Matt Wagner (00:04)

Welcome to the Main Street Business Inside 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, MainStreet Business Insights is here to provide you with the tools, strategies, and personal stories to help you and all of your MainStreet businesses thrive. So subscribe now and tune in every Wednesday to get inspired by the individuals driving our communities forward.

Matt Wagner (01:00)

Welcome everyone to another episode of the Main Street Business Inside podcast. I'm Matt Wagner, Chief Innovation Officer. And today you find me in Woodbury, New Jersey at the Monogram shop with Dottie Lang and Dottie McQuade. And we're going to get to them in just a second. But we have a little bit of background. As you know, I've talked about on the podcast and in number of our blogs about sort of this peak 65, the silver tsunami, as some have called it, where we've got a number of

boomers and other generations that are exiting or transitioning from their businesses and we're sort of reaching that peak and I've talked about it in number of different sort of ways and occasions about those that have bought businesses as a result of other business owners exiting their shops but haven't had really an opportunity to cover it from sort of the other side of the equation. Those that are

in sort of what they're going through, both from an emotional perspective, but also just kind of the nuts and bolts of what it's like to sell their store. And so I was really excited. It's now been probably six, seven months ago that one of my former colleagues at Main Street, Josh Bloom, good friend and just a great, phenomenal expert in the world of downtown revitalization, was in Woodbury. And I think maybe he came into the store

And he immediately, I got this note from him and he's like, you've got to come up to Woodbury and talk to the Dotties. I'm like, the Dotties, okay. I mean, of course I'm going to do it, right? But explained their story and I thought, this is perfect in so many ways, both just from the wonderful business aspect, but also again, to I think this really important subject that's on the minds of thousands of small business owners out there.

is they sort of make that consideration and are thinking through what's it like to transition and enter a new chapter of their lives. with that, I'm really glad to be here and just want to introduce Dottie and Dottie. Welcome to the show. Thank you. All right. And if you haven't noticed already, if you're watching the video on YouTube or another format and you can see behind me and in the store, these two are

big Philadelphia Eagle fans. And I am certain that this episode will air post Super Bowl, okay, since we're recording about a week before the Super Bowl. But do you all want to do a little shout out? Is there like a cheer that Eagles fans do? Go Eagles! And for all my Kansas City fans out there, I don't know if you can see this. I'll try to hold this

they

embroider toilet paper as well and I guess we can show that on the screen. I hope I didn't offend any of the Missouri... Everybody from Kansas City just tuned in. Okay that's the last we'll talk football today but had to share that with you just speaks to the innovation from the Dotties. okay I'm gonna turn it over to you we'd love to hear a little bit more about how the two of you met and

and how did you become the Monogram Shop? Okay. Hi, I'm Dottie McQueen. I started this business in my basement, actually. I was there for about a year. And I had always loved embroidery, but never even considered doing something like this. I had five children, and when the youngest one went to kindergarten, I had been down in Ocean City and saw an embroidery shop down there.

And I was fascinated by the fact that this machine was sewing all by itself. And I was like, wow, that's incredible. To make a long story short, we looked into purchasing a machine. It was actually my sister-in-law and I. And set it up in my basement. And I was like petrified once the guy who trained us left because I was like, so now what?

And my brother said to me, really need a storefront. That's what you need to do. You don't want to be in your basement. So he helped me open a storefront here in Woodbury and not in the location we're in now. We've been in this location for about 12 years and the whole process. We've been in business now for almost 40.

and absolutely love it. mean, it's I just adore this shop and about 12, what was it? 1999? Yeah. That Dottie Lang became a partner and we've moved to this location. It's on the corner abroad and and Delaware Street. And now we have gone from.

not only just personalized baby gifts and beach towels and totes and all, but we do a lot of company logos and we have quite a customer list. yeah, just love what we do. So the two of you have a long history, right? Yes. how did that happen? You're from the same neighborhood, same area? Actually, we are from the same neighborhood, four blocks away from each other.

That's wild. About a mile from here. Yeah, we met at church and our husbands were in the fire department together. Okay. we...

We just always knew each other. And how did you get into the business? How did you, did you fall in love with Monogram? Well, I've always been very into crafts and I did a lot of sewing and I was looking for something to do when my kids were little. And so I started working here as an employee and then I became Dottie's partner in 99.

So fast forward, we're sitting in 2025 now.

