Let's Get Bizzy – Episode 1: Mike Conlon

CHRIS WEEKS: Hello, hello, and welcome to Let's Get Bizzy! Wake Tech's entrepreneurial ecosystem podcast. I'm Chris Weeks, director of entrepreneurship here at Wake Tech, and I'm joined by my co-host, Mia Lamotte. Hey, Mia.

MIA LAMOTTE: What's up? How are you?

WEEKS: I'm good. How about you?

LAMOTTE: Doing well, thank you.

WEEKS: So, as you know, we have an opportunity to talk about all things entrepreneurship here, and for the inaugural podcast, we have the pleasure and the honor to have the one, the only Mike Conlon. So, how you doing today Mike?

MIKE CONLON: I'm doing great. I appreciate you guys having me one, and look forward to it.

WEEKS: Well, we, we appreciate you taking the time to, to come in and chat with us.

CONLON: Sure.

WEEKS: I guess we can either take an opportunity to, to find out more about you through the questions or, I, I read the book, so I'm, I'm, I'm kind of well-versed on, on who Mike Conlon is. Tell me a little bit about Mike Conlon before we kick off.

CONLON: Yeah, I'll just give you a quick snapshot so everybody knows where I'm coming from, but I've sort of been an entrepreneur my whole life. I never started out that way. I just sort of ended up into it and I, as we'll talk about, I never really felt a compelling reason to become an entrepreneur, but I always had something inside of me that wanted to control my own destiny. And, and so, I started in the financial planning business years ago. That worked out well. Ended up owning a broker-dealer, sold that to a large insurance company, got into the real estate business and figured it out from the beginning. We started in apartments, and now we moved on to mobile home parks, and we have just over 50 mobile home parks now with almost 7,000 residents that would take care of.

So, it's been an incredible journey for the last 15 years in real estate, but there's definitely been bumps along the way and little things that we'll talk about. But I understand a lot of things that the entrepreneur goes through.

WEEKS: It's interesting hearing you say "taking care of the residents." I think back to New York City and the buildings and never heard the landlord referred to as taking care of us. Mia, what do you think?

LAMOTTE: Yeah, I think I wanna jump into the questions like I, I love the fact that you didn't set out to become an entrepreneur, but here we are. Right? And one of the things I'm curious to know about is, like, what is your philosophy about entrepreneurship?

CONLON: My philosophy, basically, is anybody can do it. You can learn it, for sure. It takes a lot of time and effort, and you have to study other people and get as much information. But, for me, the, the one thing that I always look back on is how can I do the most to benefit other people, and no matter what business you are in – it's more of a sales aspect, I guess, that you come from – but the more you can do to help other people, the, the better you're gonna be as an entrepreneur. And I always look at it as a win-win situation. If you're benefiting your end customer, the money's gonna take care of itself and everything else like that. And I think there's people who get into it, into entrepreneurship for money, and it never usually ends up well. When you get into it from more of a purpose of why you're doing this and you want to help other people and you're able to help other people, it usually works out the best.

LAMOTTE: So, you're coming from a place of service always?

CONLON: Typically, yeah. That's where we started from. And in the mobile home park business, it's a little bit unusual because we're talking about affordable housing. And, as everyone knows, the rents have gone through the roof everyplace, especially in the big metros where we are in the Southeast. And so, there's that. Then, I guess, it's the balancing act between you wanna, you know, make money for yourself and your family and maybe some investors if you have that, but you also want to make sure that people can live in an affordable, safe place, and you're constantly reinvesting money into the properties. There's no longer anything such as a slumlord. Slumlords are out business very quickly now. You have to make the properties nice. You have to constantly reinvest in them, whether it be the infrastructure, new homes, whatever it may be. And that's really what we're trying to do is make it win-win. If we can, you know, make it a steady, reasonable profit, but the residents have a safe, affordable place to live, that works out for everybody.

LAMOTTE: I love that.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Well, the first question, he hit like seven other questions.

LAMOTTE: I know, right.

WEEKS: I guess all of the technical hiccups that we're having at the inaugural kickoff we've kind of caught up.

CONLON: Caught up quick.

WEEKS: I appreciate that. That's funny. You know, you kind of touched on it, but, as far as the, the purpose and the financial benefit meeting one another, when did you, and I came from a, a financial, was a broker at Edward Jones.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And that's where I started, and I did it, right, with the intent of, of a purpose of teaching people

and making everyone comfortable at some point. And then the, the dot-com bubble burst, and, and I couldn't get anyone to pick up the phone.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And that's where the purpose and the financial component, where you wanted to kind of ride along together, at what point in your journey were you able to ascertain that the, that the journey and the, or the purpose and the financial component kind of needed to link up and be wrapped up together?

CONLON: Well, you know, I think from a family perspective, you gotta make sure you put food on the table and things like that. So, you, when you, when you get into entrepreneurship, you really don't know what you're doing, and you're trying to figure out every step of the way. You gotta have some type of hunger that you wanna create your own time freedom. And I think the ultimate goal for all entrepreneurs is time. Financial freedom is one thing, you know, and everybody's a little bit different because they have different lifestyles and whatever, but time freedom is the ultimate goal. You can do what you want when you want, and that's really what I think people get into it for. Not, you know, everybody achieves it. It can be very difficult at times. There's more entrepreneurs that tend to spin out for whatever reason because you not having the right things.

