

GRAIN, WATER, AND YEAST
Full interview transcript

Guest: Megan McKay
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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JD: What makes you proud to be an Iowan? Why did you choose to make this your adult home?

MM: I think the basics of that are really just the people, and the quality of people that are in Iowa. They tend to be very honest and straightforward, hardworking. There's a real sense of community, neighbors helping neighbors, I don't think you have to, you know, you can trust people, for the most part, in ways that you maybe you can't in other areas. It just made it a very attractive place to raise a family, and also be very comfortable and kind of set a good foundation so that, you know, I think if things are safe and easy in your foundation then it's easier to go out and do something crazy like start a brewery because you've got that safety net where you've got a firm rock to stand on as you're jumping off.

JD: People have your back.

MM: Exactly, yeah.

JD: Well, maybe we'll start with your childhood, and I know you've talked in other interviews about your dad being a real influence on you, embracing change and things. What is your dad's biggest influence on you growing up in Iowa?

MM: I think my dad's biggest influence was just really watching him work in the insurance agency and the way that he treated his customers and his employees, and then the way that he interacted with us at home; that ability to run a business, build a business, take it over from his family and make sure that third generation carried on, sometimes by making some hard choices. I'm not always sure I was aware of those as a kid but you could tell that he was pushing to make that better and having a higher standard than maybe what had been there before. And then, just that same feeling of, obviously it was a family business, but there were a lot of non-family members in it, but it was very much a group effort. People helped each other out and cared about each other, and they were there for a long time – it wasn't like there were new people every year at the agency Christmas party or anything. I think the other thing I really got from him was that work-family balance. You're gonna work hard, there's gonna be some times when you have to go into the office on Saturday morning or you have to kind of be there late at night to go see a customer or take a trip, travel. But on the other hand, maybe you can take off at 3:30 to go coach your kids' soccer, or show up for the basketball game, or take a family vacation, or all those sorts of things. I think those were things that really rooted me as attractive in a lifestyle as far as having a work-life balance.

JD: And you grew up in the country or in town?

MM: I grew up primarily in the country until about sixth grade. We lived out in Painted Rocks, which is really close, actually, to my mom's family home, which was in the town of Red Rock, or right outside the town of Red Rock, which is now Lake Red Rock. I felt extremely fortunate. We grew up in a little neighborhood, but it was ten miles outside of town. You could walk over to the painted rocks that overlook the lake, you could walk around in the forests. We spent a lot of time with the other kids in the neighborhood, building forts or making little towns within the forest to kind of hang out in. On the other hand, we also had our kickball field, and we would sell, I think we would make little pieces of driftwood that we'd paint with ground-up red rocks and our neighbors would actually stop and buy them from us on the way home from work. It was just really silly, stupid things, but again, it was like that extended village or family atmosphere that I grew up in out there. It was pretty magical, actually. We'd get snowed in together, and somebody would have a snowmobile and inevitably have to meet someone out on the highway to pick up the groceries and bring them back into the neighborhood just because we were that far from the highway. So again, kind of that idea of just community, people caring about each other outside of that traditional family unit. And that was a lot of fun and a big safety net, but we were free to go out and explore and look around in the woods and appreciate the natural world around us, too.

JD: So, looking back, was the driftwood sort of a sign that you'd be an entrepreneur?

MM: It probably was, I don't think about that so much, but I think we painted driftwood, which I'm sure was fantastic, I hope there's relics somewhere in the world of that. We also started a newspaper and we did word finds, and I think we had a little article in it, and we would type it on one of our parents' typewriters. We might have only done that once, it was a lot of work and we weren't very good at typing at age eight, or whatever it was. But yeah, I think we were always looking for ways to kind of do something different and solve a problem that we thought existed. People needed to know the Painted Rocks news for the week, and whatever else.

JD: Painted Rocks News?

MM: Yeah.

JD: What do you remember about your mom growing up? What did she teach you about Iowa values?

MM: My mom also was a very hard-working person. I don't think anybody can really outwork her, if it was around the house and getting things done and just a really high standard of making sure that things looked nice. She worked outside the home – she was nurse when I was born, but, took a little bit of time off and went back to be a school nurse, so she kind of had mom hours, which was great. She always put family first, as far as making sure we were well-fed, had great meals at home, making sure we were getting back and forth to our activities, but I think also kept up her professional work as well, which I think was a good role model thing for me to see. She didn't just give up everything for her kids and family, she kind of had both roles going on. But again, that really good family balance. I think the thing she always instilled in me was really just that idea of having good integrity. She was very strong on that, do what you say you're gonna do, be there when you say you're gonna be there, all those good things.

JD: So, later on, we'll get into this more a bit later on, possibly, I'm curious where your sources of confidence came from as a business woman. You had this idea that we'll talk about in a bit, starting an all-female mechanics shop in California, and I was curious if that was something you sort of came to on your own or if you see those roots of confidence and power, independence, in your mother. Is that where you learned that?

MM: Yeah, I would say she's very much an independent person, very much had her own ideas about how to do things. And I think there's that whole childhood, growing up my best friend, Melissa coke was out there and as two young girls we could pretty much figure out what we wanted to do. We were very supported by our parents. I never got any sense from my dad that there wasn't any reason I couldn't take over the business at some point. I'm not sure it was ever discussed or encouraged or anything like that, but I never felt held back or anything along those lines. And I think just that idea again of that firm foundation of community, I'm not saying I was, or still am, the most confident person in the world, but you can fail a little bit and people aren't gonna just kill you for it. They're gonna try to help you out and get you to the next level and maybe dust you off a bit and help you build that confidence, or let you fail a little bit so you can build that confidence yourself. And I think that's the longer lasting, stronger bit of confidence maybe, too, instead of – you know, there's people who have it innately, but I don't think I was necessarily one of those people, but have built it slowly over time through outside influences and just good experiences through the years.

JD: So, relationships, community, is a source of strength, it's not just within yourself?

MM: Yeah, I would definitely say so.

JD: And you have a son, Urban?

MM: I have a son, Urban, he's ten.

JD: And are you sort of teaching him the same things that you learned growing up?

MM: Yeah, I really – it's a really interesting to run a brewery and be a mom and all these other things. I really try to instill in him that if we get to go and do something it's because we worked for it, and we had to work for that to be able to get it. There are times when "Hey Urban, we can't go do this today because I need to go to work, so if you come and help me do this, then I can help you get to football" or do those sorts of things. I really try to instill that lesson that you're not really entitled to anything, you're not given anything, you've gotta put some effort in and whatever effort you put in, you'll get back. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not in five minutes, but in the long run, kind of see that long view. I also think it's very important he understands kinda how to treat people and how to have those relationships and that it's not just showing up and being the boss, it's showing up and being a good team member. I think, hopefully, we're making good strides in that. He seems like a pretty good kid so far. I'm waiting for the teenage years.

JD: Everybody dreads those. With my girls, too.

MM: Yes.

JD: I'm curious, also, if there's anything different that you're doing with Urban to fill a gap that maybe you felt like you had, because I know you went away for a while, and maybe that's just a natural thing for kids to do?

MM: There's a presidential alert, Josh. Sorry, I just thought you should know that.

JD: Alright, thank you. Airplane mode.

MM: Thank you, President Trump.

JD: So, I don't know, when we talk about California, it might be interesting to hear if you went there because you feel like you were lacking something in Iowa or if you just needed a change of scenery, but do you feel like you try to help him see something in Iowa you didn't see when you were growing up?

MM: Yeah, I think I do a little bit. I kind of force him to do some things sometimes that are outside his comfort zone a little bit because I think sometimes as Iowans we can get a little stuck in our mold, and we do that a few different ways. One is by making sure that we have experiences that are not typically Iowan. Whether it's going after a baseball game – he wanted ice cream, and the closest place I found was the Mexican market, so we went and had ice cream from the Mexican market and everything was in Spanish and it was very much not a typical Iowa experience. I think it's important for him to see things like that. He loves to get his hair cut, he's kinda into haircuts and shoes, and so one day I took him to the American Barber College, which was pretty much mostly African American. We were two of the only Caucasian people in there. It was, again, just a really good experience for him to see that there are different people that are just as nice, just as friendly, give just as good a haircut as anybody else. He doesn't see that as like Iowa is this one color, one thing, one experience, but that there are multiple peoples from multiple backgrounds. I'm not sure I got that as much when I was growing up. My parents were very good about travelling with us or going out to different restaurants if it was possible; there weren't as many I think back then as there are now, obviously. So I do also try to – every year he and I go on a trip and I let him choose the destination, and now that he can read and look things up he actually has to research a little bit, figure out the route, maybe figure out some things along the way, but I think by going out and seeing other things and seeing other parts of the world, when you come home it helps you appreciate or compare and contrast what you can really appreciate about being here versus maybe some things in other places. We might not have a pro football team, but we don't have any traffic issues. We might not have a huge art gallery, but we have a little small one that's easy to get into, and it's less expensive, and those sorts of things. Even things like cost of living, we talk about that, or when we travel different places, what it would be like to live there versus what it's like here. I think those are really good lessons for kids to help them appreciate what they have after seeing what else is out there.

JD: And I guess you'll see if any of that matters in the teenage years.

MM: Yeah, we'll see.

