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Chad Chancellor: Welcome to this week's episode of the Next Move Group We Are Jobs podcast. This is Chad Chancellor, co-founder of Next Move Group. Today, we've got Joseph Boylan with us. He's executive director of the Wilkes-Barre Connect up in Pennsylvania. Joseph, I think you're our first Pennsylvania guest. You might not have been. We might have had somebody who grew up there that's moved around, but I think you're our first Pennsylvania guest and Joseph's organization is really doing some impressive things in innovation and entrepreneurship that I think

our listeners are going to get a lot out of. So, Joseph, thank you for being with us today. Why don't you tell us a little bit about Wilkes-Barre?

Joseph Boylan: Yes, first of all, thank you for having me on. It's an interesting fact; I'm the first one from Pennsylvania. So, just--

Chad Chancellor: I think you are. We may have had somebody who grew up there that moved elsewhere. I think you're the first Pennsylvanian.

Joseph Boylan: Well, hopefully, you'll hear in the podcast the reason why that is quite interesting. You hear someone from Wilkes-Barre first outside the major metro area. So, Wilkes-Barre is located northeast of Pennsylvania. We're part of the Scranton--Wilkes-Barre--Hazleton MSA region which constitutes about half a million people and we have become one of the top ten locations for logistics in the country basically because we sit right on the interstates of 81, 80, and 476.

In addition, we're two hours away from most metro large areas; New York City, a few hour drive from Boston as well, and Baltimore as well. So, we're just sitting at this interesting location northeastern Pennsylvania where folks like Adidas and chewy.com had it going here all setting up million square foot distribution hubs within the past 12 months here.

Chad Chancellor: I know you guys are doing some cool stuff with entrepreneurship. The more we're in business-- we started out business six years ago and everybody just wanted manufacturing jobs and now with unemployment where it is, I think more and more people are doing entrepreneurial stuff which suits me because I'm an entrepreneur. So, I really like that and in reading what you all have done, I think you've done some different stuff than our listeners may be accustomed to. So, talk about some of the special things you all have done.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely. I think we made it a focus and when we launched Wilkes-Barre Connect, again, which is the entrepreneur and economic development arm of the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, that was a primary focus and we love to say that when we launched, innovation was dead here. It had some spurts. Entrepreneurs as in the economic development world we love to take credit for them, but they found their own way and for us, we just saw the impact they can have and we knew that we had to capture them and figure out how we can partner with them.

So, part of the focus on Connect is not only providing space. So, the THINK Center which I'm sitting in right now has co-working space. It's about 6,000 square foot. It's like a multimedia center, but now we have four downtown incubators and just opened the second accelerator building in the entire state of Pennsylvania. So, for us, all of those projects whether it's owned or in partnership with our local entrepreneurs who have been successful in the past 20 years here and so they've given their time, their money, and their resources to help really build the culture here.

So, starting with the co-working and working its way up the whether we're doing handholding to do some cap raises or going through the basics; the business plan fundamentals, we've really taken an effort to really focus on growing entrepreneurs because what we've seen there is a huge opportunity of folks that don't even know they're entrepreneurs and I think for us we've focused on them and letting them know that that idea that's been rattling around in their head, you are an entrepreneur. Come on in and let us take that idea, pull it out and really start to run with it for you and that's the beauty of what we can offer at Connect.

Chad Chancellor: And how do you find those folks? So, I grew with you 100%, but how do you target what is your messaging to get those people who have that idea to think of themselves maybe I am an entrepreneur so they come talk with you?

Joseph Boylan: Well, it's actually funny. It's a by-product of what Connect was intended to do. When Connect was formed, we had a staff that had at its heyday about 30 people. We are down to two. I was the second full-time person on board. So, Connect became an automated online system of which businesses can request services and what we did is simply identify some entrepreneur opportunities within there as well.

So, if we were walking down the street and someone said hey, I've got an idea, we sent them to wilkesbarreconnect.org, they completed an online form in about a minute saying hey, this is the idea I have. How can you help me? And from there, we enlisted our network of partners whether it's Wilkes University or Pennsylvania University or Ben Franklin Technology Partners. They were right by our side to come in and start taking that idea and running with it.

