must wear, and the critical importance of driving sales. Banking, to Lee, became a means to an end—an avenue to forge meaningful partnerships and provide invaluable support to entrepreneurs facing similar challenges. In 2008, Lee seized the opportunity to purchase Fortress Bank just before the tumultuous period of the great recession. Lee faced initial difficulties, but with resilience and support from mentors like Dick Scarlett and partners like Dean Heinzmann, he shaped Fortress Bank into an institution that understood businesses deeply, offering financial services while nurturing relationships and fostering growth. Lee’s dedication to his clients’ dreams shines through as he listens attentively to their visions and visits their facilities. He pays forward the mentorship he received from Dick Scarlett, seeking out and uplifting aspiring entrepreneurs. Lee Garlach’s journey inspires entrepreneurs, emphasizing the importance of embracing challenges,

HIS VISION WAS CLEAR:
To build a business so extraordinarily prosperous that it would attract the attention of everyone in the industry.

seeking mentorship, and collaborating. His commitment to growth and passion for helping others is a testament to the transformative power of entrepreneurship. Successful entrepreneurs, follow Lee Garlach’s path. Embrace the journey’s highs and lows, nurture your dreams, seek mentors, and pay it forward. The world awaits your innovative ideas, passion, and unwavering spirit. Cheers to empowering the next generation of entrepreneurs. 🍷

JIM KOCH

Another Entrepreneur from the Beer Business

Explore Jim Koch’s journey from consultant to brewmaster. In 1984, he left consulting to follow his brewing passion. In an industry dominated by giants like Budweiser, he had a unique vision: carve his niche. Armed with a \$1 million sales goal in six years, he used a family beer recipe passed down since the 1860s, becoming the foundation for Boston Beer Co.’s iconic Boston Lager. Jim tirelessly pitched his beer to bars and restaurants, drawing a modest \$60,000 salary and a small team of eight. Six years later, he exceeded his goal with \$21.2 million in sales. A decade in, that number soared to an incredible \$128 million. Jim Koch’s bold venture fermented into an inspiring success story for entrepreneurs worldwide. 🍷



Boston Beer Company’s iconic Boston Lager

TOP 5 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT CRAFT BEER:

- 1 **Craft Breweries:** In September 2021, there were over 8,400 craft breweries in the United States alone. This number continues to grow.
- 2 **Market Share:** Craft beer represented around 23% of the U.S. beer market by volume.
- 3 **Economic Impact:** In 2020, the craft beer industry contributed over \$82 billion to the U.S. economy.
- 4 **Brewery Growth:** New craft breweries continue to open, with an average of more than two new brewery openings per day in the U.S.
- 5 **Homebrewing History:** Believe it or not, homebrewing was illegal in the U.S. until 1978!

THE ONES TRYING TO MOVE MOUNTAINS

AND HOW YOU CAN HELP



Meet some visionary, local entrepreneurs
you might not know, but should.

*“We make a living
by what we get,
we make a life
by what we give.”*

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

CAROLINE LAHOOD

Co-Owner At COLORFORGE,
Peoria, IL

Custom manufacturing and packaging
system for make-up products.

Q: How did you come up with your business/vision?

A: Our journey started at a 3D print conference in NYC, where inspiration struck. We saw the potential of binder jet technology for personalized cosmetics. We acquired a vintage industrial 3D printer, spent years refining it in our Illinois basement, and secured a US patent in 2018. ColorForge was founded in 2019, leading to collaborations with a Liverpool engineering firm and a top additive manufacturing software company.

Q: What are the average costs of your products/ services, and what do you sell them for?

A: Currently, we're in the pre-revenue phase, finalizing hardware development. Our approach involves partnering with beauty brands and manufacturers, licensing our technology. They can create custom cosmetics with intricate designs in any color or shade. This innovation, combined with our commitment to sustainable packaging and agile production, offers brands a competitive edge in a crowded market.

Q: What is your business's biggest challenge and biggest opportunity in the next 5 years?