But again, I came from what I call, you know, very typica go-to-college-get-a-good-job type background. My dad was a corporate guy. I didn't really know about entrepreneurship. I had to learn it. I sort of got thrust into it, but once I got into corporate America, I realized quickly that wasn't for me. I hated it. I, I just couldn't understand the brown-nosing and the backstabbing. You know, I worked for some large financial institutions that made money in spite of themselves, in my opinion. But I, I, so that sort of drove me. And when I went over to the entrepreneurship, I failed miserably, by the way, because I was totally unprepared – no sales training, no understanding of cash flow, which I think is very important, which needs to be taught all the time, and really no understanding of overall business management and having a five- and 10-year perspective, knowing that the first year or two you get into it, you probably not gonna make any money, or you make very little money. And you need to be prepared that you have some savings or your spouse works or whatever it may be because it's difficult. And I always tell other entrepreneurs, "If you could get past the first two years, you've made it. You've really got a chance to be successful." But those first two years are the hardest.

LAMOTTE: And when you say get, when you say get past the first two years, and this is the important distinction, I think, they're getting past the first two years, like, you mean in the black? Do you mean, like, growing? Do you mean, like, all of the things, like, what do you mean when you say past the first two years?

CONLON: I think it's in the black. I really think the expectation that you can make money in the first year is, is probably slim. It's probably not gonna happen. And you're gonna have to reinvest almost all your money in the first two years into what you're doing. But, you know, maybe in the third year you can start drawing small salary or taking a little money out of the business where, you know, "Hey, I can sustain a lifestyle where I can again put food on the table and do things like that."

But I'm also somewhat purpose driven. You know, you really look at the big entrepreneurs, you know, Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos and everybody. They had that purpose that was driving them. The money, you know, obviously occurred to that way beyond their wildest dreams. And it happens. The longer you stay at it, the more that's gonna happen. But yeah, that's a great question because it's, you know, it's different for everybody.

But, for me, it was a little bit everything. I wanted to make sure that I could still survive, and I guess the other thing I always looked at is, "Hey, I could always go back to corporate America." And, you know, one of the questions you guys were talking about earlier was, you know, what would you do differently? I would burn the bridge.

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

CONLON: I would say, "There's no way to go back. Either this is gonna work or, you know, I'm gonna have to find some other entrepreneurial venture or whatever it may be." But the more you burn that bridge and you don't have that safety net, per se, because you're not going to give it your all if you do that.

WEEKS: Yeah, I can, when I retired at the end of '19. I found myself just kind of hanging out and enjoying my time freedom.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And, and kind of started feeling guilty a little bit because of the time freedom, some of the choices like having liquid lunches at 2 o'clock in the afternoon because you didn't have anything else to do, but besides that, started feeling a little bit guilty.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And so, a friend of mine said, "Hey, man, would you consider working part time, like, come to the corporation?" And I was, like, "Yeah, I don't know." And he says, "Man, if you come and work part time for three months, you get a $2,500 bonus, and I'll get a $2,500 bonus for referring you." Now, I said, man, I was like, you take what, what you guys – this is in New Jersey – take what they were gonna pay me plus $2,500, plus it was working remote.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: So I was, like, "Man, I'll do it." By day three. I was in HR. I'm sitting in HR [and am asked], "Is there a problem with diversity here at the company, sir?" And I was, like, "No, why?" "Because you made a comment, it seems like all the people of color are on one team."

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And I said, "I made that observation, but I didn't mean anything by it."

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: “OK. Well, we were checking in. You know, we …” I was, like, “Whoa, wait a minute. The corporate culture here is, I don’t know.”

CONLON: It’s changed.

WEEKS: This isn't, this isn’t me. So, I called my buddy. I was, like, “Dude, this $2,500, it’s gonna be a hard $2,500.”

CONLON: Yeah, it’s not gonna work.

WEEKS: But I actually did. I toughed it out for him, not, you know, again, being from a, a place of serving. So, I had to serve my homie and make sure that he got his $2,500 and, and I, I got mine, too. But it is, getting that bridge is an interesting place, and landing here in academia is kind of fun. I think it, it's ...

CONLON: It's definitely different than corporate America, and I, I think, once you have a taste of success being an entrepreneur, it's almost impossible to go back because you just, you can't tolerate all the things that sort of strap you in. And, obviously, your income is someone limited on the upside and things like that, but, and, and what, the other thing I'll say, going back to your question, Mia, too, is entrepreneurship is not for everybody. You really need to get personality-tested and a lot of different things because it's a rollercoaster. There, I always tell people, it's higher highs and lower lows. And it's just, you feel like you're on an island sometimes, especially in the beginning. You don't know who to talk to. You haven't really set up like an advisory board or anything. You're so in the weeds trying to make this thing work, and you're working in the business not on the business because you don't have the time or the ability to hire people or anything at that stage. You just gotta do whatever you do. I really figured out, you know, myself, when I look back on it, I was gonna do whatever it took. I wasn't going back to corporate America. I hated it. I just felt like my life was going to be somewhat wasted at that stage, and I could do a lot more good if I just stuck it out and rode it through. And luckily, I was in the right situation andthe right time, and a couple different times in life someone helped out.

