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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 and today, we got one of the most well-respected economic developers in the country with us, Gray Swoope. Not only well-respected, award-winning, well-known, I don't know what I'll adjectives to use. Gray is the president and CEO of VisionFirst Advisors and proud of that, runs state economic development organizations at the local level in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Florida. So, Gray, thank you for being with us today.

Gray Swoope: Chad, it's always a pleasure. Thank you for having me on the show.

Chad Chancellor: And he's a good Mississippi State Bulldog, but we'll save that for the end for our podcast guest.

Gray Swoope: That may be just a long term wishful thinking.

Chad Chancellor: That's right. Well, Gray, first of all, I want to start today by honoring someone who was a true shining star in our profession, Melissa Medley, who obviously was a principal with your company. I know you had worked with her for years and she wasn't just known in economic development circles. She was actually the former chair of the Sales and Marketing Executives International board of directors. So, she was well-known really nationwide and we lost her on January 17.

I can't imagine the outpour you all had. I didn't really know her well and I must have had 50 people call me that day. That's just how well-known she was in the profession and I really don't know anybody that didn't love her, think the world of her, but what I thought we would do to honor her star was you just talking about how talented-- everybody loved her, but talk about how talented she was and how good she was at marketing.

Gray Swoope: Well, the first thing I'll say about Melissa is that if you ever met her in person and not in business, she treated you well. She left with a smile. One of the things I admired the most about her when you did meet her in business it was the same. You were treated the same whether it was business, personal, church; it didn't matter. She respected people and was just a delight to be around and really wickedly smart. A smart individual that was a master at marketing and advertising and really came over into our economic development profession and just made her mark. She's legendary and will be forever.

Chad Chancellor: Yes and what you say is right. I really only was around her once. It was at a-- I can't remember if it was IEDC, something in Orlando where we kind of hanged around for two or three days at a conference, but you felt like you knew her all your life from just two or three days with her.

Gray Swoope: Absolutely and ironically, her dying on January 17, I went back and was kind of looking at our notes because Melissa was one of the founders along with Griff Salmon and myself

of VisionFirst Advisors and ironically, our first meeting that we sat down and really had to try to make a decision is this something we want to do then we really need to start getting our act together was actually on January 17 in Griff's house in Orlando in 2014 and we just really kind of drew out a plan that when that opportunity presented itself, what would it look like? In some ways, that day will be remembered not just because it was transformation of her life moving on to her next life, but it was also the beginning of our business and so it's just a good way to always remember her.

Chad Chancellor: Well, she was so well-known I'm telling you that the day it happened I must have had 50 people call me and I hardly knew her. That's just how much people within the profession talked and it wasn't really till I researched that I understood how connected she was in marketing circles, not just economic development-wise. Did you hire her in Mississippi or when did you all start working together?

Gray Swoope: I met Melissa in December 1996 when she was on the search committee at the Area Development Partnership and she was on the search committees because she was on the-- was a commissioner on the tourism commission that actually started the convention center. She was on the search committee that was looking for the replacement of the executive director, the Area Development Partnership and that's where we first met.

So, she was on my board and we got to know each other and then she moved on in investment development authority when we were looking to make some restructuring and really trying to beef up our business development. I really believe that business development is not just a team of project managers that are out there doing relentless work, but it also has to be about a smart strategy from marketing and how you're out there presenting your message.

I called Rick Taylor who is with Convention Commission. He's still there in Hattiesburg and asked Rick who are some folks out there that I ought to look at and he said have you talked to Melissa? I basically said I don't know where Melissa is anymore and he connected us and we invited her in for the interview and basically, Governor Barbour and I did a lot of listening. She explained to us a lot about marketing and the rest is history. We worked every day. Actually, Griff, Melissa, and I have worked every day together since then, since 2006.

Chad Chancellor: Wow! In her memory, SMEI which is the Sales and Marketing Executives International has established the Melissa Medley CME Marketing Scholarship which will be given

annually to the collegiate students who are getting a marketing major and you can find that-- we're going to put this on our podcast blog, but you can find it at blog.smei.org and there's a place on there you can donate. Next Move Group is going to donate in her name and I want to get the word out so others can do that as well.

