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 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 full. Welcome, everyone, to another episode of the Main Street Business Insights Podcast and today finds me in Mount Vernon, Washington.

We're going to be hearing this story of this amazing husband and wife team of Phoebe and Jonathan Carpenter Eells, owners of elSage Design, which we're actually in their beautiful space this morning and had a wonderful tour. We've got a lot of things to cover off today, but these two self-taught artisans and entrepreneurs have built really this incredible business around what I like to think of it is the intersection between the art side of your minds and the business side. I think you've brought a lot of creativity and savviness and probably a little pure guts in this amazing real estate and success story.

As a quick side note, I have to do a couple shout-outs and we've got one person in the studio with a broken leg and we've been joined by this incredible Main Street executive director here in Mount Vernon. So, Ellen Gamson, she's not on screen, but I'm going to do a shout-out, Ellen, to you. Thanks for being here and thanks for having me here. I've known Ellen now for eight to nine years, and I did one of the first ever transformation strategies in Main Street. We did it right here in Mount Vernon. It's so humbling to come back and see places like elSage now here and all the wonderful transitions that occurred in the Main Street to her testament and her board and all the volunteers.

That's what makes this all work is community and business intersections. Now we're actually doing some additional work here in Mount Vernon. I want to just thank the Washington Main Street coordinator, Brian Durham, and the staff here. We're doing a lot of entrepreneurship ecosystem building work, and that's actually how I got connected to the two of you. So, with that, Phoebe, Jonathan, thanks so much for inviting me here and allowing me to share this story to our listeners. So, welcome to the show.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Definitely. Thanks for having us.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, thank you.

Matt Wagner:

You bet. So, as we talked about before, we do a lot of journey storytelling and we think that's certainly a very important component to understand people's different backgrounds. Most people come into this with I've been an MBA and now I'm starting to business. You actually were both teachers and I find that fascinating as well. Talk to us about how this all came to be.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, definitely. You want to start?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

After you.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

We both started teaching right out of grad school and middle school was where we both landed. Jonathan was seventh and eighth grade science, and I was seventh and eighth grade math. Then we both taught a course called AVID, which is a college prep course for traditionally underrepresented students at the college level. We loved it, but as we started a family and tried to figure out time and childcare and all of the different things, I found myself creating on the side as I was home part-time with our oldest. Etsy was new on the scene, Instagram was new on the scene. It was this whole way to pour myself into a community and something that was vibrant while I was home with a nonverbal infant, which wasn't my normal speed. That was way more mellow and slowed down from the way-

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, you needed some other things. Okay.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Totally. So, elSage started as a just for fun thing, try these different platforms out. It caught speed and started to grow, and two years later, I resigned from teaching.

Matt Wagner:

Wow. Jonathan, how'd you get roped into this?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Well, I am very lucky in that Phoebe built something that started gaining momentum and gaining income, and she was looking to add people into the mix. So, I often describe that I had a great interview and I am very lucky that she built something that was able to have both of us jump into and continue to grow. But a step back too, Phoebe comes from a really deep art background. She's always been an artist. So, art, and as a kid in high school and college, it's always been a part of her life. She's always been a creator, and so that was pretty natural in this time of creating. Then Phoebe is the one who was getting into farmer's markets, for example. That was our first real go at direct to consumer.

Matt Wagner:

This was first coming out of the home and now into the marketplace. You leverage farmer's markets as a way to do that.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Yeah.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yup. That was our first in-person channel. Before that it was all online, so all Etsy and Instagram.

Matt Wagner:

Through other platforms essentially. You didn't have your own direct necessarily at the time?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Not at the time.

Matt Wagner:

Okay, okay. Were you traveling around to different farmer's markets and doing the whole circuit thing?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

We were, yeah. We were working out of the renovated garage in our house and had two little kids at the time. We were driving from Bellingham, which is almost at the Canadian border, all the way down to the Bay Area to do shows. We were building and hired staff and we were doing four a weekend at one point, sending people out to go sell and everybody coming back and reorganizing everything.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

As most business owners understand, it was a thing of having weekends just disappeared. It was driving. It was packing the bins again for the next market. It was loading and unloading for us trucking kids around. Our oldest two kids grew up in markets. They're sitting in bins underneath the table.

Matt Wagner:

They're like little entrepreneurs now.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

They have really good business brains. It's fun to talk to them.

Matt Wagner:

You got your own focus group in the house now over dinner.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

They get to know the other vendors too, which is awesome. They knew they would have their little route to get their treats.

