

Building Buchanan

Episode 04: Things We Wish Were Different (Brian's Missed Pony Ride)

[Energetic beat]

Mike (announcer): What's happening, everybody? Thanks for tuning in. This is the *Building Buchanan* Podcast, a platform for sharing the stories of visionaries that are helping move social change forward, here and across the nation. On this podcast, we'll explore the possibilities as we get the scoop from pioneers in inclusion, community building, and making the world a better place...

And, now, here's your host, Colette Canchola Cox.

Colette: Hi, everyone. It's your host, Colette Cox and you're joining me on the Building Podcast. Today we have a special guest. It's a St. Joseph native, Brian Myers. He was once kicked out of Savannah High School in 1996. He went on to have a career in optical retail management and later, financial management, while raising a son, Torrin. Brian was also enrolled at Missouri Western University at this time and he later graduated with a B.S. in Marketing Management from WGU. Tired of the daily grind, Brian and his wife Amy began opening and operating small businesses in St. Joseph Missouri in 2012. They currently own a vintage clothing store named The Lucky Tiger, a combination bookstore/bar called The Tigers Den, and the newly opened event venue, Metropolitan. Brian has been involved with the St. Joseph community on multiple levels. He and Amy co-founded First Saturday's downtown, also now known as Downtown First, and have been co-recipients of the Mayor's Award for Arts. Brian has served on numerous boards and commissions including the Missouri Western State University Arts Foundation, the St. Joseph Public Library Foundation Trust Board, has served as a past President of Downtown First and the Downtown Economic Stimulus Board. Currently, Brian is serving his first term as City Councilman at-large for the City of St. Joseph. Everyone please welcome Brian and we're going to get into it. So, in your bio, Brian, you talked about your Savannah school teachers that, would you say they kicked you out of school or expelled you or said

Brian: Oh yeah, it was administration. Yeah, I got kicked out of high school about halfway through my senior year. So, whoever, if you ever hear an adult say those are the best years of your life, they're either lying or they peaked at 17, so..... but I had all my credits; it wasn't that I was a poor student - at least academically I wasn't a poor student. I took summer courses in Missouri Western between my junior and senior year and truth be told I had one class that I needed my senior year to get my basic diploma and that was an English class and I had offered, hey I'll just take a college-level English class at Missouri Western and just let me get out of here before my senior year starts, and I'll have all my credits and they refused and, well, let's just say the first six months of my senior year were pretty interesting; interesting enough for them that they asked me not to come back, so - but they had to give me my diploma. I had earned all my credits so it was a good way to I guess kind of cheat the system and kind of move on with the adult life that I wanted.

Colette: Yeah, so you more so were just a pain until they let you go.

Brian: Yeah, I could I could tell stories not suitable for your podcast of things that I did when I was 16, 17 at that high school.

Colette: That's funny; I was also not the most, believe it or not, I was also not the most responsible teenager. I don't know how my parents made it through. I mean, I wasn't probably the worst but I definitely wasn't making all the best choices and I joke about it in some of my presentations now and it usually does not go over that great; it usually makes



with COLETTE CANCHOLA COX



people uncomfortable but I say quite regularly and I should probably stop now, that I'm kind of thinking about this, that if my parents were able to they would have become my guardians because I made such terrible choices with money, with my decision-making, and I did that until I was about 23.

Brian: Well you learned, right?

Colette: Yeah, so I kind of talk about that dignity of risk sometimes because for people with disabilities, usually you turn 18, you immediately get a guardian; that paperwork's already started before your 18th birthday and I think if my mom would have known about that she would have tried to get it on me. I don't have a disability but I couldn't make choices! (laughter)