JD: Well, speaking of your teenage years, you graduated from Knoxville High School in '91, is that right?

MM: Yup.

JD: Then you left pretty soon after for California to be a nanny.

MM: Yeah, so in that whole graduation thing – I was active in high school, I was busy, I took all my classes and I was done with my requirements by semester in my senior year, and so, there was kinda the option of sticking around and working at Pizza Hut, which I was doing, or going to college early, which I wasn't really interested in, because I wanted to start when my normal peers were starting, or my mom suggested maybe I should go get a job as a nanny. So, basically, I filled that time between January of '91 until I was supposed to come back to college by taking a job with a nannying firm out of Nebraska, so, good Midwestern firm, but they place people in east coast or west coast, and I ended up going out to the San Francisco Bay area to be a nanny. And that was kind of what propelled me out of there. I wouldn't really say there was a ton of forethought to it, or "oh, hey, I'm getting out of here." I had planned to go to UNI, it wasn't like I was going far for college. I think another thing – my mom was always very encouraging about trying new things, having different experiences, so it seemed like a great opportunity to try something new, see another part of the country, save some money for school, and just kind of have that as I went into college.

JD: So you weren't trying to fill a void or run away from anything necessarily?

MM: No, I really don't feel like that was the case. I would say once I was out and away, it was somewhat freeing to be able to just kind of be your own person and not have the confines of being that kid who grew up in Knoxville who you always were. You could kind of experience new things, whether it was art, music – the Bay area had lots of different cultures, that sort of thing. Once I was out there, I think it made it harder to come back and say "well, I'm gonna go back to UNI. I had no idea what I wanted to study, what I wanted to do, so I might as well stay out here where it's more interesting and I can do some different things while I'm figuring that out.

JD: What did you expect California to be?

MM: I think from just the landscape and the opportunities for more metropolitan people and lifestyles and that sort of thing, was really attractive. I loved San Francisco, it was a great place to come of age, just from the standpoint of you could be in Chinatown, and then in a ten minute walk you could be in Little Italy, and then a ten minute walk and you could be in the financial district. Within an hour, you could drive down the coast and have this beautiful, very dramatic, crashing coastline, and enjoy the natural part of the country as well. But yeah, I think it was kind of all those things, and just having that sense of freedom, where growing up, that's the blessing of a small town that everybody knows you and there's a solid foundation but you're also kind of like "you're Megan McKay, you're an insurance agent's daughter and this is what you're supposed to do and here's your next steps all laid out," and that can be a little cloying sometimes.

JD: And if you had an embarrassing nickname in third grade then everybody remembers you that way.

MM: It stuck forever.

JD: Was there anything about California that didn't fit that picture you had of it?

MM: No, I think I was pretty open-minded. I tend to do pretty well with suspending a lot of expectations. It was nice, the family that I went to work for was also – CJ, the mom, was from Nebraska. Her husband was actually from Jamaica, he was a triple jumper in the Olympics. They were insurance agents, they had a pretty middle-class life. Their house was very similar to our home in Knoxville. They had two kids – it wasn't really shockingly different. They lived in a suburb, I wasn't in a city when I first went there. It was probably more the same than really a lot different, to be honest with you. I think the different part was then being able to meet some of the other nannies and go off and do different things in the city, and obviously, Des Moines is great but it's no San Francisco. So, just being able to experience that was a lot of fun. But yeah, I don't know if I had really strong expectations about what that would or would not be. But I think you just realize not everybody thinks as similarly, people are a little more open-minded, a little more "yeah, go off and make your way" because a lot of people had come there because that's what they had done, they didn't necessarily grow up there and stay.

JD: Do you think you would have maybe had more expectations if you were not looking at it as this temporary experience but if you were actually going there to get away from Iowa?

MM: Yeah, I think if that had been a more conscious choice, I mean, when I was interviewing with the nanny agency, my full expectation was that I was going to New York or Connecticut or Massachusetts or something like that, so that was kind of in my mind where I was going, and it would be this large house with a manicured lawn, and probably a housekeeper and some other things, you know, kind of all the trappings of a family that would have a nanny. And instead I ended up in this very laid back California town with a couple from the Midwest who were very middle class and the only reason they needed a nanny was because their son had a heart defect and couldn't go to daycare. And so, it wasn't out of excess money or anything like that, it was more a family need, very practical, and I think that fit very well with where I was coming from, too.

JD: Flipping that around, did you feel like California people or Californians had any expectations of you as an Iowan? Did they have views of Iowa?

MM: Yeah, I think so. Later, after I was there for a while, I ended being a nanny after nine months. I was supposed to come back to school and my contract was up, so I had moved on. I can remember I worked for a woman who was – she lived in California for a long time. I wanna say she grew up in New York, she was Puerto Rican, she was really nice, but I remember her saying "oh, you're just a nice Midwestern girl and you're gonna go back there someday." Or I had some friends who would be like "well you're gonna go home and marry some guy with a big truck." And it was like really? I don't know if that's really the case. On the other hand, I'm

looking at my fiancé's big truck sitting in the parking, and here I am, so. They might have seen something that I didn't at that time, or maybe I was working hard to shed those small town, too-nice-middle-United-States roots, I don't know.

JD: Heartland, wholesome values?

MM: Exactly, yeah. I think there's a need to kind of – I think, one of the things we'll talk about later is just what do people think of the Midwest, and I think they see us as very simple and, wholesome is a nice word, but sometimes I think they see it also as simple-minded or not very worldly, all those things, and I think I probably worked hard to try and overcome that sometimes and so it was offensive when someone said "oh, you're just gonna go back and live in your small Midwest town because you can't hang in the big city. You're not able to do it."

JD: Do you think in that context, if someone thinks of you, in their words, as a nice, Midwest girl, is nice code for not interesting?

MM: Yes, I think that's very true. I think that's a great way to put that. And I think people are often surprised by that, that in the Midwest you can be interesting and cultured and have some ideas and thoughts or have art in your house or listen to music other than country western. There's a lot more variety and background here than I think people realize sometimes. Or even than we realize, ourselves.

JD: And that brings me to something we talked about before, this idea of Midwestern modesty, that even before someone else can make those assumptions, at least I've found, a lot of people from Iowa or the Midwest will sort of lead with that, "I'm just a simple person," or "my story isn't really that interesting because I'm from Iowa." Where do you think that comes from? It doesn't sound like you were taught that by your parents.

MM: Well, I think subconsciously we are, a little bit. You're not gonna step on people to get ahead, you're not gonna boast about who you are or what you're doing, it's more kind of, "I'm gonna be a nice good person and fit in with the crowd a little bit instead of pushing ahead." Does that make sense? I think our family maybe was a little more worldly than some, we traveled and we did different things, but on the other hand I think there was very much a – we would fit in, and we came from very modest Midwestern roots. If you look back a generation or two as well.

JD: I've sometimes wondered if that stance of modesty is more of kind of like you're saying you don't want to seem like you're above anyone else, so you sort of lower your own profile to not make anyone else feel left out or bad or whatever, and I just wonder if that gets internalized at a certain point and you start really believing it as opposed to something that's externally polite now becomes part of the story that you tell about yourself. It's not better than anyone else, it could perhaps erode your confidence, is what I'm assuming.

MM: Yeah, yeah, I think you have a point there, for sure.

JD: But you've found ways of overcoming that?

MM: I think you have to. I mean I think I still struggle with it from the standpoint of, right now, I lead – it's a small company, but I have a very public company, so it's important that I'm out promoting what we're doing and promoting our products and promoting our story because I think that's what people connect with. They connect with the beer but they also connect with the story, and so it's very counter-my normal persona or who I am, to be very outwardly forward about who I am, "here's what we're doing, et cetera, et cetera." You do have to kind of counteract that a bit. I think it'll be interesting to see as you see more competition, more things coming into the Midwest, more outsiders coming in, if all of us shift a little bit that way, realizing that you kind of have to be a little more self-promoting to get what's due, not only to you but to your staff, to your group or your tribe, whatever you wanna say.

JD: It's interesting that's how you describe it to me, when we first talked about this, it wasn't your favorite thing to be at the mic or on camera.

MM: No.

JD: But that you sort of owed it to all your employees or your community, your family, your Peace Tree family, to be out there doing that. Is that accurate, that it's not something that you would sort of accept naturally, but it's also not something that in your mind you're not doing for yourself as much as for everybody involved in this?

MM: Yeah, I think that's true. I think it's a hard balance. And now that you're saying that you can think about a hundred different ways. My sense would be it's be easier for me to just kind of be quiet and stick around and do my job, but I don't think that's fair to give our organization the best chance or to give my town the best chance. I guess I do feel some sense of responsibility as a business owner, and as somebody who grew up here, and as somebody who has a child who goes to school here, and hopefully would potentially come back someday. If we wanna give ourselves the best chance, sometimes you have to go out and toot your own horn a little bit. And it feels very – it doesn't feel very great most of the time, but at the end of the day, I think I'm reflective enough about it that I hope I don't come off sounding arrogant or overly-enthusiastic about it, but that also my staff and my community have enough, they see enough of that that they feel like someone's pulling for them, or pushing forward for them so they wanna jump on the train and help me do it. Does that make sense?