Matt Wagner:

That's great. I am starting to foresee other little elSage stores now popping up with your kids. Talk to me a little bit about the product mix. How did you get started? Was it primarily printed apparel or the succession? Because there's a lot of inventory in the store and much of which is now your own brand. So, how did that grow?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

That's a great question. I started out with paper art prints, thinking I'm an artist, we're going to make art. It was fine, but enough people said, "You should put that on a T-shirt" that I was like, okay, maybe we should put it on a T-shirt. We outsourced our first print run after trying to block print. All my art is block prints, so a big stamp, basically like a carving. I had tried to print it and it didn't work. I couldn't figure it out.

So, we outsourced to a screen printer and those came back and they were fun, but while I was picking up that order, I actually heard another printmaker talking about the way that he block printed fabric and it was like, "Oh, somebody else..." All I needed was somebody to say, this is possible for me to go back to the drawing board and say, "I can figure this out."

Matt Wagner:

You got this.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

So I started printing one piece at a time. That way we didn't have our own equipment to heat set it, so I would air dry everything. One bin at a time, I'd take the two kids with me and cross the river to Burlington and we would rent time on a dryer. I would put everything through that was air dried, one bin, I mean one set of things at a time. It was absurd.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, my gosh. This makes me really think, sometimes we live in a YouTube world, which this video will be on obviously, and you think like, "Oh, it was just so easy." These are the realities of when you're starting a business, the trials and tribulations of just getting a product to market. Oh, my gosh.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

I have pictures of me with an 18-month-old on my back and another kid drawing at a table and me renting time in this warehouse-

Matt Wagner:

Oh, my goodness.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

... feeding things through as quickly as possible.

Matt Wagner:

This is note to self. We're going to have that picture on the website, everyone.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

To your point earlier, thinking back on our starting in our roots, we didn't have this exact plan. We kept growing and gaining fans and making sales, but it was these incremental movements and then figuring out the next phase while we're in the current phase.

Matt Wagner:

You obviously had the artistic side. How did you figure out the business side of this whole journey?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Well, again, it's more of learning business as we were going. I think the math and science teaching background certainly helped a bit in the nitty-gritty of bookkeeping and a lot of trial and error of how to forecast, what inventory you need. When we were doing four different farmer's markets and then a big art event coming up, how do you buy enough inventory that you're guessing is going to sell? What's going to hit? So we've always really leaned into data. We've always been very data driven, and I think some of that is from the teaching. It's identifying what students are learning and being able to adapt your lesson plans in order to maximize that learning effect. In the same way, what we're doing either by week or by month, we're looking at sales and how can we forecast, how can we find some data that helps support decisions.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. Were there any particular resources or organizations or associations or just go-tos in general that you leverage during this time or was it a lot of just figuring it out?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

It was a lot of figuring it out. Blogging was big. This was like 2012. I went full-time, so it was like the height of everybody had a blog. People were talking about things. So, a lot of independent bloggers, a lot of women who were trying to do it a different way were sharing their experiences and building community that way. Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

So in many respects you build a network through the blog, other people that were doing this that you could peer to peer with.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Definitely.

Matt Wagner:

One of the other things that I found fascinating is, as I mentioned earlier in the intro, I think your artistic nature also has made you extremely creative in how you envision the business, not so much from a design perspective, but maybe the kinds of tools that you're leveraging or different things you've tried. You've done a Kickstarter campaign. You were doing experimentation with mobile vending. Could you talk about those kinds of things and where did that come from and what was that experience like?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

I think both of us like figuring things out, systems, how they work, and applying different approaches to something that's only been drawn a certain way traditionally. I like breaking the mold. I like doing things a little bit differently. It's exciting to me to do the thing that somebody else has done, but in a different way. So, yeah, mobile vending was just what made sense. It paid bills. It's a great way to get market research in real time. Boy, you see who responds to what and what's selling and whether it's a style or an item or a design or color. It can vary from region to region, but you definitely pick up on what people are responding to and have a lot of good conversations.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

It's marketing. It's something we always noticed with a hoodie for example, it might take somebody two or three times to see that hoodie. So, by the third time they say, "Continue to think about this each market, and now I'm ready to buy it." So how do you take that information and use it towards your sales advantage?