So, I think it was the ease of which people push that idea out from the comforts of their own living if they want to being in a crowd and getting that embarrassment factor. So, that's really been a huge component of how we've grown.

Chad Chancellor: I just think back to my own story. I had this idea for probably 10 years before we started the business. So, I'm glad we started when we did. I can see somebody pulling that out. The incubator space is also important. Just right now, our company we just made a decision we're probably going to hire somebody else here in the next month or two and we're in a building where we can kind of flex up into more offices as we need it and so I don't have to commit to a bigger office than I need or I get an extra one. So, all that stuff.

We have a lot of small towns listen to our podcast and so even the smallest of towns probably has an old building where they can do something like that with. What do you think has been your biggest success out of that program?

Joseph Boylan: I always go back to our friend Ian Robson who is the founder of American Paper Bag. Ian was a great story. He was part of two manufacturing companies out of Europe and had exclusivity for this manufacturing process and a specialized paper bag for North America and was out scouting locations. He was in Canada. He was in seven other states and accidentally came through Wilkes-Barre on his way down to Allentown near Philadelphia and walked in on the about third meeting we ever had with our Connect core partners.

So, we said come on in and chat with us and kind of fell in love with what we are trying to do here and so next thing you know he spent a weekend here. I gave him a tour of the entire northeast here. He fell in love. So, we set him up in our THINK Center. He was the first co-worker here with just his idea of launching his company.

He loves to say he was down here. It was just him and I, no coffee, no water. I think we had two chairs at that point and for us, he's grown now into about 45,000 square feet of manufacturing space in less than a year. Some of his clients include West Elm, Chipotle, Victoria's Secret, Wahlburgers. It's just expanded rapidly. We helped partner with him to secure some capital from out in the Seattle region and he has defied expectations already in his first year heading into around two.

We project to add about 35 new jobs, expand in that flat space to another 25,000 square feet next year and it's just been an amazing story to have him sitting in this little space. As Connect was born, Ian was born and American Paper Bag and now, some of the clients he's worked with is

incredible. Just to know that he's really-- he came through when we were starting and he's one of our proud children of the program.

Chad Chancellor: So, you also have flex space for manufactures. It's not just office space.

Joseph Boylan: Right. We're in a really interesting trajectory here. To get the industrial parks up and running, there was really a labor of love of the Chamber. We were developer of last resort and that now has led to private development taking over the variation of different industrial parks including Mericle Commercial which has CenterPoint Park, which is one of the fastest-growing parks in the country and what you see a dynamic that he has created is that flex space.

It's perfect for someone like Ian and American Paper Bag who started at about 10,000 square feet and needed to go to 25 and then to 40 and so for him, it allows him the space to grow with him as his company grows. So, that's been a huge selling point of what our private developers have done locally and really has been an attractive component.

As you know, as economic development long gone are the drag-out days. It's I need x amount of space. I need it yesterday. When can I be operational? I think the flex space has really been a great tool for us and the entire region to attract companies in.

Chad Chancellor: I do too and there are lots of small towns out there that have an old building, industrial building and maybe they can do something in and again, being an entrepreneur myself, we don't need manufacturing space. We need office space, but we have to flex in it. We're growing, so I got to add people and I just think that's huge for any entrepreneur to be able to flex up as they get contracts and not have to make long term commitments. So, I think that's probably a lot to do with why you've been successful and it's something our listeners can take away.

Our listeners know the coal miners are really important to me. I spent time in Kentucky. I was raised blue collar. My dad was a construction worker and the coal miners kind of remind me of that and we've done several shows on different things that are being done to help the coal miners find work in your part of the country. I know you guys have a program I think called coding the coal region I believe is the name that I am interested in. So, talk about this if you don't mind.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely. I think it's been something and speaking of Kentucky, there really leading that edge of addressing and actually specifically providing coding opportunities to the coal

miners and the generations there. I think it's something in Pennsylvania specifically northeastern Pennsylvania we wear as a badge. We're so proud of being a coal region and I think from our standpoint that has really driven our ability to-- in terms of the workforce determination, the hardworking folks that we have here I think it's been engrained in the next generations.