JD: Totally. Circling back to California, you said you want to talk about Peace Tree and your work philosophy and how that's come together for you, but long before you got involved with Peace Tree, you had this dream of an all-women mechanic shop. So, you went from being a nanny to mechanic school. Tell me how that happened.

MM: I think if there's anything in my life that you'd notice is a pattern is that I make some pretty strange jumps. What is that – openness to experience, I think? I rate pretty high on that. So I was a nanny, and then decided not to come back to school because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, my friends at the time, another one was a nanny, she was also sticking around, and I think we wanted to better ourselves, so we decided to start going to community college. I had another friend who, well, we had crappy cars – that was part of it – we were young and poor and all of us had crappy cars that would break down all the time, and as a young female, I think you always

felt like you were being taken advantage of; did it really need a new clutch or did it just need a little work? Does it really need new brakes or is it just the pads? And you just didn't know. It was this lack of information and knowledge, and it wasn't something you grow up learning about, because you just don't get taught that necessarily. Shame on us for not asking to be taught, I guess. But, there's pretty clear gender roles, I think, too, when you grow up in the Midwest sometimes. So, we decided that we'd take mechanics classes, partially just because I thought "Well, hey, I can learn a little bit and then at least be a better-informed consumer." I enjoyed it, and then the more I got to thinking about it, it was like "Well, if I'm having this problem, I mean, who's really getting the cars fixed?" And again, when you think about early nineties, I think men were still mostly the breadwinners, especially in the Bay Area – you had a lot of stay-at-home moms. They're the ones who're getting the cars fixed, buying the groceries, doing the house stuff. They're the consumer, but yet, the auto shops aren't really catering to who the consumer is. It seemed like not a big leap to say "Why don't we have more female-oriented auto shops?" Where we could really explain things, maybe not fully educate them on it but at least give them a good sense of comfort, tell them how it works so they can do better preventative maintenance, and kind of build those relationships to have a great auto mechanics shop that would be filling that need, I guess. Does that make sense? It sounds kinda crazy, but I think it would work.

JD: No, it totally makes sense, because it seems like you became aware of this entrepreneurial problem, or the problem that entrepreneurship would solve, because of your vantage point as a nanny because in that, for lack of a better word, domestic role, you're seeing other women in the same role who were the ones getting the car fixed, potentially being taken advantage of, or constantly being in these awkward situations and so it wasn't like a completely random thing.

MM: Yeah, there was a need. There was a problem that needed to be solved in my mind. I think there's a lot of different ways to solve it. But I tend to be pretty hands on, too, so that was kind of interesting – "I don't know what else I'm gonna do. Might as well be an auto mechanic."

JD: And you actually went to work as a mechanic?

MM: I did. So I worked in the shop, in the tool room at the college. I was the tool person.

JD: And this is Contra Costa?

MM: Contra Costa Community College, yeah. So that kind of got me in there. I ended up tutoring some of the other guys in the mechanics classes. I think that was also really eye-opening to me. Here are these people that are in this technical college and they don't have basic math or reading skills. And so, how can they go out and be successful and do that? I was always a good student. This was really probably – the mechanics part wasn't that hard, it was more the physical part of it, just not being awkward. I helped do that, and I was seen as a leader in my class that way. And then there was an internship that opened up at the Z Doctor, which was a Nissan – they worked on Nissan 280 Zs, 240 Zs, all those. So I got that internship and then ended up working for them full time. I think I didn't actually finish school. I was kind of finishing and then I went to work for them full time and I had one more class to take before I came home.

JD: And how long was all of this in California?

MM: I was there almost four years. I went to school for about a year and a half and then I worked for them for probably not quite a year.

JD: Okay. And you had some allergies to the chemicals or the solvent?

MM: Yeah, so I was, well and of course, you know, I was trying to make ends meet, going to school, working, all these things, and so I would work during the day at the mechanic shop and then I would clean up quick and I would go to my waitressing job. I started to notice, especially toward the end of the week, that my hands and my face and my arms would just be really red and swollen. It was some kind of an allergic reaction, and the only thing I could ever pinpoint it to was probably the solvents and the things we were using in the mechanics shop. And it just kinda felt like maybe that wasn't gonna be a long-term solution. And then around the same time some other things happened and I ended up moving home. SO that kind of put a small stall to that. Although, when I came back to Iowa, I originally looked for mechanics jobs, I did. I had a decent resume and good references, and I had been a hard worker, no problem. But, I applied to probably four or five car dealerships or nicer mechanics shops and either did not get a call back or was told that they had a nice job in the service adviser role or something like that. Which I think is also entry level but I think they were also kind of like, "We are not putting a woman back there in the mechanics shop," you know? Either because they didn't think I could do it, or they were worried I needed protection or, I don't know. It was very interesting.

JD: Was that sort of what got you thinking about coming home? The allergy, or you just didn't feel like that was panning out?

MM: I think it was a whole lot of things. I think it was – you know I think we all kind of figure out where we fit the best and at a certain point when things aren't fitting, it causes a lot of stress. I like California, I like a lot of things about it, but I would say I wasn't super comfortable there. There was a harshness and kind of – you kinda had to put on that city face where you don't look people in the eye. You don't say good morning. You're not kind. You're always watching your back a little bit because people will take advantage of you.

JD: Did that ever happen to you?

MM: Yeah, it did, in different ways. Whether it was a homeless person on the street, and then you'd always see the same person and you'd have to harden yourself to it, or friends who you thought were your friends, but they'd kind of figure out ways to take advantage of different things, whether it was money or friendships or whatever. Really the big breaking point was when I got held up at a Denny's. I was the one walking out, and the guy with the gun grabbed me and walked me back in and I think the next day I called my dad and said, "I'm ready to be done. I think I need to come home."

JD: What were you thinking when that happened? Just a typical night – you're in the Denny's and then suddenly – can you take me there for a minute?

MM: Um, yeah, you know I would probably say I was just at a point of no direction about what I was doing next. It was like “well, I can’t really do this forever. I can’t be a mechanic in this shop, in this neighborhood, forever. This is stressful.” I mean, it was “Hey, don’t stop at the stop sign. Make sure you leave yourself some room so if someone tries to carjack you, or whatever else, you can get away.” You know, those aren’t things you think about in Knoxville, Iowa, when you’re growing up.

JD: Right.

MM: So, just stuff like that, where it wasn’t safe from an environmental standpoint. To, at work, it was making me physically not feel good, ill. I’m not a wimpy person, but it was like physically just not working for me.

JD: How did you get out of that holdup at the Denny’s?

MM: He walked me back in and just kind of let me go, and then they went around and ransacked the place and looked for the safe and whatever else, and then they ran off and left. I think that was a pretty common thing. This was Oakland, Emeryville, California, and I think they would just come in and just scare people and grab what they could and run.

JD: Is that something that you had to – does that still come back to you? Did that take you a while to...

MM: Um, I think it certainly comes up. I don’t think I have long-lasting issues around it. It’s more that I don’t tell a lot of people about it, more from the standpoint of, it’s a big deal, but it’s not that big of a deal. I was probably gonna come back to Iowa anyway, that was just the straw that broke the camel’s back, on top of all these other few things that were going on. It was time to grow up. It was time to go to real school and get a real job and have some kind of career path. That was probably the bigger part of it.

JD: That wasn’t a huge climactic event, it was just a combination?

MM: It was, but it wasn’t. That’s the best way to put it. But I think that whole experience and that whole lifestyle – I mean, you look back at that neighborhood, and kind of what was going on. It’s given me something I can never give away. When people are sitting around a room and talking about politics or those sorts of things and in Iowa, we don’t think about all of those kind of safety issues or socioeconomic status issues. We obviously have our own things here, but, man, nothing like that. I’ve never been in a situation like that. We just don’t have that here. I mean, you can go to the worst neighborhood in Des Moines and it’s nothing compared to Oakland.

JD: Right. Well, so you came back to Iowa. What was next?

MM: Basically, I didn’t know what I was gonna do because it was really quick decision. I applied for a few jobs at car mechanics, those sorts of things, and was just kind of trying to figure out what I was gonna do next. I ended up working for my dad for the summer. I worked at

the golf course. I was a bartender. I ended up going that fall to Kirkwood Community College. And then also because I was working for my dad – he'd won a trip to Paris for one agent to go and no one else really wanted to pay for another person to go and nobody else really cared. Since I was technically working at the agency, I got to go to Paris. It was my first trip abroad, so everything all worked out. I know, that sounds kind of crazy, but that's life.

JD: And then there was another complex set of events that brought you back to Knoxville?

MM: Right. So, I went to Kirkwood, worked up there, and ended up going to the University of Iowa. I finished school, worked, all that good stuff. I'd been out of college about a year or so, couple years maybe, and my aunt passed the year before – she was my dad's office manager at the insurance agency. I made a choice at that time not to move home. And then the following year – a year, year and a half later – my dad's business partner and brother died suddenly of a heart attack. My dad, once again, kind of asked if it was time to come home. I just remember kind of looking at him and going, "What do you need? What can I do?" And I really meant it from the standpoint of, "I will get you through what you need to get through so that the business could be stable and whatever else." I didn't have licenses for insurance. I hadn't really worked in it as a professional, any of those things. I'm up for a new thing and willing to work and figure it out, and my dad just – it was a big blow to lose two siblings and two key business partners within a year and a half of each other. It just seemed like the right thing to do, to come back and figure out how to help him get through it in whatever way.