LAMOTTE: Well, Mike, let's talk a little bit about corporations and why they are so horrible. Like the Great Resignation that’s happening right now, do you feel like people are awakening to the fact that, “Hey, I can do something else with my life instead of reporting to a, a place that doesn't have the culture that aligns with who I am.”? Do you feel like it's a, it's an awakening from the pandemic or people are just really getting into the space of, like, “I wanna live a fulfilled life, and this is not it.”? What do you think is happening?

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CONLON: I, I think the pandemic has opened up, obviously, everybody's eyes to working remotely and, you know, you're not getting as much of the, and I don't know if that's a positive thing, but the interaction with workers, things like that – sometimes could be negative – but you spend more time with something you like. But I think it's really that people are waking, awakened to the fact that they could do

different things. Technology's amazing. You look at Zoom and some of the other things that have come out of the pandemic.

And again, for me it's if you wanna have that purpose-driven life where you're doing better for other people, you know, whether it's, you know, being able to make donations or different things, philanthropy or whatever it may be, or just in your business day to day. Like you're helping other people succeed, and in our case, having a safe, affordable place to live. You just, I never found that in corporate America, and maybe I didn't see enough places. And if you, if you have that type of culture where you're working now, you should relish that.

LAMOTTE: Absolutely.

CONLON: Because I think it's rare.

WEEKS: Especially when there are so many places that are considered either, or were there at one point, Starbucks …

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Was the place to be, the culture was so awesome, and, and then it just drifted away.

CONLON: Well, it becomes so big. It's hard to manage.

WEEKS: To circle back, and the other part is when you kind of go off that cliff.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: But you still have to march around talking about what a great place it is when you know good and well that it isn't that place anymore.

Funny note, Mia, so he's talking about, you know, doing good and stuff like that. When we got here to the studio, the director of technology services ...

LAMOTTE: Speak up.

WEEKS: The director of technology services was in here, and he said, he told me, I had to guess but he didn't tell me, you know, that there was somebody on the board of trustees, and Mike was, like, "Yeah." He's like, "We've never met, but there was this one time out in the parking lot, he kind of gave the school a check for $1 million." And Mike was like, "Oh yeah, there was that." So, so it is real and, and the, the energy to hear you talk about is kind of cool because it's not, "I'm the guy that …"

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: "… oh, by the way, I work hard for my family, and I, I do good by folks, given an opportunity to do something for the common good. I'm there, which is, is definitely ...

CONLON: I've, you know, I've been, I've been, you know who my parents were, able to go to college, things like that. And I just look at a lot of people, and I think it's probably 50 percent of the country now that doesn't have that advantage anymore, and that's what I love about Wake Tech. They're trying to give people that advantage to get them ahead. I feel like I have the duty to, the obligation to give back because I started a lot farther ahead than most people. You know, grew up middle class, probably became upper middle class by the end, and was able to go to college and end up going to law school and stuff like that. Not a lot of people have that same opportunity, and I truly realize that that makes you appreciative of everything.

WEEKS: So, that, that's the funny, a funny feeling. We're three entrepreneurs, and I think we, all three of us, interesting when Mia and I met, one of the underlying conversations was law school or the law overall.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: So, you went to law school, I went to law school, and Mia was the smartest one. She was …

LAMOTTE: I worked for the court system instead.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And, and then I said, "Well, where are you going?" She was, like, "I was going to law school. Then I spent enough time around lawyers to realize that I didn't want to go to law school." I was in the middle side where I, you know, I got a year and a half.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And I was like, if I have to hang out with these people for the rest of my life. I'm, there's no way.

LAMOTTE: Nothing against lawyers. We love lawyers and judges.

WEEKS: Yeah, lawyers are good.

CONLON: It's just a tough profession when you gotta get paid by the hour. And you continue to work, and I got a lot of bodies that are lawyers, and I would say 98 percent of them hate it, just cause it's such a grind. But it's necessary to the extent, the only value of law school, in my opinion, because I never practiced, I went right into the financial business, is that you do understand different things with the legal profession. Lawyers have thrown up these shields that make you sort of wanna or need them, and you really don't need them as much as you think you do. If you understand the system, like I do a lot of

the legal work, quasi-legal work for our company, but we turn it over to the lawyer to sign the docs and stuff like that.

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

CONLON: It's sort of a good way of thinking. I, I look at it, Sam Zell, you know, one of the guys that I idolize, was in real estate business for a long time. He's in his 80s now, but he went to law school and said, "Hey, just help me think differently." He lasted four days at his first job out of law school. And I just, I never wanted to practice. I barely made it through because I was, like, "This is just not for me. I, I don't like the people. I don't like the concept." I just had a hard time.

WEEKS: It was tough. Shout out to Professor Wright, who was my writing, my legal writing instructor.

CONLON: Yeah

WEEKS: [Indecipherable] lacks clarity.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And, and then the punctuation. So, I am a proofreader now. I got something from, from a writer yesterday, and I sent it back with the corrections, you know. Like I was like, "That's not a jerk move, was it?" I was like, "I didn't mean to." I was like, "That's still my teaching."

