

2025 EDITION

THE FORT



*An exclusive magazine celebrating
local entrepreneurs and*

VISIONARIES.

**PCT EBEAM & INTEGRATION:
FROM BUYOUT TO BUYBACK**

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**PLANTING DREAMS, GROWING
FUTURES: A LOCAL FARMER'S
STORY**

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WHAT'S YOUR VISION?

The Sights & Stories of
Midwestern Entrepreneurs

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

EPISODE FEATURE

TOP SHAPE GYM

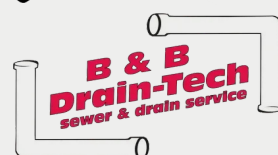
UNCOVER THE STORY BEHIND THE
SUCCESS—AND MORE JUST LIKE IT...



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

Vision in Motion: A Full-Service Journey with the Fischers

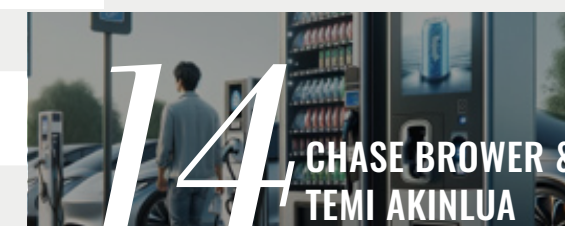
In this edition of Big Vision we will be chatting with Matt and Shelly Fischer, owners of Top Shape Gym, Hanssen Electric, Window Genie, and B&B Drain-Tech. When you leave your eyes open to opportunities, you start to see them everywhere. Join us as we review Matt and Shelly's approach to a full-service journey and how they have kept their vision focused AND fluid.



Cover Story



TRAILBLAZERS: STORIES OF VISIONARIES REWRITING THE RULES



Welcome to the Fort: Where Local Entrepreneurs are Shown Support

In this edition, we feature a host of local entrepreneurs who are using determination and innovation to make a difference in their communities. "The Fort" is a place where entrepreneurs are celebrated for their unwavering dedication to building their visions. You will also see curated national business features with rich stories. Business is our mission, and the time is always now to support local business and the people behind them making them run.





FEBRUARY 2026

To attend as part of our live audience
or to apply to be a finalist, scan the code
or visit BankFortress.com/BankTank.



**KNOW SOMEONE
WITH A BRILLIANT
BUSINESS IDEA?
THEY COULD
WIN \$20,000!**

Bank Tank is the \$20,000 pitch contest you don't want to miss! The event is hosted by Fortress Bank, whose mission is to empower fellow visionaries and small business owners to fulfill their dreams. Finalists will be selected, and a panel of successful business owner judges determine the winner. It's open to the public, with music and drinks to keep things fun and festive! The finalist with the boldest vision wins \$20,000! What's your vision?

THE BUSINESS OWNERS CLUB



01 CLUB PORTAL & MASTERCLASS

02 ANNUAL BUSINESS SUMMIT

03 CURATED ROUND TABLES

04 FUTURE OWNERS PROGRAM

05 QUARTERLY ECONOMIC UPDATE

Dr. Chris Kuehl - Armada Corporate Intelligence

06 CUSTOM GIFT BOX SERVICE

From custom curation to packaging & shipping

07 PRIVATE EVENTS

**Helping Businesses
Grow with Club "Bo"**

Club Bo— a private club designed specifically for business owners. Structured to power future growth, innovation, and connections.

