Matt Wagner:

Welcome to the Main Street Business Insights Podcast. I'm your host, Matt Wagner, chief program officer at Main Street America, a nonprofit leading a collaborative movement dedicated to strengthening communities through place-based economic development and community preservation. Each week, join me as I travel the country and take a deep dive into the personal journeys of downtown and neighborhood entrepreneurs, the stories that far too often go unnoticed and unheard. Whether you're a small business owner who wants to learn from your peers or a community leader looking to better support your local business base, Main Street Business Insights is here to provide you with the tools, strategies and personal stories to help you and all of your main Street businesses thrive. So subscribe now and tune in every Wednesday to get inspired by the individuals driving our communities forward.

Hi, everyone. I'm Matt Wagner, chief program officer at Main Street America and host of the Main Street Business Insights Podcast. Thanks for joining as we explore the personal journeys of small business owners offering their personal perspectives, lessons learned, and of course, sharing their wisdom on operating and succeeding on our Main Streets. We had two primary purposes when we started in the show, and one was to tell the stories that are really inspirational and important, and as we like to say on the podcast, that far too often go untold and unheard. Secondly, it was really to illuminate the incredible intersections of small businesses and artwork as place professionals. Today's guest personifies what our show aspired to do. But before we get to the guest, for a second year in a row, this is kind of cool, we are recording in front of an audience at our Main Street Now Conference this year in Birmingham, Alabama, which I really enjoy is we have this opportunity to not only engage with the guests, of course, but to engage with all of you.

So as you're going through, as I start asking questions and we start having our chat, I hope you'll start thinking about questions that you might want to learn as we go through our podcast today. If my voice sounds a little bit different than maybe what you're used to, it is not because we have great editing on the back end. It's just because after I think five days, I've spoken more than maybe five months in total, and it's starting to go I think a little bit, or it's sounding deeper or huskier of something, I don't know. Okay. Normally, I would jump right into the questions, but just by way of a little bit of background, what we tend to do is record our intro and outro essentially after the podcast. Okay? But we're going to run this a little bit differently. As I'm doing somewhat a blended intro and then we'll leap into our questions with the guest. Our guest today is Alycia Level-Moore. She's the owner and founder of Polaris, which is a co-workspace and entrepreneurial event center in the Woodlawn neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama.

She's also one of the leaders in our Main Street America work in partnership with Living Cities on the Breaking Barriers to Business entrepreneurial ecosystem work supported by the Truist Bank Foundation and working in five cities and 15 neighborhoods. If you thought that was a lot, okay, take a deep breath here, Alycia has also an amazing and busy family life as a wife and mother of four. Also, she's not going to do it, folks, I already tried, she's an amazing singer. Okay? We're not going to get that. That's a separate podcast, totally different venue. So Alycia in very many, many ways personifies what we're trying to do and aspire to do with the podcast and what it means to be a Main Street business owner. So with that, please join me in welcoming Alycia to the show. We can clap. All right. All right, so we're going to dive in. If you've listened to the podcast in the past, you know I like to always ask about their journey, what's the story? So that's where we're going to get started. Let's hear about Alycia's story and her journey to small business ownership.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes. Well, good morning, everyone, or yes, it's morning time. I'm a little delusional. So good morning. I was born in upstate New York. I was born in upstate New York. I was raised in East Atlanta. I attended Tuskegee University, and that's where I met my husband, and he's from Birmingham. So he said, "Hey, I think we should move to Birmingham." He had been volunteering in a community, Woodlawn, at the high school doing a lot of work. So me not knowing anything about Birmingham, anything about Woodlawn, it's an amazing community, at the time, 10, 11 years ago, it was very much in transition. It's not the Woodlawn we know now. So I packed my bags, and I got there and I was like, "Oh, okay." Right? So I was like, "Yeah, all right." But my thought process when I do anything is, how can I make sure that whatever I'm a part of it's better once I'm finished with it?

So he was heavily involved in civic engagement, and I jumped right in with supporting our small business owners and got involved with the organization doing some urban main work and coordinating porch parties and really figuring out how do we nurture our community-based ecosystem of entrepreneurs. My natural matriculation in doing that work was like, "Well, hey, there's no spaces. Where are people meeting? Where are they gathering? Where are they ideating?" So I saw a building in my community, it had been vacant for about three years, and I just thought it was cute, and I didn't have any money. So I walked in, I called the property manager, and I was like, "Hey, I want to take a look." Every week, I would come in with an interior designer, a contractor, and he was like, "Ma'am, if you come here one more day without putting a deposit down, I going to call the cops on you."

