Speaker 1:

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 forward.

Welcome everyone to another episode of the Main Street Business Insights Podcast. Today I'm in Miami visiting with Mileyka Burgos-Flores, founder and CEO of The Allapattah Collaborative CDC, and the 2024 honoree of the Mary Means Leadership Award. Now, this is a huge honor, part of really only a select few that have won this award in its short period of time and so well deserving. Hopefully you saw Mileyka in Birmingham receiving this award at our national conference. If we take a step back, there's more than 1200 communities that are committed to using the Main Street approach as a management framework for the communities downtown or neighborhood commercial district. But underlying its success is really the tireless leadership of their directors who demonstrate their commitment to the mission of creating these wonderful places that bring people together, allowing us to share amazing experiences. Of course, shop, eat and drink, perhaps grab a book at the library or even walk through a park.

Mileyka personifies what it means to lead a movement. So let me introduce a little bit about Mileyka before we dive into the show. With a background in community organizing, she was at first reluctant to start yet another nonprofit. Instead, she focused on committing and connecting with neighborhood leaders and building owners and business owners, really to encourage self-representation in organizing with community members to develop an equitable development plan for Allapattah. The historically Dominican neighborhood in Miami. Now, one outcome of the plan was identifying a clear desire to pursue and preserve the identity of Allapattah. And to do so by creating an economy that works for everyone, especially the small businesses that are at its backbone. It was the community that decided that Mileyka should lead them in this bold effort to implement the recommendations of this plan. And so with this directive, Mileyka formed the Allapattah Collaborative infusing the organization with her community organizing principles.

Now, my conversation covers the important and very timely issues of displacement and community identity, along with her philosophy and approach to leading her mainstream. It's chock-full of insights, and so I know you're going to enjoy it and we'll see you on the other side. Hey, I am with Mileyka. Some of you may know her. I would like to say you're very famous in the mainstream world and probably beyond, but we're here in Miami in the Allapattah neighborhood. It's so good to be with you Mileyka.

Speaker 2:

Thank you so much, Matt.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, so for those that have listened to the show in the past, we always like to start with the journey, the story. And so I want to turn it over to you. Maybe tell us a little bit about your journey to this whole world of community and place building.

Speaker 2:

Something that I wasn't expecting in my life as I thought about my career as a young person, I came down to Miami to go to the University of Miami, got a scholarship and stayed here. But at the end of my first semester, I was really homesick. And I told the ladies in the cafeteria at UM, "I am so sick of this cafeteria food, can I please go somewhere to get my hair done?" I'm Dominican, hello. So I needed to get my hair blown out and I needed to eat some kind of comfort food, and it brought me to Allapattah. And that completely changed my... I felt that that place saved me at that moment.

Speaker 1:

Was it like a feeling of home?

Speaker 2:

Yes, it feels like everybody is your cousin. People knew me without even knowing me. People were so... It just felt like home. I grew up in a hair salon because my mom and my aunts do hair. So walking into that hair salon and smelling their special smell of a blow-dryer, the heat of the blow-dryer and just the smells and the sounds and the music. And just going across the street and eating [foreign language 00:05:20], which is this Dominican breakfast dish. It was just really nostalgic for me. It was just a moment where I felt saved from a place that was really unknown to me because I didn't know Miami. I don't know anybody in Miami. I've been in Miami for probably three months, and I was just really, really homesick. So that's what it was. And then when they brought me back to my dorm room, I just opened up this big old map because in '98 we had maps, physical maps only, and I'm looking at this place called Allapattah.

Oh, this is where I was. And I would tell people, "Oh, yeah, I went to Allapattah and I had this food, and I got my hair done." They're like, "Oh my God, you went there?" Like I had done a big sin. But then when I look in the map, I'm like, oh my God, this place it's really right next to the airport, to the east of the airport. It's to the west of downtown and the hospitals, and there's all these things. And then 36th street that brings you all the way to the beach. And I'm like, this is just perfect place.

Speaker 1:

Were you studying city planning, because it sounds like you had a planner mind already?

Speaker 2:

I wasn't, but I just like to be comfortable. I like to have things close by. It had so many Metro rail stations and I'm like, well, why are they talking so bad about this place? This place is really cool. It has all these things around it. Why would it not be a nice place? But it had a different connotation. So I just decided to gather my friends from UM and come and clean the park and go read to the kids at the non-profit, and kind of got involved as a volunteer for a long time. And to the point that about 2013th or something, one of the non-profit asked me to kind of lead it because they were in the red and I know how to help businesses and help us get out of the red. So I kind of did that. And then saw that the challenges that the community was going through as I got deeper beyond the volunteer, were deeper than what a small non-profit could do.