JD: Right. And you were in the middle of a house search?

MM: Yeah, to make the story even more unbelievable, I had been laid off that Tuesday before my uncle passed away. I was working in a software company doing sales support. They decided to bring that all back in-house in Canada instead of letting people work from their homes, so I was let go, and then that afternoon I was supposed to close on a house with my fiancé at the time, so we called that off. And then that Sunday, my uncle passed. So, here I was, pretty much at the end of my apartment lease, no job, and my dad really needs somebody in Knoxville. So, I came.

JD: All the pieces.

MM: Yeah.

JD: So, you worked with your father and his insurance business for a while?

MM: I did. I ended up – so Scott and I ended up changing our wedding plans, and we ended up getting married in Knoxville, instead. My dad pretty much told him whatever job he wanted in Knoxville, he'd get it for him and Scott wanted to come back and work in the agency as well. So he kind of got a two-for-one deal. We dug in, got licensed, all the things we needed to do, and just kind of committed to being insurance agents, helping run the agency, and kind of planned to do that until we retired.

JD: You got your MBA in that period, or you'd already done that?

MM: I came back in 2000, and then 2003, I was feeling a little lack of confidence, back to that a little bit, about my skills to be able to run the agency if my dad was no longer there. My undergrad degree was in human resources, management of organizations, so I felt I was very good on the softer side of business and organization structure and that sort of thing. It didn't feel like I had the finance and accounting as much as I needed to. I think just from a confidence building standpoint, I wanted to go back and kind of have a bigger challenge of a different set of peers to push me forward a bit. So, I went back and did my executive MBA.

JD: Was it during the MBA program or your undergraduate – you had this personal development class, I think, that gave you a kind of mission statement?

MM: That was actually my undergrad. This sounds bad, but I really flailed about until, well, probably age 41 or so, just trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I think sometimes you look at people and you think, "Oh, they're gonna go be an English professor, or go do sales, or do whatever." I never knew what I wanted to do. Like I don't think I even had a clear thought of being, "This is exactly how I'm gonna spend the rest of my life." When I was in college trying to figure out a major, I didn't necessarily want to just have a business major, so I took classes in anthropology. I took classes in sociology, management organization, some business classes, and at one point was thinking about creating my own major around basically – it pretty much ended up being the management and organizations degree that I got, which was fairly new. One of the classes in that was this personal leadership, personal development. You had to figure out your personal mission statement. For me, that was I wanted to make work better for people. I felt like we spend so much of our day at work, and people pour so much into it that if work is better, they'll do a better job. They'll pour more of themselves into it, but they'll also not pour so much into it and be stressed about it that they'll be better people at home. They'll be better for their families. They'll be better for their communities. They'll be more engaged. All of those things. I felt like if you make work better, it bleeds over into everything else.

JD: And that stuck with you?

MM: It stuck with me forever. It stuck with me very much at the insurance agency. It was like, how can we get rid of double entering a bunch of policy information, because that's just boring and mind-numbing and not fun, and how can we change our work schedules so it fits better with family lifestyle things? How can we do a better job for our clients so that we feel more proud of the work that we're doing? All of those things. And then, in everything else I've done at Peace Tree or anywhere else, it's very much a central focus, I guess, of me.

JD: So, you were working with your father's insurance company with your husband at the time, and you all – did you have an idea for a brewery, or?

MM: So, we had the insurance agency and then we had a property company that owned the insurance agency building. And then when my mom and dad got divorced, my dad was looking for somewhere to live and he was thinking he'd like to live somewhere, you know, inexpensively that was above a commercial unit or whatever, and I found what is now Jacobson Travel building and there was a big apartment upstairs. We bought that with our property company, the three of us, and he lived up there. And then the building next to it was full of junk and just really cruddy

and the guy was selling it on contract to the café owner down the street and the café owner ran off – I don't know what happened. The guy who had the contract was like “You guys own the building next door, you have property across the street, I'll make you a heck of a deal and then I can walk away from this thing because I really don't wanna do this anymore.”

JD: So, it just started with the space?

MM: Yeah, it just started with the space. And it really just started with... the travel agency used to be in the insurance agency and we needed just more room; my dad wanted a place to live. It was just kind of like these weird events that all happened, and then the brewery building came for sale and we bought it, really with the intention of – we thought we'd put some new windows in the front, fix the crappy siding, make sure it had a good roof, put a for rent sign in it and someone would come and wanna rent that and create a business in it, right? And nobody did. A year or so went by, maybe two years, maybe not quite that much, and so we're like, “Well, nobody's gonna be creative to know what to do with this thing.” It was 5,000 square feet on Main Street. It was an open span building because it was an old car dealership. And so, we started brainstorming ideas and came up with like, we didn't really have a nice laundromat in town, people could use indoor storage, and those both seemed really like – they didn't do anything to create jobs or help the community, or it wasn't gonna add any vibrancy to Main Street and so we kinda let those sit. Then my dad read something in the Wall Street Journal one day about breweries, and this is in 2009. This was early 2009 because he had the idea – he said something to Scott. Scott had home-brewed just a little bit, maybe a handful of times. And I knew they were up to something but they never really told me what. So finally, I cornered Scott one day, and I was like, “What are you guys thinking about for this thing?” And Scott's like “Your dad thinks we should start a brewery.” And I'm like, “That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.” So, I went in and I go talk to my dad, and I'm like, “Dad, seriously.” And he's like, “Why not?” And then he threw out the challenge, and this is, you know, this is what always gets me in trouble. He says, “You have your MBA, why don't you go write a business plan?” And so it's like, well, alright. Let's see if this thing has any teeth to it. And it seemed really stupid and really crazy and really far out there, as all good things do in hindsight, but it was perfect for the space. We had a lot of open space. It was good concrete floors. You could have this night front retail taproom space that would be very appealing from Main Street. It would be a place where you could bring tourists in. You could make a product and sell it outside of Knoxville, so we weren't gonna depend on our local economy to support it. It was a place where we could – you know, I think that was the thing where Scott and I actually really miss, and my dad too, from the standpoint of there was nowhere you could go and hang out that was nice, meet people, hear music, see art – have that cultural exchange. That just didn't really exist in Knoxville at the time. I think the Mexican restaurant had opened a couple years before that and it was like, we finally had a place where you could run into your neighbors and your friends and people you didn't see in your normal course of your day. So, there was just really, we felt, a need for that. And so, that was March of '09. We were incorporated at the end of the month. We had the banker on board by April or May. We were off to Boston in May to go to the craft breweries conference and start interviewing and putting jobs out for a brewer. We had most of our equipment picked out.

JD: Is it fair to say that craft brewing was a bigger deal elsewhere – you were kind of on the cusp of it in Iowa, right?

MM: I would say we were very much on the forefront of it. I think there was a resurgence, a renaissance of it, definitely, right around that time – 2008, 2009.

JD: There'd been Raccoon River, Court Avenue. There'd been some places in Des Moines.

MM: Yeah, I think if you look at the bumps. Back in the late eighties, early nineties, there was a little resurgence, which would be like kind of when Raccoon River, Rock Bottom, there was a brewery in Solen at that time, Millstream kind of got its wings then. And then the industry kind of fell off. There was some contraction. Those who made it, made it, but a lot didn't. Then all of a sudden, we were very much on the front of this new expansion. 2008-2009, the economy's terrible, but people are starting to get interested in more locally produced things. I think some of those old holdovers who'd had craft beer from the one who'd started in the nineties and eighties were interested in that again. There were people who were interested in home brewing, those sorts of things. But there were only 1,500 breweries in the U.S. at that time. There were only maybe 25 in Iowa. Only 2 or 3 of them were packaging legitimately, actually putting stuff out on the shelves.

JD: And how many are there now?

MM: Oh man, today, in the United States, I think we're up around 6,500. In Iowa there's over 70 or 80. I feel like every time I say a number it changes the next day. Market share went from like maybe 5% back when we started to today, it's up over 13, 14% if you look at it nationwide.

JD: Market share of the beer industry?

MM: Craft beer, yeah.

JD: So, you've felt like there was a landscape that looked good for you to open that kind of a business?

MM: Yeah. We thought so. I don't know if we knew what we were getting ourselves into, to be honest. We kind of thought we would maybe just throw some haphazard tables in the taproom and we'd make some beer and hang out and our friends would like it and we'd sell a little at the store, and you know, no big deal. It'd just be this thing we did on the side. Create a couple jobs, right?

JD: That sounds good to me.

MM: Seems easy. No big deal. I think what we quickly realized and through our planning process was that, well, if you're gonna put it on the shelves, you've gotta get to a certain size to make that work, because otherwise distributors aren't gonna look at you. I don't think I was as aware of that as I am today, but we kinda thought, oh some distributor will pick us up, no big deal. But it quickly became apparent we needed to be legitimate, or we needed to not do it, or we

needed to just say we're just gonna be a little taproom in Knoxville, Iowa, and serve our local community. And I don't think that would have been a good long-term solution. I just don't think there's enough population here to support it.

