

Something Extra EP 113 - Andre Alexander

Lisa: Chromosomes, little strands of nucleic acids and proteins, are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people are born with 46 chromosomes, but each year in the United States, about 6,000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down Syndrome. If you've ever encountered someone with Down Syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest, most joyful people you will ever meet. They truly have something extra.

My name is Lisa Nichols, and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of Technology Partners and as a mother to Ally. Ally has something extra in every sense of the word. I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone she meets. Through these two important roles as CEO and mother to Ally, I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world.

While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore this something extra in leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities, and in themselves.

Lisa: I'm very excited to have Andre Alexander on the show today. Andre is an author, engineer, pastor, and the president of Tabernacle Community Development Corporation. Andre, oh my goodness, I'm so excited that we could make this work today. Kyle McClellan recently. I heard your name from Kyle, and then I had another friend reach out to me, a mutual acquaintance of ours, and said, "Lisa, you need to have Andre on the podcast." Then, you and I had a conversation. I'm like, "You're right. I need to have Andre on the podcast." I cannot wait for people to hear your story and all the amazing things that you are doing to invest in St. Louis. Thank you so much for making the time today.

Andre: Thank you for having me, Lisa. I'm excited about our conversation today.

Lisa: I am, too. We've got a lot to talk about. I'm going to dig in and let us know a little bit about your background, your story, how you grew up.

Andre: Sure. The classic St. Louis question, where did you go to high school? I went to Berkeley High School, grew up a few blocks away from what is now, boy in my day, I'm telling my age, it was McDonnell Douglas. I have two older siblings. I'm the baby of three. I'm 11 years almost younger than the middle child, my sister. I'm what you call a hybrid kid. I grew up in the county, North County primarily, and some time in North City.

When I was six, my mom passed away and my dad worked nights, so I lived with my grandparents. It gave me exposure to both worlds. My dad was big about education. As I grew up, I got the chance to see the difference that educational push, that push from a man-made because most of my friends were single-parent homes, a few have both but primarily single. I saw that.

I graduated in '95 from Berkeley top of my class, went to Mizzou and majored in electrical engineering, graduated from there in December 2000 with electrical engineering degree and a minor in math. Moved to Kansas City, started working for Hallmark Cards for a while. Then from there, to alignment tech systems. In the middle of all of that, got married. Mary, my wife, we met in college and did the dating thing off and on, and then made it official. Moved back to St. Louis in 2003. Son was on the way and we wanted to be around family. That's where life for me really got interesting because I have been going down this engineering world. I love numbers. I love project work, building systems, infrastructure programming. In St. Louis, when I moved back, it's when I really made the turn to the people business. As I shared with you before, my thought was I wasn't going in the people business. I went into engineering because I told my dad machines don't talk. They just do what I want them to do, when I programmed them. We will laugh about it. You look up, and here I am in the people business and working for a church. From there, the seminary, and from there, to plan the church. You see that 180, if you will, in life.

Lisa: You are definitely in the people business, but your background in business and all of that comes into play, doesn't it, with what you're doing today.

Andre: Absolutely. If I can real quick, I want to debunk the myth that non-profits can just run off of passion. Passion is part of it but it has to have infrastructure. It has to have business strategic planning. It has to have legal things in place to even be recognized officially by a state and federal government. Having the MBA with the emphasis on finance has really helped with all of that.

Lisa: Absolutely. I say it all the time. Even though it's a non-profit, it still needs to run like a business.

Andre: Absolutely.

Lisa: With processes and all that. Tell me the story, because I think you told me even that your pastor at your church had left and they had said, "Step in and be the interim." You're like, "No way. That is not for me."

Andre: No, it wasn't on the radar. He did. I had took a role as assistant pastor to help. Me and him had developed this great relationship over the past couple of years. I step in. Two weeks later, he resigns. Even leading up to the role, I said, "I'm not doing this. I have a great job," which I did at the time.

Lisa: Right.