Matt Wagner:

Mobile vending tends to be connected when you're at the startup. You think there's a place in the market for mobile vending as existing stores to either test out new geographies or maybe things that aren't core to your business right now and you don't want to dedicate space, but you can test it. Do you see that as advantageous?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Definitely. Yeah. I think if you have the time and the bandwidth for it and you're trying to see how something lands to get it out of its normal ecosystem and into a fresh audience, fresh eyes, I think that can be a really neat thing and I wonder if we're going to see a resurgence of that. We're going through a really interesting time business-wise and also a tough time business-wise. I'm seeing people, they've been in business 15 or 20 years and they're going back to old building blocks that they leaned on when they were starting.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, fascinating. Talk to me a little bit about the Kickstarter experience crowdfunding. We found in our research, when you say crowdfunding to a lot of small business owners, they're like, "What is it?" Or they think of it as like a GoFundMe for someone that's been having something tragic happen to them or whatever they don't maybe necessarily think of as a business finance tool. So, how did you get involved? How did you build your campaign? What was that experience like?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

It came out of Jonathan joining the business and also that story about running the kids across the river with one bin at a time. So, we were trying to get the piece of equipment that would allow us to not have to go one bin at a time, and it was a really interesting preface. Kickstarter is one part or crowdfunding is one part advertising and one part funding. I didn't know the advertising part until I lived it. I also didn't know how much work it would be and how vulnerable it would feel to ask for money and really self-promote that hard.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, that's really important.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, we learned a lot and it was great. I mean, we were able to [inaudible 00:15:42].

Matt Wagner:

I think that's an interesting pullout about the vulnerability because I think it's natural for a lot of small businesses not to maybe air the laundry that there's a need or whatever, but maybe flipping the mindset. This is just another financing tool where those that are giving or in essence buying into the brand, they're buying into the concept of what I'm trying to create, much like a customer just making a sale in general.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Sort of, but those people, many of them are still with us, those people that funded that and they feel a sense of ownership, a sense of investment. If your listeners are listening to this and considering crowdfunding, I highly recommend it less for the final payout and more for the community building. Lean into the vulnerability, lean into allowing people in to be part of your story and part of your building, because that's what people want. They want something that means something.

Matt Wagner:

That's powerful, that's powerful, because in essence, what they're doing is they're buying into the community with others in many respects. I'm a Green Bay Packer fan, and you can own stock of the Green Bay Packers. It's not a financial thing, but you feel like you're part of the ownership. It really is. It really is.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Especially small business, people want to support. People like being involved.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. I hope I didn't lose any listeners with my Green Bay Packer fan thing. Whatever you are, it's fine with me. Let's talk about the journey to the physical nature of where we're at in the storefront because I think that's also been quite the journey for you all. Again, going from home, farmer's market and then a variety of places and spaces, what's that journey been like?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Well, a friend actually, a connection had said, "There's this space for lease," and it's just smaller community type of networking. We went and looked at it and we thought, "No way. We can't afford that."

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Way too small.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

It's too small.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

This was right.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Maybe I was [inaudible 00:17:47].

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Way too small.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Fast forward a little bit, we had two employees and it morphed into our entire basement. The kids are growing. We just needed to get out. Then we thought, "How about we manufacture? We have a little sales space and we can do that outside of our house." So we went in and checked this space out and it was a disaster. The sink drain wasn't even hooked up, so water was just pouring on the floor. It needed a whole overhaul.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Everything needed [inaudible 00:18:23].

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

So we said, yes.

Matt Wagner:

Safe to say, we love it.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

We love it, we'll make it ours.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, my goodness.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

So we ended up signing a lease and renovating this entire space. We added a whole floor up above. We found original 100-year-old signage on the party wall that it shares from the agricultural roof of Mount Vernon-

Matt Wagner:

Very cool.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

... and made it a really beautiful space.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

It was so small though that Jon would be printing and someone would need to check out with their goods and he would just turn literally 90 degrees and check them out and then go back to printing. Everything happened in this teeny, teeny thing.

Matt Wagner:

Now I am trying to envision that given where we're at today. So, talk to me about how did this particular space happen? Now you're right on the Main Street.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

We are.

Matt Wagner:

Lots of visibility. You're an anchor here in downtown. So, what's the vision for the space overall? How do you utilize it?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

This space?

Matt Wagner:

Yes.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

The owner of this building was looking for a tenant and connected with Ellen. So, we're fortunate to have that champion on our side of a small town, and she had said, "You should go talk to these guys." So we set up a meeting and a lot of things were happening at the same time during this point. We were approached by the owners of the location where we were at and asked if we wanted to purchase that building, which we agreed to.