When did it occur to you? Was there sort of like an epiphany or was this a long, I don't wanna call it like a trickle that just started to open up wider and wider, but how did the two of you come together to start thinking about, you know what, maybe it's our time. Maybe it's our time for retirement or a new chapter in our lives. Talk to me about when that occurred or how did it occur? When my husband turned 60, he said,

to me when I retire, I want to move out of the state. I said to, you know, I told Dottie, says, you know, we've got five years. You know, he wants to move out of state and.

It's been seven years. You stretched it a little bit longer. stretched it little bit longer. And, you know, in between that time we had, you know, the whole COVID mess. And so he is now retired. And for me, that is why I'm ready. Because life's too short. I want to do, I want to do stuff. Yeah. Did...

Dottie, did you come to the same point? Or was it more Dottie coming to you and saying, this is my plan, what do you think? Are you gonna continue on or? Dottie brought it up and I was like, I can't do that. I can't leave the shop, I'm not ready. But now I'm ready. I mean, I'm gonna miss it terribly, but it's time to move on. And honestly, I'm what, 12 years older than you?

you never know how many days you have. And I was like, how terrible would that be for either one of us to have something happen where we couldn't continue to work because one person couldn't do this on their It would be a real hardship for either one of us that was left with this by ourselves. And yeah, it's time. It's time. And today, by the way, everyone send out shout outs to Doddy McQuade. It's her birthday today, which I think

because the first we've ever had on the podcast. We're celebrating your birthday as well. All right. Thank you. So you come to this conclusion and then what? Is there was there certain steps? Did you like, how do we do this? Do we just put a shingle out like or like what was going through your mind at the time about like just how do we make this happen? Well, we talked with Gerald O'Connor. I don't know if you're familiar with him.

He's involved with Main Street and the Chamber of Commerce and, you know, very knowledgeable. You went to the resource, local resource. And he was right across the hall. Even better. Yes. We didn't have to leave the building. And we talked with him and, you know, we got together the information that he requested and said, how do we do this? Yeah, he's been helping us. One of the things I did was

put...

a small article in our local Chamber of Commerce newsletter. Unfortunately, that was totally misunderstood by those that read it because people read the headline. They didn't read the article. And in the article, I stated that while we were looking to sell the business, we were not planning on closing. We were going to stay in business

until we have too much background, too much connection with our customers, some of whom we've had for all 40 years, to just up and leave. And we had people come in and say, my gosh, when are you closing? When's your last day? And I'm like, that's not the case. no. Because if we, we've never put a sign out that the business is for sale, it's always been pretty much word of mouth.

because we didn't want to lose business if people thought we were closing. It's a wrong impression. Exactly. Which could impact then someone's willingness or... Absolutely. I think that's why in so many cases, most of the time, it's a pretty quiet process for that very, very reason. So over time, you were probably able to rectify a little bit of that or people had forgotten about it. What next? you have to... How did you think about...

what is the store worth? Like there's a financial equation at hand here. We turned over what years of financial records to Gerald and he kind of guided us to a price. Talked with our accountant. Yeah talked with our accountant and came up with a price and

We've had some inquiries, but we're looking for what we consider the perfect fit. We do have a young lady who shows a lot of interest and that's what we like young. We want somebody who loves the shop like we do. So it's kind of what we're looking for. We would like someone to keep everything just like it is. That may not happen.

We have an awful lot of business customers that we do their logos. So we would like to stay on maybe for a few months after the sale and help them through the transition process. We want them to meet our customers, feel comfortable with each other.

We have a plan. just hope it works out. Yeah. Did you was there discussions around? like it's this is the price and cut a check or I know there's been, you know, some other pathways where business owners have said, you know what? This is my retirement. And so you could almost like treat it as an annuity where you're the bank and they're making payments on that. Like, what's your

consideration about like how a purchase would take place? We have been advised to cut a know have a check. Have a check. Yes.

But then maybe stay on and help to advise or something like that. Yes, most people don't know how to run an embroidery machine, don't understand the embroidery software. So there's going to be a period of instruction. And we have two, the two machines, both are very different. So you need to learn both of them. You need to learn the embroidery software, how to program stuff. So I'm thinking, you know, like a three month kind of thing, but that could

change. Exactly. Both of us live very close and we are not opposed to coming in if there's a call that help I don't know how to do this.