A: Our most significant challenge and opportunity converge. Our transformative technology impacts every

colorforge

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If you can help Caroline's vision, email us privately at thefort@bankfortress.com or contact her directly at (309) 231-6172 / caroline@3dcolorforge.com

LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR



facet of the color cosmetics value chain, demanding work across sales, design, manufacturing, and optimization. This monumental task also promises a significant industry shift, making cosmetics more inclusive, sustainable, and personal.

Q: How must you take your business to the next level?

A: To progress, we need strategic partnerships, working capital, and top-tier talent for our ColorForge team.

Q: What do you want people to know about you as a business owner?

A: Our strength lies in our visionary thinking. We see the future of the beauty industry before it happens, enabling us to address challenges like inclusivity, sustainability, and green packaging in innovative ways. As “outsiders” bridging additive manufacturing and beauty, our perspective extends beyond industry norms.

Q: How could someone help you to move forward in your journey?

A: ColorForge requires research and capital. After hardware development, we'll seek venture capital. Connections in the beauty industry and the thriving Midwest entrepreneur ecosystem are invaluable.



Q: If you could ask successful businesspeople for help or assistance with one thing, what would it be?

A: We seek advice, learning from other entrepreneurs' experiences. Increased visibility, such as through competitions like Fortress Bank's Bank Tank, has provided us with connections, advice, and mentorship to navigate the challenges of startup life.

DERECK LEWIS

Owner At THELMA'S TREATS,
Des Moines, IA

Handmade ice cream sandwiches &
small-batch frozen novelty production



LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR



Q: How did you come up with your business/vision?

A: We wanted to make a premium product in Grandma Thelma's honor that would bring joy and a smile to foodies and families nationwide.

Q: What are the average costs of your products/services, and what do you sell them for?

A: You can find our individual ice cream sandwiches in retailers for around \$3.49. We have a few different product lines, but we sell single-serve items to retailers for \$2.20 with an average cost of \$1.05.

Q: What is your business's biggest challenge and biggest opportunity in the next 5 years?

A: The biggest challenge and opportunity are the same—securing placement with new retailers and ensuring we get sales velocity at those retailers. Getting in the store is simple; getting in the cart is much tougher.

Q: How must you take your business to the next level?

A: After automating our production for the past 18 months, we aim to align output capacity with sales. Advancing Thelma's entails connecting with loyal customers, sharing our story, and attracting new ones. With Spring 2024 product placement season approaching, we'll focus on building relationships with promising retailers.

Q: What do you want people to know about you as a business owner?

A: I'm just a regular guy who believes in figuring it out and being nice to everyone along the way. There are always ways to do better and go faster, but keeping your sense of humor, humility, and kindness at the heart of it all will make it all worthwhile in the end.

Q: How could someone help you to move forward in your journey?

A: We're adding strategic equity investors who align with our growth and culture vision. Expanding this in the next 12 months is a priority. Building retailer-buyer relationships is crucial, especially with key retailers like Publix, Meijer, and Harris Teeter, where we aim to connect with buyers.

Q: If you could ask a group of successful businesspeople for help or assistance with one thing, what would it be?

A: I'd like some help understanding when they added certain roles to their operation and how they decided what skill set their business needed.

FEATURED STORY

Golf Ball's X-Ray Visionary

Titleist's story isn't mere coincidence; it's a tale of vision sparked by an unexpected X-ray discovery. In 1932, a golf-loving rubber company owner, Phil Young missed a crucial putt, suspecting his golf ball was to blame. With his hospital X-ray friend, they examined the ball and found an off-center core—a eureka moment!

Determined to revolutionize golf balls, Young enlisted his MIT graduate friend, Fred Bommer. Their mission: craft the world's finest, most consistent golf ball. After three years of relentless dedication, the first Titleist golf ball was born in 1935.