CONLON: Yeah

WEEKS: From law school, where he, I'll watch TV, and I'll say they spelled it or, you know, like on the news ticker. And then I go to Planet Fitness, and they spell judgment wrong. It's the "judgment free zone," you know, and judgment is spelled wrong, and it's on every piece of equipment. So, that kind of …

LAMOTTE: Oh, now I gotta go look.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: It's a big thmbs up, and it says "judgment free." And I said, "I guess we're not gonna judge your spelling then."

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Pretty funny.

LAMOTTE: So, are we ready for halftime or what?

WEEKS: Halftime.

LAMOTTE: Halftime. So, we, we don't know how we're gonna do halftime yet, but this is halftime.

CONLON: Halftime, I like it.

WEEKS: So, halftime's gonna have some cool music.

LAMOOTE: OK.

WEEKS: So, I'm gonna have halftime. Sound like a good idea?

LAMOTTE: So, you're not gonna blow the horn and make like a lot of noise like football games.

WEEKS" I'm gonna dress up like a referee and run, twirl flags or something.

LAMOTTE: You could be the mascot for the podcast. High five!

WEEKS: OK, so we were having a debate about whether the praying hands emoji …

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: … is a praying hands emoji or if it's actually a high five. And we determine that it's a high five and that you should feel guilty about any time that you high five something. Like, my mom was in a terrible car wreck.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: High five.

CONLON: Yeah, yeah. That, that's for sure. Yeah, you don't wanna be throwing that out.

WEEKS: So yeah, I don't know if she's gonna high five. So, the halftime is, you know, kind of the fun side. What you got for halftime, Mia?

LAMOTTE: I wanna know where is the, where, where's your favorite place that you've visited, Mike?

CONLON: What? Where I visited or lived?

LAMOTTE: Visited, lived, been.

CONLON: My favorite place to go, I think I've been there a couple times, is the Cayman Islands. I just enjoy it. It's obviously a beautiful place, beautiful beaches and stuff like that. But the wildlife and everything else that you get to do, swim with the dolphins, swim with the stingrays and all that type of stuff, is great.

Probably the most beautiful place I've been is Banff, Canada. I highly recommend people to go up there. It's a little bit of a trip. You gotta fly into Calgary and go a couple hours, but it's amazing country up there, just north of Vancouver basically is where it is, a couple of hours. Beautiful place, especially in summer. It's, it's amazing. So, between those two are really the places that I like to go to the most. We, we're Caribbean people, so we've gone to Turks and all the other places.

LAMOTTE: But the Cayman Islands is your favorite out of all of the Caribbean islands?

CONLON: Yeah.

LAMOTTE: Awesome.

WEEKS: And apparently the Cayman Islands make you tough. And I, I say that because my daughters just went to the Cayman Islands, and they'll call me – I live 22 miles away from them, and if there's a bug, a bug wanders into the house, they'll call me. "Dad, you need to come kill this bug." They freak out.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: But, for some reason, they went to the Cayman Islands, and they're there kissing stingrays.

CONLON: Stingrays, yeah.

WEEKS: And holding, hugging dolphins. I'm like, wait a minute, stingrays? That's like the Steve Irwin, you're kissing them? What's going on? So, I don't know.

CONLON: They're a little more tame than what Steve Irwin was dealing with, but yeah. It's, it, it's just really laid back, and talk about getting away, you know, I mean, just get away and you see things that you wouldn't see, obviously, here in the States and stuff like that. And it's a different mix of people, a lot of European people there, too. So, it's nice to get away for people, and it's really not that far in Miami, a quick trip from Miami, so it's pretty easy to get to.

LAMOTTE: What's the, what's the most adventurous thing you've done?

CONLON: Say that again.

LAMOTTE: What's the most adventurous thing you've done?

CONLON: I think the, probably a combination of the most scary and adventurous thing was …

LAMOTTE: Yes.

CONLON: When I went skydiving, went with a bunch of buddies on like a Saturday morning down in Florida when I used to live there, and I didn't really know what we were getting into. And I swear to God,

the scary part of it was going in that rusty bucket of the plane where it didn't have a door. And you're going up, and you're all packed in this plane. It's like, “Oh, this looks really shady. I don't know what's happening here.” And then your first step out is the most bizarre experience because, you know, you, you're on, you know, somebody’s back, so they're, they're helping you. But it's like, wow, that is really amazing. So, I love that. I haven't done it since. My kids are bugging me to do it again. I would do it again.

WEEKS: OK, I definitely another go, but the rusty bucket and however, how long of a preparatory time they gave you, you know, an hour.

CONLON: An hour.

WEEKS: Yeah. So, you go to Fort Benning, Georgia, and you spent three weeks of being stripped down and built back up to become a United States paratrooper. I think they, I mean they make you tough. Tough. I would go and kiss Steve Irwin’s stingray. That's how tough they make you in preparation of, of jumping out of airplanes.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And then you get up in the plane, and you're, you know, you realize how tough you are. And then that same feeling you had when they were like, you know what, it's time to jump. They open the door on that C-130, and it goes [makes wind blowing sound]. And then every ounce of toughness …

CONLON: It goes right out the window.

WEEKS: You train, and it goes right out the window because that feeling of jumping out of the, coming out of that door.