That I think makes it easier for us to walk away because we're still here and we can still have our fingers in it if we need it. If they need it. I think that's a really key line, right? As you think about kind of the personal side, you both have been at this work for a very long time. You've built this business up. It has an identity that

identity is very much in some ways like associated with the two of you. How do you think about that separation? Well there's definitely a need for what we do. It would be a shame. I don't even know where our customers would go because there's not a lot of businesses.

that do what we do. A lot of them will do big bulk orders, but they don't know where to go to have a baby blanket embroidered or a beach towel. We also allow people to bring in their own item. They don't have to buy from us. And we just have found that we're unique in many, many ways. But as far as what you said about leaving the business, it's going to be very emotional for both of us, you know?

We've put so much into this shop, into this business, and we wanna see it succeed, to continue to succeed. Is it your sense that a buyer of a Main Street kind of business is probably one that's fairly local, or like have you branched out and communicated to any potential buyer?

The people that we've talked to have been local. The one person that we felt was not a fit at all. Well, there's two people. The first was a retired couple that all they wanted to do was own a business. They knew nothing about embroidery and they didn't want to be hands on. So pretty passive. They just want to invest, buy it, and then someone else. How can you? They even talked about moving out of the area and was like, you're not even going to

to be around here. Yeah, they wanted to continue their travel. So how are you going to oversee a business that you don't want any parts of? The other one was a young man who really, really, he talked down to us so much about, like, I don't want all this. He says, I just want your client list. you know, you're a big part of business.

Just because we do a logo for the car dealership doesn't mean we're doing 175 pieces at a time. Each employee may be bringing in five or six shirts for us to do. And that employee then becomes a retail customer, not just a wholesale customer. So when he asked me, what is your percentage of business versus retail, I'm like, can't answer that.

Because they are one and the same. back and forth. They're one and the same. Interesting. You bring up one part of, I guess, this whole puzzle that I never really thought about. But in essence, it's almost like a job interview. Like, I feel like the two of you are interviewing folks. Tell me what that's like. you have like like, what should we ask them or like, are you, know, sort of what's the criteria? Because it does sound like you've

We've

had these intense kind of conversations that in many ways you're trying to make sure this is the right fit. We want a good the business for you. Yeah, we want a good fit. Exactly. There's a lot of people who've inquired and we're like, yeah, I'm not feeling it. How about you? The one person walked out the door and I said, yeah, that's a big no. I'm glad you don't have like a scorecard. So I mean, we shouldn't be picky, but we're picky. Yeah. We're like.

This is like our family. This is like, we're not just going to throw it to the wolves. It has to be hopefully just a perfect fit. And we're also aware of the fact that that may not happen. We may end up often to sell off equipment and inventory and just close the doors. I don't think that'll happen. And I hope that doesn't happen. It's not what we're hoping for. Yeah. But we are also being realistic that maybe that is what our destiny is. I don't know.

This is really fascinating in the fact that I think you're like many, I think, Main Street business owners where this is not just a transaction. think this is like a big corporation. Sure, you have the money and you want to buy, fine, write the check, but this is totally different. It's not just about the financial side of it. It has to be the right fit. I think that's quite distinct. It's like finding the best place as well.

It's like trying to adopt out your kid, know, one that you like. The one you don't like, you might not be a problem, but you want to make sure that they're going someplace perfect, you know, and yes, perfect doesn't exist, but...

We would like to see our reputation is the biggest thing here and we don't want anybody to ever have a bad experience here. We want them to be successful. We want the other person. Do you feel like in some ways that's part of your legacy? mean the two of you live here. if it's a bad fit or whatever is that a reflection on your decision at all? Does that weigh in the back of your mind? Yes.

I often think to myself, someone may come along and have the money and have the desire.

And honest and truly, I'm just like, but do I like you? Are you a nice person? We want you to represent us well, even though it would no longer be our business. If that makes sense, I'm just like, it's important to me who you are that is going to take over the shop. As far as the succeeding versus the failing, excuse me, that can go both ways.

You can sell the business to somebody who you think... Excuse me, I'm sorry. Sell the business to somebody you think is a perfect fit, and then they just fail through no fault of yours, but of theirs. And then you could also see them go like, whoa, way up here. And you're like, well, darn.

Why didn't I do that? Yeah, why didn't I have it, you know? Why didn't I grow it to that level? You're right, there are both sides of this. Yes. And then I think that's why we need, I would like to see somebody young because they know so much more today than we know. I mean, we were moms who had no business sense of anything, made a lot of mistakes. People hopefully can learn from our mistakes, but...