Today, every Titleist golf ball still undergoes an X-ray check, upholding Young's commitment to quality. Titleist is now synonymous with golf excellence, a brand rooted in a missed putt and an X-ray that forever changed the game. 🏌️

PHIL YOUNG

Titleist®



HISTORY OF GOLF BALLS:

- **Early Days:** Golf balls started as wooden orbs in the 15th century.
- **Featheries:** In the 17th century, feather-stuffed leather balls improved shape.
- **Gutties:** In the 19th century, gutta-percha balls made golf more affordable.
- **Haskell's Innovation:** In 1898, Coburn Haskell's design boosted performance.
- **Dimples:** Early 20th century saw dimpled balls for better flight.
- **Two-Piece Balls:** 1960s brought durable two-piece designs.
- **Multi-Layered Balls:** Modern balls use layers for distance and control.



Thelma's

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If you can help Dereck's vision, email us privately at thefort@bankfortress.com or contact him directly at (515) 343-7388 / info@thelmastreats.com

SUMMER KUEHL

Owner of QUAD CITIES AERO,
Davenport, IA

A customized flight
training program.

LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR



Q: How did you come up with your business/vision?

A: I started flying in the Quad Cities but faced limited options. In Minneapolis, I found a thriving aviation community and brought that inspiration home to create QUAD CITIES AERO, supported by my entrepreneur husband.

Q: What are the average costs of your products/ services, and what do you sell them for?

A: Pilot certificate costs have risen due to increased aircraft rental expenses. We offer affordability with rates of \$9,400-12,000 for a private pilot certificate, typically requiring 55-60 flight hours.

Q: What is your business's biggest challenge and biggest opportunity in the next 5 years?

A: Maintenance is the primary challenge we face. If we had a heated hangar to work with, we would hire a full-time mechanic immediately. Currently, we rely on contract mechanics, and their availability can be limited. Having an in-house mechanic would resolve the bottleneck issue with required aircraft inspections and open up an additional revenue stream by servicing other aircraft on the field.

Q: How must you take your business to the next level?

A: We aim to build a spacious 12,000 sq ft hangar with a dedicated bay for our mechanic, a cafe, a conference center, and more. This expansion will create a vibrant aviation community. We also plan to offer charter services, starting with a Piper Malibu and expanding to cater to various travel needs.



PAY IT FORWARD

If you can help Summer's vision, email us privately at thefort@bankfortress.com or contact her directly at (563) 296-7177 / summer@quadcitiesaero.com



Q: What do you want people to know about you as a business owner?

A: Aviation is my passion. I left my comfortable job and liquidated assets to pursue my dream. While I have aviation expertise, my entrepreneurial husband compliments my skills. Together, we're committed to building a profitable business in the industry.

Q: How could someone help you move forward in your journey?

A: The best way to support our journey would be to connect us to individuals who have either used or are considering using private charter companies. Whether for personal or business travel, every conversation with potential clients helps us determine which aircraft to add to our fleet and in what order to meet the demand best. Your introductions can guide us in the right direction.

FEATURED STORY



KENDRA SCOTT



KENDRA SCOTT

From Bedroom Startup to Billion-Dollar Brand

In 2002, Kendra Scott's jewelry journey began with just \$500 in her spare bedroom while she was on bed rest, expecting her first child. She transformed her passion into a collection. Despite past setbacks, she was determined to turn her love for jewelry into a philanthropic venture.

She began her entrepreneurial journey with her infant son by her side, selling pieces door-to-door to local Austin boutiques. Today, her jewelry, home décor, and beauty products are in Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, and hundreds of boutiques, with over 75 Kendra Scott stores, including one in London's Selfridges.

From a home office to a billion-dollar valuation by Forbes in 2016. Kendra Scott's philanthropy lives on through Kendra Cares, taking the Color Bar experience to pediatric hospitals, and donating over 75,000 jewelry pieces in 2017.

FUN FACT:

Kendra Scott struck a deal with Elyce Billany, the Marketing Director at Fortress Bank, when she and her husband Nathan presented their side-hustle business on ABC's Shark Tank.

SAMM HUTCHISON

Owner/Manager at BEAR'S BITES,
Peoria, IL

An organic, steroid and hormone-free dog treat company.



Q: How did you come up with your business/vision?

