Liesl Riddle:

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Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to GWSB Proud, a podcast all about, why are you proud of GWSB? My name is Liesl Riddle and I am the associate Dean for graduate programs here at George Washington University's School of Business. And I have the great pleasure of sitting down with GWU alumni, faculty, staff, and students, to hear why they are GWSB Proud.

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to the podcast, today I am joined here with Anthony Shop, who is a global MBA class of 2011. He is also now the leader of an amazing digital marketing company called Social Driver, more on that in a minute. Welcome Anthony.

Anthony Shop:

Thank you for having me.

Liesl Riddle:

So before we get into what the business is doing today, Anthony, your story is, I think, so inspirational to me because it really began when you were an MBA student on our campus, isn't that right?

Anthony Shop:

Yeah, that's right. I'm so grateful for the GW community and just everything that I learned and gained from being part of that wonderful school, in the classroom and out of the classroom. My husband, now husband, Thomas and I moved from Kansas City to D.C. So that I could pursue my MBA, I was really interested in entrepreneurship and other things. And we were inspired to start our business while I was an MBA student. In fact, we competed in the new venture competition and won first place, which was just such an amazing thing. I mean, obviously the money is great, but the people we met, the encouragement, the mentorship, we have relationships that a decade later are still really important in our lives and lessons that we learned along the way. So I owe so much to GWSB, thank you for everything that you've done to make it such a great community.

Liesl Riddle:

We'll, you're the kind of student that we are so excited to be able to welcome on our campus. So, so many different students have that kind of story of, I came to GWSB because I wanted to be an entrepreneur or I wanted to come up with new ideas and offer them to an organization, that intrapreneur kind of spirit. So the innovation spirit kind of runs deep. Before you went to the New Venture Competition, in what ways do you think what you learned in the classroom or that other things that you got out of the program kind of informed how you shaped the concept of the business?

Anthony Shop:

Yeah, we came to DC believing that digital technology and communications has the power to make positive change in the world, allow us to do things that were unimaginable a few short years ago, but I didn't necessarily have a focus or structure around that. I really loved the strategy courses. I loved my managerial accounting course with Dr. Kulp, and seeing real case studies of what other businesses had done and learning frameworks that I could apply, not only to my own business, but to clients. I still remember one that I learned about corporate social responsibility that I use to this day. And so having some structure and some strategy approaches to be able to apply not only to our business, but again, to clients that we work with was just really super invaluable.

Anthony Shop:

And it helped me close the gap that I had, which was, I love communication, I love digital, I love helping to apply this, how do I get to do that at a large scale or national or international organizations, because that's where I wanted to go. And I had some work experience in the MBA program that helped me get a little taste of that, and then we realized we could do this through our own business. And so we started as just the two of us and now 10 years later we're about 50 people and we're working with Target and Amazon and Cigna and big brands that I never imagined I'd have a chance to work with. So pretty incredible to have that opportunity, and the MBA program was just a strong foundation to let me do that.

Liesl Riddle:

Did you have kind of this idea that you wanted to go into this industry in some way shape or form before you came to the program? Or was that something that kind of made itself clear as you went through the program?

Anthony Shop:

I don't think I knew that the industry really existed before the program, because I knew the type of work I liked to do but I had always done it more in-house and I didn't realize that you could be a service provider consultant agency that would deliver those services to a lot of clients. And for me, that fits so well because I was never the person that had the one passion issue that I just wanted to work on my whole life, I was the person that could really fall in love with other people's passion issues and help them figure out how to scale it and make it bigger, tell that story, drive that story. And I liked to do it for many different... I was curious and wanted to learn about different issues. So learning that you could be a consultant and a service provider, you could have a business working with many clients, it sounds simple, I just hadn't encountered that. I didn't work in that world until I met some folks through the MBA program who were in that world and then realized, wow, we could do that.

Anthony Shop:

And D.C. is such a great place to land if you want to build relationships because people come to DC to make a difference in the world, people come to DC because they want to be a leader. And even people who don't live in D.C., they make their way to D.C. for a meeting, a conference, lobbying, something, so you end up interacting with so many fascinating and passionate people who are doing things. And when you're starting a business, some of those people take a chance on you and they give you an opportunity to help them do what they're trying to do.

Liesl Riddle:

You said something really important, I think in there and I want to underscore it for the audience, is that you met people in the MBA program that helped you evolve the concept further, even make you aware that this was a possibility. And I love that because I hear that phrase so many times from our alumni and our current students, it's the people that they meet in the program. And whether that's fellow students, whether that's faculty, whether that's alumni conversations in some of our events or through the mentors that you get through the Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship if you participate in their programs, that really help you along in your entrepreneurial journey. And I think that's one of the things that makes GWSB really kind of a special place if you are an innovator.