Matt Wagner:

It sounds like you had moved in already.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes. In my mind, because I'm a crazy woman like that, the moment I see a vision, it's really nothing else to talk about. So I brought all the folks in, and we were able to lease the space from the property owner and begin building out Polaris, which is our community-based co-working space. But really for me, it is an educational hub, and that's really the hope and goal for what we do.

Matt Wagner:

Excellent. Excellent. When we talked before in the past, your vision around Polaris that you articulated to me was really about building community. I think that's an interesting component that you hear from a lot of small business owners that it's hard to talk with them where they don't mention community. It's like what separates, I think, a lot of mainstream businesses from other businesses. Could you talk about what does that mean to you in the context of the work that you do at Polaris? Why is community so important to this work?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

I think when we think about community, it means acceptance, it means belonging, and where you feel accepted and where you feel like you belong, you thrive. There's safety there. So it's important because when we think about nurturing the gifts and the talents and the ideas of folks who have not been invested in or have not been exposed to certain things based on whatever the circumstances, in order for you to really thrive in your creativity and all that you can offer, you have to feel safe. You have to know that you belong.

I think when you look at the word community is really just communing and unity. How can we commune in unity? So I think providing space for people, a safe space for people was really important to me because I knew that if it wasn't safe, no matter what your mission statement is, you're not going to accomplish it because people can feel inauthenticity a mile away when something's inauthentic. So it was important to really nurture a space of safety and community so that we could build trust and that we could really help to get some of these ideas out of people's heads and into the world.

Matt Wagner:

Wonderful. You and your husband are very active in the Birmingham area-

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

... and I'm interested in this capitalist mobile. You certainly had many different parts of Birmingham where you could have built Polaris. What was it about Woodlawn the place that attracted you so much?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, I think the interesting thing about my story is I live on the Main Street, I have a building on the Main... so everything about what we do centered around our community. So my husband, he's a public servant, but his work revolves around our community. So I'm raising four children somewhere, and if I'm going to do anything, it's going to be right in my neighborhood because that's how you add value. So I want the kids when they're walking home from school or walking to school they see folks in their community working.

I want people who are in the community to know that there is a safe place for me to go to tinker, to think, to ideate and even to fail and get back up. But it's okay. So it was just important to me to start it in my neighborhood. On top of that, it's up the street, so I can always just get in the car and drive two minutes away if anything is ever going on. Then you have neighbors and other business owners who are around, you who can say, "Hey, make sure that the lights are off," like, "Hey, I took your trash out." So it's a benefit in building a community with other folks.

Matt Wagner:

Excellent. We're going to talk a little bit about that support system, but one of the themes that continues to come up in our conversations, especially in a post-pandemic, post-COVID world, is the mental aspect of running a business. You've been engaged for a number of years in both sides of running and owning a business, but also as a technical assistance provider. In many respects, that's not the thing that is part of some small business or entrepreneurial curriculum is the mental aspect-

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

... the mental health aspect of running a business. We'll teach you about your finances and how to network and build relationships. So I'm curious, in your role at Polaris is, how do you approach issues of mental health and loneliness among entrepreneurs in this new world, and what strategies do you implement to combat these challenges?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, I think that's a good question. I'm going to touch on it from two different ways.

Matt Wagner:

Okay.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

So one, you talked about there's a mindset thing and then there's mental health, and then there's another component to it as well, 'cause you made mention of being a technical assistance practitioner. I think you have a lot of folks who are working with businesses, but they don't understand what it feels like to be a business owner, so they're supporting and teaching all from theory. So I think that's a great opportunity for me is when I'm talking to a business owner, I'm working with them, I'm like, "No, I know that you want to cry," Right? Right? "Here's a shoulder. I know what's going on. I know it's time to meet overhead. This person, they said they were going to do this."