A: In November 2017, I shared my plan to start a dog treat business despite no prior business experience. I began on February 8th, 2018, after quickly learning the ropes of entrepreneurship.



Q: What are the average costs of your products/services, and what do you sell them for?

A: Bear's Bites offers various prices. Our medium bags, the top sellers, cost \$13.99 for meat treats and \$11.99 for fruits and veggies. We also have assorted chews ranging from \$2.49 to \$11.99.

Q: What is your business's biggest challenge and biggest opportunity in the next 5 years?

A: We're in the midst of a new expansion. In 2020, we expanded nationally with Bear's Bites, just before COVID-19 hit. Now, we're working on opening a distribution center with new facilities and equipment, aiming to become a household name in the next 5 years as we continue to grow.

Q: How must you take your business to the next level?

A: I require approximately \$350,000. I lack significant equipment and seek an affordable building to accommodate this expansion and the necessary power. I'm also exploring a few pieces of equipment that would expedite this expansion.

Q: What do you want people to know about you as a business owner?

A: My husband compares me to a pit bull: when I set my sights on something, there's no stopping me (I adore pit bulls, by the way, lol). Starting with \$10,000 in year one, Bear's Bites is now on track for \$100,000+ in sales as we celebrate our 5-year anniversary. I tirelessly work to make Bear's Bites a household name, supported by many on this exciting journey.



PAY IT FORWARD

If you can help Samm's vision, email us privately at thefort@bankfortress.com or contact her directly at info@bearsbites.net

Q: How could someone help you to move forward in your journey?

A: I am looking for an equity investor. Everything takes money, and I am in manufacturing, so my equipment is expensive.

Q: If you could ask a group of successful businesspeople for help or assistance with one thing, what would it be?

A: How do you tackle financial challenges? Self-financing means personal debt, and loans demand upfront capital. Where can I find the extra capital needed for rapid expansion? Managing monthly payments is feasible, but my savings lack the thousands required.



FEATURED STORY



LIAM HUGHES

Reviving Whiskey in Glasgow

Glasgow Distillery, the city's first active since 1902, earned the 2020 Distillery of the Year at the Scottish Whiskey Awards. Founder Liam Hughes' journey began with an offer from Grand Metropolitan during his university days. After starting in Webster's Brewery, he partnered with Mike Hayward post a 2010 contract with Absolut Vodka.

In early 2012, during Liam's sabbatical from Grow Sales, they crafted a business plan birthing The Glasgow Distillery Company. Whiskey expert Michael Moss from Glasgow University mentored them along the way, deepening their whiskey heritage knowledge. In December 2012, they founded the distillery, driven by Glasgow's single malt potential. 🍷



DIFFERENT TYPES OF WHISKEY:

- **Bourbon:** Famous American whiskey, at least 51% corn, aged in new oak barrels.
- **Rye:** Known for spiced flavors, at least 51% rye in the mash bill, popular in the US and Canada.
- **Tennessee Whiskey:** Made in Tennessee, 51% corn, charcoal filtration for unique flavor.
- **Scotch Whiskey:** Old and classic, primarily malted barley, aged in Scotland for three years.
- **Irish Whiskey:** Smooth and light, 51% barley, often unmalted.
- **Japanese Whiskey:** Crafted like Scotch, malted barley, aged in various barrels for distinct flavors.

2023

CHRIS YOUNGMARK

Owner of THE FARM SITTER, Mackinaw, IL

A locally owned and operated pet-sitting service that provides care for dogs, cats, horses, and animals of all types.



Q: How did you come up with your business/vision?

A: The Farm Sitter began from necessity when our neighbor moved. Finding farm care was tough, so I started local farm-sitting, gaining momentum through referrals. We stand out by vetting our sitters meticulously, focusing on trust and lasting relationships in farm care.

Q: What are the average costs of your products/services, and what do you sell them for?

A: Our services range from \$15-\$25 for basic needs to \$100-\$200 per day for The Farm Sitter Experience. Labor and transportation for our service providers are the primary expenses.

