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With Your Host

Crystal Cooper

Welcome to Net Worthwhile, Do More with Your Wealth, a podcast designed to explore financial topics from a broader perspective than just the numbers. We'll look at the emotional impact of financial decisions and how you can use your wealth to live a great life. Thank you for tuning in.

Crystal Cooper: Thank you, guys, again for joining us on Net Worthwhile. We, again, have two guests with us today, so that's exciting. Joining us again is Elizabeth Burdette, director of client engagement for Signature Generosity.

Elizabeth Burdette: Hey, hey.

Crystal Cooper: Awesome. We have a new guest, Michael Lennox. Now he's got a laundry full of titles, which is awesome. He is the founder for Atlanta Family Meal, which he's going to talk about in a little bit here and he's also the CEO and founder of Electric Hospitality, which is the group that houses some of our favorite restaurants here in Atlanta.

Michael Lennox: Hello. Thanks for having me.

- Crystal Cooper: Of course. Of course. So you've got these two titles, right? So it's sort of this merger of a couple of worlds. I want to talk a little bit about that. How did you take this journey from business owner to non-profit leader? What inspired that?
- Michael Lennox: Sure. So I'll try to keep it brief, but I'm born and raised in Atlanta. I went to law school after college, practiced for a split second and realized I didn't really have any interest in being a lawyer long-term and was looking for something more entrepreneurial. So end of 2012,

beginning of 2013, the BeltLine had just opened up and I'd been tracking the BeltLine for a long time, wound up stumbling on a space that I thought would be perfect for an outdoor-oriented restaurant concept, ended up one thing led to another, [inaudible 00:01:52] out the landlord, ended up leasing the space and decided to take the plunge. So we ended up opening Ladybird and the fall of 2014 and have really kind of kept one foot on the gas since then.

So we opened our other two restaurants, Muchacho and Golden Eagle a few years after Ladybird and then formed Electric Hospitality a year after that to help build up our organization. Then fast forward to spring of this year, COVID started to roll in from Asia and then Europe and by the beginning of March, we're seeing various things happening in New York and Seattle. So it seemed to me like it was a matter of time before Atlanta was going to be experiencing a similar type of lockdown. So I was imagining, "What happens if we need to close our restaurants? What happens if tons of other restaurants needed to close here in town and what do we do under that circumstance?"

So the outcome that I kept landing on was, "If we have 300,000 or so hospitality workers here in Atlanta, if most of the restaurants are closed for a meaningful period of time, that'll leave hundreds of thousands of people that are already living on the margins economically in a pretty dire circumstance. So we need to do whatever we can to parlay the resources that we have at our disposal to help feed and support people in our community that have been feeding us and providing us with awesome service and hospitality for so long." So that was the origin of ATL

Family Meal and we ended up officially forming and pushing off the day after we closed our three restaurants temporarily, which was March 16th, and started making food and trying to get it out to people that were out of work.

- Crystal Cooper: That's a really awesome story. I love to share a little bit about myself and give a face to SignatureFD when I'm talking about these sometimes, so this really sings to me. I grew up in a very poor household and a lot of times, my only meal came from school and if school is not happening, then what happens? So I love hearing that story. Tell me a little bit more about what did you do to get it started and how does it all work together?
- Michael Lennox: Sure. So our kind of core thesis was centered around the fact that if people are going to be out of work and going through a quarantine and stuck at their homes, it would make not very much sense to then ask them if they're out of money and aren't receiving a paycheck, "Hey, you should now leave your house and go across town or wherever to go get food." That just didn't make any sense to me, so we started to build up our infrastructure around producing meals in restaurant kitchens and then delivering them out to people's homes and addresses, wherever they live around town.

So I don't have a tech background at all and so a key piece to the puzzle here was me reaching out to a friend of mine the first week who's big in the tech world and said, "Hey, we need some tech and logistics support. Do you have anybody that you know that could help?" He introduced me to his cousins who are in the tech and logistics world and they had jumped in full force, built up a

platform so that we could quickly reach out to GMs that are owners of restaurants around town that we know, ask if they have any staff that are out of work or are experiencing food insecurity. Then they would circulate a very quick form in English and Spanish to their staff so we could reach 50, 100 staff or more just with the click of a button.