Brian: We're all somewhere on one spectrum or another, I think, and some of us have better decision-making skills than others, and I think I just made a series of choices between 17 and 18 that disappointed my parents in multiple ways, and not to get too far into the weeds on it, but I had decided I wanted to enter the military with the delayed entry program, and then you know, changed my mind before - it was actually before I got kicked out of school, so there was no boot camp or anything like that it was just that commitment that I was going to make and ended up not making, and within a month of me getting kicked out of school, telling my dad I didn't want to do the military, and then announcing that I was going to be a supervisor for a pony ride at a carnival for the next six months. I saw a combination of emotions in my father's face that I had not seen before and have not seen since then. And the only way I can describe it is a perfect cocktail of rage and severe disappointment and anyway, I ended up not doing the pony ride at the carnival. I ended up going to Missouri Western and boy, I think I dropped out at Missouri Western three times before I went back and finally got my bachelor's degree so, my, uh, successes that I've had as an adult definitely weren't linear and they weren't immediate. Like right after you get out of high school it's weird; I mean the dialogue that is ongoing when you're growing up is you know you're gonna graduate from high school, you're gonna get a four-year degree, you're gonna get a good job, get married, have kids, and I did all of those things; I just did them like way out of order. And I think that the dialogue that we, you know, force high school kids to have, it's not the norm, but you kind of feel like a failure when you think it is, especially when you're when you're in your early 20's, so yeah, but things worked out you know. Thankfully I met some good people and made some good contacts along the way and had a little bit of luck and I'd say hard work in certain areas, and it's made me put a lot of that bad stuff from high school in my rearview mirror, but I still look back and laugh.

Colette: Yeah, I am not surprised to hear that you were wanting to work at a carnival. I was a little surprised to learn that you thought you were, like, that you were going into the military. I'm not - I didn't know you as a teenager - I've only known you as an adult, so it was a little unexpected.

Brian: It was, yeah, a mechanism I was going to use to pay for college and it was just gonna be you know part-time, Guard and my hat goes off to any person that wants to join the service. I just decided it wasn't the route that I wanted to go and thankfully I made up my mind to not do it before I got on the bus to boot camp, otherwise I would have been stuck doing it; so yeah, it's been an interesting, been an interesting life before and since.

Colette: Yeah, I think the part that I found it interesting, is I see you as being the person who does not follow rules, not very compliant. I'm not sure that would have been a good fit for you. I think you made the right decision; I think they might have done like your high school and asked you to maybe leave.

Brian: Yeah well I left high school when they asked me you know, politely to leave. I felt the institution no longer had anything to offer me and they agreed - here's your diploma son, and you know, make your mark on the world and yeah, yeah, I guess in certain ways I did but that's not to say that there weren't individual teachers that I had in high school that I did not respect; I mean, God knows there were two of them that I just absolutely admired all the way through high school and have become friends with as an adult

Colette: Yeah, I hear that often. There's always - not always - but a lot of people have a teacher who really maybe invested in them and took the extra time to you know, work on those personal strengths and assets that someone has and kind of gets through some of the tougher stuff you know we're not all always the easiest to love or to teach or to be around all the time, you know; it's just we all have some people that are willing to deal with our stuff. I mean I guess there's an

occasional few people, usually not in my circle, but I guess there's always a few occasional people that they're just hard not to love and they're always just great and easygoing, but the majority of the people that I'm friends with can butt heads and are very opinionated.

Brian: I'm not instantly likable I'm more of an acquired taste; you get, you know...maybe you don't like it, but you get used to it over time. So especially when you're younger and you know your brain is still developing and you're getting used to, you know, all the weird things the hormones do to your body and your sense of self, it's refreshing that, you know, even if you have parents that are extremely supportive, it's a real asset to have someone outside of your family show you the kind of attention and love and support that educators will so often do. And I'm not a teacher, I wouldn't have the patience to be, but I think it's extremely easy for people in that role to tend to ignore some of the problem kids because there are so many others that are just easier to take under their wing and pay attention to but, you know, you have somebody like me that I mean I was an honor student I made all A's a handful of B's all the way through school, I was National Honor Society, debate team, Quiz Bowl team, but I was a real pain in the ass. And I had perfect attendance for several years so they had to put up with me every day. But I think I definitely would have turned out worse for wear had I not have had Mike Pittman or Bill Luce (sp??) he was a history teacher I had for a couple of years that yeah, they really set me straight on a lot of things and I didn't always like everything that they told me about myself at the time, but you know, looking back they definitely formed me into the person I like and you know, for better for worse, I like who I've become at this point and I owe that a lot to them.

