

People would call me Iowa: Adam Hammes

Interviewee: Adam Hammes

Interviewer: Brian Campbell

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AH: When you go on a seasonal job what tends to happen is everyone is coming from someplace else, so you're all kinda interested in being like 'Oh, you should come see me in Arizona when this is all finished we can all hang out'. And I'm like 'Yeah you should come to Iowa' and you just look at people and their like 'mmmm yeah maybe, maybe'. And I was like, 'I mean it's your lost and there is a lot of great stuff here'.

Eventually it became like a source of pride, and people would call me Iowa. because I would say things like, we were in California and I was just, I mean clearly it was amazing, but we would like turn this corner in the mountains and see this majestic thing. I'm also a smart ass and people get to know me and they know that and we'll be sitting there in this just beautiful moment of just extreme beauty and looking out over this sunset or something and I go to thing, was I'd be like, lean over to somebody to somebody like 'Man this is nice, I mean it's not Iowa, but it's really nice' and they would just punch me and be like 'shut up' like 'what do you have in Iowa?' like, I'm like 'I'm just sayin, I mean this is very nice'

BC: Adam Hammes had an idyllic rural Midwest childhood, with a big family and lots of nature to explore. Even as a kid, he wanted to wander farther afield, to experience the wild and scenic places he had read about and dreamed about, all over the world. For several years during and after college, that's exactly what he did, leading outdoor education trips in some of the most spectacular places on the planet.

And like he says, in these dramatic landscapes, Adam's Iowa roots were a source of pride, but also something of a joke. People called him Iowa, but they couldn't point out Iowa on a map. The Midwest was unknown, uncool, and unremarkable.

Before long, Adam returned home to challenge that perception, in himself and in others. He devoted himself to sustainability, founding not one but two non-profits and working to green businesses across the region. He was part of a wave of young professionals who helped transform Des Moines from what some called "America's dullest city" into a place with a green, thriving future.

Over the past eleven years back in the Midwest, he's also been on a personal quest to discover hidden gems of hiking and outdoor recreation, the places he'd be proud to take visitors willing to give the Iowa a chance. I invited Adam over for a visit to hear his story and share notes on

favorite destinations. We sat down at the dining room table, both of us downing cups of tea and battling colds.

I'm Brian Campbell and you're listening to a new podcast, Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest, hosted by me and co-producer Josh Dolezal. This season, Homecoming, features the stories of eight native lowans who left the Midwest then came back to stay. This is episode six, so if you're new to the show, go back and listen to our other interviews. Like Adam Hammes's story, they challenge our perceptions of the region and hopefully help us laugh about and think about what makes the Midwest distinctive.

BC: So, tell me a little bit about the place you grew up.

AH: The place I grew up.... It is 29273 292nd St. Richland, Iowa which is when they started with 911 addresses. It used to just be Rural Route 1 Richland, Iowa. It's a double dead end road northwest about 5 miles of Richland, Iowa in Southeast Iowa, north of Fairfield about 15-20 miles on Highway 1. Look to the left and you'll see a grain bin and then you'll get to Richland.

We lived on a farm. It was more of a livestock. We had land but kinda started out like 10 acres and slowly bought up land around us, lot of farming as far of fields around us. But, it was mostly animals, like we had tons of different animals growing up. The very traditional like cows and pigs to the very non-traditional - ostriches, hunting dogs, quail. Our family tried a lot of different things. It was a diverse livelihood growing up as a kid.

And that was it, like nothing much around, ran around in the countryside did whatever we wanted there were no very few roads very few police very few people telling us what to do we would get shooed out the door in the morning and we would come back when we wanted meals. But we just play outside and we were quite a ways away from everything is where I grew up.

BC: Family was a big part of Adam's childhood, visiting the homes of aunts, uncles, and cousins on nearby farms. It's pretty much what there was to do.

AH: We would always joke that we could easily field our own baseball team at any event, if we had a family reunion or anything like that. So, growing up most of my friends first were my cousins and after i got further along in school and got into sports and stuff I started hanging out with non-family members, but most of my life was just going down the street- talk to family members. You call it visiting, the recreation was going for a visit. So we visit my aunt and uncle or any number of my aunts and uncles, and just basically show up at their house unannounced, everyone would stop what they were doing and you play cards and drink coffee or tea or whatever, drink some Diet Mountain Dew or something, depending on who's house you went to and you just stay for a couple hours. Eating, drinking, playing games, and then you're like "oh, welp, we gotta go." And so that was that. Pretty much my whole childhood.

One thing that was super popular in both sides of my family were like the rolled pickles, like ham rolled pickles there is basically a pickle with ham, cream cheese on the outside and sliced up into little pieces. I mean people would wrestle for those and like soon as they opened up a container, people just like grab them and they're gone.

I guess my family was pretty large because when I started getting of dating age in high school and saw like how stressful it was to the girlfriend's that I had and they would come to a family event I'm just naming off like hundreds of people and they're like 'I'm never going to remember this' like 'oh my god' like a lot of stress and I was like 'yeah I guess this could be difficult if you didn't grow up around all these people' plus they all have a nickname so you don't know who anybody is talking about because it could be using their real name or their nickname and you just grow up knowing all of that and so you don't think about it

BC: So, I mean for you that was sort of typical Iowa childhood.

