Matt Wagner:

Welcome to the Main Street Business Insight 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.

Welcome, everyone, to another episode of the Main Street Business Insight Podcast. So last year, I had the pleasure of going to Maine quite a bit as part of a large initiative around our entrepreneurial ecosystem building, which was driven by our partner, the Maine Downtown Center. And special kudos to their U.S. senators there in Maine for really supporting the funding through the U.S. Small Business Administration that allowed us to expand on this work.

As part of my visits, and for those who know me, I'm an absolute coffee junkie. And so, I was able to spend some time in this wonderful bookstore in downtown Biddeford, Maine, called Elements: Books, Coffee, and Beer. A quick side note for everyone: Biddeford is also a past Great American Main Street Award winner. Just a fantastic downtown. So if you're in Maine, please visit.

In today's podcast, I was able to go back to Elements, not just for great coffee, but really to chat with their owners, Katie Pinard and Michael Macomber. But before I dive in, I think there's a need for some context behind why I was there, besides the coffee, because I think their story is so profound and meaningful for our small business owners and our network of place professionals to really hear.

Over the last decade, while there's been amazing technology advances resulting in the ability to work or receive a degree, share moments of our life, or even really talk to your doctor from virtually anywhere in the world at any time in an online manner, that we're also now coming to grips with a much better understanding and acknowledgement of the resulting limitations of technology to provide for real human engagement. And now I suspect most of us have been impacted by the decline in the social underpinnings that allow for and enhance social and civic connections. We can kind of see that in certainly our politics, the way folks are dating, number of friendships, participation in civic organizations, and volunteerism.

In addition, there has been recently a great deal of conversation and meaningful dialogue, I'm sure you've all heard, around this space, this topic, including the surgeon general's 2023 report on the epidemic of loneliness and isolation, and the work of groups like Reimagining the Civic Commons, who recently published a wonderful article, insightful, in the American Planning Association's magazine around the importance of social and civic infrastructure, much of which is found along the very Main Streets in which our small businesses reside.

So we'll put those links in the show notes, so please check those out. Great reads. I would, however, like to propose, suggest that in addition to our civic infrastructure in the public realm, I think there are real opportunities, given the important intersection of Main Street businesses and their communities, to think about their role in creating human connection, building social capital, or even creating sort of the accidental collisions for new ideas and innovation to occur.

I think of these as kind of like micro-communities in many respects, and the work of Katie and Michael in creating Elements as a hangout for the Biddeford community and building a culture of connection among their employees, residents, new Mainers, and the immigrant community and visitors alike, I think, really represents a wonderful example of the possibilities to combat in the tragedy of the age of dispersion, when so much of our lives are spent working and living in isolation. So please enjoy the show. I'm sure you will, and it's a great conversation. And, of course, we'll see you on the other side.

Welcome, everyone, to the Main Street Business Insight Podcast. We're coming here in downtown Biddeford, Maine, and I've got Katie and Michael here from Elements' store, the bookstore. And it's really exciting, because I've been here a number of times in Biddeford over the years, and I was just sharing that one of the best experiences and memories was actually working out of Elements with some great coffee. And now we've got books, of course. We always had books, but we also have beer now. So I should have come back a little bit later and had the beer portion of that. But as always-

Katie Pinard:

Did you come just post-COVID?

Matt Wagner:

Yes, it was post-COVID.

Katie Pinard:

So that must have been in that sort of weird moment of reopening, where we slowly started bringing things back.

Matt Wagner:

Aha.

Katie Pinard:

Michael did found Elements as books, coffee, beer. So we were always a trifecta, but COVID forced us into some adaptations.

Matt Wagner:

Adaptations. Yeah.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

I think the main word during the pandemic was pivot.

Katie Pinard:

Pivot.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Right?

Katie Pinard:

Mm-hmm. Sure did.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

So that's a good launching point.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah. Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Michael, why don't you talk a little bit about your journey to founding Elements and what that was like? What brought you here?