Colette: So while you've been talking I've been kind of thinking you know your kind of talk you've kind of mentioned like, some of your helpers along the way. I don't know why, when I do this podcast, I always refer back to like, Mr. Rogers, and I don't know why. So I have to ask - do you consider yourself a helper?

Brian: I mean in certain respects I think there are times that I, you know, you do help people and do enjoy doing it. You know an example I mean, I've had a business downtown on the retail side for eight years, and anytime I hear someone is wanting to open a business or is considering opening a business really anywhere, especially in their downtown, I'm you know, I'll break my back help somebody every bit of the way to get them open and continue to help them, support them after they're open. I mean there's a lot of resources out there a lot of people don't know about when they get to opening their own business and there's a lot of lot of legal steps that people have to take that I've been through multiple times with multiple businesses so there are things that I wish people would have walked me through when I opened a business so when I hear of other people wanting to do that, I want to be that resource, and I guess to you know, really simplify it in PBS terms, sure; I mean I could consider myself a helper in in that regard.

Colette: I do definitely think you're a helper in that regard. So, I'm gonna ask you kind of a loaded question

Brian: That's the best kind.

Colette: So, this podcast; yeah, and it's being recorded if it's too bad we'll have them edit it out. I don't trust ya.

Brian: Hey you know they don't get to edit my mouth at a City Council meeting, so it's only fair that you wouldn't edit things out of my interview, so.....

Colette: Okay well we won't edit this one then; we'll let it go. So, we named this *Building Buchanan*, the podcast, and I've been finding people who I know of that I think have, I don't want to say it like it's a negative thing, but like an ordinary person, just a person who lives here who saw a problem or felt like something could be better, rolled their sleeves up and started making it happen. I remember you used to do Big Brothers and Big Sisters; so, you've always kind of been community minded and giving back when you can. I remember that you and Amy started First Saturdays

Brian: Yes; that's become Downtown First, but yeah, my wife and I started that 7-1/2 years ago.

Colette: So, I know that you've always tried to kind of not only, just like do what you felt was right, but build a community when you do it. I remember when you and Amy were starting First Saturday's, it was about downtown, it was about the city as a whole, it was about bringing tourism giving people something to do because we don't have a whole lot. I mean it's

gotten a lot better since 7-1/2 years ago, but kind of giving people that space to connect with each other. And what are some things that you would like to see happen in the future and be here doing?

Brian: The one thing that I'm very passionate about, honestly my hands are tied on a lot of it because of, well, for several reasons which I can get into. They, this city is never going to get any better than what it is and you can take that however you want. If you're fine with the way St. Joseph is then this conversation is not for you; but we are never going to move the needle forward unless we do something about the severe mental health issues we have in St. Joseph and the drug problem that we have in St. Joseph, too and there are different schools of thought out there that those two things might be one in the same exclusive but for the sake of this conversation we have two problems. We've got a mental health care system that is broken and we have the drug issues that I would say you know, statistically, are above the state average. You'll have people say, well crime is our problem poverty is our problems; like you know, crime, bad crime rates and high poverty rates which in Buchanan County as an aside, the poverty rate for individuals under the age of 18 is almost 30%. That's a big problem that is way more than the state average it's more than the national average. Back to my point crime and high poverty rates are symptoms of the bigger problem and in this community those problems are drug addiction and it's untreated mental illness. I don't know what the solutions are; I'm not gonna blow smoke up anyone's ass saying that I know how to solve these problems because I don't. What I do know is not enough people are talking about these two things and until we get the right people having these discussions then we're not going to have the mechanism in place to take care of these problems and we didn't get to where we are overnight. If you want to go back, the history of why I think we've got mental health problem in this community, and we can do that on another podcast, but the point is we've got these problems now, there's not going to be a quick fix. We need to have a long-term strategy with short term goals just like you do with any other large problem; you bite it off one chunk at a time. Short term and got talking about this in the middle of a pandemic when our sales tax rates are down probably makes it seem even more pie in the sky, but we need we need a detox center in this community we do not have one at our jail anymore our emergency room at Mosaic is our detox center and that costs the hospital money which it's a community hospital so it costs all of us more money. We're giving ambulance rides to people that have drug addiction issues and mental health issues at \$5,500 a pop those ambulance rides aren't free either. I mean they do take their toll on the community and until we get serious about having a detox center and about how to do proper inpatient mental health care, not just in this community but in this country, we're not going to move the needle much on any of those issues that I discussed. And a lot of people get really uncomfortable when I talk about this publicly because no one wants to do anything about it and when you put an elected official whether it's you know on television or on the radio or on a podcast and they're talking about something negative that they don't have the solution to, it makes people really uncomfortable. Well, that's fine. We need to make everybody really freaking uncomfortable, because until people start looking at this and taking it seriously and we get the right heads around the table, this community is not going to get any better than what it is right now.

