



Something Extra- EP: 73 Jason Hall

Lisa Nichols: I am thrilled to have Jason Hall on the show today. Jason is the co-founder and CEO of Arch to Park.

Jason, I am so excited to have you here today. You have just become my good friend for the last couple years here.

Jason Hall: Well, thank you. It's great to be here this morning with you. And look forward to this conversation. I always get such positive energy from you. So I am just excited and we both love Saint Louis and entrepreneurship so much.

Nichols: So we have a lot to talk about. So you and I originally met because we're both on the Missouri Technology Corporation board and I want to talk a lot about that, but before we go into that, growing up, what was growing up like for you?

Hall: I was born and raised in the St. Louis metro. I was from the Illinois side of the metro in Granite City, Illinois. And Lovett is still my hometown. But St. Louis, as the metro, is my home. You know, I was lucky, as one of the very first of my family to graduate from high school and go on to earn a college degree. I went out East for a while to school, worked in New York for a bit, and law school - then ultimately had this big decision. You know, do you go back home or do you go to one of these bigger cities at the time on the coast? And I just really did a lot of deep thinking. And for me, it was so many people sacrificed for me to have those opportunities that they didn't have. And that's, you know, my parents, my family and teachers and the church I grew up in - all of that. And I just said, you know what? I want to go back and be a part of that. And I want to give back. I want to work. I need a career, but I want to give back to the place that is home. And I just have a deep sense of connection to this place that created who I am and my foundation and so, I came back



and joined the Bryan CAVE law firm downtown out of law school. And just what a terrific place to start a career.

Nichols: How long were you at Bryan CAVE?

Hall: So I was there a little over six years. And loved being there and still feel a very strong connection. You know, it's a longtime employer in St. Louis. Started here. Saint Louis made. very deep connections to the ole McDonald Douglas, which I know is near and dear to your heart. Two organizations that sort of grew together. And I loved it. But six years in, I had done some volunteer activity with then Attorney General, Jay Nixon. And he approached me after he became governor and said, I'm trying to get some young people involved in my administration. Would you come to Jeff City and be a part of it? And I thought, wow, I know that's a big decision, you know? And after talking internally to mentors in the firm, you know, mentors are so critical to help make these decisions. I agreed to go down for 12 months.

Nichols: You kind of time boxed it?

Hall: Yes. And I thought, well, it was the recession. You know, business was gonna be a little slower.

Nichols: What year was this, Jason?

Hall: 2009. So the big recession was going on. And, you know, it was clear our community needed help. We needed to fight for jobs. Jobs are critical to families. So, you know, I went for 12 months and here we are over 10 years later. And I haven't been back to the practice of law yet. But I love working in economic development and trying to bring more jobs and opportunities to our hometown to ensure that it has a viable, bright future. You know, great cities and regions. They're not automatic or accidental. You have to fight for them and people have to come together to be a

part of shaping the place and be proud of the place. Everybody's got challenges. Everybody's got opportunities. We've got to work on them and seize them. That's what I



and being a part of the community, being humble that you don't know all the answers, but if you surround yourself with a diverse group of people in viewpoints, we can work through things. It requires a state of mind and a state of action.

Nichols: As I always tell people, hand-wringing is not a strategy either. So you got to do. But you've got to do together, as a community. Greg always says hope is not a strategy - you can't just hope things will get better. You know, you have to take some actions.

Hall: It means being comfortable being vulnerable. You know, you may not know all the answers. You may fail on attempt one. You're learn something and you get it right the next time. And so it's sort of like being an entrepreneur. You know, you've got a you got to have a little bit of appetite for risk. It gets a little more comfortable when you're not going at it completely alone. You'll make some mistakes. The question is, do you pick myself up? What you learn and how do you keep going forward? Because that's the only direction you can go.

Nichols: That's awesome advice. So let's go back to Jay Nixon. When he asked you to come to Jeff City. Did he ask you to come? Were you the director of economic development or the?