So I think there's an inability to relate to people in a very special way because you understand the journey because it does take a certain level of resilience and miserable fortitude to do anything that's risky. It is a scary thing. I remember probably a couple of days before we opened Polaris that we have an LED sign, I had to go pick it up. It was $750. I'm looking at my credit card statement, and I just burst out crying in the parking lot, hard tears, like you can't really see? It's a little snot, it's not too cute. I'm like, "Ah, ah," and I'm just-

Matt Wagner:

Everyone has an image right now.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

I'm bawling because I'm like, "What am I doing? I think I'm a psychopath." I think entrepreneurship, it does cause you to have to operate in a small level of delusion because you have to believe what no one else believes. You have to see what no one else sees, and you have to really find it within yourself. Because even I had people around me who love me dearly and they're like, "I don't think this is a good idea. You just had a kid." So I was on baby number three, and baby number three was six weeks old. They were like, "I think it's a good idea, but I don't know if it's now the time," so you have to be able to encourage yourself. But in terms of the mental health aspect, it goes back to the resilience, it goes back to the fortitude and it goes back to having people around you where you can say, "Okay," business owners who get it, "Hey, is this okay?"

So I have a friend in Inglewood, so he opened a co-working space in Inglewood, California. I remember when I was getting ready to press Purchase on all of the furniture with a MasterCard, and I was like, "I think this might be a bad idea for my credit score." I called him, he was like, "Hit it, now do it. Now you have to do it." So I had somebody to talk me into doing the things I needed to do because, again, when you're walking somewhere you've never been, you need some folks who have been there. That was really helpful for me because it alleviated some of the anxiety, some of the stress around knowing that this is just what comes with business ownership. But I think therapy is important.

I go to therapy two times a month because I know I need a outlet. My friends are great, my husband's great, but I need other outlets to make sure I have a space to talk through things, to work through things. Fridays, I don't do a whole lot. That's the day for me to just walk around Hobby Lobby and have a good time and look at everything that's 40% off, the spring section, but doing things that don't require productivity. So I think you have to build in that time. After 6:00, I don't answer my phone. I'm not responding to an email because nothing is the end of the world except the end of the world, and so we're not quite there yet.

So I'm like, "Hey, I'm not doing it," because I know too, it's time for me to take off one hat, put on another, which is to make sure that my kids have my full attention, and so not letting the work consume you. I'm a woman of faith, and so I understand that everything is not within my control. As smart as I am, as much as I can work, I can't will it enough. I will run myself ragged, and I like to look good, so it's important. It's a real thing. So I don't want to run myself ragged. I don't want to look like what it takes. So I think what are some boundaries you can set for yourself and you make other people respect those boundaries as well? Then it becomes a part of your culture. So people know if they don't hear from me after it's 6:00 or 7:00, it's no offense, they understand.

Matt Wagner:

I am sitting here in total awe of that response, so let's make sure we clip this out as its own segment. That was completely powerful. I'm struck by the response, but then at the same time, I'm also thinking about perhaps the entrepreneurs that don't have that existing network or aren't sure how to build those connections that ultimately, to your point, are so incredibly important to just getting started, to pressing the button. So what do you advise when you're at Polaris and new folks are coming in with their ideas? How do you get them to that point where they've got their support system?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, I made mention of this in a session during the conference yesterday. One of the things we try to do at Polaris is build a culture of that. So sometimes I'm there, and we do a good job at knowing who's in the building, who's connecting with us online or in person. For lack of better words, if someone tells me what they want to do, they are nervous to see me again if they haven't started to do it, 'cause I'm kicking you in the back. I'm texting you like, "Okay, so you don't want to do nothing? Okay, that's fine. You just want to be regular," because sometimes you need someone to push you because I think that we get so comfortable just in our comfort zone.

Then what happens, though, is for me, I think about my life, and I said, "Hey, I don't ever want to be a person that was like, 'I could have done, I should have done, I would've done.'" You know the person you talk to or the family member that always talks about the past in '75 when they ran that one play. You like, "Listen, it is 2024," right? But sometimes we can get stuck in time if we're not willing to push ourselves. So for me, anybody who's around me, and hopefully, this isn't messing up the podcast, but Chris, he's here, he can tell you firsthand, if you are going to do something, I'm going to push you to the very edge of yourself, but I'm going to be there to walk alongside you so you know you're not alone. Every resource that's available to me is now available to you because I'm just committed to people's success like that. I think you have to be self-aware enough to know what's your superpower.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. I think you've got another 10 lines of business. So we were already ideating before the podcast started, so inspirational speaker, new slogans for T-shirts for Main Street. So you just want to be normal.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Right.