Anthony Shop:

Well, a hundred percent. In fact, the place that I worked during business school, which is called APCO Worldwide, where I sort of learned the most about this sort of world of providing services. One, I was invited because I was a student to attend an event that they were hosting at the National Press Club with a major leader from China, and that was something offered through an alum just to students. And right around the same time, a mentor who was paired with me through GWSB, Madelyn Jennings, who I believe was on the board of the school at the time, she sent me an article about the founder of that company and said, "I came across this, this seems like the type of company [inaudible 00:08:11]."

Anthony Shop:

And so these two things happened at the same time, sort of serendipitously through these GW connections. And then I applied to work there in the summer as sort of a summer fellow graduate internship position and worked in government relations, but then I transitioned over to business development when I realized that that's something that really I was passionate about. So yes, I mean a hundred percent, that's the story. It came through those connections, those relationships being open to those and I just am so fortunate, who would have guessed that, that kind of random thing would have happened, but it did.

Liesl Riddle:

So take us back to that New Venture competition. If you can kind of remember, what was your mind frame going into that competition? What were you hoping to get out of it? And was there anything that you got out of it that you had not anticipated?

Anthony Shop:

It was kind of like a fun lark. It was like, "Hey, there's this thing, you could win money." If we sign up for this, it'll force us to put some of these ideas down on paper. And I got us signed up with that in mind, and we'd been working on a side project that is sort of what sort of turned into our specific project for the competition. What I got out of it that I didn't expect was relationships and mentorships.

Anthony Shop:

We were assigned a mentor, The competition matches you with somebody, a guy named Michael [Grove 00:09:38], who was an entrepreneur and just, he was so encouraging but also pushed us. Like, "I don't understand why is it set up this way? Why..." He was really pushing us on some of the things, as well as Professor Lynda Maddox was paired up with us when we became a finalist to help us prepare for the pitch and she helped us totally restructure the way we were going to do it. And those are people we keep in touch with. In fact, Michael's a good friend. I'll probably see him pretty soon. And so I didn't anticipate, I thought maybe we'll get lucky and win some money, but if not, it'll be a good process. I didn't imagine, oh, 10 years later they're going to be people that we keep in contact with.

Anthony Shop:

And then I've been a mentor to others in the competition, I've been a judge at different levels. And Thomas was actually a finalist round judge this year, that's the big time judges, the final judges, and so that was pretty cool that 10 years later he got to serve in that role. So yeah, it's been-

Liesl Riddle:

[crosstalk 00:10:32] that's special.

Anthony Shop:

So yeah, it's just such an important part of our lives that's continued on.

Liesl Riddle:

So what I remember from this business back in the day was that you all had kind of a much more narrowly defined sort of time span that you were thinking you were going to be doing this particular business. What I remember is that there wasn't a ten-year plan for this business originally, am I correct in my memory?

Anthony Shop:

Yeah, and so we were starting Social Driver around that time, but we also co-created a product with a friend of ours that was specific to car dealerships, and that's the product that we actually pitched in the competition. That's actually what our friend is in that business now and is very successful in that area, and we sort of doubled down on the Social Drivers services. And to be honest, when we started Thomas and I wanted to be able to travel together and have a sense of freedom and kind of own our own jobs, I mean, that's really why we wanted to start a company. But then as we started to see more opportunity to help bigger clients, we realized we need to grow, we need to hire people. And so we started on that path just growing organically, which is what we've done over the last 10 years.

Anthony Shop:

And it's pretty amazing to look back and just see that we've worked with hundreds and hundreds of clients and helped them achieve some pretty amazing goals, whether that's... We're all about helping companies connect with people today, so whether that's building a website ecosystem of multiple websites for the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, which is chaired by Tom Hanks and having him shout out our website on the Today Show, or whether it's working with companies, nonprofit organizations like Goodwill to help them fight misinformation that is a threat to their brand with social media strategies. Or working with just major brands like Target and Amazon to figure out how to bring those to life, whether it's on websites or videos or social media, that's the kind of stuff that we do now.

Anthony Shop:

So of course like any business that evolves, it's a little bit different from what we envisioned back 10 years ago, but at the core we have this mantra that I think still persists. We always like to say, number one, the future is bright, we're optimistic and we just see that all these amazing things are possible that didn't use to be possible.