AH: Yeah I didn't know anything different. And most of the kids I went to high school with grew up the same as I did and like even if you grew up in town. Richland was a town of like 500 people... on a good day. And so, still wasn't very large and there is still only a small group of kids like our age so we basically just went to each other's homes and if we did hang out we just went and ran around outside and did whatever we could get into, not getting into too much trouble. But that was, I didn't know much different until I got into college, that was just the way everyone grew up around here.

BC: From a young age, Adam was pretty clear that farm life wasn't for him. Raising animals was hard work, year-round.

AH: There is always a fun saying for everything in small town Iowa and he's like 'Work's never done when you're on the farm' it's like 'when is this gonna be done' and we'd complain- he's like 'it's never done, there's always work to do on the farm' and I was like 'well that sounds terrible, like, that sounds like I don't want that like you can't go away for even like a small vacation. We would take like a week long vacation or something which they were like a highlight of like jumping in the car and doing a camping vacation or something around the U.S. It took a lot of work of like, we have animals and if you leave they'll die, like literally the- the reality was like we can't leave unless you find an aunt or an uncle or a cousin or a mixture everyone adopts a day. And they have to come over and like feed and water and scoop poop and liek do all the chores for animals so they don't die. And I was like 'man that's a lot of work like that's-' I respect how much work it is and I'm not sure if that's what I want to do- like- every time I take a vacation I have to like plan months in advance to get like- proxy to come in and run the farm for you. So, that was one thing I remember not loving but specifically but specifically it was because I was like, there were days, when it was like cold icy rain and it was like 10 o'clock at night and we just hadn't finished doing whatever like building a giant fence. And as a kid I was like 'this... sucks.

And I wanna inside and get warm'. I was also not very good at cold weather and so I was just like 'man I don't wanna be doing this'

BC: Yeah. So, tell me about some of these animals, were there particular ones that, that you had specific memories of?

AH: Oh, I've got memories.

BC: If you had to pick a few?

AH: I have memories of all of them seared into my, my brain, and I'm sure that my brother, sisters, and cousins do too... but, um ostriches. An ostrich is fascinating animal and to see one in rural is even more fascinating and to live on a farm where they have them. It was kind of like cool but also my least favorite thing. Like, we learned fascinating wildlife biology like male ostriches when they become in mating season they like literally puff up their neck, blows up like a balloon and make these deep guttural grunting noises like 'MOOOOOO, MOOOOOO'. And they do it at night when you're trying to sleep right out your bedroom window and you just want to scream and yell like 'shut the F up' and that's like a few years of having ostriches out in the yard just not getting good sleep, being angry, lying in bed wishing they would shut up. But then they were also super cool because they are kinda like dinosaurs with these incredible like talons that can like rip open an animal and they're definitely like aggressive when they're males and they're older and it's like breeding season. So you're also kind of out there like 'no other kid gets to grow up like this' like, I'm out here like sneaking around trying to not get killed by these ostriches who are like bumping up against the fence like if I didn't have this fence here like I would kick your head off and I'm like yeah I know, like it's not lost on me that I'm happy this fence is here.

So there is just like all kind of stuff like that, once an ostrich got out and like literally I was like staying up at the house because I had to watch the gate because if it came back or they went off trying to catch it, and I'm like 'man, what happens when a male live ostrich is just like out in the wild, running, like what if they don't catch it, what if it runs on the highway, what if it is just living out there in the wild, like we'd never get it back'. And so, those days were fun just thinking about like I don't think ostriches belong here, like I don't think they were meant to be in Iowa, but it was pretty popular there for a while and I think some people still raise them.

BC: It sounds like growing up with animals there are certain ways you are saying you have this typical Iowa farm childhood but in another way, your farm was really different and that experience probably shaped you in some different ways growing up around animals and experiencing that.

AH: Yeah, I think when people typically ask me like what made you get into sustainability topics in general and I just kinda have to point to a ton on different things but one is I believe that and I don't know as much about crop farming, and it's different I do know that it's different to raise

tens of if not hundreds of acres of just grow crops then it is to care for a living, breathing animal. It's very kind of intimate sometimes, it's kind of heartbreaking. In different ways then it is of like yes you can lose crops. But there is not like flood insurance for animals. You just, you know them, they're not pets but they're sort of- almost take on this air of like a pet that you care for and raise and most of them, we have horses that you're selling them you're not like eating them or anything. So just a different vibe on a farm where you're raising animals for many years to like maturity to like keep them healthy and living. Versus like crops where you're just putting as many as you can, raising it, harvesting the next year, you know crops- a crop dying than an animal dying. And so, I think there is just like a different kind of lesson I learned growing up about taking care of baby animals, like getting up in the middle of the night when they're born. You know training them to be able to lead and to be ridden and all those things, it's not the same kind of work that you do and learn on a farm where you're raising crops. So, I think that had something to do with it.

BC: This compassion for animals was one influence on Adam's future sense of call to sustainability work. He learned an ethic of care from watching his father, and he developed a curiosity and connection to the outdoors spending hours wandering the fields, woods, and creeks that surrounded him. He also developed a concern for social justice and the well-being of people in need, especially from watching his mother.