And for us, we talk about that transition now from the coal mining that really ended back in 1959 with the Knox Mine disaster into what the next generations can be in northeastern Pennsylvania and computer programming has become top of the list. You know as an economic development professional, you can't get through a conversation for more than a minute without workforce coming up and workforce is just something that continues to plague no matter the industry, the type of business.

So for us, we decided to take a unique approach based upon some of the strategic planning that we do and understanding we just don't like to solve a singular problem. We like to address the environmental problem if you want to say kind of like a design thinking process. The stuff that caught my eye was-- this is after several meetings with these companies.

As we're building this accelerators and incubators and clients coming in, they need more and more programmers. In a six-month span in 2019, Luzern County we had 217 job postings for advanced computer programming skills and we project to add another 600 in that industry in the next 5-7 years.

During that time, we produced seven qualified candidates from our schools and this is a profession that offers \$50,000 at entry level where our region is very good. We have medium income of about \$33,000-\$34,000, but I'm telling you I have companies that say hey, if you can find me someone, I'll pay him \$75,000 today.

And so as we started to look and understand the problem, we saw that the traditional way of addressing that is-- traditional go to the government side, go to the academic; it's about a three-year turnaround so we can start to help these companies. So, for us, we decided to be proactive at Connect and what we did is we sat right in the middle of our developers and the ones doing the hiring saying identify the skill sets.

What we did was we took those and found a good partner-- and it so happens to be Microsoft-- to develop those skills into a customized certification program that we could start providing immediately to students and young professionals locally or folks looking to go into that industry can come to our THINK Center, get a customized certification course co-taught at our THINK Center and not only leave the certification, most likely leave with a job and so, for us, we're about 30 days from finally announcing that this has been a labor of love for months.

The cool thing is while that is the short-term impact, the long term side is developing a system where K-12 students can start having access to monthly computer programming skills that they might not be getting in the traditional academic setting. They can have access to it. So, our focus is I don't care what your background is. I don't care your demographics. What your opportunities are, we want to make sure that you can have access and for us, that's the goal and something that started as a little project to solve 50 jobs that we had open, now we're looking at potentially impacting a million students over the next six years.

So, as soon as this rolls out, this is something that we are so proud of that as coal really defined our region and then the warehouse distribution has defined the last few decades, now we see the next opportunity to be a hub for advanced computer programming workforce.

Chad Chancellor: Speaking of the computer programming workforce, I know you all have been chosen to be part of the America's 250 celebration. I believe it's called America250PA and Pennsylvania governor Tom Wolf is highly involved. I think Wilkes-Barre has been selected to be part of the innovation team for what they are doing. So, talk about that and kind of the opportunities that is going to create for you all.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely. It's a project we're very proud of. America turns 250 July 20, 2026. U.S. Congress appointed Pennsylvania as one of the host communities for the celebration. In turn, Governor Wolf and his legislative body created a commission made up of academic, businesses, and community leaders and even including former and past governors of Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. They appointed an executive director and the two government factions there was no funding. There were no resources behind. So, they came to us to help create a launch of the initiative and define what America250 can mean working with the commission.

For us, this was a tremendous opportunity. It was an honor and one of the first parties that we brought in which just really gives you the chills is we brought U.S. Postal Service in. We've been working with their innovation team for the last couple of months on some pilot programs for them. What better way to build an innovation team than utilizing the foundation of an organization that was there from day one of this country. So, for us, it was a tremendous opportunity and what America250 is really shaping up to be is an opportunity for us to celebrate the past and innovate the future.

So, from that economic development perspective, we're not only celebrating and working with historians in academic institutions across the state to document the amazing things that have come out of Pennsylvania. We are using this as leverage to start getting communities to think differently; addressing problems.

So, the commission and our team have come up with different challenges that we've issued. As we talked about coding the coal region, that's one of the challenges that have come up. How can we make Pennsylvania a hub for advanced computer programming skilled workforce? Some other challenges talk about how can we make government work more efficiently and effectively integrating different technology?