Matt Wagner:

As he shakes his head.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Which I'm so fortunate, I'm so happy we did. But it was a lot to take on at one time and we were going to move our store into a larger spot, but not where we were at. So, we came and we looked at this space and we talked to the owner who was just wonderful. We thought about it and we decided no. We know the location is prime retail, but we have this other plan. So, we agreed that we were not going to.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

We even role played. He's going to say this. I'm going to say this.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, I can see that.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

A big decision. So, we came into the store and we said, "Steve, thank you for your time." Phoebe looked at me and she said, "We'll take it."

Matt Wagner:

Your head is spinning. What just happened here?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

It was just comical. I'm so lucky to be in business with Phoebe because she's got this natural instinct.

Matt Wagner:

Instinct.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

I don't have all the pieces figured out, but I know that this is the one.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, I can see a pathway here. One of a number of things that this space allows you to do is think about in many ways diversification of revenue. One of the things that we're seeing is businesses beginning really to lean on brand. I wonder if you could talk about your brand, the vision for the brand, and now these new outlets, whether that's in the eCommerce space or B2B in terms of wholesaling and really repping your brand. What does that mean to you?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

All right. So, elSage is like the thinker or the wise one. So, a lot of our designs are anchored in quippy little sayings or things that are positive. What do we want to put in the world? What do we want to see in the world? Whether it's lift others up or work hard, be nice, they all have stories that they come from, but there are also things that can be shared with people that folks see themselves in. They identify with, they are connected to in some way.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, that's powerful.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

So that's the cohesive piece. Then what was the second part of your question?

Matt Wagner:

Well, how has that now gone from retail? How does that building of a brand allow you then to move into some of these other channels that a lot of small businesses never get to, which is building out really a robust digital or e-commerce sector or even thinking about more B2B, which is a whole different side of being a more of a B2C business to consumer, now being business to business? Where does that strategy come from? Where are you going with that?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

I think a lot of our work is really recognizable. It comes together not necessarily around one specific theme, but around a style. So, it's all typically one color prints, they're all hand carved block prints. I leave a lot of the grit in on purpose. So, there's this gritty undone feel in a very vectorized world that we're living in.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, feels authentic.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Right? So I'm hopeful that we've done wholesale before and we're jumping back into the wholesale game in 2025. We're excited to approach it a little bit differently, but I think that people who have seen us and fallen in love with it here in Mount Vernon or at any of the places they've found us in the past will be excited to see new offerings, new designs, and some old favorites.

Matt Wagner:

Tactically, does anything change with the business when one hat is I'm direct to consumer in a variety of ways in the store and in through e-commerce versus now I'm selling to another business. How do you change focus? What's the selling? What's the tactical to do that?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Did you want to talk?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

[inaudible 00:23:54].

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

The relationship piece comes in on both sides, but you get really deep relationships when you work with other store owners and they end up being friends. I still have friends that started as people we used to wholesale with who own stores in Winthrop, Washington or Leavenworth, Washington or the Oregon Coast. So, yeah, I think it's a need. You're listening to what a business wants, what is selling, requests that are being made, but it's that personal relationship. I think in this store, the better that you know what you're selling and who made what you're selling, the more successful it is. Even customers off the street want the story. They want the connection. They want to know why it's special.

Matt Wagner:

It is interesting you bring that up because actually that's where my mind was going, where an important aspect of your business is that story and feeling connected. How do you ensure that that vision, that story carries to another business and they articulate it in a way? Do you have to build in like here's what you need to do in order to have my product? I'm just thinking of the tactics that you are employing to ensure that your brand doesn't get twisted in a way because someone else now is owning it.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, it's a good question. Yeah, I don't know if there's an answer.

Matt Wagner:

That's an honest response.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

I do. I think there's a couple of things jump out at me, and one is the relationship that you were speaking of with other business owners. For the product that we make with many other businesses that are going to carry it, it's more of this relationship like, "Hey, this is selling really well for us. I bet it will sell well for you too." At the end, we're still in business. We do have bills to pay and we're looking at margins and revenue. The other piece, even the small things, we re-tag everything that we print. So, from the starting point of that branding and marketing, there's little pieces of information on the size tag on the inside of the apparel to the hang tag that's on it. It's very little pieces of that information. It may not be the whole story, but it's starting to paint a picture.

Matt Wagner:

That part you can control.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

It certainly leads people to the website or the social media in order to get more of that story and see the real people who are making the product.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

You also don't have to work with people you don't want to.