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. I grew up in Saco, which is across the river. Went away for school and grad school and all kinds of school, and ended up moving back in 2010, a bit all over the place, trying to finish a dissertation that wasn't moving quite so fast. And I was still in grad school and teaching at UNE, the local college here. And it just felt a little stagnant, wasn't really writing the way I wanted to, and wasn't really feeling the graduate work anymore. But one of the things I was trying to find when I moved back was a coffee shop to do work in, because that's how I did it.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Michael Macomber:

And there was a Starbucks and Dunkin' and the normal places, but with the downtowns, the Saco and Biddeford downtowns sort of connect one big, long Main Street. And of the two towns, there wasn't a coffee shop. Not only that, there wasn't a bookstore. And this is around 2010, so the craft beer movement in Maine was just starting to really hit its stride. And so, there wasn't much of that downtown either.

So I've always kind of had the idea in my head of doing something combined. When I was doing grad work in New York, there was a few spots that had both a bar and a coffee shop, and there was a few bookstores that might have coffee. So that was always in my mind, and it was just a good confluence of events. I happened to see a Facebook post that Heart of Biddeford was part of, that said something like, "Downtown Biddeford seeks long-term relationship with coffee shop," because they-

Matt Wagner:

Love it.

Michael Macomber:

... couldn't sustain one for some reason, for various reasons. So I saw that, I clicked the link, and it actually brought me to the Main Street Challenge, which is what Heart of Biddeford was doing to promote newer businesses to come and fill in some of the empty storefronts in town. And I saw that there was some good perks involved. I kind of wanted to do the idea, and I wasn't really feeling grad work anymore. So I pitched, did my little one-page pitch, and made it through a few rounds, and then ended up winning one of the grants that they gave us to help us sort of get going.

So that's sort of where it came from. It was, essentially, I saw a need not just for books and coffee and good beer and wine and a nightlife kind of thing, but a need for a place to go to do your work, especially if you're in the academics or various workforces where you can either sit in your house, which is fine, or you want to be out amongst other people and share that energy. So that's kind of where it all came from in that I saw the need and then decided to open Elements.

Matt Wagner:

I really want to get into the community front, but I'm going to hold. I'm going to hold on that. We'll get a little bit more of the background and the journey, but I think your whole context of how you've created and built and scaled Elements around that word community I think is really powerful, and I think is really kind of the bleeding edge of retail as we think about it in a post-COVID era.

But could we talk a little bit about people that start businesses and run business come from all walks of life, much like Main Street directors? And I'm sort of curious, especially coming from the academic side, and now you've won this pitch contest. Was this an "oh, crap" moment? Like, "What am I doing? What don't I know?"

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. In a moment of honesty, I will say that I pitched the idea and was going through the various rounds, still not sure if it was something that I was actually going to do. And then when I won, I remember coming to this office, and the news was there, and the papers were there, and the banks were there, and everyone was ready to go. I'm like, "Okay. I guess I'm doing this." And then I just did it.

I'm not going to say it was easy, and I'm not going to say I knew what I was doing. I was a philosophy major, so I could come up with some good ideas. But in terms of running a business, the only idea that I knew was a good one was the idea to do it, like the combination. I thought that it was going to work. All the other stuff, I was learning trial by fire, just, "Where do I go?"

Now, I will say, Heart of Biddeford was extremely helpful in pointing me in the right direction, already having contacts with the city. Yeah. I had been away for so long. I grew up here, but I didn't know a lot of the infrastructure. So they were pointing me to the right people to talk to about codes. These are the banks that are interested. These are the people we know and trust. And I could always call them with a question, and then they would point me. If they didn't know, would at least know where to point me in the right direction to get that solved.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. That's so huge, is the building of your own network and being able to be connected to all the various aspects that are necessary when you think about entrepreneurship.

Katie Pinard:

And I think Michael didn't know at the time that he needed a business partner, but it so happened that three months after he opened, I walked in, and I said, "Hi, I'm in a professional pivot moment. What do you need?" And the very long story made very short is, I came on in June of 2013, started as a manager. Over the course of the next few years, we sort of took on a 50/50 ownership structure, both of the shop and then also the coffee roastery that we founded together.

And I also have a background in academia and in nonprofit development. So I think our skill sets and our growth edges complement one another. Michael is brilliant at book curation. I took on our bookkeeping and all the financial, HR side of things.

Matt Wagner:

Kind of like the back office.

