Matt Wagner:

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

Welcome everyone to another episode of the Main Street Business Insights Podcast. Hope you had a chance to listen to last week's episode where I was in Biddeford, Maine, chatting with the owners of Elements Books, Coffee and Beer. Well, after the recording, I made my way up to the Build Maine conference in Skowhegan, where I did a little bit of a talk and judged the business plan competition. But before I left the state, I had one more opportunity to do a quick stop off in beautiful downtown Westbrook, Maine. So last year, to set the table here, I had the opportunity to work with the community. And as part of my visit, they showed me around this incredible historic mill property that had been repurposed for hosting small and micro entrepreneurs. And I'd always wanted then to get back, but obviously with a microphone in tow.

So prior to departing, I checked in with the director of Discover Downtown Westbrook. And Amy was kind enough to share with me that they also had just completed their first business plan competition. Bummer, of course, that I missed that. But she shared with me the story of. Ebenezer Akakpo, an artist from Ghana who had opened a studio in the mill where he manufactures jewelry and related accessories based on patterns of traditional symbols from his native Ghana. It didn't take me long to catch on that Ebenezer's story as an immigrant entrepreneur and his experience launching his business and connecting his culture to consumer culture in the US would make for a wonderful episode.

But before we jump into our conversation, many of you know I like research and data. So to set the context for our story, I thought it was important to share some quick stats related to immigrant entrepreneurs here in the US. Now, according to the US small business administration, immigrant entrepreneurs consist of roughly 18% of business owners with employees, and almost 23% of business owners without employees. Immigrant-owned businesses are found in every sector of the US economy. And so when we think about the sectors traditionally found in our neighborhood and downtown commercial districts, it's important to know that immigrant entrepreneurs make up about 36.8% of employer businesses in accommodation and food-related services, and nearly 20% in the retail sector.

So let's go ahead now and jump into my conversation with Ebenezer Akakpo of the Akakpo Design Group, and we'll see you on the other side. Ebenezer, it's so exciting to meet you here in Westbrook Maine at your Akakpo studio. When Amy, my Maine colleague we'll call her from Discover Downtown Westbrook told me about the recent business pitch contest they did here in Westbrook and resulted out of some of our entrepreneurial ecosystem work here in Maine with the Maine Downtown Center. And she told me that you were a huge fan favorite, I don't know if you knew that, but coming out of this event. And I was like, "Oh my God, please connect me to Ebenezer." So I'm so glad to be with you here. Welcome to the show.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Mark. Thanks for having me.

Matt Wagner:

You bet you.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

And like I said, I didn't know I was a fan favorite.

Matt Wagner:

Well, now you do.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Now I do.

Matt Wagner:

We're going to get you a sign.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Matt Wagner:

Within the show, we always start out with a little bit of talk hearing from you about your personal journey, and it's quite unique, coming from Ghana to Maine here in the United States. Tell us about that journey. What brought you here? And then how did you become a small business entrepreneur? What was the steps like in that?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

So once again, thanks for having me. My journey... If I have to tell everything according to what it is, it's probably going to take us maybe, I don't know, to the end of the year.

Matt Wagner:

We'll go with the Cliff note

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Version. The Cliff note. Okay. So the Cliff note version is that, yes, I'm from Ghana. I always narrowed down the story to my dad being an architect, and growing up wanted to follow his steps to also be an architect. But it wasn't just that. I was very interested in technical drawing, I was interested in... When I look at architectural structures at the time when they're drawing, you have different pencils and you have the hard pencils like H2 pencils or H6 pencils. And those are for construction lines. And then when you're done with your work, you either use the H or HB to highlight what you want to see or what you want to convey to the client. And I think it's very similar to what I'm doing today because it's all about in life, this is my philosophy. We have many stories, the stories create patterns. But then we decide which part of the story we want to share with friends.