So, there are constantly challenges that are going to be coming out through America250 over the next six years and our role at Connect is to help manage and launch these pilot programs, help secure funding. More importantly, we measure them. So, not only we can decide whether these programs can elevate the potential statewide projects, but also we want and are excited to be able to demonstrate the actual economic impact this initiative that is taking off in America250 is creating for the Commonwealth as a whole.

Chad Chancellor: You've mentioned Microsoft several times. Did they have a large presence there or is that just a partnership you all have?

Joseph Boylan: Fingers crossed hopefully that is part of America250 and beyond and right now, they've come on board with the coding the coal region and they've really worked to challenge the State to not only build this pilot but look at how this can become a statewide effort. So, for us, Microsoft is kind of that private push that is saying yes, you want to do it, let's do this. So, for us, we're excited about the potential opportunity to call them as a true partner moving forward

especially for a community like Wilkes-Barre that we can say that they are one of our partners and Microsoft it's an exciting opportunity.

Chad Chancellor: I know you all had a conference last November. You had 250 attendees; folks from the White House, IBM, and others and out of that conference some of these programs you've talked about came out of or were expanded upon. So, talk about that. Is that something you're going to do again or was that a one-time deal or what are your plans?

Joseph Boylan: It is now an annual event. It actually was born out of a group of students that we had been working with; our student ambassador group that said you know what, it's great that you tell us all these things that you're working on and these companies that are starting to spin out locally, but no one else knows that. It's time that we started to tell the story.

So, for us, we decided to put this conference together, no idea what the heck we were going to get, if we were going to have 15 people there, but we said you know what, let's do this thing and it evolved into something that-- to have students from 15 different colleges and universities, 8 or 9 different high schools represented there and to see some of the folks that came up, gave their time and what I love about you mentioned some of them. I had Ashleigh Axios who was former creative director for the Obama White House, said functions, who's worked in and out of the NBA. He's got a great project called Schooled that he is working with former MLS soccer player, Dr. Dale from MIT Solve, folks from IBM, Liz Keener. We had the U.S. Postal Service innovation team up there.

They didn't just come up, speak, and get out of Wilkes-Barre, they spent time here and for us, that really meant a lot, but I think it really showed that we've got something different going on here. It's not your traditional chamber or economic development. Things that we're rolling out we're trying to change and for us, that conference really helped to change the mindset locally that these things are happening.

So, if you're a student-- my daughter is a freshman in high school. No longer are the days when she's got to go to Philadelphia or Pittsburg and state to find what she wants to do. She's seeing now that opportunity can happen right here in our own backyards. So, we're excited. We've already got the date; November 18. We're set as a kick-off for next year. I don't know how we're going to get it bigger or better, but we're going to try.

Chad Chancellor: I think as I look at your organization what you all have done, I think one of the biggest differentiators is you really use technology and automation. You've built processes to try to help businesses and businesses are getting faster by the day. So, talk about-- I'm sure that you didn't just stumble into and I'm sure that's something you all have tried to do. So, talk about kind of the automation technology used to assist your businesses and any other things that you really feel you guys do different than most economic development organizations.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely. A lot of the common problems all of us as economic development organizations share you go through your business retention expansion activities, you're going and talking to businesses trying to understand what they're going through, how we could work together to solve some of the problems. It just became more and more apparent the frustration level with the businesses side, the private side of two things; time and communication.

The communication side if they felt like if they had-- and wanted to do something good; hey, we want to add a new piece of equipment, we want to add some jobs, it was a six-month drag out process, 25 business cards, five different agencies. It was endless meetings and quite frankly, they don't have time.

When we were going to see these businesses, hey, you've got five minutes of my time. Here are the three things that I need help with. Go do it and so it was kind of that head-scratching moment we were like okay, we've got to change. We can't have roundtables and we can't expect them to leave their office and leave what they are doing. They are trying--

I grew up in a family business. You didn't just turn that light on in the morning. It was 24 hours a day in my house and so, for me, it was okay, we need to start a look at how we can be a better agent for these private businesses. If they only have five minutes, how can we collect the information they need and deliver for them?