Matt Wagner:

We can go on, right? We've got five new business concepts already started here. Let's switch gears a little bit-

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

... because you wear another hat, and it's with my colleague Dionne who's in the crowd here, and our work with Breaking Barriers to Business-

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

... Initiative where we're working, as I mentioned earlier on our entrepreneurial ecosystem work with Living Cities through the Truist Foundation, five cities, 15 Neighborhoods. Could you share with the audience a little bit more about the kinds of experiences and insights you've gained by being engaged in this program effort and what have you seen has been most challenging about working in new communities?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, that's a good question. So I want to shout out Dionne for bringing me on to the project because it has really been amazing too. When you're building your own community you know what's around you. But when you get the opportunity to go to other cities and communities, you get a chance to really see what's happening on the ground. The thing that I think that was important and what my grandmother, Maya Angelou used to tell me, she's really not my grandmother. People are like, "Oh, Maya, this girl..."

Matt Wagner:

She's not in the background.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

... is crazy." No, no, no. But in my mind, she's my grandmother. One of the things that I realized in doing the work in all these different cities is that we are more alike than we are different, and I see that we're all having very similar experiences. If you may be in a different geographical location, the political landscape may be a little different, but we're all grappling with the same thing. So I think that's one thing I was able to see.

But I think in terms of the challenges with working with newer communities is helping them to organize themselves and believing that regardless of what has not been invested into you, regardless of who hasn't responded to your email, who has not paid attention, you can make them because there's power with people. So it's really helping them to organize themselves so that they can be their biggest advocates and their biggest cheerleaders for their quality of life. so I think the biggest challenge, it goes back to that mindset thing, helping people to get past all of the hurt and to be able to rise above so that they can really focus on what's important, which is a solution for their communities and for the quality of life for themselves and their families.

Matt Wagner:

Excellent. You just highlighted the importance of Main Street, right?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

That's right.

Matt Wagner:

Capacity building, setting mindset, creating vision for the community. Given that we focus on the hyperlocal, and it would seem that most programming and small business support is often driven down from city, regional or even state institutions. I'm wondering what are some of the common disconnects that you find as an entrepreneur and as an owner of a business that supports other entrepreneurs in the programming? Are there disconnects between what we come up with and what really people need?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

That's a good question. So yes, 'cause I think sometimes you have organizations and cities and in their minds based on all their annual reports, they think that they're doing everything, and it's no shade to the annual report. I love a good annual report. However, I think that, again, when you really get down to the heart of the people, to your point, seeing what is actually beneficial, and I think some of the disconnects is one, we have a lot of programming.

We're asking a lot from people who have a little bit of time, a little bit of capacity, and they are fighting for their lives in terms of revenue. So when you actually to sign up for a 56-week incubator program, and it's like, "We're going to give you $500," it's like, "Seriously, get out of my face," right? Because you're like, "Hey, I have to open this building. I have to close this building. I have to cover overhead. I'm trying to expand. I'm trying to do something with my facade. I'm navigating leases." It's so many different things. So I think one, how do we make sure that the programming that we offer is culturally competent? It's relevant, that it fits into the time and the capacity that business owners have, right?

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

I think making sure that it's connected to some type of outcome and resource, because I think, and this is just in all transparency, I think sometimes when we're looking at programs and the different organizations I've had a chance to work with and things I've seen, the outcomes are more so tailored to the organization. So when we're looking at our metrics, it's like, "Okay, we need to be able to report," and it may not be exactly what that community needs. So then what happens is people feel slighted, "I don't want to fool with you anymore. I don't want to go to your program, don't come around here, go. I don't trust them."

That's one of the most important things in community building, and the work that we do is trust. So if you give me a program, and if you give me something and it's not really tailored or focused on what my needs are, but more so how can I meet your goals, you're going to have a hard time seeing true results. So I think the disconnected is really considering the capacity, the true outcomes that people need. I think we also have to be agile in our programs so we can create it. We're really smart, but then we have to be willing to pivot and adjust if needed and be able to articulate that to partners or articulate that to the team like, "Hey, if we are truly about impact, we have to be willing to be a little more agile in what we're offering."