Katie Pinard:

I love all that stuff, managing the staff. So we each have parts of the businesses, both of them, that we run, but it's always together.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

The sort of three elements of the business are all in really a highly competitive landscape, certainly maybe the craft industry, Michael, as you mentioned earlier, but now that's really grown in scale. Coffee business, obviously. And then bookstores has this really unique, I think, history where we saw so much decline when Amazon first got into, first, big-box category killer, with Barnes & Noble moving into e-commerce space with Amazon.

But in many respects, independent bookstores have sort of risen from the ashes, as they say. And I'm sort of curious about from both of your perspectives, what have you done? What's been sort of the secret sauce in existing in this hypercompetitive landscape?

Michael Macomber:

Well, in terms of books, it's actually an interesting little niche we have, because I do identify our store as an independent bookstore. However, it's just one-third of the store. So in terms of what we offer there, one of the positives is that I don't have to have a giant book day to make the day work. We are primarily a coffee shop. That's where most of the revenue comes in.

Matt Wagner:

So diversification?

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. And so, the other part of it is that we're not necessarily a new bookseller. We're secondhand or discount, which does two things. It keeps our overhead down. It also provides us with this ability to offer books to the community at very reduced prices. And one of the things I try to do with that is I love, personally, a dusty, old, used bookstore. That's how I came up. That's the places I worked in. But we can't do that there, because we have food and coffee and things like this.

So what I try to do when I curate the books at the shop is make sure that they're all in like-new or new condition so that it's very, very organized and clean in there. But also, you'll come into the store and see a relatively recently published book at less than half the cost. And oftentimes, people come up and like, "This is great. I can't believe you're only charging so much for this." And I'm like, "Well, no, that's how this works. This is the way that market works."

And that also helps so that we're not tagged with a giant inventory of overstock and things that we might have to send back to publishers and things like this. What we get in, we can move pretty easily. So in terms of the book angle, I guess independent bookstore is definitely who we are, but we're able to sort of have a cheat code in there, a little bit, about getting away, with our book sales not having to buoy us every day or something like that.

Matt Wagner:

Go ahead, Katie.

Katie Pinard:

And I would just say that it's really heartening to see that print is not dead. I mean, our book sales are very healthy. People buy them as gifts. The books find the people that need to take them home, whether it's for themselves or for other people.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. I'm sorry.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah, please. Yeah.

Michael Macomber:

Part of that is the layout and how we're doing it. I mean, we're a coffee shop, so someone will be... It's kind of fun how you see it happen. Someone's sitting at their favorite spot for weeks working on whatever it is they're working on, work or a novel or whatever, schoolwork. And then at some point, they're just staring at this book the entire time they're working, and they're like, "Oh, I got to get this book now." So they're all set up. They're there. It makes for good ambiance, but also makes for the fact that we have interesting titles that we're selling. So it has that kind of general, overall atmospheric approach.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Katie Pinard:

And in the evenings, when we have live music, people end up browsing books, and we have big book sales at the end of the night after the live music is over. So yeah, it's part of the-

Michael Macomber:

And it doesn't hurt that in terms, again, still, with the two downtowns, we're the only bookstore. And part of what's happened is, we've been open now for about 11 years. And when I first opened, we were one of the only craft beer places. Now, of course, craft beer is everywhere. We were the only coffee shop. Now, we have a couple of others in town, and we were the only bookstore, which we still are downtown. So those three things that we're offering are still very much needed in the community too. So that also helps with the stress of having to make a good day out of it.

Matt Wagner:

The thing that sticks in my mind, having been in the store a couple times, but I didn't know actually, and I think this is where design is such a big part, a lot of stores don't recognize that, but I wouldn't have known, and I didn't till this very moment, that it was used books, and because, one, the curation, but the design, because I think the connotation is used bookstore, dusty, to your point, Michael, or you're moving around and climbing over things, and it doesn't have that feel whatsoever.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. I struggle very hard to not overbuy books, because I do. I love the stacks of books, finding gems, hidden gems in stacks. And we are a little full at the moment, trying to squeeze in as many bookcases as we can, but because we're a coffee shop, we have café tables. So all the books are all on the sides. There's no stacks to walk through.