Then once the staff receive it, they just fill out a quick form, gets in our network and then we coordinate meal production with local restaurants to line up the right amount of meals for the number of people receiving meals and then do all the routing for Lyft and Zifty, Lyft being the rideshare company and Zifty being the local meal delivery company here in Atlanta. Then they'd come around a few times a week and pick up six meals per household and go on a sort of post office route. They'll do 10 addresses at a time and so they can do pretty tight turns and efficient deliveries, which has allowed us to cover a lot of ground. We're now delivering across 20 counties in Metro Atlanta and of the 125,000 meals since we started.

Elizabeth Burdette: Wow.

- Crystal Cooper: That's crazy. So let me know if I'm hearing this correctly. Did you do all of this in four or five months? Am I understanding that correctly?
- Michael Lennox: Yeah. So it's been a bit of a blur, if I'm being honest, but we literally started March 16th and the big picture pieces we put in place. We formed a non-profit, filed our 501c3, built up the digital infrastructure and then we were able to scale up from maybe 500 meals a week to after about a month, we were doing about 5,000 and had five or six

restaurants involved at that point. Within maybe the first four or six weeks, we got to a point where we had staff who were out of work from over 200 bars, breweries, restaurants, hotels, just a wide variety of hospitality businesses in Metro Atlanta that were in our network receiving meals, all of which really wouldn't have been made possible had we not had some horsepower on the tech and logistics side to really help supercharge things. But yeah, it's definitely been a lot of work and we've moved pretty quickly and I'm really proud of the just incredible effort of so many people that have come together to help make this possible.

- Crystal Cooper: That's incredible. Elizabeth, could you talk a little bit about how you guys work together before you start? Just so we can get the lay of the land.
- Elizabeth Burdette: Yeah. So Michael and I actually went to the same high school. We did not know each other in high school because I am his elder, but we did graduate from the same high school and he is actually friends with my brother, Jay, who is a partner at SignatureFD as well-

Crystal Cooper: How nice.

Elizabeth Burdette: Also, Michael and I have in common that we're both recovering attorneys. I think I practiced slightly longer than he did, but not much, before we each found our own callings. So Jay connected us, I think it was sometime in the spring, Michael, maybe in May, just to say, "Michael is doing this really amazing thing. You're in the generosity and philanthropy space. Maybe you could kind of put your heads together and brainstorm some things." Honestly, it has been the most amazing experience just to watch. To your point, Crystal, over just a handful of months,

[crosstalk 00:09:30] what he's built. I hope Michael will get into this more about kind of the comparison and contrasting between running a private company and then running a non-profit.

But what strikes me in talking to him both today and then over the course of our relationship is, well not only the speed with which he acted. He founded his 501c3 the day after he closed his restaurants in mid-March, which is astounding, but also what stands out to me is how targeted he was in his response to COVID. So, and I think that's a really good example and lesson for other people who are looking to be generous and give back. They don't necessarily need to start their own non-profit, but the precision, kind of laser precision that Michael had. He is in the restaurant industry and so he saw a very specific issue in the restaurant industry, which is restaurant workers being very food insecure when their places of employment are closed and that is what he chose to tackle. So I think that is really instructive on a broader scale of sometimes you don't need to solve every single problem.

Pick the one that is the one that is closest to you and maybe go after that, so that precision really stuck out to me. Then the other thing that stuck out to me is Michael was really smart from the beginning and he leveraged his network. He talked about reaching out to his buddy and using his cousins and his connections in tech and using all of his business contacts to really get this going. I think that's another lesson for people who are looking to give back to the communities. Don't be afraid to tap into those networks that you have or whatever skills or resources that you have, not just financial, to create a greater impact

and create momentum because that's exactly what Michael did. I think, I don't know of many case studies, although COVID is certainly unique, but I don't know if many case studies of somebody who is able to do so much in such a short amount of time.

Crystal Cooper: So I kind of want to dive into that a little bit, Elizabeth, because what you're describing and what Michael described here really digs deep into our philosophy with Signature Generosity, right? It is that volunteering or being generous does not stop at your wallet.