Q: What is your business's biggest challenge and biggest opportunity in the next 5 years?

A: Our biggest challenge and opportunity converge. We thrive in an underserved niche amid pet-sitting app growth and market saturation. We differentiate through tech and a gig economy workforce, catering to Pet Owners and Service Providers. Our trademark sets us apart.

Q: How must you take your business to the next level?

A: We're enhancing our market presence and customer engagement for business growth. Funding is crucial for efficient expansion, including finalizing tech development, expanding into new markets, optimizing workforce efficiency, ensuring legal compliance, and creating an attractive environment for staff.

Q: What would you like people to know about you as a business owner?

A: In December 2020, as the pandemic hit and travel stopped, I took a step back from daily operations and pursued further education, growing the business in a new way. I joined the Illinois SBDC at Bradley University, where I am the Assistant Director and a small Business Advisor, blending my experience with newfound knowledge and resources to thrive as an entrepreneur.



PAY IT FORWARD

If you can help Chris's vision, email us privately at thefort@bankfortress.com or contact him directly at (309) 925-1140 / chris@thefarmsitter.com



Q: How can someone contribute to your journey?

A: Our services drew interest from 40 U.S. states and abroad. While I'm deeply involved, my expertise alone can't scale our nationwide Technology Platform. We seek an equity investor with financial backing, guidance, and connections in finance, legal, and insurance sectors.

Q: If you could ask successful businesspeople for assistance with one thing, what would it be?

A: I'd seek support in securing access to capital—a resource encompassing financial backing and expertise. A shared commitment to nurturing the ecosystem for early-stage investment in emerging enterprises and innovative entrepreneurs is essential.



FEATURED STORY



J.J. SIMON

OMAHA STEAKS®

A Meaty Mail-Delivery Legacy

Omaha Steaks, a colossal name in meat, traces its roots to the 19th century, when the Simon family left Latvia to escape antisemitism. In Omaha, they founded Table Meat Supply Company in 1917, laying the foundation for Omaha Steaks in 1966. Over a century later, it's a nationally recognized food delivery service, with over half a billion dollars in revenue in 2017. It's the largest direct response marketer of beef and gourmet food in the U.S. Omaha Steaks embodies the American dream, starting small and rising as a symbol of entrepreneurship and resilience. Today, it offers high-quality beef and gourmet products, a true American culinary institution.

HOW TO GRILL THE PERFECT STEAK:

- **Ribeye:** Season, high heat, sear, finish indirectly.
- **Filet Mignon:** Salt, pepper, medium-rare, moderate heat.
- **New York Strip:** Salt, pepper, high heat, 4-5 min per side.
- **T-Bone:** Salt, pepper, high heat (strip), moderate (tenderloin).
- **Sirloin:** Marinate, high heat, 4-5 min per side.
- **Flank Steak:** Marinate, high heat, slice thinly.

PIERRE PAUL

Owner at WE HEAR YOU,
Peoria, IL

A multi-faceted company creating innovative and accessible technology.



LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR

Q: How did you come up with your business/vision?

A: Pierre, an immigrant to the US, experienced severe racism and xenophobia upon arrival. His passion for underserved communities led to the inception of his first invention. Inspired by a dream where he used sign language at a McDonald's counter with a tablet for communication, he resolved to turn this dream into reality.

Q: What are the average costs of your products/services, and what do you sell them for?

A: We are currently selling the Push™ fob and module. The fob costs around \$8.00 to manufacture, and the receiver around \$12.00. We sell the fobs for between \$40-\$75 and the receiver for \$200.



Q: What is your business's biggest challenge and biggest opportunity in the next 5 years?

A: Our primary challenges in the upcoming years are scaling the Push™ device and advancing research for the sign language translator. The translator has the potential to foster inclusivity in sign language translation globally, and our partnership with Air Emirates provides an ideal platform for its development. We're also collaborating with CBC to ensure barrier-free broadcast media for six upcoming Olympic and Paralympic games. Additionally, we are setting up operations in St. Louis following a substantial funding opportunity.