AH: On the social side like my younger brother had a, had brain damage growing up. So he was mentally disabled and my mom was like, just like an angel, worked, she didn't have. Neither parents had a college degree but she like worked with not only my brother but worked in with special needs kids and adults her whole life and so we would volunteer to go to special olympics. Volunteer to help her, we definitely helped raise my brother. And those were things like socially just kind of realizing that you know life isn't necessarily fair in the way that everybody gets the same shake at life and some people definitely are in position they need help So like I think socially that introduced me to just like people who struggle, different people who go through, what I consider really tough things to deal with. Having a special needs child or an adult, like it's very all very difficult, it's also very rewarding in some ways. But it's also incredibly difficult so those are just things that I got to see as a kid growing up that I would say are probably what shaped me into getting me into the field I got into.

BC: As much as Adam enjoyed the freedom to roam around the farm, he also had the itch to explore farther afield. At first, he fed this hunger through reading.

AH: I read a ton of books when I was- I did Book It when I was a kid- I don't know if they still have that. Basically they reward kids with reading with unhealthy pizza. And you get these tiny personal pan pizzas if you read X amount of books in a certain amount of time. And I would literally just like- the summer, I didn't realize the first summer when they offered to me when I went home and read like dozens and dozens of books and I came back with four Book It sheets filled out, and my teacher was like "Oh, I'm sorry, you have to read those during the school year" and I was just like, my first angry, "What!? I just spent the whole summer reading all these

books!" which I loved, cause I loved reading, but I was like, "I didn't get any pizza!" No pizza, no Book It. It was a very tainted experience, I was angry at all my teachers. But that's like when you read books it's like, oh, like there's this place and there is people over here and I just thought it was really cool and like always wanted to go see those places when I was growing up.

BC: It wasn't just books that gave him a taste for travel. His family did manage to get away on occasion, and when they could, they always headed to iconic natural areas.

AH: It was nice that my parents would take us like camping, car camping basically like we would go on a weeklong tour around like the United States and visit a bunch of national parks, just do a huge loop. And while sleeping in a car wasn't my favorite, we did have like pop up tents but like just driving long distances, I still love going to see Yosemite going to see Yellowstone. Just like driving around the country, seeing the Grand Canyon. That kind of put it in my blood too, I was just like, I'm gonna take these trips, I'm gonna go travel I'm gonna see things.

BC: It was during his time at the University of Northern Iowa that Adam had the chance to really begin exploring.

AH: My freshman year in college I went home after that and worked at a factory and then in Fairfield at Nelson and then I went to the second half of the summer I went and like roofed for my good friend's dad. I would, roofing houses, and I was like- okay well I'm used to this I've done all of this before, but then I got back and my first day of my sophomore year at UNI and one of my dorm friends comes in and he's like tan, he's talking about like 'oh yeah, I went and got paid to go to Japan and teach kids swimming lessons and then I got to like spend my nights and weekends travelling around Japan, specifically Okinawa'. And he called it "the Hawaii of Japan", and I was like 'tell me more about this program' that he was just speaking of cause that sounds more fun then what I did this summer. And I actually, the end of my sophomore year came around and I was like, I was offered an internship to go down to like Texas and work in business and friend of mine George was like, it sounded like a great deal as far as making money but I wasn't excited about it. And I felt pretty bad I was like 'Thank you for getting that for me and I'm not gonna do it, like I'm gonna go to Japan and do this camp adventure program.'

BC: And so, for the first time, Adam took a flight and left the country, leading outdoor trips for U.S. military kids. And after that first summer, he continued to work for camp adventure, and he looked for every opportunity to travel he could find.

AH: So that's how I got introduced to, it was just like, 100% selfishly wanting to go to this place and work outside instead of go to this internship in Texas and I wasn't like 'oh the children you know, later on I was like 'wow these kids are amazing' and there were like days where you were crying because like the kids were seeing you leave and you were like 'oh this sucks'. But that was way after the decision was like completely selfish.

I had worked so many different jobs I knew I wasn't cut out for working the factory. I could do it, but it didn't make me happy, it wasn't like a calling or anything. I worked a lot of construction, worked on the farm, worked in like multiple like sawmills, lumber mills, and things like- it was all fun but it was mostly like I enjoyed the people. Because it was like family and friends and stuff. But I didn't- I was like 'I don't know what I'm going to do but these places are pretty cool and I love being outdoors like rock climbing, camping, and backpacking and suddenly I was like 'oh there's some careers out here,' and for a while I was like, 'maybe I'll just be like a, like a trip leader for the rest of my life and like that doesn't sound so bad'.

BC: He dreamed of a life of travel, a career leading trips all over the world, but Adam also reflected on how much, at the time, this life felt selfish, which to me sounded so very Midwestern. Was it ok to leave the family farm and abandon the familiar Iowa landscape for exotic mountains and beaches half a world away? This was a struggle at first, but over time he found meaning and purpose, and felt like this just might be his calling for the long term.