So I went on to the YMCA thinking maybe at the Y we can make it happen. It didn't really happen like that. And a great friend, Manuel Ochoa visited Miami when he worked with NALCAB and told me about everything that NALCAB is. And I'm like, oh my God. But before that, there was this another mentor, she became a mentor after this, that had a prosperity study for Miami. And I just went right after her and said, "Yes, that's what we need in Miami. That's what we need in my community." So between meeting her, she told Manuel to come down, we met. But this happened in the course of three or four years. This didn't happen immediately.

Speaker 1:

It wasn't overnight.

Speaker 2:

It wasn't overnight. And then when Manuel came, what ended up happening is that I took a leap of faith and I left my job. And I just was like, okay, I'm going to take my savings-

Speaker 1:

This is a commitment.

Speaker 2:

And I'm going to just do this equitable development action plan. I was sponsored by the South Florida Community Development Coalition, got a grant from NALCAB, and I was the project lead, and I got the community together because right before that, right before Manuel came, I would always visit the businesses and hang out and buy clothes, get my hair done, eat at the restaurants, whatever. And I would read their letters. The ladies when I went to get my hair done, they're like, "Oh Mi, how can you please read this?" Because they don't speak English. So I would translate what it's saying. And I would start reading, we're buying your house for two cents, can you sell it to me? And I'm like, "No, they're trying to buy your house." Or this is what's happening.

So what I started to hear from them, it's like how things are starting to change, how someone bought this place and demolished it. We started seeing a lot of demolitions, and by seeing all of that when I worked in that previous nonprofit, I'm like, okay, a small nonprofit. We need more beef into this. So when I saw Manuel and I saw the power of a national organization, and he spoke to me about Main Street as well, and I'm like, okay, let's do this equitable development action plan. And let's get these people that have been tugging at my ears about we got to do something because we don't want to lose our business. We got to do something because my rent went up. What would I do if I don't have this? And the more I studied the history of Allapattah, the more I understand the value of these micro businesses that created this micro economy and where Miami was before they were there. So at least this part of Miami.

So after we did the equitable development action plan with small businesses, residents, renters, owners, landowners, service providers and so on, we finished it. And then I tell the community, "Look, this is the report." And they're like, "Okay, so what now?" "Nothing. That's it. We did the report." They're like, "Oh no, we're going to implement this."

Speaker 1:

We have to execute.

Speaker 2:

"We got to execute it because who's going to do it? The city's not going to do it, Mileyka. Nobody's going to do it. You got to do it." So we submitted our 501C3, and that's when the Allapattah Collaborative Community Development Corporation was born.

Speaker 1:

Wow, it's amazing. And just as a show note, so your development plan we've had at Main Street America post it on our site, but we'll make sure we post it into the show notes. I think people would be really interested in reading through, especially after they hear our conversation because I think it was really good at structuring community engagement and involvement. But also lots of clarity around how to tackle difficult issues around displacement. So we'll make sure that folks have an opportunity to take a look at that in the show notes. Let's talk a little bit about the pace of change. So hopefully the way that we have the camera set up, Mileyka, you can see there in the background you have the city of Miami,

Speaker 2:

My beautiful city of Miami.

Speaker 1:

And we are in Allapattah, so you can get a sense, our viewers can get a sense of the proximity to Miami Beach and downtown Miami. And so the pace of change all over the country has been accelerated, but perhaps nowhere more so than Miami. And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your perspective, kind of the Miami experience and how its growth has impacted your neighborhood.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I've been at Miami, it's like a honeymoon. Miami has literally outrageous growth due to foreign investments. People love to invest in Miami. A lot of high wealth companies are moving here after the pandemic. A lot of high net worth individuals are moving down to Miami. Citadel came to Miami. Jeff Bezos lives in Miami. A lot of Hollywood people and California people and San Francisco people and Seattle people and New York people are coming to Miami, and that's great. But I think that the challenge there was the lack of regulation of how all that wealth is really going to benefit Miamians. I think that that was the oversight that sometimes we need to not only see the benefit, but the collateral damage of whichever benefit it is. So despite the impact of climate change and sea level rise, we see this continued investment that has literally put a lot of pressure on our historic communities, because our historic communities happen to be highest ground.