JD: Backing up a little bit, why do you think – because I've seen this across other breweries – why is it so important for craft brewers to have a kind of regional identity or a local sense of place?

MM: I think the local sense of place is important because it gives you a testing ground for your products. It helps you identify who you wanna be. It really drives that sense of community and creativity. I think it takes a lot of energy to be creative, and so, I think you need that local space to be able to do that. As far as the regional footprint – again, it just goes back to the scalability. You've gotta have that in order to be able to have big enough tanks to get on the store shelves, to be able to have a distributor look at you.

JD: Distributors are regional?

MM: Distributors tend to be – they can be multiple things. They can be statewide or you might have some that are regional, as far as Des Moines and Ames, central Iowa versus eastern Iowa. But, I mean, today, I think we're the second largest craft beer in my largest distributor, and we're still less than 1% of their business. I mean, it really, at the end of the day, we're more of a hassle for them than we are a true business partner or something they really wanna put out, you know? We're kind of a speck.

JD: Part of where I was going with that is the names that people come up with or the identities they build into the, I guess, the brand or the face of it, so, one of our favorite towns in Minnesota is Grand Marais, and they have the Voyageur Brewing Company there, which is harkening back to the trappers and what not. And that was important to you with your name?

MM: The original name my dad just kinda threw out off the cuff, that same day when he told me this crazy idea. He's like, "I even have a name, it's White Breast Brewing Company." And it was like, well that really rolls off the tongue, sounds great. White Breast is a great recreation center around here, people know it, nobody thinks twice about it. I started reading the history books to figure out where the White Breast name came from, because I did just wanna have – I think so many beer companies, especially at that time, you're either a marketing company that happens to make beer, or you're a true microbrewery that has a sense of story and place and you're selling that as much as you are the beer, because people will wanna identify and connect and be that local, you know, feel that local connection. And so, to me, it was very important we understood where the name White Breast came from. And then we decided, Joe, bless his heart, was like "We can't name a brewery White Breast. People don't know what that is. You're gonna get all kinds of comments when you're out in the market." Thank goodness we did not keep that name and we changed to Peace Tree.

JD: And Joe is your brew master?

MM: Joe is our brew master. Yeah, I think he was a week on the job, and he's telling like, the

owners of the company they need to change their name. Kudos to Joe, you know, for having a good strong conviction about things, that was good. But as we were researching that name, we came up with all these other names and I'd read the history of Marion County and I'd read the Grace Carr books, I'd read whatever I could get my hands on, basically, and kept coming back to this idea of this tree back in the lake. Some of the other names we came up with were Dragoon Brewery, and we thought about – we had something along our geographical location as far as our longitude or latitude at one point. That was like, it felt very, I don't know. It was place, but it didn't have a great story.

JD: Just numbers?

MM: Just numbers. So, the Peace Tree really kept kind of coming back to the forefront from that. Just from the standpoint that my mom's family grew up out there. I actually grew up across the lake from the Peace Tree. This idea where cultures kind of came together and it was really something we were trying to recreate, obviously in a really different way, but that same idea. I think for us, it was fun to settle on that and from the standpoint of tricking people into learning about history, we were able to do that, too.

JD: Like a mystery, right?

MM: Yeah, people are like, "What's the Peace Tree? Where'd that come from?" And then you start telling them the story and then remind them that 50 years ago there was no lake there, it was a river. And there were towns. My grandparents farmed out there, that was their livelihood. And it's like, "Oh, that was not that long ago." So it's been a great way to kind of awaken people about our history, locally.

JD: You're preserving that history as much as you're selling beer, in a way?

MM: Yeah.

JD: Now, randomly I just heard that the Peace Tree came uprooted?

MM: It did.

JD: And you're trying to get it, or buy it, or something?

MM: Yeah, I don't know. I'm a little torn about that. It's the marina, a guy name Gary out there, actually found me on Facebook and sent me a message as they were towing it in and he was giving me updates. It took them a long time; they were going like a mile an hour towing this thing in and then they hit the bottom at the marina. So, it's sitting in the parking lot right now, the old parking lot, which was well under water at that point. And then as the water went down, that tree that's been submerged for 50 years now, over 17 feet tall, I don't know circumference, but it's two or three people wide, and it still has this root ball. There was a lot of talk from a lot of people, "Oh, you should go get that tree," this and that and the other. I don't know. I'm not super sentimental about it. I like the tree story and the idea and the history. I don't know if I need the physical tree. But I do think from the standpoint of preserving the idea and having this visual

cue for people to stop, look at, and then make some connections there so they understand where it came from and why it's significant. But I think that can be done at the Lake Red Rock visitor center or, frankly, it's just fine out there in the marina parking lot. It's gonna take a lot to move.

JD: I was gonna ask what you're gonna do with it, but.

MM: Yeah, I don't know. There's been talk, like, "Oh, you put it in your parking lot, or you should make tables out of it," but I don't know. We'll just let it simmer for a while. I just think it's more the idea of remembering what it symbolizes and where we came from and all the changes that had to happen and take place so that we can be here today and have this story.

JD: Seems like a very western idea that you need to own the actual thing, possess the tree to have it be meaningful in some way.

MM: Yeah.

JD: I mean, it'd be cool, but it does seem very imperialistic in a way.

MM: Yeah. I feel very – I'm very torn about it. I don't have strong feelings that I need to own it, but there are certain people in my life that are very much, "You have to have that tree!" and then I feel like I'm maybe not doing the right thing because I don't really care. I care, but I don't care.

JD: Yeah. So, I had a question and now I've lost it. Maybe we can just go back to how the business is coming together. So, you had the name. I guess, what was your expectation of what owning a brewery would be like, and then what was it really like? You said something about hanging out with friends. Is that really what it turned into?

MM: In those first days, we were, it was Scott and I and my dad, and Joe, our brew master, would bartend. We had Betsy come on and help bartend, and Joe's wife, Danny, sometimes. Then we didn't really have any other employees those first six months. But it was fun. We could stand up here and sling beer and it was our business. And we would only open on Thursday nights, and we had a lot of friends who would come in and we met a ton of new people. You think you know everybody in a town of 7,000, and you don't, at all. It was a really fun way to see this whole other community that exists outside of my little world. And then I think once we added some employees those first two or three years, it very much was, Joe said it the best one day, it was just magical. We would work our tails off, we had young children at the time, Joe has two boys and Scott and I had Urban. The kids would run around, we had an old table from the junior high and we'd unfold that in the back of the brewery and we'd order pizza in and we'd let people go in the back and watch us bottle or you know, whatever project we were working on, people were in and out. It really was this big kind of extended community and it was a lot of fun. Mind you, we had a full-time job. Scott and Dan and I were still running an insurance agency and so I think it did get to this point of tension where every time I was over here, I felt guilty because I wasn't back over there doing what I needed to do for those employees or those clients or whatever. But every time when I was over there, there was some fire to be put out here. We didn't really have a manager, per se, it was just kind of Joe brewing and running it, and in the taproom, Danny was kind of here working on that. The underlying day-to-day accounting and

business operations and all of that, I did a lot of that from my desk at the insurance agency. So, yeah, I think it grew faster than we expected. It took off quicker and it just took a lot more resources and energy than we ever thought it would.

JD: With some of that pressure, that feeling torn, is that why you decided to buy everybody out and be the sole owner?

MM: Yeah, I think there was some of that. We were almost five years in that point. Scott and I were divorced by then, so, we'd been separated a couple years. My dad was ready to retire. The brewery was at the point where either we needed to get in there and make it happen, or we needed to not do it anymore, whether that meant closing it or selling it or doing something else. But it couldn't exist in the form that it was very much longer. So, again, kind of a lot of soul searching and trying to figure out what I really wanna do – what's my life look like for the next thirty years until I wanna retire? I loved the insurance business. I felt a big duty to be there because I was the fourth generation of that family business. If I sold, I was the last of the McKay's that was in there. On the other hand, the brewery, man, it ticks all my boxes. It's creative, it's fun, it's a puzzle, I love growing and developing something. I felt like the insurance agency was gonna exist whether I was there or not, you know? It's gonna fill that space on Main Street, it's gonna fill that need for those clients, whether I was there or not. Whereas the brewery, I felt like it was precarious, and I could continue to build that. Or, if I sold it, it probably would get moved somewhere other than Knoxville.

JD: And it was important for you to stay here?

MM: Well, it's kind of, you know, it's my second baby. I have one child and I have one brewery. I'm not saying I gave up having another child for the brewery, but in some respects, it's kind of hard to do both. I feel very invested in it from that standpoint. I've poured a lot into it.

JD: We don't have to get into this if you don't want to, but was some of that pressure and stress and workload, was that part of the divorce you went through, or was that something completely unrelated?

MM: Um, I think it was, I think the stress and the pressure highlighted or made clear the other symptoms that were not letting the marriage work. Does that kind of make sense? Different ambition levels.

JD: I just ask because entrepreneurs don't always talk about those kinds of things and it seems to be part of, sort of, what you were dealing with.

MM: I think that's part of it. I mean, I think there were issues before any of that. I'm not gonna say like the brewery was the cause of our divorce or anything like that, but I think it certainly highlights different pieces of it. And, I would say, and I've said it before, entrepreneurship and running a small business, you do kind of have to put everything in. You either need to have a partner who's right there with you putting everything in, or you need to have one who's really understanding and totally not into it so that you have somewhere to go home and rest and get away and clear your head and not think about it. Does that make sense? So.