AH: But, it was kind of like out of selfishness wanting to travel. I think there was still like as a young person it's nice to be, it wasn't the social media age so there was like no posting pictures to facebook back then but it still felt good to be like 'I'm going to you know this place' and it sounds cool and people might have not gave a crap but I felt cool saying it. And so there is like this selfishness of like 'Hey I'm going to go do this trip' and that sounds cool. And it was, I loved being out at most of these places, they were fantastic.

I also loved like just learning new stuff. So I'm a big fan, it's kinda like while I like books, I will read about anything I don't know. But going to a place it's like reading a new book, you have to learn like okay I can't lead a trip here unless I learn the ecology, and the history, and what's safe and what's not and what's the economy like. So all that stuff is always fun because I was constantly learning new stuff but then I'd also see like, it's a different version of the same story. Like everybody, everywhere I went had an environmental story to tell a social story, an economic story, and it's like once you learn it you just see these themes that run through everything. You know like okay well they handled theirs this ways and they handled theirs this way but it's all the same stuff, so I started to see more big picture things and realize that I care about these environmental issues, I cared about social issues, I cared about economic issues and they were fascinating because I kept getting to see different versions of them play out in different places that I got to work.

That was like an unintended consequence. I was like lucky maybe that I got to see all that. But typically I was just like let's go do something fun, let's go hangout, let's go see a new place, let's go recreate outdoors. Especially in the warmth, I was a big fan of islands, going to like tropical islands that was never, that never hurt. Okinawa, Hawaii, the Florida Keys, those are places I really enjoyed going. The Galapagos, Costa Rica, they were very, very fun.

BC: And so he organized his education to get away as much as possible.

AH: I would lead outdoor trips through the university at UNI, worked in the wellness program, got my CDL, like drove 18 passenger vans and kayaks around, hiking, rock climbing stuff, but then every summer I would just be off to some country. Usually like do some camp adventure, or an internship or something. Really just started leaving and bouncing around as much as I could.

And also the classes I took I would be lying if I didn't look through the- I don't even know if they have this anymore- but there's a big fat program you through all the classes and at the bottom of every class it will say whether there is a field trip involved. And I definitely looked for those classes that said like 'field trip to Utah, field trip to-' you know, I went on a lot of field trips when I was in college.

BC: So you had this urge to see the world-

AH: Yeah

BC: Pretty intensely.

AH: I say like 4 continents, 7 countries, like living and working in those places but I also like when I was there I would travel and see as much other stuff nearby as I could.

BC: Adam spent the next few years guiding others on adventures in the outdoors - hiking, backpacking, and rock climbing. The goal of these trips was to help participants deepen their sense of place, and as he explored these faraway places, he also grew curious about his roots in the Midwest, about his own sense of connection to home, his own sense of concern for his native environment.

AH: Because I was an outdoor trip leader I often taught environmental education and the people brought, like the people that came to our program, like they brought the social and the economic stories. We learned a lot about just what their life was like and what issues that we're facing in their communities and we were teaching them the environmental truth of their community. Here's the ecology of where you're from. Here's the native ecology.

And what I found interesting is like I started realizing that I didn't know any of that stuff about where I was from. Like everywhere I went to I became basically a naturalist and an educator and I could tell people about their own home and like the history and stuff and like kind of like I don't know shit about Iowa like I don't know, I couldn't tell you all of the ecological history and stuff- now I can do better.

But it's like, I started realizing like I wonder like I wonder what version of this, like and I had memories from growing up that I could kind of put 2 and 2 together. But also just like interesting like I didn't pay attention to these things when I was home. I didn't pay attention to what the situation was with this or that and that started making me really curious about home for the first

time. Not that I knew exactly what it might look like. Like I had this inclining that I was like 'oh man, like, part of me is interested, like i'm interested enough to like move back and figure this out and like I want to know about my own' because you, I say you, I saw the impact it has on people, they call like place based education for kids but it's the same thing for adults so like when you learn about where you're from it can have a tremendous impact. Because it's the thing that shaped you, it's way more relevant and how its impacted your life directly. Versus just like going on a fun trip, like cruise to a nice island, and being like 'oh that's fascinating, how, how interesting'. It's different to provide placed education to people who are local and I was like 'Aw man it would probably do me good to go back and learn about like Iowa history and ecology and social issues and financial, economic issues. And things like that. And so all of that fascinated me and I was interested in like learning all about it but I was also enjoying myself. So it took a while for that to sink in and for me to create a plan to move home.

BC: For several years, Adam worked with a program called Ambassadors for the Environment, a sustainability education and youth leadership program created in the 1960s by Dr. Richard Murphy, Jean Michel Cousteau, whose father was pioneering ocean explorer Jaques Cousteau. Adam spent several seasons at their base on California's Catalina Island. And it was there that both he and the program came to a kind of crossroads, charting their future course. Adam had been working with the program while he was pursuing an MBA with a focus on corporate sustainability. In the back of his mind, he thought about working with Iowa businesses, but there didn't seem to be any jobs. And so he continued working on Catalina Island and contemplating a future with these mentors who had been his lifelong heroes.