Hall: So it was interesting, you know, back in 2009, again. People forget that didn't live through it. Big global recession, hemorrhaging jobs. There was so much uncertainty. So economic development was everything. He had said, you know, we need to get really strategic about entrepreneurship, new technology, jobs, and make sure that's an important part of where our state is heading forward. He goes, we have this thing called the Missouri Technology Corporation. It's not really done much before. Let's figure it out and let's turn it into something special. And I had done a lot of technology work in my legal practice, and he said, let's figure it out. So we went down there and that was my first job. We figured out a get started strategy to make sure entrepreneurs were at the table and valued and supported in our state. And it was a bipartisan issue, really. And then from there, he actually appointed me to lead the Department of Economic Development, which



is the umbrella organization over that. So I was with him for the entire first term. It was so much fun. You know, we fought for families. You know, when I look up the road here in Wentzville, I can remember flying up to Detroit with the governor, you know, fighting for those auto manufacturing jobs. Those were families like I grew up with. You had to be smart, but you had to play like you wanted to win. You know, every time I drive through that area, you talk to somebody that works at a supplier to the Wentzville plant for General Motors. Part of the satisfaction you get from this job is knowing you helped make that happen. And those are the great rewards.

Nichols: But it's the supply chain underneath to there is a ripple effect, is there not, Jason? Because their suppliers that get affected when the auto manufacturers in that are doing well.

Hall: And really, Governor Nixon deserved a lot of credit for thinking through that strategy. He goes, you got to get the manufacturing plant, which we did, and brought the Chevy Colorado here, which has just been a tremendous vehicle for General Motors. They keep adding investment and lines out there. So that's been good. But then we said, what else can you get? And we went to fight for all those suppliers and made a real strategic effort, went to the Detroit Auto Show, started meeting with decision makers, that were putting those plants for the supplier. So, you know, you've got to be smart, strategic and just keep bringing more jobs and opportunities to this region. That's what makes for a great place to live.

Nichols: Absolutely. So let's talk about MTC, because, you know, some people may not really understand what the Missouri Technology Corporation, what's the mission? And then let's talk about the impact. What is it been, eleven years now?

Hall: Yeah. Two thousand nine.

Nichols: Right, so eleven years now. So it had tremendous impact. I would love for our listeners to understand a little bit more about MTC.

Hall: Well I always like to tell people young and a simple kid from Granite City, when you get into economic development, it's really about creating jobs. And there's really



three ways at the end of the day that you can do that. You can expand businesses that are already here, just like Technology Partners share a tremendous success story and making sure we have a good business climate, a good education and things that allow you to find the employees and talent you need and expand. The second way you can do it is go recruit new businesses here. We got to do that. You know, KPMG located their whole I.T. center here. You know, that was one over the last couple of years. KWS, which was a company from Germany. They decided to add the ag tech space, expand to the United States and they looked at San Francisco, Saint Louis, and the Raleigh-Durham area in North Carolina. That's an example. And we fought and we won. And KWS is here in St. Louis as a growing global corporation. But the third way that we often forget, because those stories start out simple, they don't often get the headlines and that is: create new businesses. Yeah, it's entrepreneurship. And I think there was a period of time in economic development policy where the big stuff, you know, big ribbon cuttings. Five hundred jobs at once kind of attracted all the attention. And what I believed was you had to fight for entrepreneurs, because I think homegrown businesses, there's something special about them. They tend to define who you are. It's the people that pay for little league. They often support the community in ways that are just so generous and they are our defining brands. And when you think back over St. Louis' life, Anheuser-Busch, Emmerson, Monsanto Press, Express Scripts, Centene, you know, they all started with an idea and we forget they started out so small. So so MTC was, at the end of the day, getting back to how do we support entrepreneurs? And then specifically technology entrepreneurs, because they face a unique challenge, because you need a type of capital, venture capital and a type of mentorship that's hard to find in the Midwest. I mean, the Midwest has had to fight for our share when you've had the rise of big Silicon Valley and these big tech markets. So we said let's work together to solve that. So we're creating the next generation.

So we worked with the legislature and the governor to create two programs. One was to help invest in some of those startups in partnership with the private sector. And if the company did well, the

taxpayers got not only the jobs, but they also got a return on that investment, which was very different, not a subsidy, but actually risk share. It had broad bipartisan appeal to do that. And then the second was to start working with local communities around the state



to build up the infrastructure of places and mentor networks that allow entrepreneurs to be even more successful and don't impose anything from the state but work in partnership and help bring resources. As we look back over the last 10 years, you know, it's so interesting. They're like children to you. I think of companies like Benson Hill Biosystems, led by CEO Mack Chris. This is one of the fastest growing ag tech companies on the planet. They've been named a top 100 artificial intelligence company in the world. They are backed by Google. That is Google's first major venture capital investment off the coasts right here in the Midwest in St. Louis. They're not trying to move the company. They're building a new headquarters here and scaling up to 300 employees. MTC invested in that company early on with the bio generator, which supports local biotech and took some of those early risks. And it was just Matt and a couple of people moving here from North Carolina because we had opportunity and now we're reaping those long term benefits.