Elizabeth Burdette: Right.

- Crystal Cooper: It is a combination of your values and the many resources that you have that can make an impact. Dive a little bit into that for me, if you don't mind, because it's an interesting look at generosity that I don't think everybody takes.
- Elizabeth Burdette: I think, and Michael in your case, you could have said, "I'm going to get a bunch of my restaurant industry people together and we're going to write a check to, fill in the blank, Atlanta Community Food Bank, Meals on Wheels," whatever the other related organization might've been. But I think the real power in your story is, yes, you could have done that, but I think your real strength and power was in everything I just mentioned, your network, your skills, your knowledge, your infrastructure. So leveraging all of that, you've done vastly more than just picking up the phone and saying, "Hey guys, let's write a check."

So I think that's what we try to do, to your point, Crystal, with Signature Generosity is getting people to think

outside the box. Of course, giving financially is hugely important, but let's think about the other ways that you can contribute. If you're not in a position to contribute financially, that by no means limits the way that you can give back to your community and help the lives of others. So I think Michael is a really cool ... you're a really cool example of that, of just kind of pulling all the levers of how you can get involved.

Michael Lennox: I super appreciate the feedback and insight. The one thing I would add just to kind of support this thread here is this is really propelled by a crisis, so it's not like I was sitting around and kind of workshopping this, that and the other. It just was an overwhelming moment of, "This is going to be a huge problem. There are a ton of people that are going to need some help and I know how diverse this population is and how much it cuts across all geographic."

> This is a problem for all neighborhoods in Atlanta. It's not just in one little pocket of town or anything. So we're talking tons of people. If we're talking about food and food insecurity and hunger, there's no way, or at least at the time specifically, and still now today, but especially in March, I was like, "There's no way that as awesome as they are at the food bank and all the other organizations, they aren't going to be able to pick up the slack overnight if they just have this tidal wave of people that have profound need just out of the thin air."

> So it was definitely a combination of seeing some gaps in the response that were likely to happen and then knowing how to reach our community really quickly by working the network, as you said, and recognizing that if I call this one

person, they can get the information out to 500 people really easily and that'll help scale the effort more rapidly than if we were just kind of having to just start making some food out of the kitchen and see who shows up.

- Crystal Cooper: Elizabeth, you make a really good point. Michael, why not a check? Why did you do this? Why did you decide to create something much larger than money?
- Michael Lennox: So it's funny that Elizabeth made that example, because I actually was on a call and I'll leave this anonymous because there's ... intentions were very pure, but I was on a call with a bunch of different people that are leaders in the restaurant industry in one form or fashion a few days before we closed our restaurants and a few days before we officially started this and we're having a conversation about it was all around ATL Family Meal like, "Are we going to do this or not?" Karen Bremer, who's the head of the Georgia Restaurant Association set up the call and pulled in a bunch of influential people. Several of them were like, "We shouldn't waste our time with this. We should just try to get some support for the food bank," or whatever.

I was like, "This is not an either/or kind of thing from my perspective. It's a this and that and if we don't do the and yeah, the food bank needs ... " We're doing a collaboration with the food bank right now. I feel like I'm bad-mouthing them or something. They do incredible work, but they're just an upper limit to how much any one organization can take on themselves and if we are able to target a particular part of the population and get food out in a more novel way that other organizations aren't doing. We're going straight to people's homes. It's not like

[crosstalk 00:16:56] do it from a center somewhere or they got to come get in a line in their car and pick it up.

This could not be more rapid to get food where it needs to go. So those were just the philosophical and strategic beliefs that I had. I was like, "We're uniquely positioned to do this. We know how to make food. I'm confident we can figure out how to deliver it to people and we know where they are, so there's really nothing holding us back. I think our time and energy would be better served by taking this on ourselves rather than kind of ... " It'd be a lot easier to just write some checks and hand it off to somebody else, but I don't know if it would be as effective.