Anthony Shop:

But number two, progress is social. We can only do that by working together. And if you're a company, your customers are your marketing so you have to incorporate them in a way that you never used to have to or could.

Anthony Shop:

And three, the drivers make history. We can't sit on the sidelines and say, "Well, let everybody else do stuff and catch up later." We have to try things even though sometimes those things won't work out the way we thought, because we will learn from them. And in today's fast moving environment you have to be a driver, otherwise you're going to be passed by. So that mantra is something that we came up with 10 years ago to really inspire us and drive us forward and it's still applies perfectly today, even though so many other things have changed. I mean, Instagram wasn't around back then. The world's changed a lot, but those core tenants and principles are still with us.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, and to that point about how the world's changed a lot, how have you ensured that the organization and the human resources within the organization remain up to speed? Because it is such a fast changing, dynamic, incredibly competitive environment.

Anthony Shop:

Yeah. I mean, I just think we're so fortunate that we have amazing people. Thomas really leads the business from a management standpoint, and over the years, I mean, I'm proud that I've helped to find some of those amazing people and bring them on board. And our second employee and third employee are still with us today as major leaders in the company. Our very first employee is a client.

Anthony Shop:

So we've had a really good track record of building great relationships and they just constantly are pushing the limit. One of our values is believe we can do better. We're never going to rest on our laurels, no matter what good benefit we put in place, no matter what good process we put in place, we always have to reevaluate and make things better. And we have to listen to the people on the team because they're the ones who come up with those great ideas and tell us where we can be better. I'm good at the things I'm good at, but I can give you a full list of things that I'm not so good at and I'm so thankful we have pretty tremendous people on our team who just impress me every day with their ability to take us to the next level time and again, it's pretty awesome.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, walk us through, how is the organization organized in terms of its structure? Are you organized by geography? Are you organized by function? And how do all the different, because I know you're in different places, how do all the different component parts work together?

Anthony Shop:

Yeah, so roughly half our team's in the D.C. area and the other half are spread out across five other cities, because of that, we have always, or for a very long time, well, really always, because we've always... Our second employee was not in our city, so we always have worked with folks from around the country. We've always relied on technology as a superpower to let us do more. We use Slack for communication. We use Asana for project management. And then we have our own sort of systems that we sort of use to layer on these things and make sure that we're doing the best that we can do.

Anthony Shop:

So the pandemic, while a major challenge with so many downsides, we were able to weather it better than many of our clients because we already had those systems in place. And they looked to us to say, "How do you do this? We need to start doing these things too." They had never done video meetings before. They had never thought about how to use structure tasks and information in a way that could be easy to follow and to update, even if you're not in the same physical space with people.

Anthony Shop:

So we're organized functionally even though we are spread out geographically, and we have an operations team that handles the HR and finance and core operations of our business, we have account management that helps us build and keep those client relationships. And then we have functional teams for our delivery, so whether it's our creative and social team where they're helping to do that sort of digital and social media marketing side, or it's the team that does websites, that does the strategy and they help design and build and maintain websites. So we're able to pull in the right people at the right time. And then we have just amazing project managers that we couldn't live without because they help tie all that together and keep track of everything.

Liesl Riddle:

What kinds of things are you... We have a lot of listeners that are current students, potential students that are interested in getting into this digital marketing industry and are getting ready to start their journeys, their learning journeys with us. So question for you, what are the kinds of skills or particular types of classes that you think students that want to kind of make a mark in this industry really need to be seeking when they come to GWSB?

Anthony Shop:

Yeah, I think it's so important to balance those hard skills and soft skills. I mean, if you're good at sales or you're good at building relationships or maybe you're good at being organized and doing project management, figure out what some of those softer skills are and really lean into them and hone them. But then at the same time, building some hard skills, whether that's learning how to use a certain social media metrics software or Google analytics or running ads. And what's great is there's so much of that base that you can learn in the classroom and then you can compliment it with there's certain things that you can learn online that you can compliment, and it's not going to replace what the skills in the classroom, of course, but it can help you add an extra little bullet and an extra bit of knowledge to what you're doing. And I think by pulling all that together, you can really differentiate yourself and tell the story of what you want to contribute to an organization.

Anthony Shop:

I think no matter what you do in today's world if you're providing services, you have to put the customer at the center and you have to listen. Where's the market going? What do people need help with? Because if you have a product or service that you think is great and it's just not what people need, it's not probably going to be super successful, but by listening and understanding what the customers need and where the market's going, you can then provide those services. And that's great for your business strategy and also it's the most helpful to the world, it also just feels really good because it's nice to be doing things that people genuinely need and are appreciative of. So the sky's the limit, I think leveraged all those resources in the business school, but leverage the alumni. I mean, I just learned so much going on a career track to New York, doing my international consulting project in Serbia, meeting with alumni across town. I mean, that's just such an important compliment to all the great stuff that I was able to learn and put into practice in the classroom.