So I think it goes back all the way to that concept of pencil drawing and then highlighting what you're able to see. So my childhood or growing up was a little bit different from the norm, different in the sense that I've been trying to incorporate some of the important people in my life growing up and how me living with them gave me an opportunity to be where I am today. And one of them is my uncle who was a math teacher. And he worked as a math teacher, but then he was also the headmaster of a school that was sponsored by the Canadian government called Accra Technical Training Center. So I think part of it also stemmed from there. We lived on campus. He was the headmaster, so I lived with him. I did not live with my dad, I didn't live with my mom.

But then through the process of living on campus and having access to so many different things, it was a technical school so because of his position, I had access to the masonry department, the carpentry department, air conditioning, radio and TV. At the time, that's what we called it. They had office machine, which was typewriters and then computers, which was also coming up. And I think that actually gave me the foundation plus the foundation of going to my high school of wanting to follow the steps of my dad to be an architect.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. It's so interesting because in both instances, your uncle and your father, they might be sort of characterized in the science field. But you're an artist. Where does that arc come in to making jewelry?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Well, I'm sure you've read the book Poor Dad, Rich Dad, even though it's-

Matt Wagner:

I'm familiar,

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Even though it's not always about the money, but it's about the professional lives. So my rich dad was my genetic dad, and then my poor dad was my uncle. So mine is kind of switched. But then through the process... And I'm going to be going all over the place because my stories are kind of intertwined. And sometimes when I try to explain it, it's too long. It's too lengthy. So 2011, my dad had his birthday, 75th birthday. I happened to be in Ghana. And I went to his room in the morning. I wished him happy birthday, and I asked him two questions. The first question was, if he were to do anything different, what would that be? And he said nothing because he believes that whatever God has written about his life is exactly how he lived his life. And then the second question was, why did he not want me follow in his steps to be an architect?

He gave me two separate answers. The first answer was the Ghanaian system, the Ghanaian government, people did not understand architecture at the time. So architects would have to depend on the government for contracts. And whenever there is a switch in government, if you don't take it, they're not going to pay you. So you can go for four or eight years not getting paid for a project that you agreed on with the previous government. And he didn't want me to go through that process. He wanted me to have control of my own life. And he felt going into jewelry making was the best choice so that I'll have control of what I do, what I create, and how I live my life. And then the second answer was, "Well, you live in the US. If you really wanted to be an architect, you could have done it."

Matt Wagner:

Not only was your dad an architect, but he was quite funny.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yeah. I felt like [inaudible 00:11:07] for a second. But then following what your parents tell you, it's also intertwining our culture because there's a belief that you don't argue with an elderly person because they know better than you. They know more than you because they've lived longer than you have. And because they've lived longer than you have, they have much more experience in life than you have. So in order for you not to trail the mistakes they've already done, you listen to them. So it shortens your process. And that's what I thought I was doing.

Matt Wagner:

Yeah. You were cutting a few steps.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

That's great. As an immigrant entrepreneur, what has been the most significant challenges you've faced here in the US in getting started?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

That's a very interesting question. Anytime immigrant is put in the same question as an entrepreneur, it becomes very complicated, right? Because it has taken me time to understand that I need to learn how systems operate, where I am now in order to be able to come up with a concept to fit in the norm. So there is a philosopher whom I've never... I keep saying that I've forgotten his name, but then... He made a statement. Once you transform a culture into a new culture, it loses its meaning.

So in order for me to understand how to integrate my culture or what I'm coming with my story into the new culture, I had to somehow learn to understand, what is it that makes main culture? And that Maine culture is what actually allowed me or gave me an opportunity to start a new business called Maine Culture using the main symbolism like the deer, the moose, lobster, chickadee, pine cone. So by understanding that, now I'm using a language that people here already understand. And I'm using that language in my own way. And once I talk to people and I say, "This is what I've done," it gives me an opportunity to now slide in my culture. And slowly it seems now people are more interested in my culture, what I'm trying to present to them than the main culture because they already know about the main culture. But initially it was very, very difficult. So once again, it was difficult as an immigrant to get that. But I had to break things down to the level that it'll make sense for me to have a conversation with someone.