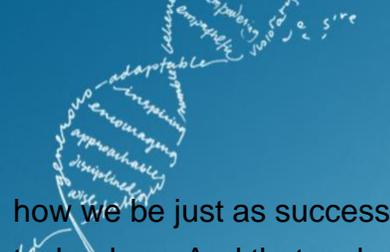
Nichols: Well, I want to dive more into this. We've got so much to talk about. And so we need to take a quick break and we'll be back with Jason Hall.

[Commercial break]

Nichols: So, Jason, talking about Benson Hill. Matt could have moved that company anywhere. And I know that you were involved in the recruitment of that to Saint Louis. You know, what ultimately was it that said, "Yeah, we're gonna put roots down here" and then we've got a lot of other stories about companies moving their headquarters here.

Hall: Communities as we were talking about. In some ways, they're just like businesses. You do have to find those areas of specialization where you can be better than everyone, global excellence. So Benson Hill is really part of a larger constellation of success stories that goes back

20 years. There were community leaders that still inspire me to this day. John McDonnell, Bill Danforth, for that 20 years ago looked around and said, you know, Saint Louis could be globally excellent in biotech and in particular agricultural technologies, which they saw as a big growth area. They brought the community



how we be just as successful as the generation before us in ag tech, in geospatial technology. And that makes sure Saint Louis is creating high paying jobs for our community for the future. Secondly, it makes sure that we stay at the forefront of technological innovation.

Nichols: Our people are being trained properly. That's part of it as well.

Hall: Yeah. When you get into the strategy, the community, you'll be rolling that out on March 24th. Actually, St. Louis University is part of a big global leadership event that we started last year. The community is excited to lay out their strategies. And I'll tell you one exciting part of this, and this has been new for economic development. We are really trying to make sure that we leave no member of this community behind. So we've embraced principles of racial equity from the start to make sure that every resident can participate in the gains and have access to the opportunities that we're talking about. Because if we don't do that as a community, particularly African-Americans in this community in North St. Louis, I think we fail. So I'm really excited about how the community has just brought that lens to this work. And I think no one knows all the answers, but it starts with intention. And it starts with recognizing you don't know all the answers. You've got to listen.

Nichols: Getting the right people together. And that's right. Like you said, we've proven that when we do that, we win. So I believe that the same will be true here.

Hall: And you can't win as a community if you leave members of the community behind you. So let's do this the right way.

Nichols: Right. How can we change the narrative? And I have said we've got to be talking. That's why I'm so excited about talking about these things that we can educate people so we can change the narrative. It's one person at a time. Do you know what's going on in North Saint Louis? I mean, this is so exciting for getting the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency. The headquarters.



Hall: It's been a long time since the community invested in a narrative. And, you know, we you do have to create a set of tools for the commute because everybody's got day jobs. You don't have time to look at all what's happening. Just like everything. You know, we need help curating it. You know, I've been a part of a movement of a broad coalition of business and civic leaders that came together to say, you know what, this is a really special moment in time in Saint Louis. Our city, which certainly had a lot of challenges, historically, nine billion dollars of investment is happening. That is generationally significant. You've got these great centers of entrepreneurship at places like Cortex and Cortex and other example. When I moved back from college, it was 200 king industrial acres. It's now home to six thousand jobs and companies like Microsoft and Aon and others that have come in. You know, we're going through a period of transformation and we said we need to do a better job of telling our story because you can't grow and be the best kept secret you've got. Because you compete for talent, you do come for investment.

So we actually did a bunch of research. What do people care about and what are their emotional connections to St. Louis and where that all came out was. We're using the hashtag STL made. We should all tell our own stories, but just add that one extra element to say I'm the best Technology Partners, but I'm part of a community and I've got that pride. And so I still made Creasey our

priority to do that. But it's really the centering principles here as St. Louis is a place where you can startup stand out and stay. And those became things we're so proud of when you go ask this community entrepreneurship, our entrepreneurial history, our ability and our growth in startups. You know, last year we were number one in the United States for women founded startups. I know I'm leading the country and Saint Louisians, it turns out, are proud about that, whether you live in the city, the suburbs or any other dimension. We were all proud of our startup community. So that's critical.

Nichols: I think that's a something extra. I mean, to be number one in the country? It's Incredible.

Hall: We are leading in this area of diversity of women founded startups. And I think it's so extraordinary at times it's hard to believe, you know, did we really pull that off? We