Liesl Riddle:

It's just such a joy to be able to hear all these years later about how you put it all together, how it's grown, because I remember those early days. It's really special, I think being a professor at GW because you can just see the talent that's there and you know it's just going to go far, and it's so great to see you get the recognition and really build something that's really made such an incredible impact in the industry and then on the people that work for you. And I know the organization's won all kinds of recognitions and awards, including the Business of the Year Award from the LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce. So tell me how important is this type of recognition for you and your business?

Anthony Shop:

Well, thanks for all of your wonderful compliments. I mean, just your fingerprints and GW's fingerprints are just all over all this stuff. So you should feel like you can take some credit for it, and we certainly believe that. The recognition is so great to get because I think especially, just it validates for our team. Anytime we win one of these awards we're nominated by clients for this stuff, and it just is a testament to the work that our team does. The National LGBT Chamber naming us their business of the year, I mean, I can remember the very first time we attended that event, I was a student, we were volunteers that went for free to help do registration and we were seated way at the back of the room. And we just thought, this is an amazing community. And fast forward six or so years later, we're on stage accepting that big award. I mean, it was just so surreal. And we had a whole table of teammates with us there to cheer us on and my parents were there.

Anthony Shop:

And so it means a lot, and I think... But more than just an award, it was a symbol of what an important community the LGBTQ business community is. I can remember when we started our business, it was just the two of us. And you walk into a meeting with somebody, you don't know their political or personal beliefs. And it's like, "Do we say that we're a couple, do we say that we're gay?" It can be a little bit awkward, you don't want to leave something of yourself behind, but you also don't want to just volunteer some irrelevant information. And when we became involved and we're honored by the chamber, it's a totally different story when you can walk in the room and say, "We were the business of the year for the National LGBT Chamber." It's a way to be very open about your identity and how your diverse perspective can bring new and innovative ideas to the table. And also show that you've been recognized for your contributions to that community and to the business community.

Anthony Shop:

I've said many times that that being part of communities, and for us NGLCC, but it could be a lot of different communities, it helps businesses become more competitive. It helps them become more connected to other important partners and businesses, but also helps them become more confident. And those are three really key ingredients of success for a business. And just, we are just so thankful anytime we get one of those recognitions, because it just shows that our team is continuing to raise the bar.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, I was particularly excited when I heard that news, because I remember back in 2009, you helped start our student chapter Out for Business and really helped grow it, and that's been such a very important part of our GWSB community.

Anthony Shop:

Oh, well, we were so appreciative of the support GW gave to us. And yeah, a group of us were going to the Reaching Out MBA Conference and we just realized that we needed to have a group on campus. And not only was it LGBTQ students in the School of Business who joined, but a number of allies, like my friend Melissa [McClain 00:23:47], I remember was one of the most evolved hardworking members and joined as an ally to be part of what we were doing. And I mean, that was just a great opportunity for us to help one another. But it also, we then went and partnered with the local Capitol area LGBT Chamber, it's now called the Equality Chamber, and we did a great networking event with them that was just a real success and people made business connections. We certainly did, and made connections that can help us grow our businesses.

Anthony Shop:

So yeah, I think those types of affinity groups are really important and it gives us an opportunity to bring everything we are to everything we do and use all of those unique attributes of ourselves to contribute even more and help solve problems in different ways, and that's what it's all about. We want to be in the business world because we know that we can contribute and make the world a little bit better, leave it a little bit better than how we found it. And I think we have to invite everybody to be a part of that and have a seat at the table if we really want to realize that goal.

Liesl Riddle:

I really love the fact that the business is called Social Driver, because when I think of you, Anthony, the word community comes first and foremost, directly to mind. You have been such an important part of the GSB community as a student, but also as alumni member coming back. You have taught, you have guest lectured, you have been mentor, you have been advisor, we're just so grateful for everything that you do for our students then and now. So thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

Anthony Shop:

Thank you, it was such an honor. And I just thank you for everything that you all have done and continue to do for entrepreneurs, businesses, business students. Thank you so much.

Liesl Riddle:

(singing)

Liesl Riddle:

That's all for this episode. Thanks for listening today. Shout out for music credit to Plantain Papi also known as Michael Ferrier, GW class of 2020. See you next time to learn more ways we are GWSB Proud. (singing)