Gray Swoope: We appreciate that. I know it's certainly near and dear to her heart because that was a way that really launched her career; started college at 16, graduated university at Southern Mississippi with a marketing and advertising degree, got involved in the local Sales and Marketing Executives International chapter and then made her way all the way up to the top and was part of the team that opened the first of SMEI chapters in China and New Zealand.

Chad Chancellor: Well, folks, go to blog.smei.org or reach out to Gray. Either one will give it to you and let's raise some money to help some kids in Melissa's name. That's what she would want us to do and Gray, I want to transition now into VisionFirst and also, given the coronavirus situation, I watched you beautifully handle-- I don't know if beautifully is the right word-- handle Katrina as well as you could, but instead of getting into bad news first with coronavirus, let's first talk about VisionFirst since that's really what Melissa and Griff and you have built. So, talk about what it is she helped build, what you all do, and really where you're going.

Gray Swoope: It's kind of interesting. When we started our business, she would basically ask us in her own way these three basic questions before we would move on and do something else and at that time, we were three of us working for Enterprise Florida, and she asked us is the organization at a better place today? Have you made a difference, and do you feel good about your accomplishments?

And we all agreed to that, but that gave us the basis to start VisionFirst because what we want to do is continue to make a difference. It was part of our founding notes that we put together that we want to be passionate about economic development, that this would be a placeholder. So, when I was to get a career somewhere else or it would be a placeholder just hold for retirement, have some extra income, but we really wanted to build a practice. We went into it as we take on any task with relentless passion and built our business from that.

So, we've grown every year starting in March 2015 to where we are today, proud of our client list. We've got five Fortune 500 companies that we do work for, a lot of different other corporations.

We work do on the stateside. We've done work I think in six different states or state organizations now and if we look at the footprint where we've already done work around the United States it's over 30 states as well.

Chad Chancellor: You guys do strategy work. You also do some site selection. I think you just put a project in Alabama if I remember.

Gray Swoope: Yes. So, last year, we worked on five site selection projects. One was in Alabama, automotive parts facility there in Gadsden. There are 100 jobs and a capital investment of about \$18 million. If you look at our corporate work, it's about half of our business. The other half is everything from working on strategy which I would include marketing, organization performance from there and also incentive compliance is a growing piece of our business as well. It comes out of the site selection and we've added Kathy Gelston to our team and Kathy is a CPA and having a CPA on our team that can look at incentives from a compliance standpoint, it's been a great product line for us as well.

Chad Chancellor: And that's probably going to grow. Just think of the incentives agreements now that COVID-19 is here and companies are not going to be able to create the jobs they promised and what do you do with them. There's going to have to be some real brainpower behind that. So, that will probably be an opportunity for you guys.

Gray Swoope: We hope so. We think so. It is growing. We get a lot of interest and like you said there's a lot of discussion of what happens in the pause of these agreements.

Chad Chancellor: Gray, talk about sort of your career. I know you came from the local level run state agencies. We've actually recommended you for a few strategic plans lately when people ask us to do the big plans. We really don't do that and you've been somebody we've recommended because I think you've kind of seen this from all angles. So, for our listeners that maybe aren't familiar with you, kind of talk about how you got in the profession and how that has built you up to having this practice now where you've kind of seen it from all sides.

Gray Swoope: So, like everybody that is kind of my age in economic development, we didn't have the opportunity to go get an education in economic development like you do today. So, there are actually people today that studied to be in economic development. I came out of advertising and

marketing career as well selling television advertising and had a college roommate and good friend that was in economic development and regional organization and he took another job out in Texas and called me and said hey, you want to get in economic development? So, what is it? So, the rest is history.

So, I worked in North Mississippi Industrial Development for a while and then at the old age of 26 years old took on the West Memphis chamber of commerce in Arkansas and that was the introduction to the Arkansas folks. Really I have been able to go from there and work on the local level, regional level, and then like you said, work for three different states. I just think that's an honor.