CONLON: Yeah

WEEKS: Of a plane, for whatever reason in the world, makes no sense at that moment.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: I ended up doing it again, a lot more, unfortunately. I have bad shoulders.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: They pay for it, but that is fun. And it's cool to hear. What about you, Mia? What's the most adventurous thing you've ever done?

LAMOTTE: Probably that, but yeah, the plane. Entrepreneurship.

CONLON: That, that could be one right there.

LAMOTTE: Yeah, that's probably the most obvious, but the plane situation for me it was, yeah, going up. So, I had to meditate. I had my eyes closed the whole time I'm sitting in this guy's lap that I just met, right?

CONLON: Yeah.

LAMOTTE: But the scariest part, I would say it was when you got to the door to jump and then when you jump out, it's like your whole face and everything is doing this. And I'm like, it's cold up here. What the hell is happening? And then I'm like, you're actually flying, so why don't you just be in the moment and realize, like, what's happening here? So, for me, like that was probably one of the most adventurous, and I would totally do it again. So, I guess the three of us will have to go.

CONLON: Yeah.

LAMOTTE: If, if your shoulder will take it, Chris.

CONLON: I heard it crack right then.

WEEKS: Yeah, it's not, not for everybody. I'll watch. I'll stay on the ground with the …

LAMOTTE: You'll do the camera. You take the camera, GoPro.

WEEKS: That's the thing is that they, they have the megaphones, the jumpmasters were on the ground yelling at you while you're, you're probably coming down. You're like, maybe I'm not going to die. No, no, things they're yelling at you, that isn't fun.

LAMOTTE: I'm glad I didn't have that experience. I might not do it.

CONLON: Yes.

WEEKS: Yeah, yeah, kind of ruined it a little bit.

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

CONLON: If you do it for fun, it's it sounds like a lot better opportunity than …

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

WEEKS: Yeah.

LAMOTTE: But I think there's, there's another false sense of security that the person behind you knows what they're doing. I don't think you had that same, that same option.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Yeah, versus that guy who's throwing you out the door. "Get out of this, get off my plane." And then the guy on the crowd yelling at you before you went in. Yeah, not the, not the leisurely way to do it, probably.

CONLON: But you're right, Mia, cause that the guy who's behind he's, you know, he's like, "Hey, I've done 20 jumps this week," you know. It's gotta be OK, you would think, but it only takes one time when that parachute doesn't open.

WEEKS: The guy who's trying to break the world record and do 300 in one day or something, and he forgot to put his chute on. Like, he'd jump, hit the ground, run to the plane, put the chute on. He jumped but didn't have the chute on. So yeah.

LAMOTTE: That's a morbid story to tell.

WEEKS: Exactly.

LAMOTTE: Ah, Chris.

WEEKS: It's a segue to Part 2 of the show.

LAMOTTE: Yeah, back, yeah, back to, back to jumping without a parachute.

WEEKS: Exactly. Good segue. Yeah, we talked about a segue.

LAMOTTE: I guess with me, yes.

WEEKS: Was that interview with the segue a good segue?

LAMOTTE: Oh God, don't tell that story.

WEEKS: Yeah, but that little man, or the guy who bought the Segway company rode a Segway, an all-terrain Segway off of a cliff.

CONLON: Really?

LAMOTTE: And ended up dying. Yeah. I'm like, "Chris, you have got to stop with the story."

WEEKS: Yeah, hello. Are you there? I'm a pretty dark guy.

LAMOTTE: Yeah. Thank God I'm here.

WEEKS: All right, let’s get the ball rolling again.

LAMOTTE: OK, so I, I have the next question. My question is like, if somebody's beginning entrepreneurship, do you think that they need to double down on their actual skill or the thing that they're selling or double down on what it on the business aspect of it?

CONLON: I think it's a little bit of both. The one piece of advice that I always give to people: If possible, work in the business or the field that you're going into first. So, work for somebody else and really learn it because it may not be what you think it is. Law school’s a prime example. We're coming out.

LAMOTTE: It's good. Yeah.

CONLON: And then, really, law school doesn't teach you anything about being a lawyer, and it gives you a lot of theoretical knowledge that doesn't really apply. And so, you're not really prepared to be there, and I think, you know, in the businesses that I've been, I've been fortunate in a couple of instances where I've worked for a year or two in the business. So, I had a very good understanding of what I wanted to accomplish when I took it to the entrepreneurial side. And then, obviously, when you're working in that business, what are the skills that you need? What, was it sales? Is it understanding cash flow? Is it managing, managerial skills? And then, again, go back and get tested. Are you, do you have those skills?

The great thing about the business I have now is my chief operations officer has been with me for 22 years through everything. We moved together, had families and moved together and everything, and he's very focused on the details and very analytical, and I'm a big-picture guy, and we didn't get it at first. You almost butt, butt heads a little bit at first when it happens, but it's just been an amazing partnership because you have alternate skills that really benefit each other.

Again, you don't get that until you move on through the process a little bit more, but that's what I would tell people. Go work in the business, work for somebody else, earn a paycheck while you're doing it, and make sure it's something you want to do.

LAMOTTE: That's really, that's really good advice. That's solid. Oh, when you say “get tested,” hold on, I got a question before you get in.

WEEKS: All right.

LAMOTTE: When you say “get tested,” what do you mean? Talking about personality tests? What are you talking about?