Andre: I was getting a promotion. We were getting relocated to Florida, right outside of Tampa, near the beach. It was the sweetest relocation package that anybody could ever ask for. Cover your house, give you downpayment assistance for a new one, put you in corporate housing for a year at no cost. My bonus increased in the new role. Again, I go back to the beach. The beach was the thing for me.

As soon as they said Florida, I was like, "The beach, okay." I just knew after some time and talking over with my wife, and my wife was really the one who said, "I don't know that's what God would have us to do." I'm like, "Okay, really?"

Lisa: It's the perfect scenario.

Andre: It is the perfect scenario.

Lisa: People probably thought, "Are you crazy? Have you lost your marbles, Andre?"

Andre: In fact, Lisa, my boss there at my job that I was quitting said those exact words. Here's how you know it was a God thing. He said to me, "I'll give you two more weeks and I'll pay you while you start this other venture in the church because I believe you're going to want this opportunity. I think you're crazy right now. I'm going to save it for you." He did. He honored that. I came back to him two weeks later with the same message and he just shook his head at me and he walked away.

Lisa: Oh my goodness, but you did go back. You went to Covenant and got your masters in divinity. Let's fast forward a little bit to why did you decide to plant the Tabernacle where you decided to plant it?

Andre: For us, and when I say us, I mean our family, immediate family, me and my wife, as well as our Cortina Planet. Pretty much all of us, with the exception of one family had historical roots in North City and in this area. My wife grew up one block over from where our church sits today. She went to elementary school two blocks away. Our family home, the house that my dad lived in, him and my parents got married, is a quarter of a mile away of that, all in walking distance.

We had a personal connection. We knew history.

We knew at one point, this was the place where African American doctors and lawyers and business owners started out and where they built legacy for their family, not just wealth but generational legacy. We saw it sitting in demise and we didn't believe it was getting the right investment. God really spoke to us about, "Okay, you be the hope that you want to see. You make the investment. You guys come." When it came around to knowing it was time to plant a church, it was easy to say this is where it should have been because of all of those different reasons.

Lisa: If people don't know, this zip code is 63107. If you look at the poorest communities in St. Louis, 63107 comes up, 63106, which is just south of there, four blocks over, or something. These people on 63107, the median household income there is \$22,000. That is the household income, \$22,000. The median household income, I think, for 63106 is \$15,000. The craziest thing, though, Andre, in 1950s, this was a bustling community with 40,000 residents. Fast forward 70 years later, we're now at 5,500 residents, 2,500 homes. It's just crazy.

Central West End is a mile away and is bustling. I don't think people really realize how desperate these communities are but to your point, you said looking around and just realizing how everything had been forgotten almost. No reinvestment there. Houses are broken down. How does that make people feel about their neighborhood that really nobody cares?

Andre: I'll tell you this quick story. There's a building right across the street from my church that we're hoping to buy. The owner doesn't live here in St. Louis. You see that a lot in the northern corridor, particularly 63107, 63106 zip codes. You have absentee landowners, homeowners, and landlords, and this building has been vacant for some years now and some graffiti had got painted on the side of it. We made the investment after talking to the owner and the owner said they couldn't, gave reasons. We didn't believe they were sufficient because in our mind, bottom line, you own it, you should take care of it. We put together the funds, brought the materials, had some people we paid and a couple of volunteers, and painted this whole building and painting over the graffiti. You will not believe how many people walking by said, "Thank you. We do not want to see that as we go to where we're going."

It debunks that whole myth that people don't care or that they don't notice, they notice and they know it. When they don't see it addressed, each time they walk by something that continues to look the same year after year and it's dilapidated or broken, it sends the message, "Somebody really doesn't care." The whole project costs us \$400, Lisa." A simple thing of \$400 and painting over graffiti said to people, "Somebody actually pays attention and they do care."