Probably the biggest difference-maker in my career was the opportunity to be part of our good friend Del Boyette and his team at the Arkansas Economic Development Commission and to start with Charlie Sloan and do two years of international work. It changed my perspective really on life and how things work globally. I give them both credit for giving me that opportunity and for somebody who grew up outside of WestPoint, Mississippi in Tibbee, which you all know from your background too, that's pretty rural.

Going from there and taking your first trip overseas and get off a plane in Seoul, Korea and then go to Taiwan and Japan, that was eye-opening and it really changed, well a lot I think it gave me some knowledge that has helped our business today.

Chad Chancellor: And the deals that you all did in Mississippi was just unbelievable. Just every time you turned around you were landing a big project. You were there when they did Toyota towards Tupelo, and I know several over in WestPoint and Columbus and so forth.

Gray Swoope: Yes, and we were proud of being a part of that team and having leadership enable to work with Governor Haley Barbour really taught me a lot about how governors can make a difference in their role in economic development. I had a great partnership with his office and in particular with him.

I think back and I mentioned earlier about Katrina and I think back at the time that Governor Barbour in 2005 we went on a three-week mission to meet with the chairman of Toyota Mr. Watanabe at that time. We met with other carmakers over in Asia at that time. We met with a lot

of different companies. We got home and within eight days after getting back to Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina happened.

It happened on a Monday. On Sunday night, my phone rings-- my cellphone rings and I notice it's a state office number and I knew it was Governor Barbour. It's Sunday night, Labor Day weekend, six days after the storm. I said what are you doing? He said well, I wanted to give you a low-down on the calls you asked me to make. I said what calls? He said the calls for our follow-up in Japan. I said well, Governor, it's Sunday night. He said no, it's Monday morning in Asia.

And so, that amount of focus and that energy was just really unique to be around. Then having the opportunity to leave Mississippi and go to a state that's six times the size of our state of Mississippi, my home state I should say, and now part of my home state was a real great opportunity, too work with Governor Scott. He's Senator Scott now and be a part of that team as well.

Chad Chancellor: Thank you, Gray. We're going to take a quick break for a message for our listeners and we'll be right back with a lot more with Gray Swoope after this message.

[Music]

Chad Chancellor: I want to thank LocationOne-- some folks know it as LOIS-- for sponsoring today's podcast. LocationOne has, in my opinion, the best buildings and sites database in the economic development industry. Now, that coronavirus is here and everything has been disrupted, I've been thinking a lot about it. If I were an economic developer still, what would I do during this time and I know without question I would transition to LOIS and get my buildings and sites as updated as I possibly could so that when we come out of this economic downturn, we're ready to go.

Let me tell you why I like LOIS. It is the most responsive mobile friendly buildings and sites database I have found. It's easy to use. It's just as easy to use on an iPad or iPhone as it is a computer. I was browsing around last week on a state economic development building and site database and the thing it just wouldn't work. It wouldn't work properly. You had to be an engineer to figure it out. It was too much. It had this circle you could draw to look at buildings. The circle wouldn't work when I backed out if I got what square footage I was looking for.

None of that happens with LOIS. This is the best buildings and sites database I have found. I've looked far and wide. It is the most easy to use from a site selection standpoint on any platform. I'm told it's just as easy to use for economic developers. It really walks you through inserting your information and putting it in so the prospects can use it. So, I really encourage you take a look at locationone.com. Use this time while we're down to update your buildings and sites. Transition them to LocationOne. You'll be really happy you did.

[Music]

Chad Chancellor: Well, I grew up in Mississippi. I was in Mississippi then went to Mobile. I was in Mississippi when Katrina hit and two months later, I was working for the Mobile Chamber where I really started learning economic development. I watched the job you and the Governor did in Mississippi after Katrina and the hurricane hit Mississippi and Mississippi had all the wind damage. I actually was in Oxford the night it hit and Oxford lost power that far north. That's just how bad the situation was.

Talk about what you learned through that process as it might relate to the coronavirus situation. I've got business friends getting frustrated because they are not getting their payroll on they thoughtm and they're not getting their SBA. All this stuff moves slowly and I'm sure you found with FEMA and all. What did you learn that you think-- even though this is a totally different situation-- that economic developers can glean?