Matt Wagner:

I think there's this misconception, whether we know it or not, that small business owners and entrepreneurs are like robots. They're going to all respond in the same way and that everyone has time to commit and resources to commit.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

You mentioned a really important, I think, thought around metrics, and we've been having a lot of conversations around metrics and how we measure whether or not we're being successful. Could you talk a little bit about where you would like to see what should we be measuring? What's really the true metric of success when it comes to supporting small businesses from your sense?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

That's a good question. I going to answer, and I don't know if it would be data metrics because I think sometimes it's tangible what I'm going to say, but sometimes there's certain things you have to find a new way to call it or how you're going to measure it-

Matt Wagner:

Does it fit into a certain box?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, so I think really being able to get real feedback from folks about their experience and taking it into consideration. So for example, we have a pop-up retail small-scale manufacturing space in Polaris. So one of the ways I measure success is everything that they needed, because you could do an assessment before they come in, everything that they needed, regardless if it matches what I want or what I want to report or the stories are there 'cause I want to tell, was I able to check those boxes off? Then also, was I able to take a look at the things they didn't even know they needed.

Because I think sometimes there's a disconnect because some business owners, they are really just trying to operate their business, and they're trying to make money and do the things that they love, and they don't know what they don't know. So if I'm working with someone who's doing retail and she has amazing product but she has no clue about visual merchandising, it's my responsibility to say, "Hey, I see what you're doing. I think it's good, but let me offer you another suggestion. Let me connect you with this person."

So measuring that based on the relationships, we help them to build other things that we're able to expose them to that we may not have written in the program or they may not have asked because most entrepreneurs are going to say, "Give me some money, give me an attorney, and give me an accountant." Then sometimes you don't even know what to do with those folks. You don't know how to maximize those relationships. You don't know the questions to ask to your accounting. So it's okay, we know that most of the time those things are going to come up, but as a practitioner, how can I expose you to other things you may not even be asking me about? How can I tap into my resources? How can I tap into my relationships and ensure that those relationships can influence your success? How you measure that, I don't know. But I think if someone's able to walk away and you see them better than where they started, that's something to use.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. It's really the intangibles and having a good understanding that there's not one journey or one pathway to success, and the intervention that you're doing to when they need it and helping them to understand what that need is is invaluable.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

I'm going to ask one more question because I want to give a little bit of time if we have some audience questions, but it's probably one that folks that are here and listeners are like, "How does she handle all this?" I think that's common for many small business owners, to your point, not only who are running the business, but they're human and they have lives. So I have to ask, how do you balance your role as a mother, entrepreneur, musician, consultant? These are demanding responsibilities.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

You talked a little bit about that, but maybe just go into a little bit tighter about how do you do all this?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, I think, again, so I said earlier, I'm a woman of faith. One, I think there's a grace on me to do it. I think you have to understand where you are supposed to be. When you are operating where you are supposed to be, even with all of the challenges, it's a ease that comes with it. I think too, when I think over my life, when I think about when it's all said and done, when I'm 120 years old and I go out in my sleep and my hair is cute, and I have on my nice outfit, I'm thinking, "Did I give it all I have? Did I give it everything that I could? Did I do the things I wanted to do?" You'll hear conversations for folks as they matriculate and as they age in life, it's like, "Man, I wish I would've done that."

I don't ever want to say I wish I would've done. I want to say, "I tried it, it didn't work. I didn't like that so much," but there will never be anything that I want to do that I'm not willing to give it my all. I think that that's important for me, how I live my life. So I have three girls and one boy, and there's this thing that parents do, right? It's like, "You can do anything you want to do. You can be an astronaut. You can be the next President of the United States." We give them all this courage, but what does that look like for me to tell you that, but I wasn't able to do it myself. How can I be an example to you? How can I say it out of my mouth but I wasn't willing to try?

So again, it goes back to I really don't have any true advice to give you 'cause I never personally took the risk. So what does that look like to try to tell you that you can do it? So I think that one of the most important gifts we can give our children is a life well lived. So I don't want my daughters or even my son to look at women and mothers who are doing all the things as though you have to become a martyr. So a lot of times women are told, "Listen, once you have your baby, once you get your man, now you gone sit down. You gone, you go sit down somewhere." I refuse to become a martyr for the things that I love. Two things can exist at the same time. I can do the things that I love to do.