When we first opened, a lot of folks thought we were just a library, like you could just read them, which was fine. But we ended up having to put price stickers on them pretty quickly, unfortunately. Yeah. So used books. I also dabble in the remainder market. So there are books that haven't been pre-owned that I can offer at discount prices as well.

Matt Wagner:

Nice. Nice.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah.

Katie Pinard:

And I would say that Michael has more and more over the years, and partly, this is more being available in the remainder market, made marginalized voices more and more available to our community. And I think when we have customers walk in and they see books that reflect who they are, that really means a lot, or reflecting issues that we really need to be thinking and learning and doing things about. It really makes a big difference.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

It also speaks to, I think, how you've cultivated community in the store. Let's talk a little bit about the changing retail landscape as you look forward. How are you thinking about that? Where's the vision going forward?

Katie Pinard:

So we always try to land on a balance between maintaining who we are and what we're doing, and then finding whatever is the growth edge. And particularly in post-COVID years, I would say that we are allowing the staff to guide us through those transitional moments. Our staff, they're younger than us. They're the ones coming up with ideas for events, for socials. The ways that we are creating community are really coming from our staff and their ideas for, whether it's...

Every Thursday now, we have write nights, and we have craft nights, and we have cribbage nights, and we have Silent Book Club, and that's all coming from the staff. And they're wanting to create new ways for folks to come in, to people who are new to town, to have a way to enter into community and meet one another. And we are mostly introverted staff, so we always try to create opportunities for introverts to meet one another in a safe, comfortable kind of way. Our live music nights are popular.

And so, anyway, so we really rely on our staff to guide us in terms of like what should we be paying attention to, and that's also in terms of the products that we're offering. Whenever we come up with some really new idea of something that we really should be carrying, generally speaking, right now, it's our staff saying, "Hey, guess what? We should be doing this thing." And then we figure out how to make it happen.

Michael Macomber:

Well, along the lines of community too, one of the things that we try to pay attention to is world events, especially over the last few years. Well, several years now. There are a particular number of world events that have happened that have influenced how we might approach how we can give back to certain communities. So one of the things we do with our roastery, where we're selling beans at the store, we have come up with kind of a rotating series of specialty bags that we give a percentage to to local charities that are reflecting what's going on around us.

This month is Pride Month, so we have a bag that we are selling called PRIDE, the bean. It's a blend, and we're giving a percentage to EqualityMaine. Prior to that, during the holidays, we have a bag that we sell called ABUNDANCE, where we give back to food banks. And then we have one called SHELTER, where we-

Katie Pinard:

At certain times, we've given to immigration and refugee organizations. And then this past winter, we supported local shelters and teen center.

Matt Wagner:

Right. Wonderful.

Michael Macomber:

So all issues that are happening around the world, and also affecting our community here. And it's a way that we can not only give a little bit of charitable money to these organizations, but also to bring awareness to these issues that are happening around us.

Matt Wagner:

Well, in many respects, you're a microcosm or reflection of the community. And certainly, that's something that, based on listening to you, that has been really core to the business. It's almost like fundamental. And I wonder, I think bookstores, coffee houses, breweries, so everything that you're about, people have characterized that as third spaces. Right? But it seems like third spaces still have been more of a passive element, but that's different with you all in terms of what I'm picking up on. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about, how do you create community engagement that's beyond the passive?

Michael Macomber:

Well, I will say that, yes, I mean, I wasn't aware of third space when I opened Elements as a term, but that was kind of the reason. Right? I mean, selfishly, I was like, "I needed a place to do my dissertation," and I couldn't find a comfy spot to land, and now I want to provide that to others who need a space like that. And then over a few years, stumbling and trying to figure out what we were doing at Elements, this phenomenon started happening where Heart of Biddeford sometimes or others would bring in newly arriving folks moving to Bedford who were thinking about opening a business, and then they would come in and say hi to us and ask us questions, and sort of see how it's going, and this and that.

So that started with businesses that were going to open, and then next thing you know, it's almost like clockwork. New people moving to town are popping into Elements and asking us questions, and, "How is the town? Where should we go? What are some of the other spots that are coming up?" And so, we kind of became that hub in that respect, too.