CONLON: Yeah, like the Myers-Briggs stuff and, you know, whatever it is, those type of tests. Because, like, it was interesting the first time I got tested, I was maybe like 32, 33, in the midst of an entrepreneurial venture and didn't really know. And the person who was giving the test gave it to our whole company. I thought it would be beneficial to our company, back in the financial planning days, and I came out as a strong like brand at that point in time, was strong entrepreneurship, and I was very surprised at that. I was like I, I don't feel like I have that in me, but I did. And, and, obviously, it led me

why I kept pushing and, and going in that direction and made me a little bit more confident that I was doing the right thing. So, and I think you know probably more about it, but it identifies some of the skills you may have, or more important, what you're lacking, and that that could make a big difference.

LAMOTTE: Yeah. And hire for what you're lacking, right? Instead of trying to …

CONLON: Yes.

LAMOTTE: Which you did, basically.

CONLON: Yeah. I did it by accident, by the way. So, I didn't know I was doing that, but it happened.

WEEKS: Everything works out.

LAMOTTE: It happened, and that's all that matters.

WEEKS: Exactly. The funny thing is, is that lots of times, particularly in entrepreneurship, you, you want or not, people want you to make a choice – either or. And so often, it is a kind of both, like you said.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And, and that's one thing here at the school that we're, we're starting to focus on, where it's, "All right, well, are you gonna do the curriculum side? Are you gonna do an occupational side? Are you gonna do this, or you're gonna do that, or you're gonna do entrepreneurship as a curriculum? Or are you gonna do HVAC?"

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And then I was like, well, then you might just say go and work for someone for two years. So why wouldn't we do an entrepreneurship curriculum in concert with the HVAC program.

CONLON: Absolutely.

WEEKS: We push in and, and guess what? You get your HVAC certification, and you get a certificate in entrepreneurship.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: You'll work with for some for two years as an apprentice.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Knowing that you have your, your …

CONLON: Your skills, because you can always work for yourself at that point in time and do it. But I, you know, I think, if you have the entrepreneurial education and you know sort of exposure to that, the greatest opportunity right now is in the trades. Whether it be HVAC, welding, whatever it may be, all the people are retiring. There's gonna be a huge gap because the country's gonna keep going and keep building and whatever it may be, and a lot of people have the skills, but very few people have the ability to run a business, and you could explode in business.

I did run into somebody recently that surprised me. Just got their four-year degree at N.C. State and are going back to Wake Tech to get their HVAC certification because he saw that. His dad's been telling him, "Hey, the trades are great," things like that. That's a unique situation if you look at it, but I, I totally agree because, I mean, the more you can have exposure to entrepreneurial situations, the better, and you never know what's gonna come in. It could be when you're 40, could be 50. It doesn't make a difference. But just to have that background, and the nice thing about Wake Tech, is you have the resource always there.

WEEKS: Right.

CONLON: You can always go back and refresh, touch base.

WEEKS: No, I agree. And I think that it, it's built by design, and they, the gentleman that was in here earlier called it a movement.

CONLON: Yes.

WEEKS: Like I've been here for 18 years, and then, you know, probably in the first year I realized that community college is a movement.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And, and once you buy into it, then you're really kind of on the, kind of on the Kool-Aid throughout.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: I think that, that's good.

CONLON: Yeah.

LAMOTTE: Yeah, I think you guys are speaking into taking a stand for the and, right? Instead of choosing the either-or, take a stand for the and. Both.

WEEKS: Yeah, I've never heard that before, but that will, I think that's my next tattoo.

CONLON: Yep.

WEEKS: Take a stand for the and. Can you design that for me, Mia?

LAMOTTE: I'm not a graphic designer.

WEEKS: But you've already become my creative team, my image consultant.

LAMOTTE: He's getting free advice on this podcast hosting gig.

CONLON: That's awesome.

WEEKS: Yeah, awesome. I send her pictures, like, "Is this, is this cool?" Yeah.

LAMOTTE: So, Mike, last question.

CONLON: Sure.

LAMOTTE: What do you want your legacy to be? What do you feel like your legacy is?

CONLON: Yeah, I, I don't think about it that much, to be honest with you. You know, you're sort of so, so busy doing what you're doing, you don't really have time to think about it. I would say, you know, I would, I want to be known as someone's good husband, good father, good business owner, you know, and took care of his employees and sort of made the, the world a better place, really, to help as many people as I can. You know, again, I've been fortunate financially, and some of the money I made wasn't from something else. And that, really to get back and making things better, you know.

You know, I donate money here and there. Last year, I ended up giving somebody $25,000 because I believed in them, and they started a food truck, and I don't want any money back from that. I don't want any equity; I just want him to be successful because it's gonna change his family's dynamic. He's gonna, he's very driven. He, he got in the business, researched it, and he came to me with a full business plan. I said, "I'll support you, no strings attached."

I just, you know, that's the type of thing where, you know, like that's really the only thing legacy-wise I look at – if I've helped a lot of people, then that's great because I've had ...

LAMOTTE: I love it.

WEEKS: That's cool.

LAMOTTE: I love that.