I can try new things, and I can also love my family., and I can also show up for my husband, and I can also show up for my friends. I think that a part of my personality too, I'm very organized. So project management is a skill. Time management is so important. I have certain days for certain things and I try to make sure they don't bleed over. I understand my peak times. I like to start at 10:00, but I love you so I came at 9:00 today. But I understand about 2:00, 3:00, I start going down and that's okay. so I think it's really knowing yourself, knowing how you function best and you operate in that way, but two things can exist at the same time, and I think there is a grace. Sometimes is it exhausting? Absolutely. I was sitting at the table yesterday and everybody was like, "Are you okay?" I'm like, "No, I am exhausted."

So every day you're not going to show up feeling amazing, but that comes with the territory too, and I think also not getting discouraged when it's not that easy. Our job is resilience, and if we can learn how to take care of ourselves, understand when it's time to rest, but know you have to push through to get to the other side. Anybody who did anything amazing, it took a certain level of exertion, and that's okay because you're also going to put in there time to rest. You're also going to put in there, "Hey, I don't feel like talking to anybody, so I'm not answering the phone," and you're going to be okay, and so I think understanding yourself, how you function best. But I think the biggest thing is I'm committed to my story, and I refuse to let anybody else write it for me. So I don't know. I think I want to become a woodworker next. I want to learn how to build things. So that might be a new skill. Whatever it is that I feel like I could be I'm going to try it.

Matt Wagner:

You should all know that we put three sugars in Alycia's coffee, just so everyone knows. There's a hack right there.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah. This is called ice cream coffee.

Matt Wagner:

Right.

Dionne Baux:

You said it was delicious.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

It was like, yeah-

Speaker 4:

Yes.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

... yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Exactly.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

You got to know what you like. Yep.

Matt Wagner:

Exactly.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yep.

Matt Wagner:

We've got a few minutes for some Q&A from the audience. So does anyone got a question like to ask Alycia? Don't be shy. Yep.

Speaker 5:

So what's your favorite-

Speaker 6:

Let me give you a mic.

Speaker 5:

Okay. What's the favorite business that you've seen come in? I know not all will graduate from your space, they don't need a different space, but what's your favorite business that's graduated and gone on to do bigger things?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

That's a good question. So I'll say it like this. We have entrepreneurs that have candle companies, marketing companies. We have communication consultants. Right now, we have a tenant, they just received a grant through the National Institute of Health. So they're doing a health equity pilot and they have hundreds of boxes in one of the rooms, and they're taping and shipping out blood pressure monitors all over, so it runs the gamut. I don't really have a favorite one. I think my favorite part about it is being a support system for folks, being an outlet, being able to talk them through things, encourage them. In our retail space, our boutique owner, I'm talking to her all the time. I'm like, "Girl, come on, let me shoot you, your social media content. That's a good angle. Okay, all right, tag me in it." So I think my favorite part is being able to support folks and be around them and introduce them to other people and just support the efforts. But we have so many different people do a lot of different things, so yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Got another question. Dionne?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah.

Dionne Baux:

I'm [inaudible 00:32:34] and I'm not a plant-

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Right.

Dionne Baux:

... but I admire you so much, Alycia, and really adore working with you. My question is, how do businesses find you and find that space to be amongst people that are welcoming them and they feel comfortable in your space?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

That's a good question. So Polaris has been open for, it's not even two years, it'll be two years in August. So we are constantly working toward, how can we talk to more entrepreneurs? How can we be out in the community? How can we utilize our social media channels? I think one of the things we're working on now is creating events that benefit them. So for example, there's an organization called Operation Hope. They do a lot of credit stuff. It's like, "Well, how does that... business credit? But really a lot of our entrepreneurs want to buy homes, so how can we create events and programming that really speaks to the heart of what they want to accomplish?

Then two, I think some of it, again, as we're building is word of mouth because they're like, "Have you talked to Alycia? She was nice but also very mean. But she told me that I had two weeks to turn this into a..." Ironically enough, people are really looking for that. I was talking to someone last night, and she was talking about how to expand her business, and she was like, "I just have to tell you, you told me one thing yesterday and the next day someone asked me to do it." So I think it's also the culture that we build, and it takes a little time to get that momentum, but when people know that they can go somewhere where they're valued, they're seen and they're cared for, I think that that's our secret sauce as we're building our community and really marketing and getting people to know that there's a space that exists for them.

Matt Wagner:

Awesome. We've got time for one last question. Doesn't anyone got a question? Sherry?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Hey, Sherry.