Katie Pinard:

So I would say two things. The first I would say is, again, Michael didn't open Elements with the intention of community being a part of the business model. It just happened gradually over time. I think the community came to have a sense of ownership over the space, whether it's the musicians that have come in, the artists who have hung on our walls, the staff who have come and gone. Everyone has left their mark on the space.

And so, at this point, we may own it, financially speaking, but really, the community and our staff really own the heart of it. And I sort of get a little choked up saying that, because that really is meaningful to us, and that's not something-

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. It's powerful.

Katie Pinard:

... you could manufacture. Just the heart of it has come from our people. And I talk about the pandemic quite a bit, because what a moment it was. We did not realize the role that we play in the collective mental health of the community until the pandemic, and the forced social isolation that we all experienced in one way or another, but together, collectively.

And again, we went through all the pivots and the curbside-only, and the plexiglass, and the to-go-only for a while, and we opened the café gradually, and blah, blah, blah. We did all the things. And the sort of consistent feedback we got from people was how important we are for them in their lives to have face-to-face human connections.

We see all the time the effect that it has on someone when we learn their name and call them by name. They have a visible reaction to that, like, "I am known in some way by someone not in my immediate friends and family circle." I think, sociologically speaking, there's strong ties and weak ties, is one way of naming primary friends and family versus acquaintances and strangers and folks you see in the community, and the weak ties are just as important as the strong ties in terms of both our psychological and spiritual, I would say, health and well-being.

So we really learned how important we are to the community and how important they are to us. We needed them as much as they needed us in that very long stretch of time, that we came to appreciate the mutually beneficial role that we play in our lives back and forth. And for some people, we're the only people they talk to over the course of their entire day. We're it. We are their social interaction, and we really take that to heart and take it seriously. Yeah.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Thank you for that. I think that's so powerful. My middle son is a solopreneur. And so, he'll commonly go to a coffee shop in Minneapolis, but to the point, though, that it's acting as passive space still. You're around other people, but that's not really engagement. And I think what the two of you have done and the culture you've built, not only internally with your staff, but also as de facto community ownership is really amazing.

And I think, I wonder as you reflect, whether in the past or in the moment right now, if you were advising other small businesses, because I think this is a really important component of where small business is likely heading in the future, what sort of advice would you give them? Is there some how-tos or some ways to get started on that journey to being about community?

Katie Pinard:

So, I mean, listen, this is one of the reasons why I have a hard time ever thinking about putting a second location, because for us, it's been blood, sweat, and tears. We've just poured all of ourselves into this thing. And I know other people take other approaches. And you have some business owners who then hire a manager, and is the manager who's really taking care of the space, and that's fine. That's fine as a model.

Can that person do what you need them to do if that's what you're aiming for, this community element, above and beyond just staying in the black? Which, for any business, to stay in the black right now is a miracle in and of itself, let's be honest. Do you know what I'm saying? You have to make some kind of money in order to keep the people employed.

Matt Wagner:

It's like we say in the nonprofit world, "No money, no mission."

Katie Pinard:

So you at least have to have a successful enough business, first of all, just to stay open, which can be challenging enough.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. Mine's more practical, I think. Every business is different. So obviously, this isn't calling out all businesses as it is. We happen to be a coffee shop, so it is vitally important that we're open seven days a week, and that we're open the hours you say we are. And now, when I first opened Elements, it was a different time, and I was much younger. We were open 7:00 in the morning until 11:00 at night, because we were also a bar. And that was part of the mission, was to be like, "Okay. We'll do coffee through the day, and then transition to an evening spot."

And then that was also kind of a factor in why I thought it was working, because we could get revenue for the whole day. But one of the things I wasn't anticipating was, "Oh, yeah. No. People want coffee on all of the days." So I quickly learned that, "Oh, no. I'm working all the time now," which was totally necessary. But sometimes, especially in smaller communities, obviously, being open is usually a factor.

So a bit of an example now, where you have quite a few businesses that aren't open seven days a week, which is totally fine. That might be their model. But in order to have that community feel, you can't ever be in this position where you're like, "Oh, today, we're going to do these hours, and tomorrow, we might open earlier," but not. You have to be very rigid and committed to your 7:00-in-the-morning-until-9:00-at-night kind of schedule.