So, that's where we really integrated technology and automation and not only way that we're collecting information and collecting requests whether it's the parks port that we launched from the state or a Connect program that I talked about earlier, it's the way you were delivering at that. This day and age, it's all about on-demand; when and where you want to consume the information. I will say my father did his best work after 11 o'clock at night because my mum and my brother

and sister and I were sound asleep. That's really been a focus of how we've also delivered that information.

So, we're constantly building webinars, podcasts, video series, we're live-streaming every event that we have. So, if you're that small business owner that needs to understand maybe something on QuickBooks, we don't need you to leave your office. We're going to live-stream in here and we're also going to record it for you so if you want to watch it at home, that's when you can really dive in and understand.

So, for us, technology automation we've embraced it to not only communicate with our businesses but to deliver the services back that they need and the response has been fantastic.

Chad Chancellor: I think it's really got to be important for BRE programs going forward. I'll never forget when I first started in 2004. The first BRE visit I went on, I had been trying to like take this form in and ask 20 questions and you sit there with your clipboard and after the third question, I could tell the guy didn't want to answer me. He felt like he was testifying to the grand jury. I was writing his every word and so, I realized this isn't going to work.

And so, after that, I just started going in having a conversation with them, but I can see where now, we do a lot of work where we have to interview plant managers or our executive search site board members. We got to where we give them an option. You can either do a Survey Monkey, you can answer these questions or we can meet with you in person and most people choose the survey, which is fine with us. That cuts down on our time, but just as the world changes, I think what you all have done embracing that, I really tip my hat and some of this program we like to kind of do is the best practices and I feel like that's best practice for you all. Talk about-- you said before we started you could talk sports with me and so my listeners know that I like sports. Are you a Penn State guy or who are you up there?

Joseph Boylan: I'm somehow Penn State grad, but I will say when it comes to football, I'm Notre Dame football.

Chad Chancellor: Oh, I think you've got a good coach. I mean it's hard academically to do what he does, but I was surprised Florida State of somebody didn't go get him. I've actually been impressed. I mean to get to the playoffs several times I think he's done a good job. They used to

play Penn State every now and then, but I can't remember the last time Notre Dame played Penn State.

Joseph Boylan: Yes, back they were one of-- Penn State was one of the last independents hanging on there with Notre Dame before they joined the big ten and that was almost an annual thing. They played a couple of years ago. I think the rivalry is coming back. Notre Dame just finished Georgia their rotation and I think they pick up Ohio State, Wisconsin is this year and next year. Then we get Clemson coming in to the South Bend in October, but I'm just a college football fan to begin with. I love it; pro football as well. My family and I we've been seasoned ticket holders to the Philadelphia Eagles since back in Veterans Stadium. So, I'm still riding high from the Super Bowl a couple of years ago. I think we sold our souls and we're okay with it. We got our ring and that's it.

Chad Chancellor: That's right. You never come off of it. I'm a Saints fan. We won ten years ago and I still-- I remember just like it was yesterday. So, it makes the losing afterwards not hurt as bad. It still hurts, but it doesn't hurt as bad once you get it.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely.

Chad Chancellor: You talk about being raised in an entrepreneurial family. So, how did you get into economic development?

Joseph Boylan: Oh, I took a crazy path. Speaking of sports, I was in school Penn State. Marketing was my background. I was dead set I was going to do some sports marketing. Interviewed for a position with the Philadelphia Flyers and an internship opportunity and that's where I wanted to be. Philadelphia I've got some family roots there. That's what I wanted to do and as luck would have it, I had to stay here.

Some family things came up and so I took a last-minute internship with this group called The Institute which is just launching out of Wilkes University. It was focused on research and analyzing different documents and work at the Brookings Institute. So, I'm like hey, I need my internship credits. I'll do it.

Next thing you know before I finished, I got a job offer with them to serve as an analyst. So, I stuck with it and built some interesting development plans for communities locally one of which

was in the South Valley partnership which is the city of Nanticoke and other third-class city adjacent to Wilkes-Barre about integrating the community college into their downtown to revitalize it.