Why? Because when Flagler came down, he built the railroad in the highest points of Miami and who were working? Our Black and Brown folks. And that's where we settled and that's where we have been historically. So those communities become the hot tickets when it comes to real estate-

Speaker 1:

Especially with all the recent flooding and climate change issues. So sort of a push towards higher ground.

Speaker 2:

Yes. So we have experience at seeing higher rents, a lot more demolishments and developments, and not having any historic preservation in our community because people feel that if we have any historic preservation, we won't be able to make modifications or we won't be able to renew our community. And a lot of misinformation about historic preservation. So that's what I feel. At the end of the day the other big impact is the number of people that have left our community because rent are so high, the number of businesses that we keep losing because the cost of commercial rent continues to go up, the inability for them to buy their storefronts and restart a new elsewhere. And that's really unfortunate because it has the American dream slipping away from our community, and that's what we are trying to prevent.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Along those lines, it's quite visible that Allapattah has this amazing, wonderful identity. It's known as the heart of Miami for Dominican history and culture. And I'm sure the plan looks at this, but I wonder if you could talk a little bit about with all the growth, tactically what of programs and activities is the Collaborative involved with that really look to preserve and protect that identity?

Speaker 2:

When we created the equitable development action plan, it was mainly thinking about anti-displacement tactics, policies and programs and conversations with key elected officials and so on. It was more like an advocacy plan. However, that plan was done in 2018, and we kind of put together the non-profit in 2019, and then what happened in 2020? So as we were getting ready to ramp up, we get this pandemic and our number one focus had to shift into high gear to helping the small businesses and preventing the closure of these businesses. So a lot of what we do, the biggest percentage of what we do is in economic vitality, helping the small businesses access capital, helping the small businesses have the business acumen that they need to move their business forward, to make sure that they have an exit strategy, to make sure that they are profitable, to make sure that they find other ways to market their business.

And to truly have resilient businesses because one day it could be a pandemic, another day could be a hurricane, another day could be a flood, another day could be some regulation that lowers the number of people that are buying from you, which happened last year during the summer. And a lot of your poor clients tell moving out of the community. So making our businesses more resilient was one of the main things. The other way that we're focusing on that is deeply researching our history of our Dominican community and communities in general in Allapattah, and the importance of their impact. How have they made it different? What has been their contribution over the decades and how have they impacted not only the city of Miami, but also the United States?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, the storytelling aspects.

Speaker 2:

Yes. And the historic aspect because nobody has ever understood how long we've been here. We're just here. We're just making it happen every day and focusing on our family, and focusing on our neighbors, and having a safe community, and making ends meet in a way. But never looking at the collective impact that we have had for more than six, seven decades.

So the other thing that we're doing is starting signature events that bring so many cultures together that connects with the Dominican culture. Literally just to bring the community together, to educate, to heal and to really enjoy. So this year we're planning to have La Festival del Platano, the Plantain Festival. And it's about how many ways can you prepare plantain? Plantains are very like a Dominican dish, a very iconic Dominican dish. Dominican baseball players always talk about platano power. And it's because it's so iconic of the Dominican culture, but it's also used a lot in Africa. It's also used a lot in Asia. It's also used a lot in other parts of the Central America and the Caribbean. So how do we bring all those cultures together and celebrate something that makes us so unique? So we're planning to do that in-

Speaker 1:

It's really smart.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, in Hispanic Heritage month.

Speaker 1:

Really smart. Could you talk a little bit about, I think when people think about displacement, especially on the business front, that it's associated with big city dynamics, because I think historically that's where a lot of the sort of development pressures have been. What we've seen post pandemic, however, is that now you have small towns with remote work and people moving to small towns or whatever. And I think that even in our small town main streets, there is a growing concern around displacement. Are there some learnings, advice that you might share with your main street colleagues that maybe didn't think about displacement as a part of their work?

Speaker 2:

Yes. Own the dirt.

Speaker 1:

Own the dirt. Love that, mark it down.

Speaker 2:

If you own your dirt, if you own the homes in your community, the storefront, if you make sure that the icons in your community own, they can't be displaced. And also aside from owning the assets and also understanding how the public assets in your community are being stored by your elected officials and being part of that, an integral part of that process. So number one, private land, own the dirt. Make sure that your small businesses own their storefronts, that legacy families in your community own their homes. And also make sure that you are connected to your city county and whoever manages your public assets to make sure that you are an integral part of how that is toured. That is one way. The other way is that as main streets we need to be facilitators. Facilitators for growth, for resilience, for open mobility, for harmony. And for making sure that we build more leaders we need to bring the community together to avoid the isolation, to create those social bonds, because that's how we make our communities together.