**"BANK TANK," INSPIRED BY A
JOURNEY ON ABC'S TV SHOW-
SHARK TANK.**

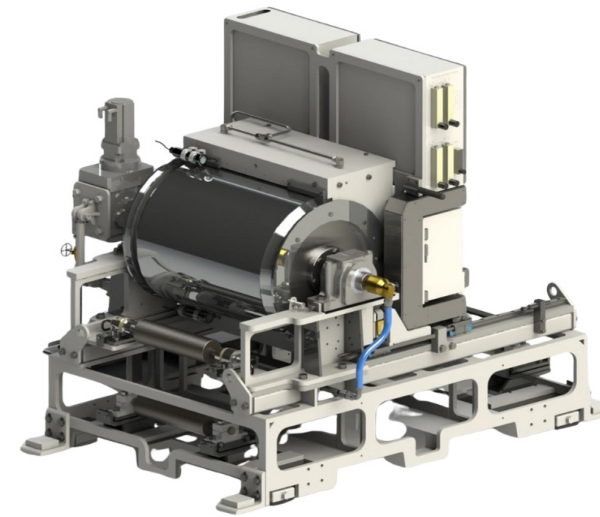
The Fortress Bank Tank contest is our unique spin on the Shark Tank concept. Hosting this prestigious event will be Elyce Billany, Fortress Chief Marketing Officer, and her husband, Nathan. Notably, Nathan and Elyce achieved recognition on ABC's Shark Tank, where they successfully secured a deal with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



FROM BUYOUT TO BUYBACK

The story of PCT Ebeam and Integration

Step inside the story of PCT—a company that refused to quit and instead built a future of growth and innovation



When you walk into PCT Ebeam and Integration's facility in Davenport, Iowa, it's hard to imagine the company was once just a small engineering firm with a handful of employees. Today, it stands as a global player in electron beam technology, shipping advanced systems around the world. But for Karl and Susan, two of the leaders who helped steer the company through its most pivotal moments, the story is not just about machines—it's about resilience, culture, and community.

Karl grew up on a farm near Rio, Illinois, and studied electrical engineering at the University of Illinois. While he never worked as an engineer, his technical background fueled his success in sales. In 1995, he joined PCT, beginning what would become a three-decade-long commitment. Susan's journey began in the Quad Cities. After earning an accounting degree and working in Minneapolis, she returned home and eventually joined PCT, bringing financial expertise and steady leadership.

Founded in 1986, PCT originally focused on system integration and automation for industrial clients. The turning point came in the early 2000s when the company acquired technology for electron beam machines—a leap that would redefine its future. "At first, we thought it was crazy," Karl recalls. "These machines ran at 300,000 volts. But eventually, we realized the potential and embraced it." That gamble transformed PCT. By the mid-2000s, electron beam technology became the company's core business, with applications ranging from curing inks and coatings on packaging to reducing the energy footprint in steel coil production.

In 2015, PCT was acquired by Comet, a Swiss-based corporation. On paper, it seemed like a perfect fit. In reality, the cultures clashed. "We shifted from focusing on our customers to focusing on investors and reports," Karl explains. "It just didn't work." By 2018, Comet planned to shut down the Davenport operation. But Karl and a group of longtime employees saw another path. "We knew there was still a good business here," Karl says. "So we asked ourselves, why not buy it back?"

Nine employee-owners came together, pooling resources



FROM BUYOUT TO BUYBACK

and determination. Among them was Susan, who had briefly left during the turbulent acquisition years. “Karl asked me to come back,” she recalls. “It was the right time—and I knew this team could make it work.” That team decision revived PCT under a new name: PCT Ebeam and Integration. The buyback was only the beginning. Customers had to be reassured. Trust had to be rebuilt. Capabilities like welding and machining, which had been outsourced under previous ownership, were brought back in-house. Slowly, the wins began to stack up. Today, PCT not only serves regional clients through its integration services but also ships machines to customers worldwide—from Brazil to Europe to China.

What makes this journey remarkable is not only the survival of a company but the entrepreneurial grit behind it. When others might have walked away, this team doubled down. They risked personal capital, staked their reputations, and proved that ownership rooted in trust and shared vision can outlast corporate missteps. Their story shows that entrepreneurship isn’t just about starting

something new—it can also mean fighting for something worth saving and reinventing it for the future.

Inside PCT, the machines may be high-tech, but the culture is refreshingly down-to-earth. Beerthirty on Thursdays brings employees together on the patio, where a remote-controlled cooler—engineered by the team, of course—delivers cold drinks. A monthly “fun committee” organizes everything from bags tournaments to paper airplane contests. Leaders walk the shop floor daily, greeting employees by name. “Culture matters,” Susan emphasizes. “When people feel appreciated, they take pride in their work. That’s how you grow.”