Matt Wagner:

Listen to that. That's really critical.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

It has happened in the past where I have said, "No, thank you. We're all done here," because things have felt like they're out of alignment with who we are, what we stand for.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, I appreciate you bringing that up because I think brand is at your core, and if you allow it to be disrupted or taken over, that's no longer aligning with your vision, to me, that's core or function of the business itself. Yeah.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

We've discontinued designs before because the intention that we had was not how they were being then used in real life, and so it was a cost benefit of, "What does this look like?"

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

I recognize it can be hard when you do need that income, you do need that money, but what we've actually learned is when that warning flag goes up and there's something we're thinking about, it doesn't usually tend to get better from that point. Those are things that-

Matt Wagner:

That's a good point.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

... often we say in retrospect, "I saw these signs," and so sometimes you really have to listen to your gut.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, and have the long term in mine versus, yeah, I do have to pay bills. But in the long run, if I don't do it now, I might not be around in a few years. Given that you are in an artisan business in terms of where art and creativity are core to the business and to the product itself, we live in a highly, I guess you could call it, fickle society, I mean where consumers are just all over the place. Is there something that you do, whether it's in data tracking or how you track consumers coming in and what they're looking at to stay on top or is it truly your vision and just thinking ahead?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Well, boy is that a tricky question for the last couple years.

Matt Wagner:

Because it has been so, right?

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

It has been.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

We have started working in smaller batches the last few years to see what hits. So, we're not rolling these huge commitments. Things have scaled down in different ways even though the store has actually scaled up in size. We're ...

Go ahead.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

No, price points have changed. We've been tracking what that individual sale tends to be, which is much different than pre-COVID.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Or even 2021. A lot changed in 2022 and 2023, and we've been making a real effort to get more available at the under 50, under 30-

Matt Wagner:

Pricing strategies have evolved.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

What can we find that's also a market fit at these different price points that makes it easy for people to sell while still keeping quality high and having all of the options? Because we certainly do sell the gamut, but we have pulled things out of the store that have been more luxury items the past two years just trying to respond to market.

Matt Wagner:

Smart.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

But also within this timeframe, what we've always leaned into is that when we're all succeeding here in our smaller community, how do we help each other all succeed? Then we're all thriving. When there's more stores and restaurants and services that are bringing people into our downtown, we're all going to be doing better. so Valley Made Market as a market that Phoebe created as a totally different piece to elSage, but during this timeframe, we've also brought about 20 or 25 vendors into the store to have this whole other edition-

Matt Wagner:

Phenomenal.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

... of small, local, all artisan made gifts.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Those folks are coming in one at a time for different pop-up events. We've got a painting class happening on Saturday. We've got jewelry pop-ups where you can get your initials or your choice of graphics stamped on a silver pendant.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

So these vendors are coming in totally free because what we have found is that people want experiences. When they are bringing an experience into the store, there's a little energy that starts to happen. People are coming in. We have a little flag on the sidewalk that says event today, and then people are coming in and doing some additional shopping.

Matt Wagner:

It's like you stimulated the market, right? You're giving them another reason, and it really creates a win-win. You are an anchor point. You're driving traffic to this newer entrepreneur that's just getting started, and so you're seeding a lot of businesses within the community. That's amazing.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Well, it's something that's always been, it's probably from the teaching days, but a cornerstone of what we're doing as we pass through doors, we're trying to leave them open and even help guide people through them if we can. So, throw a shout-out or a co-sign.

Matt Wagner:

Or sharing your knowledge.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Making those ecosystem connections, having those little, small collisions. Oftentimes the fine art is now creating the label for another product-based business, and a lot of those things have been happening through the store.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, my gosh. You're just speaking my language. I get a big smile on my face, an ecosystem, accidental collisions. Yeah. This is wonderful.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Amazing. One of the things that I learned for the first time today is Phoebe was giving me a tour, and it relates to, I think, another big trend out there is hyper personalization, people wanting something that speaks to their lifestyle in particular. What's that journey been like? Because you've already moved to some smaller bins as you've mentioned in terms of inventory overall, but it seems like you're also trying to add another component where people can have hyperpersonalization. What's that journey been like?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, this is a good example of taking something we used to do and we were just starting and-

Matt Wagner:

Full circle.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

... repurposing it into like, "Oh, maybe we should try this again." So we've done it twice year, once in January and once in September. Both of those months are months where we have a little theoretically extra bandwidth to take on a big project, and we allowed people to choose the graphic from our archives that they want and the item and the color of apparel if you want. So, we have people recreating their favorite sweatshirt that they lost on a trip to New York. We've discontinued kids' clothes this year in an effort to streamline things, but we allowed people to special order kids' clothes. So, we have people buying futures for their kids. They're buying the next four sizes up for all of their kids. We have people buying a whole fleet of different designs, but the two styles that they really like and all of the colors that are their favorite.