Colette: I agree that we have some serious lack of service issues in our county or in our city. We always call it my County but most people call it the city. We have major gaps in services for developmental disabilities, for mental health, for drug addiction. I remember I was talking with an agency here in town, which I will be nice, I won't say their name, but they provide mental health services and that's what they were saying; that there's a special like key guide or something; I don't remember what they called it; like a Herks tool (????) or something. Somehow even though they've got these massive waitlists and they can't get people in and they can't provide care and there's no really, they felt like, solutions right now available to them that'll work but when they try to get more funding they say no you have, you have way adequate mental health in the area. And they're like, are you serious? We have wait lists that are like nine months long; people can't get in here. In what world is that adequate care?

Brian: You're right it's not adequate care and the reality is if someone needs mental health care and they have to wait a month, let alone nine, as a species many of us tend to self-medicate which is why if someone has a mental health issue they are so many times more likely to develop drug or alcohol dependency. It sucks; it's a horrible place to be in and I don't think that - there are some agencies in this community that provide long-term strategies for people that they're servicing, but by and large most of what we do are putting band-aids on problems, where we're coming up with extremely short-term solutions for something we need to be getting a better grasp on. I'm a big proponent that we have an Open Door Food Kitchen because we need to be able to feed people that are going to go hungry I'm a big proponent of Second Harvest being able to do the same thing you know setting up a place for people that are low-income or homeless be able to get food on-site, but those aren't solving any long-term problems; they're band-aids. We need to as a community figure out

why these people are poor, why these people are addicted to something-the ones that have addiction issues, why they have mental health problems that are going unchecked because if you don't get to the root of those things then you're not going to be able to solve the poverty problem. Overall poverty is a symptom it's not a cause.

Colette: I agree with you um I know that's one thing that we that I think that's why our program is catching the attention it is for DD, which is because we are looking at taking all that data and spreading it across everywhere and strategic planning and looking for themes. Why are these people in crisis? Let's not just get them out of the crisis; I mean we are getting them out of crisis but we're also digging down deep room how did they end up here? What do they need to not be here again? Do they need training? Do they need education? Do they need a service that they could have qualified for but didn't know how to fill out the paperwork or weren't able to get it done so are they utilizing everything they can? And I think that happens across a lot of different areas and I think it's important to talk about how some people don't want to talk about these difficult topics because they think it doesn't affect them; they think it's not their problem but overall everyone, we should care about everyone around us our whole city, our whole community having what they need, their basic needs met. I mean we're in the long and short, just really trying to figure out how to meet their basic needs to survive. I mean like having health care, having your mental health, access to that care and we're not meaning - I think sometimes get confused; I mean it doesn't make a difference to me but, so people get confused and may think access means necessarily always free, always walk-in. Yeah that's great but I don't think they realize people don't even have access if they have insurance and money to pay for it, they still can't access it.