JD: Okay. You've mentioned when we've talked before that over these years of growing the company, you've learned a lot about tenacity. What is, personally and on the business side, what have you learned about tenacity since you've started being the sole owner?

MM: Well, some of it's tenacity, some it's stubbornness. Some of it's competitiveness. But I think it's just – I've learned that every time you think you're at your stopping point, you can dig a little deeper and you can go a little farther. And you have to be willing to do that to make it work. If you don't surround yourself with people who are willing to do that as well, you probably will fail. It's not easy and especially when you think about, "Hey, let's start a brewery in Knoxville, Iowa, sprint car capital of the world, where everybody drinks Busch Lite and nobody really wants craft beer." You've gotta have a little hardness about you to say, "No, that's what we're doing. And I know it sounds crazy but it's gonna work. We're gonna make it work." I think that tenacity to get started but then that tenacity to keep going. My favorite thing our banker at the time has said to us was "Okay, this sounds great. What are you gonna do when you get tired?" And I think that was very telling and he's seen that, obviously, with other entrepreneurs or other small business owners, that it's awesome when you're getting started. The adrenaline is off the charts and man, things are going well, and people are excited, but three, four, five years in, it's like "Well, we're not the darling new kid on the block, and employees want raises and people want this and that and somebody wants a different product." It just gets wearing, and you have to have that reserve to always keep pushing and changing and growing.

JD: Yeah. You just described your brewery as like a child, and I'm wondering what you've seen in the brewery if you imagine it as like a person growing up or coming of age. What are some of those maturity signs?

MM: I think now we are – I say this a lot – we're in those really awkward teenage years. I think we're getting to be closer to maybe eighteen or so. We're starting to figure it out. But I talk about that a lot. I think in the early years, you can be cute and throw tantrums and throw food on the floor and everybody thinks it's really fun because you're like a young entrepreneurial company and you're cool and your customers, as far as wholesalers, let you get away with a lot of stuff and they're willing to hold your hand and wipe your face off while you figure out how to eat at the big boy table. And then you kind of get into that grade school era and it's like, "Ooh, we gotta kinda figure out how to have an attention span and be a little more focused and mind our p's and q's and do things consistently in the right way all the time."

JD: What would some of those things be, when people weren't cutting you the same slack? Was it customers or the distributors?

MM: When I talk about distributors, we've been really fortunate to have extremely supportive distributors. I think they've done a great job helping us grow, helping us develop as a company. But it's things like, if you have your beer on a store at HyVee, they're not gonna hold that space open because you didn't get enough beer made this month. They're gonna fill it with somebody else's, especially when you look at going from 1,500 breweries to 6,500. There's always somebody new wanting to put their beer there in your place. So, holding you accountable for things like that. Making sure that if you say you're sending a keg of this, that's what actually

shows up on the truck. You can't have somebody who's kinda sleeping when they load the truck and put the wrong thing on the pallet, you know, some of those sorts of things. Simple business stuff I think every small business goes through and it's like, well, we can just get away with whatever we can, but at a certain point you have to start being disciplined about it. Or, "Hey let's make this beer," "No, let's make this beer," "Here, let's do this," – you really have to be more forward thinking and have a plan. Okay, "Here is what we're gonna program out for the next year. Here's how we're gonna do it, when we're gonna do it. Here's what you can expect from us." It's no more, "Hey I had this great idea, let's do this next month." Does that kinda make sense?

JD: How do you balance that? Because you say creativity is really part of why you wanna do it, part of your business' identity.

MM: How we balance that was, I bet the farm and I built a brewery in Des Moines as well. We were getting to the point of, we had to produce as much beer as we could out of Knoxville, and we're at the point now where my next expansion plans in Knoxville are expensive and maybe not even smart to do as far as building out more tank space and those sorts of things were a little hamstrung with building space and all of that. So, for us to keep that creativity piece going, it was like, we can't produce any more variety in Knoxville. We've gotta keep those store shelves full and consistent and all of that. So, we're gonna build this other brewery in Des Moines where we can have the taproom but also the small brewery so Joe can go up and create whatever he wants to create. And I think that's why I say we're in the teenage years right now because Joe needs to be able to go up there and be able to do that, yet we still need him back here to run operations and do those things. It's that common push and pull of letting other people be accountable, having a little more structure and organization. My new marketing person, I think he said it really well – it seems really not fun to have all this structure, organization, and discipline, but yet, if you have all of that, it totally frees you up to go out and be creative and do a lot of wild and nutty stuff. Because you know the basics are taken care of.

JD: Right.

MM: And so that's kind of where we're at right now. Does that kinda make sense?

JD: Yeah. And you've described yourself as a kind of patron of the arts? My interpretation of brewing is that it's more chemistry. What's the artistic side of that, I guess?

MM: I think, I don't know. You should spend an hour with Joe and have him talk to you about it. When you think about – it is chemistry. There is very much a prescribed way you need to do things. There's a lot of cleaning. It's very specific about time and temperatures and recipes and those sorts of things. But if you think about looking at a glass of beer and what the color looks like and what the taste looks like and what kind of flavors you wanna have out of it, what kind of aromas you wanna get – to be able to go from knowing the four main ingredients and the varieties that are available to be able to actually have this finished product in your hand and visualize that and come up with it without doing it two or three times and tinkering – he can do that in a big batch of beer without ever brewing a small batch first. He can just take it from this stuff that's simply – grain, water yeast – and all of a sudden have this thing that comes together

in a wonderful way that's well planned and exactly what he wanted it to be. I think that's very artistic.

JD: Well I know from talking to a friend that you've gathered some wild yeasts. Do you know much about that? Or do I need to talk to Joe about that?

MM: I can tell you the basics. So, in Belgium, the very old breweries that have been doing this for years and years and years – centuries, really – we didn't have yeast strains, per se, that you'd buy, so they'd collect wild yeast. Whatever was in that local neighborhood or from that farm where they'd brew the beer, they'd have naturally occurring yeast. And then that would be what came into the beer and fermented it, and then from there they'd have this beer. So, it became very local, very specialized. It was that localized yeast. Joe has been a big fan of those Belgian-style beers and that style of brewing because you have to really treat it in a certain way so everything comes out the way you want it to. It's very natural and spontaneous, yet you have to have that discipline and organization to make sure it's set up well to be able to do it. So, what he's done here is taken it out to Blue Gate Farms, set it out, waited for the right time of year when the fruit trees have the appropriate amount of blossoms, that gets into the science part of it. And Jill was really sweet when she was out there helping him set it at the appropriate angle from the trees depending on which way the wind was blowing so the appropriate particles got to the wart and then all of a sudden you create this great beer.

JD: This is Jill, who owns Blue Gate Farms?

MM: Yup. So, it's been a fun partnership. We did it last year, a lot of times what will happen with this naturally occurring yeast is that once it starts to produce alcohol, it will eat itself up, burn itself out, so you don't actually get a finished product from it that has any alcohol to it. But if you do it right and you have the right base there and you collect the pieces naturally, you get this really beautiful thing in a glass. And it really ends up being kind of like a beer, kind of like a wine. It can have a little bit of cider characteristics.

JD: That sounds like a next level sort of thing for you.

MM: I think it really is, and it's the kind of stuff for me, for Joe to creatively think about what he wants to do and how that wants to happen – you don't just do that. You kind of have to brainstorm and think about what other people have been doing and figure out a way to do it in your own manner.

JD: It just seems like a really cool tie in with your name, that you're preserving history, and here you're literally preserving a place through these yeasts. It's like the soil regions in France, they say the wines taste differently in the different soils, it's not just the type of – so the region is actually the name of the wine.

MM: Yeah. I think there's very much a piece of that that he's very much interested in. How do you make yourself unique and stand out in a business industry where you've got this many new breweries doing this many crazy things? Some people are putting maple hazelnut chipotle whatever in their beer. Instead, Joe's taking it back to the most simple form, taking it back down

to its essence and using something so local that you can only get it here. And I think you can look at that both ways, which one is more creative or more different or more better. That's the path we've taken and I think why we've done really well together is we've both – we like that authentic, local piece to it.

JD: I'd buy that as artistic.

MM: Yeah.

JD: Backing up a little bit, we've talked a lot about community and your childhood and maybe that kind of thing you felt you were missing in California and part of what drew you back here and part of why you stayed in Knoxville. Can you think of some specific experiences you've had that show how craft beer builds community?