Q: How must you take your business to the next level?

A: In order to take our business to the next level, we need additional funding to hire a sales team and take the company to the next level. We are also looking for connections to contacts from businesses, universities, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, or assisted living homes! Using a direct sales model, connections are critical to the business's success.

Q: What do you want people to know about you as a business owner?

A: Having grown up as an immigrant to the US, Pierre has an unmatched spirit of giving.. His drive to help the world is rivaled only by his active advocacy for change. We Hear You has become a vehicle for him to help others, improve the world, and create revenue. Pierre's drive is a major factor in the success of the company.



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If you can help Pierre's vision, email us privately at thefort@bankfortress.com or contact him directly at (330) 327-1660 / pierre@wehearyouasl.com



Q: How could someone help you to move forward in your journey?

A: Right now, we could utilize introductions and funding opportunities. The most beneficial introductions would be any connections with businesses, universities, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, or assisted living homes. We also really appreciate funding opportunities such as grants, competitions, etc., as we are not yet taking equity investors.

Q: If you could ask a group of successful businesspeople for help or assistance with one thing, what would it be?

A: What advice would you offer to a startup transitioning from regional selling and small business-type operations to a more structured and scalable startup or larger business model?

FEATURED STORY



WARBY PARKER

NEIL BLUMENTHAL

Visionaries in the Making

In 2008, as a Wharton MBA student, Blumenthal lost his glasses and envisioned an affordable online eyewear company. He shared the plan with friends Gilboa, Hunt, and Raider. Graduating in 2010, they intended to launch Warby Parker. But when GQ scheduled an article for February 15, they sped up, launching that day.

The "Netflix of eyewear" article attracted many customers, creating a 20,000-person waitlist due to a missing "sold out" feature. Remarkably, they hit their first-year sales target in three weeks. Blumenthal called it a mix of panic and opportunity, leading to an embrace of exceptional customer service and a customer-centric approach. 🙌

UNVEIL YOUR DOMINANT EYE WITH THIS TRICK:

Keep both eyes open and focused on a distant object, then extend your arm out and point with your index finger or thumb at the object. Alternately close one eye at a time. The eye that keeps your finger directly in front of the object while the other eye is closed is your dominant eye.

FORTRESS BANK SIDE-HUSTLERS



Jamie and Elizabeth of EJ CLEAN

A family owned commercial
cleaning company.



Q: How did you two meet?

A: We met when we became sisters-in-law's back in 2005, but we have been friends since 2002. We work closely together at Fortress.

Q: How did you come up with your business idea and get started?

A: The bank's former cleaning company went out of business. They hired another company, and they were just not working out. One of the issues with the former cleaning company was the alarms going off constantly, so one of us would have to come in and secure the bank. We decided we knew how to clean, so we partnered.



AT FORTRESS BANK

We support side-hustlers. And these two visionary team members are cleaning up. Literally.

Q: What is it like having a side-hustle while working at Fortress Bank?

A: Our side hustle fits the bank and our schedules. A former loan officer encouraged our idea to create a cleaning company. He gave us advice and direction on how to get started. We have felt supported by the bank for the past 11 years. We have helped other team members within the bank start a small cleaning side-hustle themselves. Having the side-hustle with the bank has given us opportunities to be hired by other local businesses.