There's the sky's the limit. Learn social media from our kids. mean, yeah. Maybe how to use AI as part of your work. When you said about a podcast, I'm like, what's a podcast? So, you know, they're learning a lot today. I'm up to date here. So, yeah, to have somebody new and young with with great ideas. mean, the sky's the limit. There's just so much you could do. Excellent.

Has there been other challenges you found along the way, whether it's been in the process itself, coming up with the dollar amount? What do you find are the key challenges? Once you made the decision to sell, where did you find barriers or challenges along the way? I think basically just...

finding the right person. For me, that's been... It's like a needle in the haystack. Yeah, that's been, for me, the only real challenge. do you mean, as far as selling goes? Yes, yeah. I think, I wanna speak for you, but I think for Dottie, the whole idea of selling, she's had to come to grips with that emotionally, because this was her baby. This was from start to finish.

And I have to be honest when Dottie first said to me I really think we need to come up with an exit plan You know it might be five years down the road, but we need to start thinking That wasn't even on my radar. I was just never even a curative Yeah, so you know but every year as I get older I can feel that my energy levels not the same my

Christmas has become a lot more difficult because of the volume. didn't we just have that last month? I need a break. Yeah, yeah. And the business is still growing and sometimes we get so far backed up with orders that I'll lay in bed at night and I'll be like, great, tomorrow I've got to do this, this, this, this and this. yeah.

Yeah. It's just time. You know, there's a, this goes beyond store ownership of course, but there's always the discussion around like retirement. Did work or business ownership define my purpose? And I wonder how the two of you think about purpose.

I'm not sure I understand the purpose. the purpose of your life has been the business. How do you think about that? I've already tried to think about, so, when you no longer own the shop, what are you going to do with yourself? Yeah. And I think, me personally, I don't know about Dottie, but I think that I would like to volunteer, do some volunteer work.

I need to do something. I don't want to just stay home and get older and sit in the recliner. I want to do something. I love being around people. So I think volunteering would be a great thing for me. When I decided the week or month before COVID hit and the world shut down,

that I was going to take the courses I needed to become a travel agent. So the world shut down, nobody was traveling, and I did all my training for that. So now I'm a travel agent also, aside from doing this. So I see that that's my retirement gig. I can do that from anywhere. I can do it while traveling. My husband and I like to travel. So that's, I'm not feeling it as much, I don't think, as die.

because I've already planned my retirement gig. But I'll feel it. I'll feel it. And she specializes in Disney. There we go. We'll put that in the show notes, everyone. Next podcast. I do. I specialize in Disney vacations. Okay. Okay. Yeah, that's a biggie. For sure. It is.

So let's talk a little bit about as we close things out, what does legacy mean to the two of you? How do you think about the legacy of the store, of the way that you ran the place? What do you want to leave behind? My legacy is I want this shop to be remembered as a great place in Woodbury that brought a lot of customers into Woodbury that

We had a great reputation for being honest, doing good work. That would be my legacy is just to be saying, gosh, remember the monogram shop? That was great. And we want that to continue. Yeah. Yeah, I feel the same.

We've done some really, really, really unique things. We've done some things that we never thought we'd be able to do as far as what some of our customers want. We bend over backwards for them to make sure they're happy. We don't want anybody to walk out of here not happy because you know and I know that somebody that's not happy is going to tell...

a whole bunch of people, somebody that is happy. It's totally different. And I just am proud of the fact that we have happy customers.

Well, in closing, I first just want to thank you for joining me on the show. This is a really, I think, powerful and important topic and one that I'm sure is not easy to talk about, but I think is really helpful to the listeners because there's a lot of information out there, I think, in terms of kind of the nuts and bolts that you described. You you've to look at your paperwork, you've got to look at your tax returns, you've got to think about a price, but there's

you're real emotional of understanding what's my criteria.