Adam remembers a particular night when the staff, including Murphy and Cousteau, gathered on the beach. They'd had a full day of training and planning for the future, and now things got heated as they debated the next step for the ambassadors program. These two elders of environmental education had grown disillusioned after so many years of developing young leaders, all the while seeing planetary challenges get worse. They decided they needed a new strategy, focused on reaching not just any kids, but the kids of the world's elite leaders, so they were considering a new program at the Ritz Carlton resort in the Cayman Islands. But the rest of the staff wasn't sold on this new direction.

AH: Some people were like upset. They're like- why did you go to a cruise ship and like why the Ritz Carlton, and they're explaining their philosophy of like, 'I get it, yeah we want everybody to have this but if we're gonna change the world like we decided what kind of people do we need to be reaching. And it's like well, decision makers, lie people who are making decisions that impact thousands of if not hundred of thousands of people, like senators sons and like people who are gonna probably have a higher likelihood of running for politics, or owning a company, or they're like- it sounds like a shady thing to do but like that's what we decided to do with the limited amount of resources we have.

I was just like 'it seems like you're really targeting kids' so my question was like, 'is it working, like do you just think people are gonna, enough old people are gonna die and then the next

generation is gonna like make better decisions?' and they just kinda, again super honest he was like 'to be honest, that, that's what we thought' and he was like 'it's not working, these kids they'll come and they'll have a great experience but it's- 100% if they go home and their parents don't support what they've learned, they don't have fertile soil to grow in'.

He's like 'So we're actually kind of stumped.' He's like 'we don't know what's next' he's like 'but we really need to change adults minds. And he's like 'That's kind of a new thing for us, we thought we would just like age out these old ideas' and he's like 'it doesn't seem to be happening.'

I was like well, 'I've had this crazy idea like what if you like go back to like a city, do like an urban program but you target adults and it's like sustainability education for young professionals' and like, he's like 'yeah, sure, great' he's like 'we need people who like have real jobs and understand this stuff so they can like impact their companies' and blah blah blah. So like "I think it's a great idea' and I was like 'Oh shit, that's my idea like that's the thing I was thinking about was like if I move back to Iowa there didn't seem to be any corporate sustainability jobs so I was thinking like if I can't be a sustainability director or something for a company like would want to do something around something around sustainability.

So I was, had non-stop ideas in my journal, it was one of the only ones that seemed to like maybe pan out and when Richard Murphy said 'yeah that sounds like a great idea what we're doing isn't working. It was kind of like a lightbulb went off and I was like 'ohh man, like, kind of wish I hadn't asked that question because it was really easy for me to be like oh that would never work that's a stupid idea that's a dumb idea like whatever. Just go to Cayman ideas and work at the Ritz Carlton that'll be super fun'. So that was the night like it just like kinda like stuck in my head that that would work because somebody I looked up to and was pretty successfully said it was a good idea. And I was like okay well, guess I'm gonna give it a shot. Like I'll move back, so, that's when I decided to come home.

BC: And so Adam moved back to Iowa to bring this idea to life - an *urban* ambassadors of the environment program, focused on *adults*, especially young adults. It would be a kind of clearinghouse to connect people to opportunities, to help them learn about the interesting environmental non-profits and businesses and projects, not in California or the Cayman Islands, but right here in the Midwest.

That was the vision, but it took a while to build it. In the meantime, he found a part-time job running a ropes course for school groups in Des Moines, but it wasn't enough to live on. He needed something to pay the bills while he developed his idea, and so he did like lots of young professionals in Des Moines and took a job in insurance.

AH: I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there were insurance jobs always open in Des Moines, we're the insurance capital of the world. So I was like, I'm- I talked to a bunch of friends I was like I went down to Nationwide and there was a 3 month training- where school is never a

problem for me I'm a bookworm, I take tests very easily, I memorize stuff and forget it. Doesn't bother me. So I was like, I'll go get trained to work in insurance but I knew that they had once the training was over like 3 months of training, I would be able to have like a late shift so I got an 11-7 shift and I had a steady check every 2 weeks. I knew it was coming in. It was a cakewalk to go in and do this insurance job. So I didn't, I never thought about it, all of my waking hours and like even when I was daydreaming at work it was about Urban Ambassadors and I would spend the first 4 or 5 hours of every day working on it, and then I would work 11-7 and then I would work on Urban Ambassadors. So I just took an insurance job for 2 years to like get me to start this thing.

BC: So he worked his insurance job and slowly established Urban Ambassadors as a non-profit. When he got too burnt out juggling his shift making insurance calls with the demands of a non-profit startup, he left Nationwide and started the three-month training at another Des Moines insurance company. Now he had more mental space to focus on Urban Ambassadors, which was beginning to take off. They hosted networking events and created a buzz around sustainability in Des Moines.

AH: Eventually we started projects, because it was more fun to do fun projects so we started creating things and then handing them off to other organizations like 'hey you should run this because we want to go create this other thing' so it was just- we call them seed projects and so we started creating new stuff like what's missing in Des Moines is one of our motto's and people would tell us and we would be like 'great let's start it'. And we would get a bunch of people together, a bunch of organizations and we would start that thing, get it going and hand it off. basically like an, little start up engine but for community projects.

So that was my life like, it was 100% volunteer run non-profit, the board was- got pretty big and we had a ton of members and volunteers. But it was just like a passion, like a work of passion. Like we were all just young enough, didn't have family or kids yet, so we were all just out there doing stuff. Kind of moving and shaking and having a lot of fun.