WEEKS: The image and ability associated with that, and the answer, again, is cool. When I got out of the Army and I, I went back to my hometown and they have you, like, fill out your, you, you submit your DD-214 as a part of the record for the town, and they hold it in, in the archives, in the city archives. And they

also said, “You know what, you also, because you're a combat veteran, we’re going to put your name on the wall and the plaque.” And you're like, “Cool,” and, say, you go back, and I ended up coming back to North Carolina and started having kids. You know my first trip back to my hometown with my kids, you know, all of a sudden, I started feeling pretty proud.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: I tell my kids, “Man, your Dad has his name on the wall somewhere, and it's like, “Come here.” And I'm going to City Hall, and we went up to the plaque, and I was like, “Get your cameras ready. Everybody pose. We're gonna take a picture with …,” and my name wasn’t on the wall.

CONLON: What? They forgot about?

WEEKS: Apparently, they forgot about it, and it’s, like, and my kids are like, “Dad, your name isn’t on the wall. I say that to say that your answer could have easily been, you know, “I want my kids to come down and take a picture in front of Conlon Hall at Wake Tech.” And, and it's on there.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And you don't have to worry about doing what I did with, with my kids. But again, that, that aspect of it, the humility that goes along with it, the authen, the authenticity that she's training people.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And right now, you know, you shouldn't have a job. You shouldn't have to train people to be authentic. That's the, the, the weirdo part.

CONLON: But it, I guess it's where we didn't, you know, as we were talking before, Mia, I, I just think it's so integral that people really be authentic with what they're doing in their business and, and find that right place, and I would encourage people who are starting out in entrepreneurship, and you said corporate, you have to pivot. You're gonna have to adapt. I've changed my strategy 10 times in the last five years. You’ve always gotta constantly review your business, know the industry, be able to change on a dime because the world is changing.

And now with social media influence, and I thought was hard growing up without it, growing up with social media and all the bullying and everything that happens, you can easily lose yourself, and you've become what other people want you to be. And that's …

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

CONLON: That’s leading down a road that I don't think a lot of people wanna take, but, and unfortunately, it happens.

WEEKS: Yeah, it is weird because you can control the false narrative now with social media.

LAMOTTE: Sure, yeah.

WEEKS: Growing up poor and trying to act like you're rich was kind of a chore because kids paid attention and, you know, “Hey, didn't you have that on yesterday?” Like, “No, my brother had it on yesterday.” You watch your business. With social media, you can do whatever you want.

CONLON: That's true, really true.

LAMOTTE: I, I think, I think part of it is that, you know, I shouldn't have to pay, you know, people should have to pay me to help him to get there, but because our society is, like I said earlier, is more accepting of people where they are and who they are, people feel like they can finally do themselves. They just don't know how.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Right. And you are doing a service. I definitely think that you should have a job. I was, I was saying that in jest.

LAMOTTE: I know.

WEEKS: I think that you provide an important piece of the puzzle.

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

CONLON: Yeah, and really, what you also tell entrepreneurs is, again, we're on an island a lot of times, and we need somebody to reach out to and say, “OK, am I doing this right? I feel bad about this. Am I doing this for the money?” You know, you know, it's hard to find sounding boards where you feel like people understand what you're going through. And I got a buddy of mine now who was the consultant I was talking about earlier – 20 years been a consultant. Has does a great business, you know, but works really hard, and now he wants to start a software business in his mid-50s. And I'm, like, “Uh, I don't know.” I mean, I think it’s a real stretch, but I'm not one to tell him. “I'll support you because you're my friend, but on the other hand, I just don't think the stress and going into something like that, you know, completely different where you're at now …”

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

CONLON: “… is the right thing to do.” But yeah, you know, I don't wanna kill anybody's dream.

LAMOTTE: Sure.

WEEKS: Sure. I mean, Everest.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: No, just kidding.

ONLON: Whatever you wanna do.

LAMOTTE: We already know you're not gonna do that.

WEEKS: If I could ride my motorcycle up it, I would.

LAMOTTE: All right. I don't know. That, that wouldn’t be a good idea. No.

WEEKS: Yeah, I don’t think so.

LAMOTTE: You’d have the same story as the Segway guy.

WEEKS: Exactly.

CONLON: You know, it was interesting. I was just reading an article. I can't remember the name of the company, but the guy who cut his salary to a dollar. This is a few years ago, he got a lot of press, and he pulled everybody else up to $70,000.

LAMOTTE: Yes, I know.

CONLON: He just resigned for a bunch of sexual harassment reasons. And it was multiple; it wasn't just one person.

LAMOTTE: Oooooh.

CONLON: And he completing a false narrative, because he could control, and the more stuff he put out, when they picked it up, and he really, turns out he really wasn't a good guy. I mean, it was ...

LAMOOTE: Oh, wow.

CONLON: I was totally surprised, and, you know, it's easy to get fooled by that stuff now, especially with social media.

LAMOTTE: Wow.

CONLON: Yeah, they control what, you know, people know about them and hear about them. And it's just unfortunate, I think, in this day and age.

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

WEEKS: It's because, also, you know, the, the next generations are looking to that for the inspiration. And you're inspired, you're inspired, you're inspired by the guy who's a dirt bag isn't the right way of going about it. It's like, oh, man, that's not good.