And that's how we are stronger when we talk to our electives, when we talk to a new developer that's coming into the community, that's how we build a stronger voice.

Speaker 1:

I love the concept of own the dirt, because it's not only about being able to protect, allow the business to exist without huge rental pressures or whatever, but you're also building generational wealth with ownership which is so important to community.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. And one more thing, I think that building leadership is important. I think that we need to get out of our own way and look around our community and be in a relentless search for leadership because that torch needs to be passed. And something could be nice and beautiful for 20, 30 years, but who's going to keep it after that and after that and after that. So it is building a culture of building leadership so other people can have that torch.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, it really leads into another form of resiliency. The more people in your community that have leadership and capacity in that area, even if you have some people moving away or whatever, you don't lose the ability to continue what you've started because you've got that built in leadership and capacity. That's wonderful. One of the other things I want to talk about is certainly the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network. You've been actively engaged. You mentioned Manuel, for those that are listening, Manuel and I were colleagues at the National Main Street Center back in the '90s. And so I've such fondness for working with him. And so I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the network itself, its purpose, because we might have some people that want to get more actively engaged, and I know that they are growing and expanding, so could you talk a little bit about them?

Speaker 2:

Sure. So SBAN as we call it, it's an amazing initiative by the University of Maryland where practitioners come together to implement best practices, share best practices, figure out how to keep that American dream alive, because businesses don't start with a million dollars. They can, of course-

Speaker 1:

Only on YouTube.

Speaker 2:

If you have the million dollars, that would be great, but entrepreneurship is essential to growth. But entrepreneurship happens with an individual, with an idea, with families, with communities that have a need that someone can supply. And them working together and making that possible. It's that American dream of I'm going to start this business, and that business ends up putting your kid through college. It's that small business that ends up putting your kids through baseball camp or something like that. So I think that SBAN is helping us identify how do we keep our communities knit? Because I regard small businesses and commercial quarters as that fabric that brings us together. Not everybody's going to gather at your living room, but a lot of people can gather at the barbershop, a lot of people can gather at the bakery, a lot of people can gather at the restaurant. So it's those commons although they're private businesses, they become public spaces, third spaces for our communities. And that is why keeping businesses in place it's important, which is what the Small Business Anti-Displacement Network is doing.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, especially when you think about in many ways how we've lost community. So much of our lives are spent online. It's our small businesses where sort of like the one place we often can come together, whether that's to your point, a barbershop, to a bookstore, a coffee house. And I think that's the next really evolution of small business is a recognition that they're an important component of our community fabric. All right, so last month you attended the Main Street Now Conference in Birmingham. It was so good to see you there, but this one probably had a little bit more special meaning than maybe some of the others that you've been to over the years. You received the prestigious Mary Means Leadership Award and so rightly deserved. I wonder if in your own words, if you could maybe talk a little bit about what that achievement meant to you.

Speaker 2:

Well, don't make me cry. I wasn't able to speak that day and I had to write out my thoughts afterwards because it was just really emotional for me, because representation matters because I am on the shoulder of so many people who came before me that were never, ever acknowledged for all the work that they've done. So it was like the validation of their sweat, equity of the dreams, of the investment, of all those immigrants that gave so much and later many of them were displaced. And were never acknowledged, never understood, and probably never even regarded as history or impactful when they in fact have been. So to me, it's like Main Street brought to Allapattah our understanding of our community's cultural authenticity matters. And in that their entrepreneurial spirit is important and that passion that they have to achieve that American dream is possible. And that we're a valid, it's validation in a way.

It's a valid part of the fabric of America, of Miami, of our community. And this is really what America's made of, it's tiny businesses that little by little grow. At the end of the day, the Mary Means Award is a huge responsibility to uphold Mary Mean's name, and it's a responsibility for the rest of my professional life. So yes, I think I was completely taken off guard because the other thing that made me really emotional is that it was my team who submitted me very, very quietly. The determination to go beyond me, get letters from the mayor, get letters from this person, from the other, and my board of directors, my team, people that truly understand the work that we're doing and the meaning that the award has, not for my for Mileyka, but for Allapattah, the people who came before me and for America. For other main streets to see this is possible.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, wonderfully said. And I'm so glad that we had the opportunity to do the podcast because you didn't have a chance to speak and obviously totally understand why. But I think it's important that message that you're carrying that yes, you definitely had something to do about it but you're carrying your community with you. And I think that's a really powerful statement about leadership in general, that it's greater than we as individuals. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about where you go from here, and what's the future of Allapattah?