Lisa: You planted the church. There's just so much, I love about what you're doing. As I think I told you, Kyle McClellan has been on the show and Kyle told me about you and I know that Brace for Impact is helping in this, but you started with a church and then you started saying, "How can we go in and renovate some of these homes and bring them up to standard?" How many of those homes have you done now?

Andre: We've done 10 homes and we've just kicked off working on the additional three homes this week.

Lisa: Correct me if I'm wrong on this Andre, but you guys are using local workers and local talent from the neighborhood, right? It's not like you're hiring a construction company out of Arizona.

Andre: No.

Lisa: It's not a handout, it's a hand-up for people. They're actually working, they've got the dignity of work. There's just so much about this whole model I love.

Andre: Well, you just nailed it on the head. We hire as much local gifts and talent, and skills as possible. In the city, proper and St. Louis city as a whole, we have this minority participation rate and goals and things like that. We typically run about 78, 79% minority participation.

We've got people who can walk to a job. Our whole hope was to create that dignity, that hope and the byproduct of that, which honestly, Lisa, I can say, I don't know that we really planned for it to be as large as it has been is that now we've created our own ecosystem of business because we oversee the projects, you take my engineering background and a couple of others, we serve as our own general contractor, we hire subcontractors who either have offices or they live in the neighborhood, they look for local labor, bring on as much local labor as possible.

Guess what happens as they earn a living, they spend their money where they can in our community, which we'll get to a little bit later. We'd like to see more business here to be able to spend and continue that dollar generation but it generates funds to then pour right back into this neighborhood and then people get to walk past things that they've personally been involved in which boosts their sense of pride and dignity.

Lisa: Let's talk about the funding and how you got the initial funding because what I saw was that the Fed has this investment connection that they launched in 2017 that you got involved in and you've been able to pitch to them twice now. How many people would love to help, but they don't really know how to do it? What the Fed is doing with this investment connection is bringing those parties together. Tell us about that process.

Andre: The Feds looked at projects, they looked at donors, and said, "How can we get everybody in the same room and leverage who we are to bring them together?" They created an investment connection. Organizations submit projects, they pick 8 to 10 max, you get a five-minute pitch. It's like the shark tank for nonprofits. In that room, you have banks, you have other foundations and the beauty of it is because the Feds pick who present, they've already vetted the vitality, if you will, of the core things that are needed for the project, including meeting certain CRA or [crosstlak] if your bank—

Lisa: The community investment act.

Andre: Yes, they've already vetted if you're a 501C3 and you're established and that you're in good standing with the IRS. All those boxes that investors or equity partners are looking to be checked, they've already done that work for you. You just get to show up, hear the pitches. Then after that, you do a speed round, like a dating speed round with the different organizations and you get to ask more questions if you're the investor or the bank or the foundation about it.

From there, they create a list, based off cards of people saying, "We're interested in this project, in this project." Then we get the contact information of the organizations and follow up on those leads. I can tell you, it has been a tremendous asset to accessing capital for us, not just funding capital, but knowledge, resources, people, connections, et cetera, that has really advanced our organization.

Lisa: Well, we've got so much more to talk about, but we do need to take a quick break, and then we'll be right back with Andre Alexander.

Speaker 3: Are you an IT executive with years of experience? Are you energized when you empower others? If I piqued your interest thus far, you may be a great mentor for the Tech ALEKS program in St. Louis. Tech ALEKS prepares rising IT leaders to tackle today's challenges and prepare for tomorrow's demanding roles by pairing them with senior IT executives like yourself. Mentors receive coaching from Technology Partners and will be invited to all Tech ALEKS networking events, featuring outstanding speakers of the IT industry. To apply, visit tpi.co/tlx.

Lisa: Andre, there's just so much, I love about all of this that you're doing, but there is something else that you guys are doing that I am super excited about and you're building what you're calling the hub. You're about 45% complete with that, but you've got exciting things with Mercy. I want you to tell that whole story and then we'll talk about what's still needed.