BC: And so Adam began to embrace life back in Iowa, and to embrace Des Moines, in spite of its reputation as a sleepy city. For generations, young professionals had been migrating away from not just the rural Midwest, but also from urban areas like Des Moines, drawn to the jobs and the culture of cities on the coasts. Now, Adam and his fellow Urban Ambassadors were finding opportunities in Iowa. Along with other start-ups like the Des Moines Social Club and the Des Moines Bicycle Collective, they were helping lead a revival of urban life and helping envision the city as a leader in sustainability.

AH: When I was a kid Des Moines was my least favorite city in Iowa. I would go there for high school, state. It was like wrestling stuff when I was younger and like basketball and football and stuff. Like, as you got in a sports you come to Des Moines for things. And I was just like, this is not a good city. I don't like it here, I don't have fun, you know maybe it was better when you were older and go to the bars and things. I was just like, not a fan of Des Moines.

AH: I think the difference for me was that and event today what I see is people when you move to Des Moines, especially young professionals, the thing you're interested is not what I was looking at. Because at the time Des Moines didn't have the best restaurants and didn't have the best outings and stuff. But I was having a lot of fun, I was like oh, not only was I going out and learning about these organizations and trying to map them and introduce new people to them, but I was hearing from them like hey next year we're already in the process of doing such and such, so like this cool thing is going to happen next year. And I'm like oh man that's going to be so cool when that comes to des Moines I can't wait. So I would get this list of cool stuff that's going to happen. Even though I promised my mom I was like hey I'll be here for 3 years tops or like minimum like I'll definitely stay for 3 years I'm not going to move. Cause she was always like, you should come home and be closer to family. But I honestly thought that 3 years would probably go by and I would just be gone, again. But every year I started learning about new things and I started working on my own stuff with Urban Ambassadors and that just became too exciting to think about leaving. Like when I thought about going somewhere else and there were other offers there were other opportunities to go places, I was just like oh man, but next year we're going to have like x, y, and z. And possibly like I worked on that or possibly like I know people who have been working on it for years. I really want to see how that kind of unfolds. So those are the things that started keeping me here. Like I was interested in keeping these cool community projects that were popping up.

And so then I would tell people about that like, "Hey Des Moines cool did you know that this is happening?" whereas most of the time they were like, "Yeah but is there any good Chinese places or things like that?"

So, that's how I started to love Des Moines, I saw more of the behind the scenes community activism and a lot of really progressive stuff that was starting to happen. And now that's lightyears ahead of where it was 11 years ago. Like the beginning that was the only thing keeping me going, some exciting projects happening behind the scenes.

But that's why Des Moines started to take on like a, "ooo I could, I could be proud to be there." I could be, call this my home, you know have access I was two hours from my mom and dad, I'm all my cousins and stuff like I'm not that far away plus we've got an airport like I can go on vacation. The cost of living, is a lot better here than other places that I've been. But if I hadn't found something fun and exciting to do for a living, I don't think I could've stayed.

BC: Whether or not there was good Chinese food, Adam found a lot to love in Des Moines, and he continued to hold out hope that one day he would find a full-time sustainability job, that the Des Moines business community would see the value of this sort of role. Eventually he got his chance, in perhaps an unlikely place, when the Kum & Go convenience store chain announced they were hiring a sustainability manager.

AH: So, there were no jobs that were titled corporate sustainability at the time that I showed up first in 2007. And then when this job posted actually had a friend who now runs his own farm, Tony Thompson, and he told- he's like this job got open and I'm thinking about applying for it. Would you think about putting in a good reference for me. Because he knows I had helped Kum & Go start a green team like 2 years prior and help was just like met with a vice president and one of their staff who had taken this green business course at the University of Iowa. I just gave him some direction, here is what I would do for Green Team and why. I also told them, "Hey, be careful as a volunteer group you could burn out if you don't have like a budget and a plan" and 2 years went by and they kind of felt like they maybe burnt out and didn't have a budget and a plan so they wanted to hire a manager of sustainability.

I put in a reference for my friend Tony and on the call they had said well why haven't you applied for it. I was like, well I read the job description and it sounded like you're just looking for someone to work on certifying green stores and like that's great but I don't want to just work in the construction industry. Like I want to work company wide. And they were like, well, trust me, like we want it to be company wide too we're just not sure what the- maybe we didn't write the job description as well as we could've maybe you can give us some guidance on that but we definitely thought that you might be applying so we were wondering where your application was.

So I called Tony back up and I said 'hey, I feel like a jerk here is what happened on the phone call.' He was like 'oh don't worry about it' he was like 'whatever happens happens' and so I did end up applying and I had gotten my LEED certification, my LEED AP, that's was one of the things I was studying for, and so it helped. But- the reason I got hired I would say is because, one, I went to work at the insurance companies, so I had a corporate go to work everyday sort of job on my resume where everything on my resume was go play outside and have fun. So I know if I hadn't been in the insurance world for those 2 years I probably would not have gotten the job.