Matt Wagner:

Oh, my gosh.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

So we have a couple hundred unique pieces to go put together real quick-

Matt Wagner:

That is amazing.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

... in the next couple weeks.

Matt Wagner:

I think what's really cool about that, in some ways, you've treated it almost like an event versus maybe going out on a limb, and this is a new thing that we're doing and being fully committed to it. I just love how you've been so creative in using different kinds of events, pop-ups, mobile vending, all these kinds of things to test concepts, and I think it's like a lost art form to really think about your business where you don't have to fully commit. You can use it as in R&D mode and test things, and then if they work, they work, great. But if not, you didn't fully put it out there. I just think that's super smart, and I congratulate you for doing things like that because sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, absolutely.

Matt Wagner:

I always like to close out the story and the interview really with advice, because underlying premise behind the show is really for peer-to-peer learning opportunities and you all are very experienced. You've learned a lot and been challenged in many ways, but then also these amazing successes. What's some of the things that you've learned or maybe even wish you knew beforehand that now that you'd want to share with other promising entrepreneurs or existing businesses out there?

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Yeah, go at it.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Yeah. We're not alone on our journey. There have been other businesses and other contacts and other people that have either been a brainstorm partner or a mentor to some degree. So, the people that are in the community, if you have organizations that are doing meetups or if you go out on a limb to introduce yourself to somebody, there's a lot of learning out there from people who are a little bit farther along in business or a little bit more experienced and that's always been helpful to find those contacts.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, leverage. Okay.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

I'd reiterate that community piece, it doesn't necessarily have to be mentors. It can be people who are right there in the trenches with you and trying to do a thing. It can be people who are coming up behind you, but it doesn't mean you can't learn something from them or have solidarity with them. I also think that in business, like life, the only constant is change, and I used to think that there would be some arrival point for business where it would feel like, "Okay, and here we are."

Matt Wagner:

We made it.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

At least to date, I have not found that spot. It just keeps being a really mostly enjoyable wild ride of pivoting and trying new things. I think just relaxing into that has helped me enjoy the ride.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah, I always think of it as a great book. There's many chapters to it, and each one holds its weight. Then you move on to the next one, and I'm just appreciative that you allow me to come in your space and have this wonderful chat with you. You two are a delight and a joy and just doing wonderful things for not only the business and your own family, but certainly the community as well. So, thanks so much for joining me on this show.

Phoebe Carpenter Eells:

Thank you so much.

Jonathan Carpenter Eells:

Thank you for being here.

Matt Wagner:

You bet. You bet. Thanks everyone for listening to the show. It was so great having the opportunity to go back to Mount Vernon and spend some time with truly wonderful and inspiring business owners, Phoebe and Jonathan Carpenter Eells at elSage Design. Like our Main Street network, small business owners come from all different backgrounds and experiences, and in many ways, it's the fact that it's not some monolithic type stamped out of an MBA school, no offense to MBAers out there, that actually creates the experiences that consumers are looking for in a non-transactional shopping and dining environment. Sometimes it's quirky, sometimes it's inspiring, but I think when it comes down to it, it's always authentic.

So, 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, solutions, and inspiration, of course. As consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and tell their stories. They're so important to our local and national economies, and most importantly, they promote and provide quality of living to the places we all call home. I want to do a special shout out to American Express and all those that participated this past weekend in small business Saturday. We're so thankful for all the support and consumers going out supporting your local independent business owners.

It's critical to their sustainability and resiliency, and frankly, as you all know and we all say it, they contribute so much to the places we all call home and our quality of life. So, that's going to do it for this week's episode. Remember to check out our growing library podcast recordings and other related films of the podcast on our Main Street America YouTube channel. Thanks for listening. Please hit the subscribe button. It's so helpful. Rate and review us, and as always, be sure to tell your family and friends, your dog, neighbors, colleagues.

So, you all can catch the next episode when this time we'll have the second podcast I recorded while I was out in Livingston, Montana, this time chatting with James Lanto, owner of True North Cafe, exploring the meshing of one's authentic self as an entrepreneur and be new to a community and how those things all come together. Spoiler alert, okay, the Purple Rain drink is totally amazing, but made even better when they ring out the Prince song as it's served. So, don't miss it. We'll see you then, and thanks, of course, for all the support.