Looking back, Karl and Susan agree the journey has been anything but linear. Yet the lessons are clear. “Have confidence,” Karl advises. “If you believe in the business and you’ve got the right team, go for it. Failure was never an option for us.” Susan adds, “Surround yourself with trusted people. Inside the company and out, relationships are everything. We were able to buy the company back because we trusted each other and shared the same vision.”

From near-closure to global expansion, PCT’s story is proof that resilience, culture, and vision can power even the most technical of businesses. Or as Karl and Susan would say, sometimes the best way forward is to take back control—and believe in your team.

“If you believe in the business and you’ve got the right team, go for it. Failure was never an option for us.”

KARL SWANSON



3 PCT “legends” – Terry Thompson, Don Allebach, and Mark Bennett at the groundbreaking for their current facility in 2006

JOHN MACKEY

NATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR



From Whole Foods to Holistic Health: The Organic Rise of Whole Foods

John Mackey’s journey began in the late 1970s as a 22-year-old philosophy student living in a vegetarian coop in Austin, Texas. With just \$45,000 in family loans, he opened a small natural-foods grocery called Safer Way—living right above it and evolving into Whole Foods Market by merging with Clarksville Natural Grocery in 1980. Despite an early flood that nearly shut him down, community support propelled the business forward.

Over the next few decades, Mackey expanded Whole Foods organically—when raising capital was tough—and took it public in 1992, later growing it through multiple acquisitions into a leading national natural and organic grocer with over 500 stores before selling it to Amazon in 2017 for \$13.7 billion.



IN THE MIDWEST, INNOVATION IS ALWAYS IN SEASON.

A Q&A with Visionary
Entrepreneurs You
Should Know

*Every great dream begins
with a dreamer.*

HARRIET TUBMAN

REX DYER

Founder, Chief Executive Officer,
Vice President, Ag Defense Systems

Ag-Defense Systems was founded to develop portable, user-friendly foodborne illness testing technology.

Q: What is the elevator pitch for your business?

A: Ag-Defense Systems (ADS) is a food safety technology startup company. The goal of Ag-Defense Systems is to move food safety from the current reactive food recall approach to a preventative approach. Ag-Defense Systems will achieve this by providing food processors user-friendly testing technology that can be used by non-scientists.

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

A: Our biggest challenge is fundraising. We need equity-based investment to grow and scale. The problem is investors see our company as still heavy in R&D mode. While it is true that we need financing to engineer commercial prototypes, the technology is well known. We are not inventing a whole new instrument and instead, we are combining existing technologies into a fully automated format for a non-scientist to use. This approach removes some of the risk associated with companies in R&D mode. The biggest opportunity is the market. With \$5 million in funding, we can start selling in the market in two years and the opportunity is not limited to the food industry. In addition, we have multiple products planned for the food industry alone including allergen testing and chemical



SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If you can help with Rex's vision, email him at dyer@agdefensesystems.com or show your support by visiting his website at <https://agdefensesystems.com/index.html>

LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR



testing devices. These devices also have markets outside the food industry.

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

A: We need funding to build commercial prototypes and to hire people who can scale and sell our products in the market. For market entry and sales, we will need to hire an exceptional executive team as well as sales and marketing, and possibly a regulatory affairs professional and a government contracting professional.

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

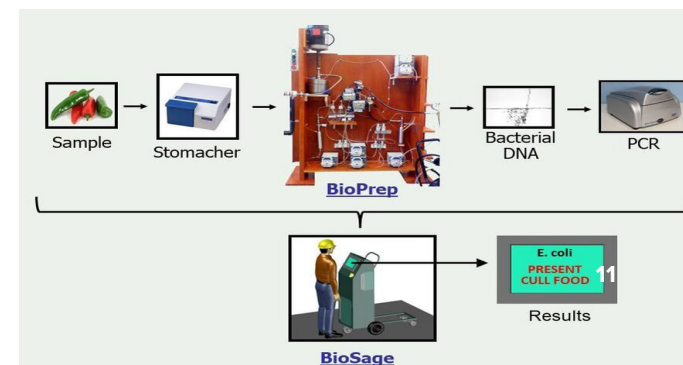
A: I am passionate about food safety because no one should die from eating contaminated food. My sister-in-law has a daycare and two of her kids who are siblings shared a hamburger and both got E. coli STEC poisoning. While they did not die, they are handicapped for life.