Now, during the pandemic, we definitely pivoted and changed a lot of that. So there had to have been some wiggle room for us there, but now we're back to it. And yeah, I'm kind of rambling now, but in terms of community, that aspect of being there for others, it's really disheartening to go up to a business and try the door when they're supposed to be open and they're not.

Now, obviously, certain things happen, and sometimes you do have to close if there's equipment failures and things like that, and that's all fine. But what we see now is a lot of struggling for places to stay open. And again, no judgment. If you're going to put in your energy in any spot, to me, it has to be your consistency of hours.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. Yeah. Because in many respects, if they have that sense of ownership, if you're not open when there's that expectation, that starts to make... The community parts begins to crumble.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah. And I guess maybe piggybacking off of that, I have a few words of wisdom for new business owners, one of which is, in terms of human resources, the human has to come first. And if you have staff, they are people first, and you have to treat them like humans, which means they're going to come in with all kinds of other things going on. They have family things. They have mental health things. They have anxiety. They have depression. They have ADHD. They have all kinds of things.

And we have to treat them as whole persons. We have to treat them with dignity, and we have to treat them with respect. We have to pay them on time, every time. Just pay your people, for the love of God. I don't know why that's so hard for some businesses, because you can't run a business without staff, and your human resources is your most important resource. End of story. They will carry your mission to the people. So you have to take care of your staff first, period.

The other two pieces of advice are not related to people. They are in terms of just infrastructure, one of which is, if you have equipment, you have to maintain it. I mean, this is such a stupid, practical thing, but you don't let your equipment break. You have to service your equipment, that you just find the money to do it.

And then the other thing that I say to new business owners is, you have to find a bookkeeper and/or an accountant immediately. You have to know what you're doing with your sales receipts, with your invoices, and you get QuickBooks going immediately, and just figure that you have to have a bookkeeper right away. Otherwise, you're going to be in over your head, and it's a bad deal. So that's what I have to say.

Matt Wagner:

Well, the practical is very appreciated, because we can talk vision and aspiration, but you still need the foundation of the business, right?

Katie Pinard:

From the business side. Yeah. Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

So that's really the point.

Katie Pinard:

File your taxes right away.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Katie Pinard:

Get it done.

Matt Wagner:

Let's just chat a little bit about the challenge front, which every business faces. So this is more of the what keeps you up at night? What are the challenges for Elements, and how do you navigate them?

Katie Pinard:

I always lose sleep around equipment, and what's the next thing that's going to break, and how to prevent it from happening. We have a lot of really expensive equipment, with a lot of really expensive product inside of it. And so, for me, it's always what's the next thing that we need to be either responsibly replacing on a good schedule, or what do I need to learn in order to continually fix and maintain our equipment? I think about that all of the time.

Matt Wagner:

So you're looking at your depreciation schedules a lot?

Katie Pinard:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Macomber:

I guess for me, on the roastery side, which we haven't talked too much about yet, but which is a separate business, we roast beans for our shop and other places. It's not really a worry. It's part of an interesting challenge going forward in how we're going to upscale the roastery. So right now, we're servicing our coffee shop. Our roaster is not very big. It's very microlot, kind of micro-roasting, scheduling.

And part of that means that if two or three other coffee shops wanted to, say, use our beans currently, we can't do that. Our machine's not big enough, and there's not enough days in the week to get that product out. So we do have external accounts, but they're finite currently. And we're okay with that, and it's doing well. But at some point in the next few years, we're going to have to figure out how to upscale the roastery in a responsible way.

It's not going to be suddenly three machines and we're going to go for it. It's kind of what happened with Elements, the shop itself. We opened, did well, scaled up, added things as we went along. We have these funny stories we're telling staff now. Now the shop is full. We cannot offer much more than what we're offering in there.

And I tell them about the beginning days when we only had one muffin and we only had this thing, and we didn't even have iced drinks at first. And so, we scaled it up slowly, and we did it as we could sort of not only envision it, but also physically do it. And that's currently what's happening with the roastery. So we'll have to figure out a way. We'll need a new machine at some point. Our machine's well-loved, but-

Matt Wagner:

It's a good way to put it, Michael. Well-loved.