Matt Wagner:

In many ways, and listening to you, it seems like you built a bridge that in essence, in order to have the sort of market or consumers understand your culture and your jewelry, you sort of first had to think about the Maine culture, main being the state of Maine culture, what was important there. And by doing so, they got to know you. They got to know your brand. They got to know your culture. It was just easier to bridge then.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yes, yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Brilliant. That's so smart.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

[inaudible 00:15:18].

Matt Wagner:

Many emerging business owners have to straddle working full time. Not everyone goes from, "I've got an idea," to instant business success or lots of revenues that we all have to support ourselves. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about going from a startup to trying to build scale, trying to build your market, but also having to support yourself. And what's it like to try to balance that time between maybe working in an occupation, but also trying to launch your business?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

There's always a balance, and I don't think you can ever find a balance. There's a reason. I have always been fortunate, and I think that is just my life. So I have my biological father and I have my uncle who was also my father. And then I came to Maine College of Arts from Italy. And that journey went from Ghana to after my high school when my dad said, "We cannot both be architects." He suggested I should go into the jewelry industry. But what I quickly realized was that the techniques that I was learning when I was in high school were similar to making products, were similar to making jewelry. So it was a nice transition from using technical drawings or technical abilities as well as metal work, wood work, and be able to transform transitioning to jewelry making. Then after three years of doing my apprenticeship program, I went to Italy to study jewelry design and stone setting.

But in life, we're always going to have aha moments or eye opening moments. And there was one particular one when I was in Italy, we ended up visiting a show in Germany called [foreign language 00:17:28]. So there's a show in Munich where everything there to me as an African child with zero technology background, zero computer knowledge, I was just mesmerized to be in the space where everything around me was coming from space, from their production to their design to even the way they thought about... I was just blown away. I'm not even talking about architecture in Italy and all the designs, but I'm narrowing it down to what I saw in Germany. And that actually ignited a question. "How can I get there?" So then fast-forward, I come to Maine, Maine College of Arts. And I was so focused on trying to figure out how I can get to that point.

And I thought, "Well, one of the ways is going to be computers," right? Because I had no knowledge in computers. But also on the flip side, because I'd been working in the jewelry industry for a while as an apprentice and also schooling in Italy, I didn't see the need to focus too much on my technical ability. But rather, I saw the need of, how can one become innovative? How can you become creative? And my short-sightedness was that, "Oh, if I know how to use that technology, I can make it happen." And one of my professors at the time said, "Ebenezer, you know technology is not going to make you a better designer or a better innovator. It can help you just like a writer uses a typewriter or computers to type their document. It doesn't make their story telling good. If they don't have innovative sense, the story will be stale."

So then I was like, "Okay, that's very good." So then I said to myself, I have a lot of talks to myself, and I said, "Well, I have two options. I either have to learn how to use a computer or I need to learn how to actually build and troubleshoot computers." And I went to the latter because I said, "Well, if I can build it, I can use it." And as a student at Main College of Arts, I enrolled in a separate school, in a trade school to learn how to build and troubleshoot computers. And without me even thinking about what I was doing, by the time I graduated from Main College of Arts, I had already gotten my certification also in IT.

So it became that kind of transition where the jewelry shop that I was doing my internship at here in Maine, they were paying me like $8.20 cents for a graduate, and then my certification in IT was paying me almost $15 an hour. So what do you do? So I said to myself, "Well, I guess I've got to go for the money. But most importantly, it's not just about the money. I'm going to go into this space where I'm also going to learn how to build and troubleshoot stuff," because I've always had this, I don't know if it's a goal, this voice in my head that a day is going to come where technology is actually going to take over the way we do design.

Matt Wagner:

Certainly AI has already entered, right?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yeah. But even with AI, AI can do certain things, but with AI now you have to also understand coding. Otherwise, if somebody creates an application and you're using that AI to generate an artwork, you and I will generate the same thing. So then AI even is shifting to more of coding. So you need to actually understand how AI is thinking to be able to alter the code so that you'll be different from other people. So that is how I've been able to keep my artwork and also be able to work... So by working for the [inaudible 00:22:26]... Luckily I got another job also with Zales. So I was the contract jeweler at the time. So the money I was making from the [inaudible 00:22:36] gave me the freedom to able to buy the equipment. And not only that.