And then also I had spent so many years working in the community that my boss at the time, the vice president of construction you know hired me, said he had never had so many letters of reference and recommendations for a single person cause I went to, it was the only job that I had seen, that I had wanted in the entire Central Iowa region. And so I went to every single person I knew that did anything, and said if you know someone at Kum & Go and would be willing to give me like some positive words, or anything, please do. And so apparently a lot of people who worked with me in the community on Urban Ambassadors did know people at Kum & Go and had like been saying things positively and so, I got the job.

So, that's how I got hired and it was really opened ended it was like a free agent. I definitely had- the goal was to get Kum & Go with as many certified to start getting all our stores certified in the LEED program, leadership and energy and environmental design. But outside of that it was kind of like, help us create and define what sustainability is for the company, what do we already do well, what should we measuring, all those things and I just got to- as a retailer in 11 different states, I just bounced around. Literally, like physically was travelling to different

markets but also going from department to department. Learning what they were doing and why and what their goals were, and trying to align those with some early sustainability goals, which was super great experience for me. Like that's, I couldn't have asked for anything better. It wasn't what I expected and it was also the perfect thing for my career and for the education learning, like the experience I was looking for.

BC: Adam had to step back from some of his leadership with Urban Ambassadors, and he had to explain to some people how he could justify sustainability work at a company that sold junk food, sugary drinks, and gasoline.

AH: People I worked with who didn't know that this was like my dream job like oh you selling out going working corporate for a gas station. I'm like, what do you want- my response was always like what companies do you want to change. Like, do you want just all the companies that stay the same, like I'm happy I'm working with a convenience store because if we can find a solution here you should be able to do it everywhere else. And it's like so I got to go work on alternative fuels, I got to work on green building, energy, stormwater management, lighting issues, like convenience stores have just as many social issues kind of hovering around them and the community as they do like petroleum issues and stuff like that from the environmental side.

So I got to learn a lot of things and get introduced to kind of organizations and experts and people in our company, people in other companies, all working on the same stuff, but it was, there was blow back in the just the environmental community. Like oh you know, like what could you possibly do that's good there. And it's like, well I could show you like, here's how much energy you saved across 400 stores, here's how much water we've saved, here's how much fuel we've saved, like just millions and millions of stats about when you solve something at a convenience store, that you have 440 other convenience stores just like it, the benefits rack up pretty quickly cause you can do these rollouts and suddenly you've got 40 stores, 150 stores, 300 stores, all doing this new thing when you only had to figure it out at one. It was a really nice model to work in.

BC: You can tell he's proud of the work Kum & Go has done - new stores LEED certified with sustainable features like motion-activated LED lighting, landscaping to handle stormwater runoff, pump-side recycling, and programs for donating leftover food to the hungry. Adam not only worked within the company, but also started to support sustainability in other Midwest businesses. He wrote a book about leading change in business settings and started teaching classes on corporate social responsibility for the University of Iowa's MBA program. After a few years at Kum & Go, he left and founded another non-profit, the Iowa Sustainable Business Forum, an industry group for sharing best practices and supporting businesses across the state. He eventually wrote another book, Sustainable Business in Iowa, and he says it is especially impressive what these Midwest companies are doing, given the challenge of getting a positive return on investment, or ROI, in the Midwest, compared to places like California with more expensive water and energy prices.

AH: It does make some of the stuff harder like investing energy efficiency, water conservation, recycling, those things are not as easy when things are cheap. And so people look at California or look at the East coast or Colorado and they say well it works there they must just care more. That's not true, the people who do it are doing it not because they care more but because the ROI is much better. And so, there's probably people who don't care as much but see the ROI and do it for the money. But in Iowa, here are people who see the ROI isn't as good and have been more creative - more progressive - more interested in going out and doing the right thing and have shown and have case studies of like 'this works, but you have to do it this way'.

This works and here's how, and you have to be a little more careful about how you do it and ask the right people the best way to do it. And so, my intention just in any other work I've done is really to shine a light on the good stuff and let people know here's what worked, here's some examples of what worked, and ask them yourself why it worked. Like you can ask them, they can tell you most Iowans are very nice and their very interested in being like yeah here's how I did it if you want to do the same thing more power to you. And so that's what I think is possible in Iowa is just being more careful to go find those success stories and then lift them up.

In the Iowa Sustainable Business Forum that's all it is, is we have businesses telling businesses how they were successful and why it worked, what was the business case for being environmentally responsible; what was the business case for being socially responsible. That's how we did it in Urban Ambassadors and honestly it's how we did it at Kum & Go.

BC: Adam has lots of examples of companies in Iowa quietly leading the way in sustainability, with net-zero energy buildings, zero-waste operations, innovative employee health and wellness programs, and more. He definitely still sees lots of people and lots of businesses that are skeptical of sustainability, but he's also excited to see changes spread, and not just in urban centers but in unlikely businesses and rural communities.

He shared a story he heard about a small town Pizza Ranch franchise looking into renewable energy. This chain of all-you-can-eat pizza buffets started in Iowa and now has over 200 locations in fourteen Midwest states. And it hasn't boomed because of its environmental leadership or liberal values. Founded on Christian values, Pizza Ranch is known as a key campaign for conservative presidential candidates in Iowa.