Michael Macomber:

Well-loved.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Macomber:

It's an older machine, and we're lucky to have it. It's very well-seasoned, and it makes really good coffee. Yeah. So that's a challenge going forward, is how we're going to do this in a sustainable way. And we're already doing certain things to get that going for us in terms of financial, squirreling money away, and making sure that we have the resources to be able to do it, and then not only to do it, but to do it right and sustainable.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. It's really, not only is that you've identified a challenge, but you've also given a lot of great advice there, because I think approaching it in an incremental way, being thoughtful about it, and also recognizing that you sort of have to build almost like personal savings as a business so you've got the resources then to execute properly.

Michael Macomber:

Right. I mean, one of the things that Elements may be different than other smaller businesses is that we did not take on investors.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah.

Michael Macomber:

And when the shop was doing well in the early years, I couldn't tell you how many times business majors or business folks in general would walk in and love the concept, and all they're thinking about is, "You could do up and down the Eastern Seaboard and many locations," and this and that. And not only did I just not want to do that, the other thing I always thought of was, "Well, now I'm using other people's money," which is fine if that's what you want to do, but Katie had said this earlier.

All of a sudden, there's five locations of Elements. Who's running these locations? Do they have the same vision? Are they understanding what we want out of the space? It just felt too disconnected. And we did look around about five years in to maybe do a second location. And during that process, we were just thinking, "I would have to move."

We were looking at upstate Maine. I would have to move here to make this happen, because I'm not going to just hand it off to someone and hope they did a good job with it. So there's that lack of a personal connection to a space. So yeah, I'm not saying other businesses shouldn't take on investors. People do it all the time, and they do it successfully.

We couldn't wrap our minds around paying for something we didn't have the money for. And that's one thing that we've actually really been pretty proud of. I mean, again, we've been open 11 years. We don't have any debt. We pay everything immediately. I mean, you hear all these stories. I read about them. I don't know what other businesses are doing, because, again, I don't really know much about business.

But I read stories, and I'm like, "I can't believe that place never paid anyone. How do you even do that?" So maybe we're naive still. Maybe we don't know what we're doing. But to me, if we don't have the money for something, we're not doing it.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Well, I think naivety might be just okay, because you're doing wonderful. One of the concluding questions, we didn't get to it, but I don't want to not cover this, because I think what's been happening across the country post-pandemic is, there's been a lot of movement of folks around the country, newcomers to communities. In some ways, that's a new phenomena for smaller communities, not so much different for bigger cities, of course.

And given community being such a critical, foundational aspect of your business, I think people would really be interested, especially our Main Street communities, is, how do you bridge your locals that have been there for many, many years and have a sense of ownership and sort of cultural affinity for your store with new folks that are coming in that obviously don't have that history, may be different in terms of socioeconomic status, or what have you? I'm sort of curious your take on that.

Katie Pinard:

Yeah. I mean, it's a massive shift that's happening right now, and not in entirely comfortable ways. I mean, first of all, obviously, rents are going up. Some of the landlords coming in, it's a really transactional experience, and they don't care who their tenants are, and tenants can come and go, where, for us, it should be a personal connection that you have with the...

And anyway, there's a tenuousness that all of us who are renting spaces sort of feel like, "What's going to happen the next time we have to negotiate a lease?" And so, all of the businesses that sort of opened around the same time that we did, who are really anchors to the downtown community, that we care very much about, I always am nervous if what's going to happen the next time they have to do their own rent negotiations. So everything feels like it could change overnight.

And so, gentrification is real. There's a boutique hotel that opened a year or two ago close to us, and we can tell when guests are staying at the hotel, because there's a different clientele that we see coming through our doors. That's good for us. They tend to be folks who have some disposable income, and they come from cities, and they're used to having some nice coffee to purchase. So it's good for us.

I think in terms of navigating the issue of locals and folks who are new to town, that's a line that we have been walking really for 11 years now. When we first opened... Well, when Michael first opened Elements, there was not a coffee shop culture. It did not exist. We almost opened too soon. We had to train the community on what it means to hang out in a coffee shop.