Brian: I think it's important for people to understand and it's just my opinion, but if basic needs are not met then they will be seized or they at the very least basic needs will be substituted with whatever if someone can get their hands on at the time and sometimes that's a controlled substance sometimes it's alcohol you know. And I know there's this extremely conservative mindset that some people say, well their poverty is not my problem I didn't cause it they just need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and be a productive member of society. And you know, they're right about half of that. It's not their fault that someone is impoverished, usually. But they're wrong in that, and you to further your point, they **are** impacted by it because it is so much, and statistics show this; it is so much more cost-effective to feed clothe, educate and rehabilitate someone out of poverty, out of the cycle of abuse if they're involved in that, than it is to just ignore the problem. And I'm not saying throw copious amounts of money. It needs to be regulated, it needs to be regimented it needs, again, to have a long-term strategy as a community and with individuals with short term identifiable, achievable goals along the way. But it is still better to do that, even though it is expensive, than it is to just ignore the problem.

Colette: Yeah, you made me think of something when you said, you know, that some people have the attitude that they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and I saw a snippet quote from a man a while back and his response to that is, "I've never had a pair of boots ". You know, he grew up in this generational poverty, mental health, his life was always cast. He never had a pair of boots; he doesn't know how to function properly because he's never been in a healthy environment with the things that he needed.

Brian: People will say that about the homeless community in particular without really, and I'm not an expert on homelessness by any means, but I do know I do know enough that people are homeless for different reasons. I mean you have people that are, you know, homeless by choice, they like to be transient. We've always had people like that. The majority of people that are homeless, I mean it's temporary; it's because you know, they were always kind of teetering and living paycheck to paycheck and they've had an incident; you know, someone losing a job, death of the breadwinner a relationship that's ended. And then you have people that are homeless and spend their lives in and out of shelters because they have mental health and drug dependency issues.

Colette: You said something that sparked something in my mind but I now I've lost it so.....

Brian: Was it about the pony ride? Cuz this was 1996, they're gonna pay me two hundred and fifty dollars a week, plus they we're gonna feed me. The only expense I was gonna have was cigarettes and booze. Everything else they were gonna take care of and because of that look(??) that my dad gave me I abandoned that idea.

Colette: So what do you have coming up right now? Is there something that we can support you? Is there something you want us to check out to learn more about?

Brian: You know, right now we just got done with city budgets, which again we had to do some cuts again this year because of sales tax revenue being down. Between that and me being active with trying to communicate everything to the public about the pandemic and the shelter in place. I mean all three of the businesses my wife and I together are shuttered by the order, and that's not a complaint. That needed to happen, but every ounce of energy I have is going in to my role as City Councilman at this moment. There are, aside from that, there are scores of local businesses that are still open that I would implore anyone listening to give them patronage whether it's a restaurant that's doing curbside, they might be able to do that a couple of days a week, different bars are doing, you know, if you drink alcohol you know, different bars are doing curbside pickup for beer and for mixed drinks, you can buy gift certificates from the retail stores that aren't allowed to be open, for a future visit. It would be very Pollyanna of me to say we're all going to get through this together. We're not there going to be some casualties business-wise because of this. Now there are steps that we can take as individual business owners and as a community as a whole that mitigate our damage here and the way to do that is you know, find your favorite local businesses and reach out to them and ask, you know, hey how can we - we love your contribution to the district that you're in or to the community as a whole; how can we support you in this? I can speak to how someone could support my own business, but everyone else's business has unique needs and are in different situations than my own so you know, I would just ask all of your listeners to reach out to the places that you appreciate that are locally owned and figure out a way to support them.

Colette: Well, thanks for chatting with us and kind of sharing your experiences and your views on things. I always like hearing your point of view. and how we can do better.

Brian: Well, I always enjoy talking to you so you know any time yeah you want me back on, or if any of your listeners have any questions or anything my inbox is always open to members of the community,

Colette: Thanks for tuning in and listening to us rant about things that we wish were better

Brian: Yes, "Things That We Wish Were Better", that's what she should name this episode;

Colette: Okay; I didn't have a name yet....

Brian: Alternately you could call it "Brian's Missed Pony Ride" but you know that's....

Colette: OK, put that on the list "Brian's Missed Pony Ride, "It's your Call", and what was the other one we just said?

Brian: "Things That We Wish Were Better".

Colette: Things we wish were better. That's my pandemic memory, guys, I have like 10 seconds. Okay, well thanks for chatting with me

Brian: Hey, thanks for having me.

Colette: Alright, bye!

Brian: Talk to you soon.

[Energetic music]

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