When you are going to the banks for a loan, you know you're capable of doing something, but the bank is looking for, "Where do you work? How long have you been working there?" and all that kind of stuff. All these things become stumbling blocks. So as an artist, you're always forced, if you're not making enough money, you're forced to take on different jobs to get the things that you can get or the things that ordinary people are getting to be able to take you where you want to go.

Matt Wagner:

So as you think about the business now, what are the biggest obstacles? Or is it time? Is it figuring out what's the best marketing strategy? Where are you putting your time and effort in terms of how you continue to grow the business?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Time, we cannot buy time. I tell my friends, if I can invent something, I'll probably invent sleep. I invented a system where I can sleep for somebody or somebody can sleep for me. And then, "How many hours of sleep do you want?" And I say, "I want two hours of deep sleep."

Matt Wagner:

Sleep credits we'll call it.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Sleep credit. Yes. So I wish that was a thing. But to answer your question, it is very difficult. It is very, very, very difficult to balance what we do as entrepreneurs. And like I said, it's not even about time. You can't buy time. But what I've come to realize now is that with everything that I'm doing, it boils down to sales. I'm creating jewelry or I'm creating designs that I term extension of human experiences. But it is not food. So it's not something that you buy a ring tomorrow, you eat it, and you're hungry again the following day. So it makes it difficult today for me, for my business to feel like, "Okay, I've gotten to the point where I can just focus on that." And that is what I'm trying to work at.

And I think that's what actually led to the peach. So the idea of going to the peach was because I've been working with elementary school kids as well as adults using the negative spaces of the symbols that I used for my work, but in cardboard where they can free themselves to create. And I was trying to figure out how to integrate that as a business thing where it also generates some sort of revenue. But at the same time, trying to market to people what else I do, what else I'm capable of doing. In terms of marketing, I know a lot of people believe in Facebook and Instagram and stuff like that. But it's one of those things that I feel like you have to put in too much money and you're not guaranteed.

Matt Wagner:

What's the return like?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yeah. And even when you hire a marketing person who is using Instagram, they're going to charge you astronomical amount of money and they'll tell you it's not guaranteed. So at the end, it's going to boil down to two things. They have done their job and maybe your product sucks, pardon my French. So what I ended up doing, which was also a happy instance, was that I ran into this lady who was so interested in what I do for work. And she was on the board of a nonprofit organization in Boston called Project Citizenship. So Project Citizenship is similar to ILAP. I also work with ILAP, by the way, here in Maine. It's similar to ILAP where they have all these lawyers who work pro bono to help immigrants who have no money and also teach them how to go to the process of getting to citizenship or going through their documentation and stuff.

So what I did was I asked them to pick a symbol that speaks about what they do. And they picked a symbol called Unity in Diversity. So I use that symbol to create a pattern, and then I used the pattern to create water bottles, tumblers and goblets. So the idea is that I'm working with nonprofits, I'm working with you, I'm helping you to raise money, but I'm also trying to get people, organic communication, people to get to see what I do. So every unit that I sell through my network, through my website, I give them $5, I donate $5 to them. And that is a system that I'm trying to adopt. That is a marketing strategy that I'm trying to adopt because one, I'm actually seeing the results. But I'm also helping.

Matt Wagner:

Well, it's also, in many ways they're your influencers. They're your sales force because they bought into what you're doing. It's a sort of a win-win proposition. But they're out in the field communicating, "Hey, this is great stuff."

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yeah. So what I do is after I've created everything, I take pictures and I send them the pictures. They'll create a newsletter, send it out to their donors or followers, and then we run a three-month program where people can come to my website based off the people that... So they help with the promotion and stuff. Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

That's wonderful.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yeah.