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

A: Introductions to investors would be great because equity financing is our immediate need. I would also appreciate introductions to key stakeholders in the food industry to do some customer discovery and gauge the interest in our products. Introductions to individuals who have knowledge of the accreditation process at accreditation bodies such as AOAC. Introductions to individuals at the FDA and/or USDA who have knowledge of the food safety regulatory environment.

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

A: Advice and mentoring during the growth, scale and go-to-market stages of the company. This could be through a board position or even a less formal setup.



BEN HOLMAN NICK J. MALOOF

Co-founders of My Recovery Spa

Wellness spot for premium, on-demand recovery
in a private setting



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

A: The idea was born in the most unlikely place: the deserts of Iraq in 2022. Co-founder Ben Holman was deployed with the Army, training hard and eating clean, but his body and mind were still breaking down under extreme conditions. Since slowing down wasn't an option, Ben dove deep into recovery science to find solutions.

When Ben returned to Central Illinois in 2023, he brought this vision home and partnered with his brother-in-law Nick, who had the business expertise to make it reality. Together, they built a space where recovery isn't just a luxury—it's a lifestyle.

Q: What are the price points for your products?

A: We've structured our pricing to make recovery accessible at every level. Individual monthly memberships range from \$65 to \$200, with our unlimited plan providing full access to all services. We also offer couple and family membership options for those who want to make recovery a shared experience. For maximum flexibility, drop-in sessions are available at \$30 each.

Our philosophy is simple: recovery should be as integral to

your wellness routine as exercise and nutrition. Whether you're beginning your recovery journey or enhancing an existing wellness regimen, our pricing fits seamlessly into your lifestyle and budget.

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

A: Challenge: Shifting mindsets. Too many people accept fatigue, chronic soreness, and burnout as inevitable parts of life. We're working to change that narrative and show people that feeling consistently good is achievable.

Opportunity: Leading Central Illinois's recovery revolution. As first-to-market with this comprehensive recovery experience, we're positioned to help thousands of people reclaim their energy, focus, and vitality. The wellness industry is exploding, and recovery is the next frontier.



SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If you can help with Nick & Ben's vision, email them at info@myrecoveryspa.com or show your support by visiting his website at <https://www.myrecoveryspa.com>.



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

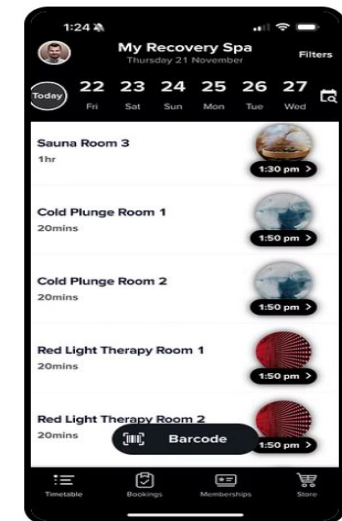
A: We practice what we preach. Ben and Nick live the recovery lifestyle we promote every day. We've experienced firsthand how transformative proper recovery can be, and we've watched it change the lives of family, friends, and clients.

This isn't theoretical for us, it's personal. Our mission is sharing that transformation with as many people as possible.

NATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR

Nature's Businesswoman: The Story Behind Burt's Bees

In 1984, Roxanne Quimby—a former artist turned self-reliant homesteader in rural Maine—met Burt Shavitz while hitchhiking and discovered his roadside honey stand. She saw potential in his abundant beeswax and began crafting handmade candles with his surplus, selling them at local craft fairs and growing the business from \$200 in first-day sales to \$20,000 in just one year. Quimby gradually transformed the operation into Burt's Bees, expanding into soaps, lip balms, and other natural personal-care products, while staying true to their original commitment of using ingredients that are 92% or more natural. She led strategic growth—moving headquarters from Maine to North Carolina, incorporating the business in 1991, and eventually selling her majority share in the mid-2000s—while reinvesting in the environment and sustainable enterprise.