Crystal Cooper: So it's interesting, Elizabeth, because Michael had the obvious thought process of, "I want to do something bigger. I want to do something greater." We work with clients who are like, "I don't know. I have this wealth. What do I do with it?" I'm big on 'what if' questions, so forgive me here, but what would you do if Michael had come to you and said, "I want to help." How would you get him from that vision of giving a check to, "I think this could be bigger. Let's talk about that?"

Elizabeth Burdette: It's a great question and I have a great model because he did it all on his own. But hypothetically speaking, when we do work with clients who present similar questions like that in the generosity space, I absolutely start with, "What are you passionate about? What are your values and what are you passionate about? Not what do you think you should care about or what does your neighbor, Sally, care about, but what do you care about and what is in your sphere of influence?" So getting people to be more realistic and honest in

response to those questions. So back to my earlier point with you, Michael, is that COVID presented unlimited challenges to all of society, but you picked one that specifically aligned with your sphere of influence, your skills and your network.

So I think that really is a perfect overlay with what we try to do with clients and with families, which is you have to start with the personal because you're not going to be as effective and it's not going to be as rewarding if you try to do something that maybe is a little bit more removed from you. Now, personal could be around the world. It could be on the other side of the world that something that resonates with you. I'm not saying it has to be local, but it does need to be something, a cause or an organization that aligns with your values and what you're passionate about on a deeply individual level. Then the icing on the cake is when you align your skills and your sphere of influence with that passion. So perfect example is somebody who's an accountant by trade and they go and leverage those accounting skills to sit on a board and be on the finance committee of a non-profit. That kind of thing.

How can you add value the most effectively in the most rewarding way? I think, Michael, what jumps out off the page to me is your entrepreneurialism because fellow former attorney, you looked at being an attorney and was like, "This is not for me." What an enormous risk you took, frankly, signing a lease for a building on the BeltLine when it was in its nascent stage and turning it into this series of restaurants and the vision and the courage that that took. It's the exact same vision and courage that it took to go out and start ATL Family Meal in the middle of

a pandemic. So clearly your sweet spot is entrepreneurialism and I just think that that's where we try to get clients to start is, "Where are you coming from at an individual or family level and how can we match that with the need in the world?" Because there's always going to be a need. That's not the issue. It's lining it up with where you are coming from and what's going to be the most rewarding for you.

- Crystal Cooper: Here's the thing I also love about that is it's a combination of obviously, what you said, Elizabeth, your values, what you hold firm to, but there's some heart in there. One of the things I like about this, Michael, there's huge heart in there obviously, but one of the things I like about this is I think you have to be close to the problem to think through the intricacies that others may not. One of those things are, if you are food insecure, you may not have a car. My family never had a car, so you thought through that because your heart is so close to it.
- Michael Lennox: That's exactly right. We have, pre-COVID, 125 staff in our restaurants and we have a small office behind Ladybird, but I'm in and out of the restaurants multiple times a day. I know all our dishwashers and servers and bussers and bartenders and cooks and you name it. These people are like family, but it's also obvious that a lot of our staff, and this is true of all restaurants really, the average hourly wage nationally is \$13 an hour. So you're talking, even if you're working full-time, after taxes, three or 400 bucks a week. This is a really small sum of money and so, the standard of living is very thin for a ton of folks working in restaurants and it sort of seemed pretty obvious to me that if somebody has \$0 in their bank account, asking

them to go get a ride or get on MARTA or walk across town or whatever is just like kind of adding insult to injury.

- Crystal Cooper: Absolutely. Absolutely. Another question I have is I think everybody's going to hear this and they're going to say, "Wow. I can change the world too." In fact, I'm feeling that energy. So I imagine we'll get that. I want to ground some people a little bit. What are some of the hurdles you faced once you started pulling this together? [crosstalk 00:23:23] You laughed, so [crosstalk 00:23:25]
- Michael Lennox: I think I, for better or worse, have this affliction of entrepreneurialism or however Elizabeth was describing it so eloquently. It's, I think, having the spark to me is, whether you're entrepreneurial or not, that that speaks to the values. It speaks to the passion and it speaks to ... nothing is going to be easy. If you're trying to support a cause or make an impact, I don't know of any silver bullet opportunities out there to be like, "Oh, well, if I just do this or I just do that, we can just wipe this problem away and move on to the next one."