My family looked at Elements and said, "Oh, I don't know. That seems a little fancy for me. I don't know. That seems a little too sophisticated." And it's not. It's very comfortable, and they're in Elements all the time now. But we had to create the culture, and we've always been really, really intentional about making sure that our price points are accessible. We never want to alienate...

Michael grew up in Saco. I grew up in Biddeford. We are from here. We know the people, and we know what they will tolerate in terms of price points and product and how fancy does it get. And anyone who's coming from a big city who expects certain things from their coffee shops, we want to be able to provide that level of service and quality product. And also, we always want the locals to feel like this is still our place. And again, primarily, we find that balance around making our margins healthy enough, again, for us to stay open, but accessible and affordable to folks like my family.

Michael Macomber:

Yeah. And in a strange way, for 11 years now, the question you asked about new folks coming into town and mixing with locals, that happens every summer. I mean, we're not a beach community, but we're adjacent to a beach community. So one of the things that I was interested in finding out when I opened Elements was, am I going to get the summer traffic? Because it's very easy to bypass the local... The way the downtown is set up, you can get to the beach without having to drive through Main Street. So I was like, "Are people just going to drive right by us and go to the beaches?" And they didn't. They came downtown.

Now, luckily, we were there, and they gave them a spot to come to, and other places were opening. I mean, for years prior, the downtowns were avoided. But now, every summer, we see entirely a whole three months of new faces. And it's a fun challenge, too, in that way, in terms of community, because we do have to do a little pep talk with our staff, be like, "Hey, these aren't regulars. They don't know the menu." So we got to be a little bit more informative, pointing out what we do here, spend a little extra time with them so that they know what we offer and what we can do for them and provide them.

And then after the summer is over, we'll go back to the normal regulars. So that's something we've been doing on a micro level every couple of months a year. But now that the downtowns are exploding in terms of people moving to Maine from other parts of the country or the world, now we're seeing it in the offseason as well. And just, we kind of do the same thing we've been doing with the summer crowd, and just say, "Hey, this is what we do, and welcome."

Matt Wagner:

Well, I can't thank the two of you enough for providing so much insights and your experiences and advice, and I'm just so appreciative of the conversation we're able to have, especially around community. And I think now is a good time to go down and get some coffee.

Michael Macomber:

Agreed.

Katie Pinard:

Thank you so much.

Matt Wagner:

All right.

Katie Pinard:

Appreciate you.

Michael Macomber:

Thank you.

Matt Wagner:

Thanks for having me. So there you have it. I hope you enjoyed the conversation with Katie Pinard and Michael Macomber from Elements: Books, Coffee, and Beer in downtown Biddeford, Maine. I was so grateful we had the time to really explore the concept of community building within Main Street businesses. It's been a central message to the podcast's mission and really a thread line in our conversations.

But as you can imagine, like many concepts, community has a number of meanings based on the perspective and lens of our respective interviewees. And I think Katie and Michael were really able to present community in the form of what it means to create a business culture in which consumer interactions go beyond the purchasing transaction, and brand affinity is strengthened through the relational bonds that are created among and between consumers.

This really represents, in my mind, what I think is the next evolution of third spaces, as we define them currently. It goes beyond the passive engagement, which, according to research, is still helpful to our social well-being, just being around others. But I think more importantly, active engagement begins to reconstruct what technology has fundamentally broken down. More to come, definitely, on this subject as we explore with new partnerships and storytelling through the podcast, and what I anticipate would be new programming through our Main Street and small business work.

So as always, if you're a business owner, and likewise to my place professional colleagues out there, I hope this episode has provided plenty of new insights, solutions, and inspiration. And as consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and always 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. So that's going to do it for this week's episode. Please remember to check out our growing library of podcast recordings and other related films of the podcast on our Main Street America YouTube channel.

Also, thanks for listening. Really appreciate it, and hope that you'll rate and review us. And as always, be sure to subscribe and tell your friends and family and neighbors and colleagues so you can all catch the next episode, when, this time, I'll be chatting with Ebenezer Akakpo from the Akakpo company in Westbrook, Maine, where we'll be exploring his journey as an immigrant entrepreneur from Ghana and translating his culture to American consumers. So don't miss it. We'll see you then, and thanks, as always, for your support.