CONLON: Well, you know, the other thing too, from my standpoint, I'm not on Facebook, I'm not on Instagram or anything like that. I, I do a little bit of LinkedIn, but I don't have time for that stuff. And I believe it's mostly fake and it's all the presentation and things like that, and a young entrepreneur now, maybe you have to sell to them there. I didn't have to – I was fortunate – and maybe you have to utilize that platform. But you waste your time preparing yourself to other people when you know that's probably not real. It was just one photo in a certain situation.

LAMOTTE: Sure.

CONLON: Again, that's the hard part of growing up now, and it's I really feel for kids because it's hard to get over that hump.

WEEKS: So, Mia, being, I mean, that being one of your areas of expertise, where is a necessary, particularly for folks that that are coming after us, what, you know, how tough is it to sell the authenticity piece as a, what, a necessity or as a, "Hey, if you really, you're really gonna be better." How tough is that to sell?

LAMOTTE: How tough is it to sell? People who come to me for that, that they're ready for it. I think it's tougher to not be yourself. I have a client right now who, who felt like he hasn't been himself the entire time, that he's owned his business for various reasons. And one of the things that was important to him was to, to be himself and to start stepping into that role as the owner and to show up for the company, for his employees, for himself. And now that he's doing that, he realizes that the struggle to stay away from it was way harder than actually stepping into who he really is.

CONLON: Interesting.

LAMOTTE: And the other piece of this is, like, I think transparency on social media is super-important. And I, I believe there are a lot of people out there that got it right, and they are transparent, and they talk about their beliefs, and they talk about the haters and just remembering that that's, that's those people's problems, not actually yours as an entrepreneur, right? It's more of a reflection of them than it is you.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Well, that kind of makes me feel good about our inaugural Let's Get Bizzy! I think that the time went by super-quick.

LAMOTTE: Yeah.

WEEKS: It's, like, we're just sitting around talking, which is I guess what a podcast is. Is that what a podcast is, Mia? Did we do it right?

LAMOTTE: Yeah, I think we did it right.

WEEKS: We can do it again, maybe?

LAMOTTE: I think so. What do you think, Mike?

CONLON: Yeah, I think it's great. And I, I like the easy format of it because it is just a conversation, which is fantastic. And one just shout-out that I'll make is Conlon Venture Fund. We're doing it again, starts next spring. Last year was our inaugural run, where we give away, I think, like over $80,000. I think 10 entrepreneurs walked away with a check. So, we'll do it again next spring here at Wake Tech.

LAMOTTE: What is it? It's here Wake Tech, and the run is in the springtime?

CONLON: Yeah, it starts with a going through the program.

WEEKS: Right, and then it culminates with the pitch in May.

LAMOTTE: Got it.

WEEKS: So, I think we narrow it down. It starts with 40, and it gets down to 10 folks pitching.

LAMOTTE: Awesome.

WEEKS: I hear we're at about $85,000, and there's only one way through the door, or there's two ways through the door. You have to come through the community programs through Wake Tech, or you have to come through the entrepreneurship programs through Wake Tech. But everything comes through Wake Tech to get to the money, and the cool thing is that, as we refine the process, one thing that every economic development and educational piece talks about throughout the community is, "We'll give you capital sourcing, and we'll show you how to get to the money." The tough conversations, A, the tough conversations aren't happening to prep people.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: And then there isn't a, always a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Well, it just so happens that the venture fund has made the Main St Entrepreneurship Accelerator a real live, a real live thing. And so, sometime we can talk about as we're kicking off one season now.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: We appreciate that.

CONLON: Yeah. I, I, I really enjoyed it last year, and it far exceeded my expectations, just the quality of the businesses, the quality of the people that signed up. And, you know the worst case, they got a great education for a few months, you know, learning more about entrepreneurship, connecting to you guys and things like that. So, it's nice that they can get a little money to help their business grow.

LAMOTTE: Yeah, I think we should bring, I think we should bring the main winner on to the show.

CONLON: Absolutely.

LAMOTTE: And they can hang out with Mike.

WEEKS: Absolutely.

LAMOTTE: Yeah, well, awesome. Well, thank you so much, Mike.

WEEKS: Can you give the closing that you haven't prepared yet?

LAMOTTE: Thanks for showing up.

WEEKS: You're supposed to tell me how to do it. So, this is where we insert the fancy closing of the podcast that happens in post-production.

CONLON: Yeah.

LAMOTTE: And then the outro music goes and starts to play.

WEEKS: And the outro. Maybe we should save this for the production meeting. Or not. We're new. We have, thank you, Mike.

CONLON: Thank you.

LAMOTTE: Thank you.

CONLON: I appreciate all you guys are doing right now.

LAMOTTE: Thank you. Thank you so much, Mike. Thank you.

CONLON: Oh yeah, if you want it, the book on Amazon is called “Unconventional Wealth.” It just really goes through a variety of topics about entrepreneurship, obviously, but really talks about people who are into businesses or careers, per se, that are very outside the norm. Obviously, real estate as part of it because I was in it, different things. But there's a lot of different ways that people make money that will really surprise you. So, it's, it’s a real easy read, probably an hour and a half. It's an airplane-type book.

LAMOTTE: Well, thank you for that.

WEEKS: Thank you.

CONLON: Yeah.

WEEKS: Thank You, Let’s Get Bizzy!

LAMOTTE: Thank you. Nice to meet you.

CONLON: Yeah, we'll see you soon.