Andre: Absolutely. The whole idea of a hub is to bring resources to people instead of people having to go-to resources. One of the things, as you mentioned that are challenges in our zip code is transportation. If I need help with resume building, job development, healthcare access, after school programming, I've got to go to multiple places for those things. We started dreaming and said, "What would it look like if you have one place for people to come to in their neighborhood and you take these beautiful historic neighborhoods, JeffVanderLou Ville, Greater Ville, and they could walk to these things? How would that change how they view themselves and also how would it help with creating sustainability and increasing that average-medium income in the household by bringing resources to where people live?" The hub gets me excited, and then when you bring in Mercy, here's something else many don't know, 63107 has the second-highest infant mortality rate. That's a problem. Upon knowing that we couldn't just continue to sit back and not address it and we knew access to healthcare was an issue and having multiple channels to get to health care for various things. We got introduced to Mercy through Kyle and through Dr. Lemper, who's part of Mission 318 and we started talking and he said to us what he thought would be helpful. He was thinking health center in terms of workouts, and I said, "Dr. Lamper, we need health care before we can get a health center."

I explained to him what we have experienced and it just took off from there. You look up a year and a half later, and now we have this official partnership where you have an urgent slash clinic going in the hub that will address the need for prenatal and postnatal care. You're talking about an investment of a little bit over \$200,000 for build-out and all the equipment necessary to do this. There's no corners being cut. This is top-notch healthcare by one of the top health providers in the region coming to North City, that's going to be on walking distance.

Lisa: So amazing. Well, that is one aspect of the hub.

Andre: Yes.

Lisa: Then I get so excited because you're building out classrooms for afterschool programs for the kids, possibly a skills training skilling up for adults. This is going to be amazing.

Andre: Yes, it is. I'm geeked about being connected with a partner who runs a tech company that said, "What would it look like if we began training students in middle school to-- Not only just coding, but software development, the skills to work in teams and build projects through computer controls, automation, et cetera, that address real-world problems as well as get them ready for the geospatial space since the hub will set 1.3 miles from the NGA?" What would it look like to start in middle school so that by the time high school comes and they graduate, if they don't feel led to college, they will have a recognized skill to get a high-paying job and, or they can take that and further their education at a four-year university that will put them so much further ahead of their peers, that when they come out, you're talking about another boost in access to opportunities, not just jobs, but projects, skills, sharpening, and all of that is going to be in enough

Andre: Well, this is going to be in a software development center space. I had to learn that because I keep wanting to say computer lab, but this is no computer lab. This is top-notch stuff where they will be learning things that as a young adult they will be able to access opportunities that their peers may not have access to.

Lisa: I'm so excited about that. I just absolutely love it and just see so many possibilities there. As you said, it's a couple hundred thousand dollar project. You're 45% complete and you need about \$110,000 more to complete, right?

Andre: That is correct. That takes us across the finish line that will make not just the classrooms built physically but that's outfitting them with the technology. What we don't want Lisa is to say, "Well, we've built this classroom, but you get the leftover stuff." No, we want to put in nice quality projectors and other things, smart boards, et cetera. As youth, adults, people from this neighborhood are going through seminars. Another partnership we have is with Catholic charities.

They're bringing in pathways to progress with brain's legal counsel, as well as counseling, mental health, behavioral health counseling, also financial management, tooling, literacy, et cetera. We want this to be state-of-the-art stuff that goes into a state-of-the-art facility.

Lisa: Well, and to your point earlier, when the residents of the community, see the investment that's being made, Andre, that's going to speak volumes to them. It's like, "Wow, somebody really cares and wants us to be successful and wants to give us the tools."

Andre: Absolutely.

Lisa: I call it equal access. Andre today you have spent about \$3 million in 63107, and then hopefully we'll get 63107 going, and then we're going to go to 63106 [laughs].

Andre: Absolutely.

Lisa: Why have you done this?