Speaker 2:

If it goes as we like, it's very bright. We see business owners owning their storefront, families owning their dwellings whether it's an apartment or a home, businesses growing, we see generational wealth being created. We see staff buying their businesses when people want to move it down and keeping community and businesses in our community, that's what we foresee. We see communities event bringing people together. We see us learning from other communities that have gone through this. I'm learning a lot from San Francisco and an organization called MEDA, Mission Economic Development Agency. We learned a lot from them, and they went through this in the early 2000s. And I am here going through this in like 2010s, 2015, not knowing anything about them. But the more we go out there, the more we learn. So always hungry to learn more, but also become a best practice model.

Work with my city, my county, my electorates, my community, everybody in the community because it's not about me. I just want to be a facilitator for these things to happen so we can become that best practice model that American desperately needs, because right now there's a lot of communities that are going through this. And we're trying to figure out how do we manage investments that we need because we're not against the progress, but how do we manage that with the human factor, with the open mobility of our communities, with the historic preservation of our communities? How do we merge our past and our future in a way, right?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, no pressure. But this work is so incredibly important and there's so many communities out there that are looking at what you're doing and creating that best practice model. And so I would just like to say that we're so appreciative of the work that you're doing because we're learning, the other main streets are learning, the small towns are learning. You're really going into areas that especially in terms of identity, community engagement and commercial displacement that so many communities are beginning to face and are really trying to wonder what the next step is. But you're past that and so we can learn from you. You're not there yet. I know what you're saying, but you've began to craft the plan, you're executing, and so that's the first step for communities.

Speaker 2:

At least we know what the inputs are.

Speaker 1:

Exactly. Every research starts with the inputs. Let's close out with what's the best advice you received, especially as the Mary Means Leadership Award winner that you pass on to your colleagues out there?

Speaker 2:

Number one, be grateful. And in that gratefulness, give yourself grace because this is not an easy job. I always tell my husband, "This is a thankless job. I cannot do this expecting people to like me or thank me or anything like that." And literally that's how I go out there. But it's also about seeking knowledge and best practices. We need to communicate. We need to know what you're doing. I need to share what I'm doing so we can have that conversation. I would also say multiply yourself, share your knowledge and build new leaders who can pass the torch and build things to new heights. There's places that I'm not going to be able to bring out of Allapattah that someone else is going to have to do that. So we also need to let go of the ego sometimes and really get out of the way of the mission and understand that the best thing we can do is build new leaders, learn from others, and share.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, that is beautiful and we owe you a big thanks. Thanks for being on the show.

Speaker 2:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

So there you have it. I hope you enjoyed the conversation with Mileyka Burgos-Flores founder and CEO of the Allapattah Collaborative CDC located in Miami, Florida. And in honor of Mileyka and her tireless work to preserve the identity of her Dominican community, I stated in the podcast and I hope you caught it, that her own the dirt push should really be a T-shirt. It's like perfect. It says so much about the drive to prevent displacement of the small businesses that gave and give our community their identity. Well, we did it, folks. If you check out the shopmainstreet.org website, you'll see the newly designed Own the Dirt swag. I'm sure you'll be seeing me sport this in an upcoming podcast video. In fact, I can guarantee it. For those of you wanting to know more about Allapattah's Equitable Development Plan, we'll also add a link in the show notes so you can download your copy for review.

Also, it's worth noting that Mileyka is also part of the Small Business Anti-Displaced Network known as SBAN. They recently published a Small Business Anti-Displacement Toolkit that frankly is amazing. We'll also tag a link in the show notes. You all can download that as well. 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. And as consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and of course tell their stories. They're so important to our local and national economies. And most importantly, they promote and provide quality living to the places we all call home. 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, and of course, Spotify and iTunes and everywhere else you listen to your podcast.

Thanks for listening. Please rate and review us, and as always, be sure to subscribe and tell your friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues so you all can catch the next episode. When this time, I'll be in Appalachia, Morehead Kentucky to be specific with the Ravencraft Brothers, Joshua and Jared, founders of the small scale peril manufacturing company, new Frontier. We'll be covering a lot of ground from creating a brand, how to compete at small scale with the big global firms, and the importance of your story to building connections to consumers. Don't miss it. We'll see you then, and thanks for all the support.