That's just not how it works and so I think step one, if you're evaluating a cause or something to get behind, it's like, "Maybe next month I might be more interested in something else. It's like maybe [crosstalk 00:24:25] get behind. It's like five years from now, at least a year from now, but five years, 10 years, 20 years from now, where do I see this particular issue being and what can I do to support it? Am I going to find some longterm value out of this?"

That doesn't mean solve the problem in five years, 10 years, 20 years, it just means engage, interest and by having the ability to stick with it, I think that's a massively

important ingredient to actually affect change because then you run through whatever walls come your way and overcome obstacles and creatively find solutions and do all the things that you need to do to move the ball further down the field. So that to me is probably the top ingredient. It's just a gut check look in the mirror. How seriously do I feel about wanting to do something about this issue?

- Crystal Cooper: It sounds to me like you had a lot of hurdles that you had to overcome, but as long as you were staying true to the mission, is that sort of what kept you with your North Star?
- Michael Lennox: Yeah. That's the cleanest, most succinct way to put it is like, "What is your personal mission and does this align and if it doesn't align, we'll find something else that does," [crosstalk 00:25:47] because you're going to be going in the wrong direction and your heart's not going to be in it, so ...
- Crystal Cooper: And Elizabeth, we just rolled out some tools that we're super excited about with Signature Generosity that allow people to kind of figure out what those values are. It's interesting. I'm also reading a book right now that talks about leadership and it also talks about leading based on your values and when you're doing that, then you don't sway. I know we have those tools on the side, of course, Elizabeth, but you're in these conversations. I've actually taken quizzes myself of like, "What do I believe?" I have a lot of beliefs but beliefs are one thing and values are totally different. How do you have those conversations? How do you even start to solidify those down to, "These are my solid three that I am believing in and that's it?"

Elizabeth Burdette: That's a great question. I think for some people it's as simple as looking at a list of words and what jumps out at you off the page as something that resonates with you. But for a lot of people it's, I start by asking open-ended questions like, "What are you grateful for in your life? What patterns do you see in your life?" So obviously for you, Michael, we just talked about being an entrepreneur. So that's a pattern for you. That is clearly a theme in your life. I would go out on a limb to say that that's a value for you and as a business owner and now as a leader of a young non-profit.

> So I think it's asking those open-ended questions that encourage people to reflect. So again, things like, what are you grateful for? What keeps you up at night? What gets you up in the morning? What patterns do you see? What are your earliest memories from childhood and why do you think you remember that? Why did that particular thing stand out? This gets into a little bit of the therapy zone, so I have to be careful because I'm not a therapist, although sometimes I play one in these meetings is, "Why did you pick your spouse or your partner? What is it about them that drew you?"

> All these kinds of things that are the underlying crux of who we are as individuals that anything you can do to pull that out of people, again, it could be like, for example, with our tools, we show people a list of values and see what jumps out at them and then we have a conversation from there as a launching point. It also involves asking those open-ended questions to get at the heart of kind of what people's life stories are, because what your life story is, is probably most likely going to be what informs what

you're passionate about and what your values are and where you want to go in the future as well.

- Crystal Cooper: So is there a recommendation on how many you should have? The book I'm reading right now says three, but I've heard others.
- Elizabeth Burdette: Yeah. The number I typically play with this five, but some people can't get it down to five and some people can't get it up to five. So, I like to think five is a helpful number if you're talking about a couple. If you're trying to come up with values as a couple or in a partnership, probably for an individual, three is probably fine. But I think it's such a fluid, personal kind of conversation that I don't think the number is what's important. I do think the more focused you are and the more specific you are, the better, so if you have one that's great.
- Crystal Cooper: Do you think, Michael, that you've defined your values? I know that entrepreneurship is being thrown on you here, but do you feel like you've defined yours?
- Michael Lennox: The short answer is, yes. The [crosstalk 00:29:35] longer answer is so we have a mission statement for ATL Family Meal, but we also have a mission for Electric Hospitality. We have a symbol that's, I wouldn't call it our logo necessarily, but it's basically a hand holding three lightning bolts and each of the three comes out on both sides. So I guess it's three or six lightning bolts, depending on how you look at it, but this all folds into the mission and each of the lightning bolts on the right-hand side represents positive energy, creativity and connectivity, which are words that have a literal relationship to electricity, which is the root word in our hospitality group.