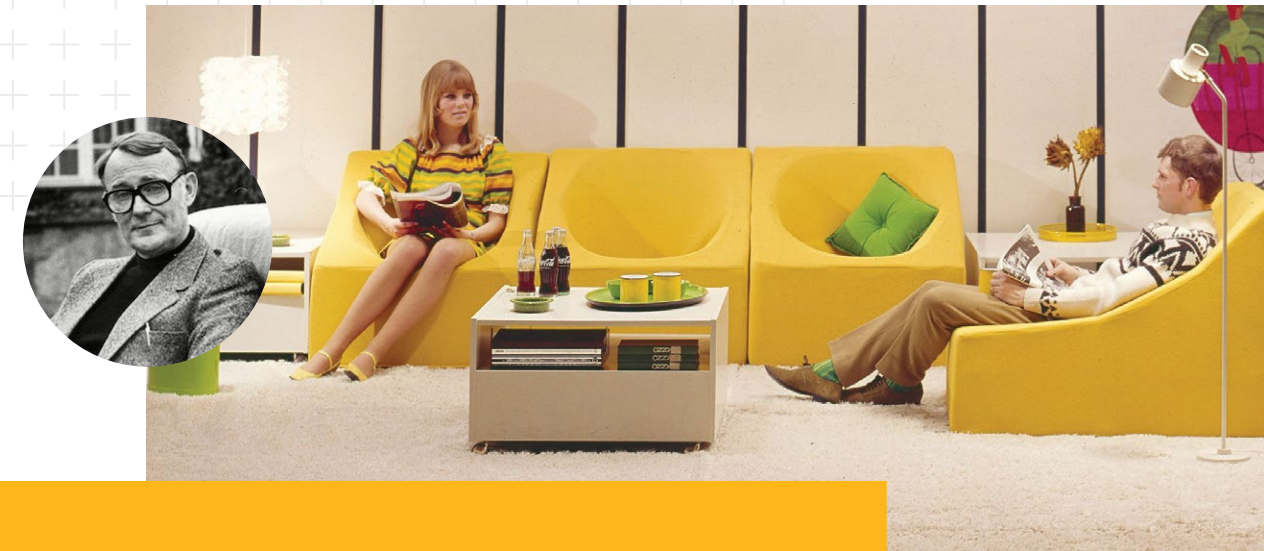
Q: How has owning a business helped you when working with Fortress customers?

We have been able to help answer customer questions regarding the specifics of opening a new small business, because we have had our own experience with a small business startup.



INGVAR KAMPRAD

FEATURED STORY



How a Farm Boy Revolutionized Furniture Shopping

IKEA

We enjoy easy access to bookcases and beds today thanks to Ingvar Kamprad's entrepreneurial spirit. Born on a rural Swedish farm in 1926, Kamprad showed his business acumen from a young age. At just five, he bought and sold matchbooks, expanding his ventures to include pens, pencils, flower seeds, and Christmas decorations by age 10. Despite being dyslexic, Kamprad excelled in his studies, driven by his father's cash incentives for good grades. Using his earnings, Kamprad founded IKEA in 1943 at the age of 17.

Initially, IKEA primarily offered small household items like pens, wallets, and picture frames. It wasn't until five years later that the store ventured into the furniture business. Kamprad's ingenious choice of the name IKEA derived from his initials, Ingvar Kamprad, combined with E for Elmtaryd, the family farm, and Agunnaryd, his hometown.

In 1945, Kamprad began using milk trucks for product delivery. By 1947, he started selling

furniture crafted by local manufacturers. From the outset, the mail-order catalog played a crucial role in IKEA's operations, as Kamprad's remote Swedish location made reaching urban customers a challenge.

IKEA's expansion soon reached Norway in 1963 and Denmark in 1969, igniting a European conquest. Within a few years, the first store outside Scandinavia opened, followed by a decade of worldwide proliferation, including Japan, Australia, and Canada.

Today, IKEA boasts 433 stores across 38 countries, with Germany leading at 53 stores and the US following closely with 51. Kamprad's unique approach to keeping IKEA private and family-owned without borrowing money remained steadfast until his passing in 2018 at the age of 91. He continued to travel the world, visiting new IKEA stores frugally, driving the same Volvo for over two decades, and opting for economy-class flights. 🛩️



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As our vision continues to grow, so does the prize money. This year the finalist with the boldest vision wins \$20,000! What's your vision?



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The Fortress Bank Tank contest is our unique spin on the Shark Tank concept. Hosting this prestigious event will be Elyce Billany, Fortress Marketing Director, and her husband, Nathan. Notably, Nathan and Elyce achieved recognition on ABC's Shark Tank, where they successfully secured a deal with Kendra Scott.





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