ROXANNE QUIMBY & BURT SHAVITZ

MEET THE MAN BEHIND THE BEARD..

You've seen his face on every Burt's Bees product, but did you know Burt Shavitz was originally a New York City photojournalist before trading city life for a beekeeping cabin in rural Maine? With a love for nature and a dog named Rufus by his side, Burt lived off the land and sold honey from a roadside stand. His iconic beard, wild spirit, and humble lifestyle became the heart of the brand—even though he famously never owned a cellphone or used email.



**BURT'S
BEES**

LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR

CHASE BROWER TEMITOPE AKINLUA

Co- Founders of SWYCH Box

Self-service kiosk designed to enhance the EV charging experience



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

A: As entrepreneurs and EV owners, we noticed firsthand how much idle time EV drivers have while charging—with few amenities to serve them. We realized we could “swych” that downtime into value by offering rentable gear and tools. The idea quickly expanded from EV stations to rest / truck stops, airports, and more—anywhere people wait.

Q: What are the price points for your products?

A: Swych Box is a platform designed to meet local user needs, resulting in an average equipping cost of \$800 to \$1,500 per kiosk. Rental items average \$5 per rental, with typical users renting one to two items per session. Additionally, users can purchase supplies ranging from air fresheners to interior detailing kits. At high-traffic locations, each Swych Box can generate \$80 to over \$150 in daily revenue.

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

A: The biggest challenge is scaling fast enough to secure prime real estate and prevent copycats. The biggest opportunity is building a nationwide network and app ecosystem that creates brand loyalty and opens up subscription and advertising revenue streams.

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

A: We need strategic partnerships with site operators (like EV charging networks, DOTs, and gas stations), capital to scale kiosk deployment, and continued product development to refine the user experience and analytics platform.

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

A: We’re seeking introductions to property owners/operators of high-traffic, high-dwell-time locations (EV charging stations, DOT, utility companies, convenience stores), and strategic equity partners interested in physical tech infrastructure with scalable upside.

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

How do you rapidly scale a capital-intensive physical product without losing quality, control, or cash flow? We’d love insight into managing that balance while protecting IP and brand.

SWYCH BOX
SERVICE WHILE YOU CHARGE

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If you can help with Chase & Temi’s vision, email them at c.brower@swych-box.com, t.akinlua@swych-box.com or show your support by visiting his website at <https://www.swych-box.com>.

NATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR



MELISSA BERNSTEIN

Sparking Imagination Through Timeless, Hands-On Play

Melissa and Doug Bernstein launched Melissa & Doug in 1988 from Doug’s parents’ garage, driven by a shared passion to create meaningful, screen-free toys that inspire open-ended play. Initially, they ventured into educational videos, but their breakthrough came with the “Fuzzy Farm Puzzle”—a textured wooden puzzle that reimaged a traditional toy category. This innovation led them to expand into a wide range of wooden toys, arts and crafts, and pretend play items, all designed to spark imagination and creativity in children. Over the years, Melissa & Doug became a leading brand in early childhood toys, known for its commitment to quality and timeless play experiences.

TURNING PERSONAL STRUGGLES INTO PURPOSE- DRIVEN CREATIONS THAT INSPIRE CHILDREN EVERYWHERE

Despite their professional success, Melissa faced personal challenges, including lifelong struggles with anxiety and depression. She channeled her creative energy into toy design, finding purpose and healing through her work. In 2020, Melissa and Doug founded Lifelines, a venture aimed at promoting mental well-being through sensory-based products and tools. This new endeavor reflects their ongoing commitment to fostering creativity and resilience, extending their mission from children’s play to adult wellness.

JON STEPHENS

Owner of GLASS LOGIC

Revolutionizing the auto glass repair industry with innovative software solutions



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

A: We came up with our business vision after seeing a need from operating our four auto glass retail locations.

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

A: Our products could range from 1K for just claims services to almost 10K or more annually for shops with multiple locations that use our point of sale software as well.

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

A: Our biggest challenge is dealing with the Elephant in our Industry...Safelite. Biggest opportunity ironically is also getting into Safelite to use our software and services.

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

A: More traction in sales over the next few years and some technology advancements in implementing Artificial Intelligence within our products.