So we talk a lot about positive energy, creativity with light bulb being the symbol and connectivity in terms of you need to have two poles to connect and have a circuit. Again, that's the literal, but we're all about connecting with our staff, our guests, our community. The other side of the equation is whenever we bring positive energy, creativity, connectivity to our food and beverage, our service and our vibe, the ambience, the experience, the sort of je nais se qois, that combination creates what we call an electric experience.

Crystal Cooper: Interesting.

Elizabeth Burdette: I love that.

Michael Lennox: So, and the most summarized way is, our mission is to bring peace and love to our guests, community and team by creating and sharing as many electric experiences as possible.

Crystal Cooper: I love that.

Elizabeth Burdette: I love that too.

Michael Lennox: So that fairly elaborate, wind up that within all that is the core values to me, which is the creativity, positive energy, connectivity and applying it in all the ways that I was hopefully articulating just now.

Crystal Cooper: No, I love that. I love that.

Elizabeth Burdette: I think what's really cool about that, Michael, is that so clearly translates to ATL Family Meal. To me, that's like a seamless, I know you were saying it applies to both, but that is such a seamless partnership between your forprofit and your non-profit. I just think that is so cool. It's

almost like you just pivoted. You took everything you already were embracing and just pivoted and put it into a different space, which is really cool.

- Michael Lennox: That's how I look at it and that's why it's honestly been a little hard to distinguish and have this binary like, :I'm in non-profit land. I'm in for-profit land," which is [crosstalk 00:32:35] me, it's all coming from the same place.
- Crystal Cooper: Well, so there was a reason I actually asked that because I think, and at least I can say this for myself, when I used to think of values, I thought for lack of a better term, sort of the ambiguous language and more quote/unquote, fluffy language, like being generous, being nice, things like that. When you look at these lists, even, I really do encourage people to try that tool on our site because when you look at the list of values, it can be things that feel more solid and business-driven like entrepreneurship or on our last podcast, if you guys listened, Elizabeth said resilience. I never would've thought of that as a value necessarily, but more as an attribute and when you're starting to narrow these things down, one thing can sort of beget the other. So if you feel like perseverance and courage are both, it could be that the courage is just the thing that drives the perseverance, but perseverance is the real value.

Elizabeth Burdette: Totally.

Crystal Cooper: I asked that because I'm really diving into this myself. I will be Frank. I have not figured out my solid vibe yet and I'm really trying. I really am-

Elizabeth Burdette: I can help you with that, Crystal.

Crystal Cooper: I know. I know. It's funny, I'm seriously reading this book and the book itself has a page where it's got this entire list of values and I got it down to, I want to say eight. Then as I started reading more, I was like, "But that doesn't feel right because they can't be fluid." So it's interesting. Well, this has been awesome. I want to make sure people know where to go if they want to help the organization. So it is atlfamilymeal.org. Is that correct, Michael?

Michael Lennox: Yep. You got it.

- Crystal Cooper: Awesome. Awesome. I'm assuming there's a plethora of ways to help, time, money.
- Elizabeth Burdette: Yeah. So if you go to atlfamilymeal.org, you can learn more about the organization. You can donate. We're not broadcasting this per se, but there are lots, because we're a new organization, lots of opportunities to provide professional service, soft skill support, pro bono to kind of help guide our direction and help build up infrastructure and that sort of thing right now.
- Crystal Cooper: Awesome. Awesome. If you are interested in seeing some of the values gamification components that we've added to our site, you can absolutely go to signaturefd.com/signature generosity. So thank you guys, both. I really appreciate this. It's always a pleasure to talk with you, Elizabeth and Michael. It's been awesome. This is such an awesome story and I wish you guys a lot of luck.

Michael Lennox: Thank you so much for having me. Enjoyed it.

Elizabeth Burdette: Thank you, Michael.

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