Matt Wagner:

Let's talk a little bit about when we think about entrepreneurship, it's a big support system or it should be a big support system. And I wonder who do you turn to when you need advice, when you need support, and where you wish it could be, maybe where it's not?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Who do I turn to when I need support? Well, the first person I turn to is God and then followed by a few friends because once again, in telling the story, it feels like there are people who come into your life and those people are supposed to be like the angels, right? There's one particular lady, her name is Sharon Heckel. I can never get her last name correct. But Sharon used to own a jewelry shop called Illuminated Me. And then there is also Charlotte. Charlotte used to own Chart Metal Works. And then Coffee By Design, Mary Ellen, the owner of Coffee By Design. All these people are people that, they have been in business for a while. And once in a while I'll go to them when I have a hiccup to talk to them about what I'm doing.

I know Sharon was also very helpful in even helping to assemble pieces when I need help. And then Charlotte was somebody who was walking me through the whole how to create line sheets for wholesale accounts, how to create flyers, even how to set up my booth when I'm doing shows. So all these, they've all played different roles.

Matt Wagner:

It's so important.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

If we were to look back and you could see yourself when you first came to Maine, what advice would you give yourself based on your new knowledge?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

I think the first thing I'll probably do, I'll probably study English. I'll probably graduate in English. I spoke English before I came. But I most likely will study English and history. Those would be my two main go... How do you say it? I'll try to get a degree in English and history.

Matt Wagner:

And history.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Yes.

Matt Wagner:

Why so?

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Because everything we do boils down to communication. When I'm telling this story-

Matt Wagner:

You're a great storyteller.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

I'm trying to figure out how to make it make sense. So I can tell you the number of times that I'll be at a show and a customer... This is what I say. "Okay. My name is Ebenezer. I'm originally from Ghana or I'm a native of Ghana. I use symbols from my native country, Ghana to create patterns. And I apply the patterns in my work." But so many times, I've told the person that and then they will repeat what I said, but in a different way. And the way they say it makes me want to buy my own product.

Matt Wagner:

You just need to record it.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

No, but you understand what I mean. So that's why I'm saying. It's like you want to tell me a story. But because I wasn't born here, the story does not resonate. And that goes back to what I was telling you earlier. When you're bringing a different culture into a new space, it loses its meaning. So if I can understand how to translate that story in the way that you will understand it, I think that is a plus. And then the reason why I say history, in the Bible, there is a verse that says there's nothing new under the sun, which means that there's a lot that we don't know. So history is only going to help us to understand what is it that human beings need based off what somebody has already done. And by understanding that, perhaps it'll help us to be creative or to create things that people are going to need or things that will help humanity.

Matt Wagner:

That is so powerful. I'm going to end the show on that note. I want to thank you for sharing the importance of culture to small business and how in understanding culture of both places that we can bridge those two together and create a great, unique experience and a really just an amazing business. So thanks for joining the podcast, Ebenezer, really appreciate it.

Ebenezer Akakpo:

Thank you.

Matt Wagner:

So there you have it. I hope we enjoyed the conversation with Ebenezer Akakpo from Akakpo Design Group in Westbrook, Maine. Ebenezer's story makes us mindful of the wonderful contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs to our economy and the opportunities present in the United States for individuals to meet their dreams of starting and growing their very own businesses. I thought Ebenezer's pivot to launch the Maine Culture brand as a way to connect American consumers to his own culture was really innovative. I think we underestimate the importance of introducing new concepts to essentially find a hook, something relatable to our product. If you want to check out more of Ebenezer's story and his products, we'll attach his website in the show notes and please reach out and support him. And as we close out the show, I'm reminded of Ebenezer's wonderful smile and huge laugh. It's what brings these stories to life.

So as always, if you're a business owner, and likewise to my place professional colleagues, I hope this episode has provided plenty of new insights, solutions, and inspiration. And as consumers, please continue to support your local small businesses and tell their stories. They're so important to our local and national economies, and most importantly, they promote and provide quality of living to the places we all call home. 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 for listening. Please rate and review us. And as always, be sure to subscribe and tell your friends, family, neighbors, pets, colleagues so you can all catch the next episode. This time I'll be chatting with Ross Chinowski from Newmarket, a brilliantly smart and thoughtful crowdfunding finance platform driving deep consumer engagement with small businesses they are seeking to support. Don't miss it. We'll see you then, and thanks for all the support.