Sherry:

Well, first of all, again, you are very inspirational and motivational, and I really admire you. But who were your people that walked beside you and organizationally, how did you get support when you first started?

Alycia Levels-Moore:

That's a good question. So one, my grandmother, Maya Angelou. I kid, I'm serious, I'm an avid reader. But I think there were so many people throughout your journey, and all of us have these touch points with folks. So what's really interesting, my mom, when I was younger, she used to do like MLM. You guys remember been prepaid legal? You remember when he was paid $20 a month for an attorney?

Sherry:

Yes. Yes.

Alycia Levels-Moore:

Yeah, that. So my mom, she used to have one of those businesses, and I would go to all the conferences with her. I would print the flyers, I would go in the parking lot. I'd be like, "Hi," I'm like 12. "Hi, ma'am. Do you want an attorney? It's 19.99 a month, and it's like, "Aren't you supposed to be in school?" So my mom, she was very supportive in helping me to develop the ability to communicate and not to be afraid to talk in front of people and articulate what it is that I need. Through working with her, there were mentors in that business. In school, there were so many different mentors and teachers. I was a part of an organization called 21st Century Leaders. When I was in high school, we had mentors and they were taking us places.

So I think it has just been these touch points with people who believed in me, and my science teacher. On all of my progress reports and report cards, they were like, "This girl talks extremely too much," right? But they were like, "She's so smart, though, but she's always interrupting the class." My science teacher, he was like," Hey, we're going to harness that 'cause that's a leader in you. I'm not going to see the ISS. I'm going to harness that." so there were so many different people that came alongside me. Dionne is one of those people. There's a woman named Torray.

Torray's office, she's in D.C. She works for the Women's Business Council. She was supportive. There's another young woman, Aris, she works for, Merritt, it's national real estate. I wanted to get into some work and she said, "Come on, I believe in you." So there were so many women that supported me and saw the potential in me and put me in opportunities to thrive. So I think one of the most important things as well is having the ability and not being afraid to build relationships with folks. I think building solid relationships was really helpful for me, but it was so many different people. Then even the people that don't like me so much, that's okay too, right? I used some of that, so I'm keeping my coffee. so yeah.

Matt Wagner:

I think that's a good way to end the show talking about coffee. That's great. Thanks so much to the audience for participating in our session today. Thanks to Main Street America for supporting the podcast and allowing us to go out and talk to folks like Alycia and share their stories. They're really so important to the places we all call home. Obviously, a special thanks to our guest, the amazing Alycia Levels-Moore. Let's give her a round applause. So there you have it. Wow, what a show with Alycia Levels-Moore, owner and founder of Polaris, a co-work and entrepreneurial event center in Birmingham, Alabama. A special thanks to all those that attended the podcast session at our national conference, you all had great questions, and to our marketing comms and conference team that made it all happen.

While I think we're about 25 or so episodes into the podcast, I honestly can't remember a time in which there were so many ideas and nuggets of advice and words of wisdom coming out all at one time from one guest. After the recording, I was telling my Main Street America colleagues that for the whole interview, I'm having this battle inside my head trying to take everything in because it was so profound and remembering the what's the next question going to be, or should I pivot to something else? At the same time, I just wanted to listen. I was so inspired by Alycia and her words. There were so many lessons, and one in particular around the idea that entrepreneurs need to be self-motivated. Of course, that's a key trait and characteristic, but also needing a strong support system and one that's honest enough to tell you when it's time to take a step back or, in Alycia's words, push the button. It's going to be all right. So that's going to do it for this week's episode.

As always, if you're a business owner, and likewise to my place, professional colleagues, I hope this episode has provided plenty of new insights, solution and inspiration. As consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and, of course, tell their stories. They're also important to our local and national economies, and most importantly, they promote and provide quality living to the places we all call home. Remember to check out the video recording and other related films of the podcast on our Main Street America YouTube channel. Thanks for listening. Please rate and review us. Let me say it only takes a minute, so please rate and review us. The algorithm gods out there will benefit us greatly and enhance the showcasing of these wonderful stories out there. A lot more is yet to come in upcoming episodes throughout the summer and fall. A little preview is we'll continue our normal interview format. We'll also be creating some special editions around the various themes and agglomerated how-tos from all of the guests. So stay tuned, and as always, thanks for your support.