AH: I was talking with someone who said, 'I sat in a meeting with the Pizza Ranch, you'll never guess what I heard today, Pizza Ranch is putting Solar panels on one of those stores and they said why are you doing that no one else in your town is putting solar panels and and I'm like I saw Kum & Go on the news for putting solar panels and I know if their doing there must be a business case so we started researching it and we're looking at putting solar panels on our building'.

If it's some sort of fringe thing, those people are losing money for all I know. But he was like "well I know if Kum & Go is doing it, it's not crazy."

BC: Adam has helped shift the culture of sustainability in Iowa businesses, from a crazy, fringe thing to a smart strategy. There's a long way to go, here as in other regions, but there is also lots of momentum. Industries like wind and solar are booming in the Midwest, and sustainability is also taking hold in sectors like manufacturing and agriculture. Through the Sustainable Business Forum, Adam is helping foster space to support this shift.

They don't usually have ham rolled pickles, but they do host "visits" so business leaders can sit and talk, share stories and learn from each other, neighbor to neighbor.

BC: Adam left Iowa in search of adventure, looking for the kind of wild landscapes we just don't have in Iowa. He came home, committed to nurturing urban and corporate sustainability. But I couldn't help but wonder whether he still missed the mountains, beaches, and warm weather that drew him away.

And I wondered how he felt now about the kind of exchange he joked about at the beginning of the episode - riding a van through the mountains of California, proud that his trip leader friends called him Iowa, but also pretty sure they'd never want to visit him in Iowa, and not really sure himself where he would even take them if he did visit, to show off the natural beauty of the Midwest.

AH: I had this like ongoing joke that like Iowa is pretty great and people should like check it out. And I was saying it mostly out of not even knowing just trying to be like proud of where I'm from because I didn't stick around and travel much. I didn't know really what to tell people I was just like 'you should come visit, I'll take you some places, like we'll go do some stuff'. But I didn't have a whole backpack full of ideas at the time.

I would say I didn't learn a lot about Iowa like where are the great hiking spots, where are the great camping spots, like where are these, there's a few waterfalls like where do you go do this, like mostly when I moved home for the last 11 years that what's I feverishly been spending my time doing like where can I go get some like good hiking cause it's just like, feeds my soul. And makes me feel- like I can live a few months off of one good hiking trip.

BC: I pressed a little. What does it say that we joke about this, that we can't be quite serious in taking pride in the natural beauty of the Midwest?

We're never going to have the ocean, we're never going to have the mountains, we don't have really big lakes. We're trying to rebrand like the Okiboji and the Great Lakes, which is wonderful- those are nice lakes. They're not the same as some other places. So it's like that's- our strong suit is never going to be that we have the, like I mean the only thing that could be our strong suit is if we restored thousands of prairie and like oak savannah, because that's what we have that other people don't and unfortunately our native ecosystem mostly is, we've gotten rid of it. But

the only thing to be unique is to like be proud of where you're from and to let that stuff grow and be you know protected.

Other states have found a good way to do that it's easier when you have the mountains because, one, it's really hard to plow a mountain. It's very expensive. So any country, any state that has a lot of elevation you know they can, they should be proud but it's not necessarily that if they could turn it into something else and develop it they probably would have to be honest. But it's very difficult to do that so you turn your mountains into tourism. And we don't have that so unfortunately we have turned a lot of our native ecosystem which is prairie and you know savannah and wetlands, very quickly into farmland, which is great for some things but it's terrible for tourism, and it's terrible for bringing people to your state to see something unique and interesting. It doesn't provide any of those other benefits...

And so that's why I would say it's joking because most people know that 90 some percent of our land is not like worth coming as a tourist to see because we developed it. And so from an economic standpoint it's not valuable for our tourism or for attracting non-Iowans who don't have life family and friends who their coming here to see. It's just a different, has a different form of value. Which is commodity crop prices. That's why we joke, cause it's just true.

The thing that I'm most interested in kind of like long-term, I would love to be able to help more restoration, getting more prairie more oak savannah, more bison more elk more of like Iowa native land. Return to its' native state because that's why- it's one of the reasons why Loess Hills is so beautiful, its like that's just Iowa. And it's really what it used to look like. It could still look like that, some places could easily turn back into that. Doesn't have to be 2 hours away, could be within driving distance of anybody in the state- I think you should be able to go to a beautiful Oak Savannah next to a prairie maybe see some bison and some elk and like that should be a goal of all of us. To be able to access that because that's truly our history and that's where we come from, so I would love to see that happen.

BC: Thanks for listening to Mid-Americana, and thanks to Adam Hammes for sharing his story. Tune in next time as Josh talks with Bob Leonard about growing up poor in a community called Dogpatch, how a twist of fate sent Bob to graduate school in Seattle, and how a tragedy he witnessed one night in Albuquerque, where he split time as a professor of anthropology and taxicab driver, convinced him to bring his young family back to his Iowa home.

Head over to our website, midamericana.com, where you can find transcripts of the show and the full interview, links to Adam's books, and information about Urban Ambassadors and the Iowa Sustainable Business Forum. We've also got illustrations for this and every episode, thanks to the generous and talented Mat Kelly.

Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to rate and review us on iTunes. And thanks for sharing the podcast with friends.

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