The project just kind of took me by storm. Met with the local representative there from the state and we talked about it more and before we finished our lunch, he said he was excited to have me on as his chief of staff. So, next thing you know I was on the government's side, but got to take the initial planning side, take that as the architectural central design of the project and help secure the public and private funds to make that project come to life and then saw a culinary arts institute built. Saw a health science building go in, saw a private healthcare start to build around it.

So, for me, that economic development bug bit me. It bit me hard and for me, it's been no looking back. I absolutely love it. We can talk about the job creation. As you know, jobs are one thing. The impact is the other. That's the thing that gets me. I can't picture myself ever being in sports marketing now. I think this is something that I was meant to find a way to and I absolutely love it. It's just a great job to wake up to every morning you can go and do.

Chad Chancellor: Well, if you like sports, you like to compete and I do think that is part of being a good economic developer as you're always competing for the next not only project but next thing that is going to change the town.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely.

Chad Chancellor: You got to have something that drives you other than the paycheck and so I'm sure that drives you. What tips might you have? We have folks that listen who just got into the business, young, right out of college, project managers. If they want to advance in their careers, what have you learned that you wish somebody would have told you when you first started?

Joseph Boylan: We just actually-- we just started Junior Leadership here. It's got about 80 high school students in the THINK Center about an hour ago. I tell the same thing that I told them and college students, young professionals: don't choose your first job, choose your first mentor and I think that's absolutely critical. So, if you're looking to get in economic development, as you know, so many pathways that could take you, but if you're not underneath someone that is just going to

show you some amazing ways to not only grow yourself personally, professionally, you're going to struggle.

So, I think that is always a great tip if you are getting into this profession because there are so many ins and outs. There are so many different things. All the textbooks and the LinkedIn learnings that you want to do, that's one thing, but to sit and hear some of the stories and I still am so fortunate to get a chance to work under someone like Terry Owens that I started my career with who not only was doing economic development here, but out in California as well. Folks like Steve Baruck who I get to get involved with projects now. The history that they could bring; it's amazing. So, I think that is such a critical piece. Make sure you find that person because not only will they help you grow personally, but professionally as well.

Chad Chancellor: I like that; choose your mentor first not the job first.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely.

Chad Chancellor: That makes a lot of sense. That's kind of what happened to me as it turns out. I wouldn't say it. You're going to have to do that purposely. So, give these folks your website or contact information if they want to learn more about your area or you.

Joseph Boylan: Absolutely wilkesbarreconnect.org is our main site. As I mentioned, we have our Connect Conference that is live as well. That's wbconnectconference.com. You can check us out. You can contact me anyway through there. I'm a huge fan of LinkedIn. I do a ton of work through there. So, that's always the best way it seems to be reaching out to folks. So, you can constantly see some things that we've got on, some of the programs, some of the launches that we're doing. So, whether it's LinkedIn or on our website, that's kind of the best way to find us.

Chad Chancellor: All right. Is there anything about Wilkes-Barre that you want to share with the folks that I didn't ask you?

Joseph Boylan: I think for us five years ago when we set out and told people that we wanted to be a hub of innovation, people thought we were completely crazy and I think for us, sometimes in our field, you've got to take that bold step that kind of sets the goal out there and forces you to run. We're just scratching the surface. I know that we're going to continue to grow here. We're going to be a force, but I think, more importantly, we'll always remember that we're Wilkes-Barre and

that's okay. And so for us, we're never going to be Philly or New York or Silicon Valley. That's okay. For us, we're Wilkes-Barre. We're confident in what we can do. We're going to continue to evolve and be just an unbelievable opportunity for people to start a business here which is what really drive us.

Chad Chancellor: Well, until your name has gotten out there, I'm seeing you guys' stuff at shows and talked about, so I think you're certainly making traction. So, Joseph, thank you for spending a few minutes with us today and I'll have to come on your podcast now to return the favor.

Joseph Boylan: Well, absolutely. You're going to be getting that email soon. Don't you worry.

Chad Chancellor: All right, thank you.

Joseph Boylan: Thank you so much.

[Music]