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

A: I am one of the few people around that grew up in a glass industry family, was educated in Computer Science theory, and now am combining the two into a great opportunity along with having the personality and skills to really blow things up...

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

A: Right now we are constantly meeting with Venture Capitalists and investors of all types. We have not taken on any investment yet but will be soon and are just looking for the right fit.

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

A: Networking, networking, networking...ha.



GLASS —
— LOGIC

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If you can help with Jon's vision, email him at logicglass@gmail.com or show your support by visiting her website at <https://www.glass-logic.com>.



NATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR

REID HOFFMAN

Building the World's Professional Network

Reid Hoffman's journey to founding LinkedIn began with a desire to make a meaningful impact on the world. With degrees in philosophy and a passion for ideas, he started his career in tech, working at Apple and later helping grow PayPal. His first startup, SocialNet, didn't take off, but it taught him valuable lessons about timing, focus, and building networks.

In 2002, Hoffman co-founded LinkedIn to help professionals connect and grow their careers. Despite a slow start, his belief in the power of trusted, professional networks paid off. LinkedIn grew steadily and became the go-to platform for career building—eventually being acquired by Microsoft in 2016 for \$26.2 billion. Hoffman's story is a powerful example of learning from failure, adapting quickly, and building lasting value through connection.

FUN FACTS ABOUT LINKED IN AND REID HOFFMAN

- LinkedIn was founded in Reid Hoffman's living room in 2002 and officially launched on May 5, 2003.
- Reid Hoffman once described entrepreneurship as "jumping off a cliff and assembling an airplane on the way down."
- Before founding LinkedIn, Hoffman worked at Apple and was an executive at PayPal, where he earned the nickname "The Firefighter" for solving complex problems.
- LinkedIn took 500 days to reach its first 500,000 users, but today it boasts over 1 billion members globally.



CORY CARTER JR.

Founder of
CORY'S PRODUCE LLC

Fresh homegrown fruits & vegetables



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

A: Cory's Produce LLC started with a cute little kid sitting on a street selling vegetables I grew in my backyard. I converted an old jet ski trailer into a produce stand. I used donated lumber from my neighbors on the West End of Davenport. From there, the first season of Cory's Produce was underway. As the years have progressed, I have grown bigger and bigger both in my customer base and in my physical appearance. I'm no longer that cute little 13-year-old kid. That being reality, (I'm not really much taller unfortunately) my mentality has also changed to more of a mature business mentality with a soft spot for the west-enders who helped me be successful.

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

A: The challenge facing Cory's Produce in Iowa is finding usable and affordable ground to grow on. My main goal is to save enough money for a downpayment on a small acreage. Tied to this goal are the long-range plans of generational change! I WILL be the first person in my family to go to college where I plan to pursue an education to be an Ag teacher. I WILL generate enough income to purchase a tractor with a 3-PT because farming by hand is not easy work, and I WILL contribute to my savings account with

the hopes of being able to put a down payment on a piece of land for future expansion. This season of Cory's Produce has the vision and goal of looking much further down the road than my previous self and working my butt off in the garden to generate the income that is necessary to achieve that goal.

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

A: To take my produce business to the next level, I want to keep growing with heart—reaching more people who need fresh food, building strong relationships in my community, and always remembering why I started: to feed more mouths and help the world. It's not just about business, it's about making a real difference.

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

A: Since the beginning, I have had the desire to “grow” the business each year. Little by little, there have been mentors, donations, equipment investments, and a wealth of knowledge not found in a classroom building up to this season.



SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If you can help with Cory's vision, email him at 09corycarter14@gmail.com or show your support by visiting his Facebook page.

Q: How can someone support your vision?

A: Come find me at one of my 7 locations and purchase some produce! Visit me at the Freight House Farmers market in Downtown Davenport, IA every Saturday and Sunday from May through Halloween.



NATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR

KENNETH COLE

Kenneth Cole®
NEW YORK



When Style Meets Strategy: How Kenneth Cole Built a Brand From a Truck and a Bold Idea

Kenneth Cole's journey into fashion entrepreneurship began with a bold and unconventional move. In 1982, eager to launch his first line of shoes but lacking the budget for a showroom at New York's Market Week, Cole ingeniously registered a film production company—“Kenneth Cole Productions”—and parked a truck two blocks from the trade show, selling 40,000 pairs of shoes in two and a half days. That resourceful spirit set the tone for his brand, blending fashion with purpose. Cole went on to build a globally recognized company, known not only for its sleek designs but also for championing social causes like AIDS awareness, homelessness, and mental health—proving that style and substance can go hand in hand.

FUN FACTS ABOUT KENNETH COLE AND HIS BRAND

- The brand was launched from a trailer in 1982 under the name Kenneth Cole Productions—a clever workaround to park on a NYC street during Market Week by claiming to be filming a documentary.
- In just 2.5 days, Cole sold over 40,000 pairs of shoes from that trailer, kickstarting his now-iconic brand.
- In 2005, Kenneth Cole was named Humanitarian of the Year by the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA).



BLACK
-KENNETH COLE

COURTNEY STUTT & TYLER MCINTIRE

Co-Owners of The Learning Garden

Child care service focused on play-based learning and nature exploration

LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR



Continued..

remains at the heart of their entrepreneurial journey: how do you sustainably grow a mission-driven business without losing the culture, quality, and personal connection that made it successful in the first place?



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

A: When St. Ambrose University announced the closure of its long-standing Children's Campus in early 2025, we knew dozens of families and teachers would lose not just a school, but a trusted community. As former staff members, we understood the urgent need to preserve this program for families. Within 3 months, we secured the building, created The Learning Garden, and reopened with only a two-week break in care for families. Our vision was to protect the roots planted by St. Ambrose while growing something new—an independent center grounded in community, nature, and family partnerships

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

A: The Learning Garden offers full-time care and early education with tuition rates that balance affordability with the true cost of high-quality care. Weekly tuition ranges from \$310 for infants and one-year-olds to \$260 for pre-kindergarten students. These rates include competitive teacher wages, safe and engaging environments, fresh curriculum, and ongoing improvements. To expand access, the center also accepts Iowa Child Care Assistance and Friendly House scholarships.

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

A: Like many in the child care industry, The Learning Garden faces challenges, particularly staffing shortages, rising operating costs, and limited state funding. Sustaining growth while keeping tuition affordable remains the greatest hurdle. Yet with the demand for child care in the Quad Cities far exceeding available slots, the

opportunity for growth is just as great. The Learning Garden hopes to become a model program for the region and, eventually, expand into new locations by partnering with local employers, schools, and community organizations.

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

A: To take the business to the next level, the founders are focused on securing additional funding to improve facilities and outdoor learning spaces, investing in staff development and competitive wages, building stronger systems for marketing and administration, and exploring expansion opportunities in nearby communities.

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

A: As The Learning Garden grows, the founders welcome support in the form of financial partnerships, grant opportunities, and community connections with employers who might sponsor child care spots for their employees. They also seek expert guidance in scaling operations, especially in real estate, HR, and financial planning. And while they've proven they can overcome enormous challenges, one question



The Learning Garden
Est. 2025

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

If you can help with Courtney & Tyler's vision, email them at courtney@thelearninggardenllc.com or show your support by visiting their website at <https://thelearninggardenllc.com>.

NATIONAL ENTREPRENEUR



TOBI LUTKE

Shopify's entrepreneurial journey began in 2004 when Tobias Lütke, a German programmer living in Canada, set out to launch an online snowboard store. Frustrated by the lack of good e-commerce software, Lütke wrote his own—and soon realized the software was the real business opportunity. He pivoted from selling snowboards to selling the platform itself, founding Shopify with co-founders Scott Lake and Daniel Weinand. The company grew steadily by empowering small businesses to launch their own online stores, focusing on simplicity, design, and scalability. Shopify weathered challenges like early funding struggles and competition from tech giants, ultimately going public in 2015. Today, it powers millions of merchants worldwide and has become a pillar of the modern creator and e-commerce economy—all rooted in a snowboarder's quest to sell gear online.