MM: Yeah. I think just from the idea of those early nights when we'd open up the taproom and you'd look around and you'd have people who were friends of ours who were trying to be supportive because they thought we were crazy and would show up, but then you'd have the guy down the street who'd recently retired but he was in the military back in the day and he'd travelled to Germany and he was looking to relive those great beers that he'd had abroad. And then he's sitting next to blue collar guy down the street who, again, had kind of experienced those things in a different way. And all of a sudden, they're talking and new friendships are being formed and you just make these connections with people that you wouldn't otherwise make. That was really how we saw it on a basic, early level. I would say I've met more people from the greater Marion County area – Knoxville, and Pella don't always necessarily mingle back and forth a ton, and that's been a really fun way where I feel like we have a connection to Pella and across the lake, partially because of the brewery and the people we've gotten to know through this business and the support we've received from that side. For me, personally, I think it's – people wanna talk about beer, it's interesting, it's fun. You walk into a party and you say you sell insurance and everyone's like, "Oh, it's time to go find another appetizer," or whatever. When you say you own a brewery, it's a totally different reaction and all of a sudden, worlds open up. I don't think you'd probably have called me if I was still an insurance agent to talk about my oral history of Iowa or how I feel about Iowa or those sorts of things, because it just doesn't hit the radar. I think beer, because it is exciting, fun, and aspirational as far as people wanna get together and have those feelings, and beer helps you do that. Both from the standpoint of you can share the beverage together – it'll take you a little while to drink the pint – and it's in a social setting. It's different, it gives you a conversation starter, "Oh, what are you drinking? What do you like about that?" It's all of those connections that you make. And then to the bigger community as far as other communities reaching out asking how we did this in Knoxville because they've seen the benefits that it's brought, so making connections across towns as people look for new ways to build their own breweries or build their own communities through some focal point business, that sort of thing.

JD: To be honest, one of the reasons beer is cool, and that's a good reason to have an oral history about beer, I see you as a kind of pioneer. I mean, you were on the cusp of this renaissance in Iowa. You are one of the few female owners of a brewery, so that is interesting, but also – not

just for your personal life story – but it sounds like what Peace Tree has meant to Knoxville is also changing other communities in Iowa. Is that fair to say?

MM: I think so. I think people look at this and they see it as, wow, if Knoxville can do that, then we see the changes it's made there. I'm not saying Peace Tree is responsible for the change that's been made, but I think people have heard more about Knoxville because we're here, and maybe heard more about Knoxville in different circles than they would have otherwise. They've taken notice. So, then people want to find out how to do that in their community as well, whether it's through a brewery or something else, but some kind of locally grown, small type of business that peaks a lot of interest. They see that as valuable.

JD: Sure. What are some of those changes that you think you see in Knoxville that aren't only because of Peace Tree but maybe partly related to your presence here?

MM: I think I see more development downtown. I don't think, I'm not sure if A&P would exist if Peace Tree hadn't existed first to say that there was a market for people to have a social space that's a little nicer.

JD: What's A&P?

MM: It's a little pub down the street. More cocktails, wine and they do beer as well. But again, kind of that meeting space where people can get together and gather, but it wasn't just done as a hole in the wall bar with a bunch of beer posters and crappy lights and that sort of thing. It's a very elevated space. They've put some design elements into it, some really cool lights, the way that it's laid out, all of those things. It's that sense of oh, people will respond to something a little nicer and different and a little out of the ordinary. You see 111 right down the street kind of the same way, that it's a possibility to do some of those things. My hope is that also, well one in particular, Hannah Vanderveer, she was young, went to college at Central and was working at Ottumwa to get back to Knoxville and she identified Peace Tree as a place she thought she'd fit well, she felt like was offering some hope and excitement to young people as an employment option, or at least as a quality of life option for them when they came back to get a job in Knoxville. It made her and I think a group of her friends say yeah this is a place we could live. Does that make sense?

JD: Yeah.

MM: So not only from other businesses, but just kind of from a "Hey, we can live in Knoxville because there's stuff to do, there's places to meet people."

JD: Some of your staff have graduated from Knoxville High School and have felt like this is a future they could look forward to?

MM: Yeah, exactly.

JD: So, you feel like you're filling a gap in Knoxville? Would you have come to work at Peace Tree if you didn't have the nanny thing going on back in 1991?

MM: Yeah, I mean, I think I would have worked here when I was young. It's a little different just from the standpoint of we usually only hire people who are 21 and over and at that point I was off to college or whatever, but I think it's an attractive place for people to want to come and work and hang out and it can be kind of that fun job that's on the side. I think we have attracted people from out of town and out of state who want to come and work here, either on the brewing side or the management side. I am really proud of that. We've been able to attract new families to our community because of the type of business we have.

JD: And you've taken a really active role as a community leader, partly because of your position at Peace Tree, so can you tell me about some of those positions you've held?

MM: Yeah, I mean I've always been pretty active in the community, I think from the insurance agency standpoint – it was important to be out in the community, not only because it would help you grow your business so you'd get to know more people and they'd trust you and want to buy insurance from you, but also because we also kind of had a duty to develop our town so a) we had people who wanted to live here and work here and then also just continue to develop the town so you have more customers and those sorts of things. I guess that always continued with me, that you only get out what you put into it. So, if I'm gonna have my business here and hopefully be financially rewarded from that and have a good living and all those things, I have to put something back into the community so I can continue to get that back. I think where I've tried to apply myself are the places where I think it adds value. One of those – I've been on the hospital board for the last nine years. I'm coming up on my fourth term next year.

JD: And you're the chair?

MM: I'm the chair right now. I think that's important. I think if you don't have good local, stable health care, you see communities start to deteriorate because they don't have that anchor in the community. Not to mention, they employ 250 people. If you didn't have those jobs, you start to see things kind of wane.

JD: You've talked also about attracting new doctors.

MM: Right. I think from the standpoint of Peace Tree, we work hand in hand too where they're trying to attract new doctors or nurses or management people, we're trying to provide an interesting place for people to get together and meet and do things and so we help each other out back and forth that way. Does that make sense?

JD: And you've been the president of the Chamber of Commerce? You're involved in more than one leadership position?

MM: Yeah, you know, last year I think internally here at Peace Tree we saw a lot of, why aren't we getting more people to our town? Why don't we know what other businesses need so we can help fill those needs, or vice versa? We just didn't feel like our chamber was very active. It seemed like there was a lot of infighting or lack of direction. And so, Hannah, that I alluded to earlier, we did a lot of talking about that and well, we can't complain about it. If you're gonna

complain about it, you've gotta go fix it. So, it ended up being four board openings so we went and recruited Maggie from the hospital, who's the CFO, and Sarah McKay, who's the manager of the Cobblestone Hotel, and Sarah Roberts who does a lot of admin work and assists managers at real estate insurance, and we put a team together and we said we're just gonna go in and get the structure of this organization and get a good purpose so that we can start helping to foster better relationships between the local businesses, figure out ways to make it a place where people want to come and do business here, figure out how we can get more workers here and assist the city with their economic development efforts, assist the schools, the hospitals, whatever else, with those PR issues that I think we have in Knoxville. Just figure out a good way to make an impact, somewhat for self-serving reasons but also from just the standpoint of being proud of the community we live in and if we're not then we should roll our sleeves up and figure out how to make it. That was kinda when we jumped into that.

JD: So tell me if I'm wrong about this, but my assumption about Knoxville – sprint car racing, blue collar kind of image – I would assume that you've hit a fair amount of resistance as a community leader in what I would think of as a more conservative kind of community. Is that accurate?

MM: I haven't necessarily hit that. I probably haven't pushed hard enough, either. I tend to kind of be a consensus builder. I think there's some people you're not ever gonna change. There're other people that I think you can kind of show them results. I'm a big fan of I'm not gonna tell you what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna do it. And then you can get on board or you don't have to. But I think hopefully if what we're doing is the right thing, we're getting momentum and people are gonna want to get on board with that. But I think my biggest pet peeve is that there's a lot of people that like to talk and say what they're gonna do and nothing ever really happens and then people get really disenfranchised and don't participate or don't belong in the future. I wouldn't say we've had a lot of resistance, I'd say it's just hard to find a unified voice in this community, sometimes, would be probably our biggest roadblock that we have. But I think, again, thought the chamber we did a lot of talking about what's our brand as a community. And we've tried to pin ourselves to be all about sprint cars, or back in the day we were the VA hospital, or we are the Knoxville Panthers, or we're the county seat, you know, and none of those things are Knoxville. They're part of Knoxville. When we sifted it back down, Knoxville's all about grit. I think that was a great word that came out of it. You can see that as bad, as like blue collar, sprint car, maybe it says uneducated or whatever else. But grit to me is that people are gonna work hard, they're gonna dig in when it matters and make sure it's done. That's something to be celebrated. I don't care what part of the economic spectrum you're on, that's a team we can all get on. We talk a lot about how people here are passionate about their community; they're willing to step in and lend a hand and help. I think if you can get past all of the labels or whatever you wanna put on it, that's what we really try to focus on. What are the things that bind us together and that are really beautiful about this place and that make us wanna keep reinvesting and keep pushing to try to make it better? And it's not better just for better's sake. The thing I always get after is that people are like "Why do you have to make it fancy?" or "Can't you just do this?" Well, I suppose you don't have to go above and beyond, you can just have whatever, Busch Lite or whatever else, but I love this town. I think people deserve more. It's not that I'm trying to be better than, it's that it's a reflection of the people around me. I want more for you, so I'm gonna try and raise that level a bit. Does that make sense?

JD: Is it fair to say that part of what you're doing at Peace Tree is bringing out the value or meaning that's already there?