Andre: I love that question. I've been asked it before and I've had people looking at me intently because they can't believe it. It goes deeper than it just being roots where my family began, my wife's family. It's because I believe personally, as well as our church and nonprofit, that the people who live here are worth much more than what we've invested already. It's the disinvestment that created the vacuum that leads to the desperation in some of the things we see today. The why for me itself was because I'm looking at image-bearers of God, people who are shaped in his likeness, who breathe the same air that I breathe, who by no fault of their own don't have the same opportunities right where they live. I believe they're worth it. I believe they're valuable.

Our team, our church, our staff, everybody believes that they are worth it. That's why we've made that investment. I would say this up until this point, that's all been by private donation or banking relationships.

We built and then took out whatever we needed to in terms of loan or line of credit to do this. This has not been government-backed. We didn't sit and wait on somebody to come along and say, "Yes, we'll give you this grant from any of these government organizations. By the way, we're not knocking them. I say that to say, to highlight that why. We dug deep and said, "What can we do to generate momentum and bring back hope?" Now it's catching on with others.

Lisa: Yes, you put your money where your mouth is and didn't sit back and wait.

Andre: Yes, we did.

Lisa: There's a great leadership lesson right there. This is called Something Extra. What do you believe is something extra that every leader needs?

Andre: Grit, especially in this day and age. You need the ability to not allow obstacles to present this overwhelming sense of this can't happen. The question has to change. It can't be why it can't happen. The question has to be how can this happen? I would say grit.

Lisa: Oh, that's a good one. I love that. Well, I want to give you the opportunity. I always give our guests an opportunity at the end to talk about whatever it is that they want to talk about and how our listeners can get involved.

Andre: Well, I have to tell this one story. We had a first family that moved in one of our houses that we renovated and into our housing initiative program. When he came in, he was facing some challenges. He had been moved place to place with his family had been homeless about a year and a half. His grades had slipped in high school. It was just a feat to get him comfortable being in one place. That was three years ago. You fast forward to now he spent his first full year last year at Mizzou on Dean's list 3.9. He's a RA, he's in leadership roles in addition to that, all because someone came along made an investment in a physical structure to give a house, not a home, but a house where love and stability, good shape resourced him and looking at him doing amazing things. That's just one story.

We have another story of a young lady who had been through an abusive situation in her marriage, got divorced, became homeless, her and her children. We were able to come alongside, help her get housed, help her get a job and now she's thinking about going back to school. She had already done two years of college education. He's trying to figure out how can I go back to school now that my house is stable and my children are safe and they're in school and they're excelling and doing well. I say all that to say, this hub is really the next step because the beauty of it is one of the other reasons why we call it the hub as it sits in the middle of all our housing initiatives. It's like a wheel, the hub of a wheel and all those houses lead to it.

As you mentioned, the \$110,000 will help us finish the hub to make sure that it's outfitted properly for the people we intend to serve and need the things that the hub will have. Here's what I would say to anybody who's on the fence, or still wondering. I would tell you this, if you need more behind the why we've got people that you can talk to who have invested and who would tell you this is why we stuck around. Here's the relationships we have, which leads to the other thing.

If that's not your thing to make that kind of contribution, the other thing that we're always seeking is advocacy. Take what you've learned here today and go, you know what? This is what's going on in these zip codes and here's the type of investments they need. You know some people in the banking world, how they use their CRA access and leverage to make sure that this investor communities are being invested in. We always need people using their voice to share more light to prepare more momentum and action. We're not talking about advocacy just to talk about it, we're talking about it so that we can do things to change what's going on.

Lisa: Well, I hope that you just have so many people Andre reaching out to you saying, "I'm in [laughs]. I'm in, or I know somebody that's going to be in." Thank you again so much for making the time to be on the show today. I've just absolutely loved your conversation.

Andre: Me too. If you're wondering about more. Let me say this quickly, our website is T-A-B-D-E-V.org. That's Tabdev T-A-B-D-E-V.org.

Lisa: Very good. Thank you, Andre.

Andre: Thank you so much.

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