HOW ONE SNOWBOARDER CODED HIS WAY INTO E-COMMERCE HISTORY

Tobias Lütke, a German-born programmer, didn't set out to build a tech giant—he just wanted to sell snowboards online. Unsatisfied with existing e-commerce platforms, he coded his own and quickly realized that others needed the same solution. That simple need turned into Shopify, now one of the most powerful platforms for entrepreneurs and small businesses across the globe.



SIERRA STEINES



Owner of **DAY BY DAY MERCANTILE**

A shopping & event venue
that will make you feel as special as
grandma did

FORTRESS SIDE HUSTLER



Q: How did you develop your business idea and get started?

A: I have always been driven by the idea of making a positive impact. I knew I wanted to own my own business one day, and after baby number one, I realized life wasn't going to slow down for us—there would never be a perfect time. So, I ran with it! I started writing my business plan in August of 2024, signed my lease and began renovations in November, and officially opened our doors on February 13, 2025. The business is inspired by my late grandmother, Verna, who passed away in July of 2022 but continues to inspire me every single day. Whether it was sipping coffee and reading the newspaper in the morning or enjoying cocktails around her kitchen table while laughing the night away, her home was always a warm and welcoming place. Countless memories were made around that kitchen table, and those are the experiences I strive to create for others. Grandma's favorite saying was, 'Take it day by day,' and those are the words we continue to live by..

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

A: Working full-time, growing my business, being a parent, and supporting my farmer husband with his side business—it's truly a constant balancing act! We've learned to thrive in the chaos and accept that there will always be a never-ending to-do list. I've been fortunate to receive incredible support from my co-workers and team. Knowing there are people in your corner, rooting for you every step of the way, makes juggling it all so much easier.



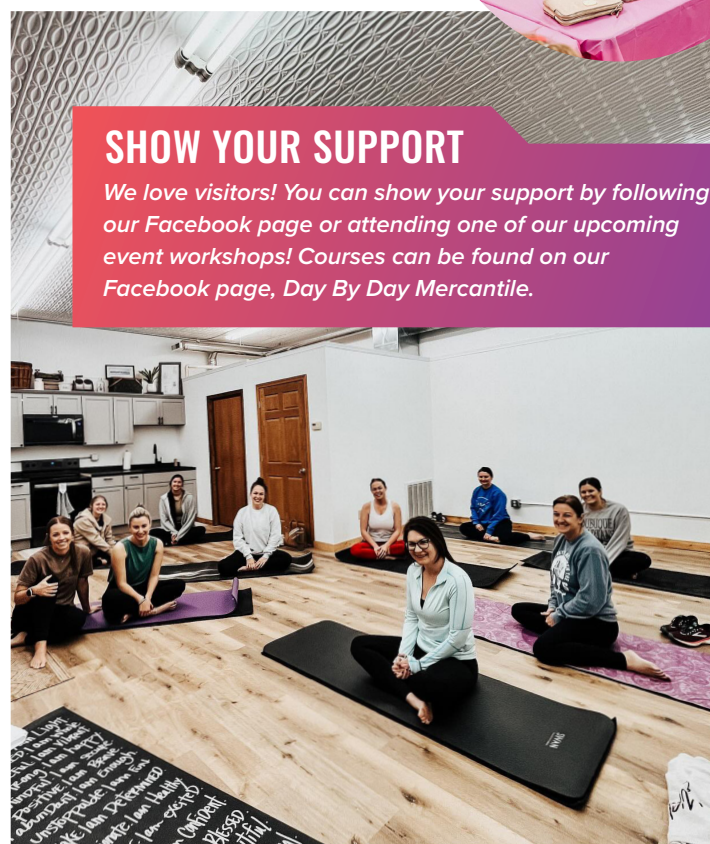
Q: How has owning a business given you a different perspective while working at Fortress Bank?

A: Owning my own business has humbled me in many ways. I've come to understand the importance of embracing innovation, networking as much as possible, and—most of all—accepting mistakes as part of the journey. With mistakes come knowledge and growth! One of my favorite parts has been connecting through our Business Club and hearing the stories of other entrepreneurs. While we may all be at different points in our journeys, there's so much relatability in the struggles and triumphs that business owners face across industries.



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