Is it purely just transactional and write me a check? And in most cases, I suspect like yours that it's not. And so every, I suppose every small business owner kind of has to go through that soul searching inside about like what's meaningful to me. And so I appreciate you bringing that out and being willing to share your story on the podcast. And we certainly wish you both the best of luck, not only in the selling part, but obviously the next chapters of your life. You're gonna do wonderful things in the

shop is going to continue to do wonderful things here in Whippery. so. That'd be perfect. Excellent. Thanks. Thank you. In closing, can I just say Go Eagles again? We had to get it in,

Matt Wagner (29:31)

So there you have it. I hope you enjoyed this episode with Dottie Lang and Dottie McQuade of the Monogram Shop in Woodbury, New Jersey. Well, I didn't have necessarily a chance to kind of get into it during the podcast with a lot of sort of data. But I do want to use sort of as we wrap up the podcast, really an opportunity to talk a little bit about what's happening out there. Because I think...

the the Dotties are symbolic in many ways of what we're seeing across, you know, downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts all across the country. And so I want to address a little bit the size and degree which we're seeing this transition of, you know, small businesses. And I've talked about this on our show a number of times, but in 2025, we're reaching this peak 65 as a demographic. And this is when a significant portion of the

lower end of the baby boomer generation reach the age of 65 as the name would apply. Some people have also called it the silver tsunami. And with baby boomers owning roughly 40 % of small businesses in the US, that's 12 million businesses approximately, give or take a few, but it's a lot. It's likely that the largest wave of retirements in the US history are going to be launched or are in

process of launching transition. But this isn't simply a one-year thing, and I think that's the thing to keep on mind. This is going to be going on for the next five to ten years, and it's not actually even just exclusively a baby boomer thing. I think it's worth noting that the oldest of the next generation following the baby boomers, the Gen Xers, are turning 60 in 2025, meaning there's another generation sort of chomping at the bit.

and eyeing retirement. These numbers point to one big possibility. A lot of people thinking about retirement and putting their businesses on the market.

So either way you look at it, that's a big transition point for many of our main streets then. So net-net, we're looking at the largest wealth transfer in the history of the US and frankly the world. Now a New York Times article indicated over the next 20 years, it's estimated that 84 trillion, that's with a T, trillion will likely change hands. Now of course not all of that is in business.

the form of businesses, obviously a lot is. And this makes the next few years a really critical stage when you think about our main streets or our small towns and neighborhoods where most mom and pop and soulpreneurs and small businesses reside.

This represents a wonderful opportunity is the the Dottie's put it, you know, we don't know a lot about, you know, technology and all this new stuff. And, you know, we're hopeful we can sell this to a young person. They're going to take it to the next level with tech know how and social media and, you know, close really some of these disparities, my words, with larger competitors or even give them the possibility to grow into larger markets by accessing AI or other

digital tools.

But there's also a really clear threat and I don't think that that's caught enough of the media attention or perhaps even our attention. And so I want to bring this forward and you know also want to like call out and shout out a friend and former boss who's really covered this. But first you know I think the real threat here for Main Street businesses and we've seen this in the past is on the private equity side.

And the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, and in particular, as I was alluding to, Kennedy Smith, who was the former president and CEO of the National Main Street Center and my boss back in the 90s, has written quite a bit about this. And we'll attach their report from September in the show notes. But essentially what's been going on is sort of in the dark of night, or at least quietly, but with profound impetus.

impact, private equity has been going in and buying up, you know, small, what we think of as mom and pop or founder, you know, one founder businesses, and many of them on main streets. And much of this buying has kind of been in the service or the skilled trade sectors. You think plumbing and HVAC businesses or even funeral homes.

as an example. So you don't have to imagine what this could look like as it grows and expands along main streets in the future as many more deals, as many more businesses look to exit. There's backed a lot of capital in private equity. And so just look at what's happened in the housing market overall, where private equity has really come in and sort of corporate based

housing and look where that's gotten us. know, less choices or no choices and certainly higher prices. And so you think about Main Street and its competitive advantage and its brand identity with community.

that really gets lost when you sort of corporatize, you know, what we're sort of mom and pop businesses or main street like businesses in our communities. So we'll explore this in upcoming episodes and blogs. I think this is a really important subject and it's important that folks are aware and hopefully we can seek out new tools and resources to ensure that, you know, the identity of our communities, which is such a powerful

you know, thing about quality of place continues for generations to come. So as always, if you're a business owner and likewise to my place professionals,

out there. I hope this episode has provided plenty of new insights, solutions, and inspirations. 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 of living to the places we all call home. Don't forget to show your Main Street pride. I'm wearing a little bit right here. I guess it's on this side by checking out our Main Street sweatshirt.

at shopmainstreet.org. 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. Thanks as always for listening. Please rate and review us and please subscribe. I don't know where that subscribe button is on here, but somewhere please hit the subscribe and comment. And of course tell your friends, family, and neighbors and colleagues. So until next time, thanks for all the support.