MM: Yeah, I think so. Letting people have one more thing to be proud of, you know. Dust some things off a bit so you can say here's one more bright spot in our community. Not everybody's gonna glom onto each individual piece, but if we have 4 or 5 different things that we can say we're really proud of, then all of a sudden, you're raising the whole level of the community. It might not be that we all agree on what the one thing is, but we agree there's a pot of stuff that's pretty awesome. So that's I think what we're trying to get to – raise that overall level of pride.

JD: Yeah. And again, correct me if I'm wrong, it seems like beer has been an unconventional way for you to make a community that looks different from the community you grew up in, you're breaking down barriers that might have been there when you were younger or that might have been there for your mother, for instance? Is that fair to say?

MM: Yeah, I think beer does allow you to do that. This is a serious business and I don't wanna pretend like we just hang out and have fun all day, but at the end of the day, it's just beer. Get over it, you know? People can be really pretentious about it and there's especially the trend in craft beer that everybody's hoarding stuff and, "I got this," and, "I'll trade for this," but at the end of the day, it's a wonderful social beverage that you can share with anybody from any background, any social status, any whatever. It's just a great common denominator where you can get together and have a conversation over beer. And probably at the end of it, you're gonna feel better than when you started. It sounds really cheesy, but when we're having the worst days – a machine breaks down or isn't working right – Joe will just look at me and say, "We gotta stop and have a beer." You do that, and it takes the pressure off and forces you to slow down and appreciate the important things and then you can get back to what you need to work on.

JD: Make work better for people.

MM: It does. It really does.

JD: Everybody should have a beer at work, huh?

MM: I'm a firm believer. I mean, yeah. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't, but yeah.

JD: In closing, I kinda want to bring us back to the Midwest and some of the bigger ideas. I guess one kind of personal question for you before we start thinking big picture – how do you think of the Midwest as an environment for you as an entrepreneur and as a female entrepreneur if that's relevant? Do you feel like that's been an environment for you to realize your potential, give you the space to do what you've done?

MM: Yeah. I think the Midwest has been fantastic. In the same way I talked earlier about really resisting that idea that I'm just this nice girl from the Midwest and I'm gonna end up back there like this common person – there's really nothing wrong with that. Because what it allows is that community, that foundation, that forgiveness, that ability to not be caught up in the unimportant

things so you can work on the important things. I think there's nobody you can't call in the Midwest. Nobody's too big or too important or anything like that. Does that kind of make sense? People are willing to help their neighbor out, whether it's your state senator or the welder from down the street. You get that same sense of feeling from both. I think being an entrepreneur in the Midwest, that's really very helpful. I think it makes it a great place to start a business and have a business.

JD: It sounds like what you were saying earlier – that it's not forging ahead, going it alone, kind of the rugged individualism I was raised with in Montana, but for you, opportunity, growth, all those things come from that solid foundation that you feel like you had as a kid and that's Iowa to you.

MM: Yeah. I think that's very true. I think that's very true. As far as being a female in a non-traditional career I guess, I think there's times when that comes into play but I think for the most part, because Iowans tend to take things a little bit at face value, if you wanna make it, you roll your sleeves up and people appreciate hard work, whoever it's coming from.

JD: Well, this has all been fantastic. So, we're still kind of working out some of these kinks with our structure, but we've had some questions just about the changing Midwest that we hope to ask everyone. So, we'll wrap up with those. So, what are a few books or movies or any kind of art, any music, bands, about the Midwest or that feature the Midwest that you would recommend?

MM: We talked a little bit earlier about this and I feel like I'm a poor person to ask because I haven't really made that a central focus so I'm excited to explore that. You tend to look at your home last. When I think about art and music and those sorts of things, not super well known, probably outside of the Iowa City area, but I think a lot about High End Lonesome from back in the day, Trailer Records and all the artists that came out of that as that very Midwestern, very honest music. It's got a lot of grit to, it you will, but a lot of influences from places and I always really appreciated that when I was in the Iowa City area. As far as books that are specifically Midwest, I really struggle with that one, to be honest with you. Art, I think the one that always stands out is Grant Wood, just as far as very straightforward, seems very simple on the surface but when you get underneath there's a lot of texture and a lot of nuance that comes along with it, and I think that represents Iowa pretty well. It's very simple on the outside but once you dig a little deeper, there's a lot more to it, a lot more variety than you might initially expect.

JD: Would Greg Brown be on that list?

MM: Greg Brown's totally on that list, yeah. He was kind of in that Trailer Records piece of it. Dave Zolo was the High End Lonesome, the one who spearheaded that a little bit. William Elliot Whitmore has been the one lately, I think he and Dave are doing some things together. It's called Middlewestern, is the name of their band. So that's been kind of fun. I don't watch a lot of TV and movies so I'm a little out of the loop there, but.

JD: All good. So, when you think about historical figures from the Midwest, are there any that are really interesting to you?

MM: I think it's been really fun, Bob Leonard does a great job of highlighting some different people. One that's been interesting is Governor William Mellostone. Really not someone you'd ever learn about in school, but then you start thinking about the things, how from Iowa, went out and influenced politics in the national level during Abraham Lincoln's election and those sorts of things. We do have influence from the Midwest, it's just not always as celebrated or publicized. Again, that modest, Midwestern piece, I guess.

JD: That's what we're trying to do. Bring it up into the light a little more. Abraham Lincoln would be a Midwesterner.

MM: Of course, yeah. And next time we talk then I'll expand my definition of Midwest, because like I said earlier, I think of Iowa as my Midwest.

JD: Sure. What do you see as some of the most surprising changes in the Midwest in the last ten years?

MM: I think there's been, I've seen and I look at Des Moines because I see it changing the most more than maybe the small rural towns. I think there's been a big push in Des Moines to have more public art, more music, more just kind of cultural amenities, those sorts of things. When you look at Des Moines ten years ago and you look at it today, just a very big difference in the amount of entertainment options – commercial entertainment options but also just small artists that are advertising things on the side, whether it's mainframe studios or kind of those studios down in the East Village. 80-35 music festival, Hinterland, you have Wooly's that's bringing in great national acts, that just didn't ever happen before, and I think either because people weren't asking for them or people didn't think there was a market for them and all of a sudden, you're seeing more interest and people being more interested in that side of things.

JD: You see Des Moines as one of those things in the last ten years that's changed?

MM: It's changed a lot, yeah. I think just that mindset of we do deserve more culture and art, we don't have to be typical Midwestern, all about just families and work. There can be some other things to life which more richness to it, if you will. Some of the quality of life things versus the have-to-dos. Does that make sense?

JD: Totally.

MM: I think the other thing that I've really seen is, and this is maybe my experience in Knoxville than anything else, but I think you see it in a lot of small towns, there's just so much transition out of small town into the population centers. I think that makes me a little nervous. It's very difficult for retailers to survive in small towns, it's very difficult for downtowns to – I think you see so many empty building and so much less economic diversity within small communities.

JD: And that's been the last ten years?

MM: I'd say maybe a little longer than ten years, yeah. But it's definitely a trend that I see. I think you see your downtowns transitioning to service businesses more and more. A lot less

retail and entertainment type things. Or if you see it, there's more chains coming in, less mom and pop – they're kind of just disappearing.

JD: So, when you think about the future, nobody has a crystal ball, but in Iowa or in Knoxville, what do you see as maybe some changes that might be coming?

MM: I think, I hope anyway, we're gonna see a little more focus on infrastructure and redeveloping some of those downtowns and city centers and that quality of life type stuff. I feel the movement here already towards that. I think people are starting to realize that those things aren't just extras. They're not the icing on the top of the cake. They're the necessities so you can keep people here and engaged, and if you're not doing that then you don't have workers, and if you don't have workers then you don't have businesses, and it just gets to be this bad cycle. I think we'll see more of that. I think you'll see more younger families realizing that even though they're small towns close to Des Moines, it's a nice place to raise a family and making that choice to locate themselves a little outside of population areas.

JD: So, the story you're telling would be part of that change you want to see?

MM: My sense is I'm starting to feel that a little bit, already. Maybe I'm just getting old and noticing young people coming back, but I think we're seeing more of that than when I was that age, mid-late 20's. I don't remember my friends coming back.

JD: As you've been talking, I've been thinking about how you're saying, quality of life is not a luxury. It's a necessity, then it goes to the heart of how you perceive yourself. It goes to the heart of your identity. If you grew up with nothing to celebrate, that's something you transfer to yourself. In some ways, I see what you're doing as a kind of touchstone for people, kids growing up in Knoxville, a place with the cool brewery that people have gone to work at after high school, so it could go back to that modesty we were talking about. Well, and the last question – your favorite Midwestern food? Beer counts as food.

MM: The obvious answer for me is sweet corn, because I don't think there's anything as good as Iowa sweet corn when it's fresh in the summer. But the other one that sticks out to me is dried beef and I don't know if that's a Midwestern thing or not, but I love a good dried beef sandwich. And it's hard to find good dried beef.

JD: They make a pretty good dried beef in Pella.

MM: The other one would be Maytag blue cheese. They make excellent blue cheese, but I don't think that's really a Midwestern thing, I think that's them imposing something from the outside on us, which is great. It's fantastic.

JD: Sweet corn, dried beef, and blue cheese.

MM: I could eat that for dinner.

JD: And beer. It's a good note to end on.

MM: I think so.

JD: Well, thanks Megan. So much.

MM: Thank you.