Gray Swoope: First of all, the difficulty of being able to mitigate risk with the uncertainty of COVID-19 is completely different I guess from a hurricane, a tornado, an earthquake, or whatever because you know there's a fine idea and you can move forward. But the basic principles I think of recovery are the same.

So, if you think about Katrina and you think about what we call-- there's really four phases that our team thought of in the end is the recovery, it's building resiliency, it's the renewal, then one of the transformational opportunities that you have. If you look at it from that, we're not even in recovery yet.

We're just in what I call the first few days of a disaster is just trying to get a handle by data of the situation. What is the situation analysis today? It's about survival. Every day is about survival. It's

hard for economic developers and companies to think about what the future might be when we're just trying to figure out how do we survive? How do we stay healthy? How do we do-- what does the new normal look like? But, with that said, it is an opportunity to start thinking about what it's going to look like months from now even years from now and to start laying that groundwork.

And so, like I said, it's being able to get data, understanding how your businesses are being hurt, who is still trying to employ folks, what are new opportunities, are you getting the tools locally, and maintaining that conversation.

A lot of time it's amazing to me the economic development organizations are just so lost because they are in shock of what has happened that they are not doing the basics of just BR&E and making sure that you got what you do with your own businesses in your back yard.

It's also at that point in time setting the vision. I think back on Katrina. It was about two weeks after the storm and we already had a team. Jim Barksdale and the Barksdale Commission-- what do they call it-- the Renaissance Commission was already talking about vision setting and as you know, there are a lot of people and certainly in Louisiana, Mississippi that are still trying to figure out how to get a roof over their head much less think about a mayor thinking about rebuilding his community, but it has to start then because that's when the planning for programs, what is needed. It has to start making its way for federal and state help.

Chad Chancellor: How did you all call on existing industries that were affected especially along the coast at that time because I have a lot of economic developers saying to me I want to help my industries, but I don't want to be overburdened. A lot of them are not working, so what would be your advice for them?

Gray Swoope: We've been around each other a lot in the past and you understand I'm always a big believer if we talk about the basics of your BR&E program. If you have a prospect that comes into town, the new company and then he's going to want to go and do-- he or she wants to go do the plant manager tour. If you don't have the relationship, you don't know what they are going to say. You hope that you have the relationship on the front end and on the front end, you do have the ability to make communications, but in the case of Katrina what we did is we relied on a lot of our people over our strategic partners. It was the utilities. Utilities you need through their existing industry contacts. You need your elected officials. We leaned on other organizations, your county

board of supervisor association MML municipally so that we could get in touch with the people that matter. The good thing is we had done a good job and had a lot of those relationships upfront and so that helps, but I do think you have to start getting a pathway for communications up right now.

Chad Chancellor: Gray, we have a lot of young professionals that listen to this podcast. You and I have talked about the need of getting more and more young people in and kind of who is going to fill their shoes you know the old George Jones song. As a lot of economic developers, we respect start retiring and so forth.

If we got a young person out here who wants to be the next Gray Swoope, what have you learned in your career? What do you know now that you wish you had known back then that might give some of those folks a tip?

Gray Swoope: I'll say this. You're never too old to stop learning. I love learning. I'll be curious. I'd be curious. I'd ask questions. I've never been one that will pretend to know it all. I did think that I've been blessed with having opportunities to share wisdom, but build real collaborative teams.

I think the real key today is to continue to listen and learn. I see a lot of folks that just-- they're instant experts and I can-- that's not just young. That can be any age, but I think if up and coming as a mentor, I like to encourage folks sometimes it's just good to listen. Just listen and do your research. Do some learning. You're never too old to stop doing that.

Chad Chancellor: Well, Gray, our listeners know I love Mississippi State and I love New Orleans and I know you love both of those. Your daughter is playing golf. I don't know what the situation is now. What year college was she in?

Gray Swoope: She goes to Loyola University there in New Orleans and actually, of all days today, Chad, she would have played her last round of college golf in the district tournament. Their action on social media today they pushed out she's the most senior of the team and thanking her for being part of the team. Today would have been her last day.

She's taught me a lot of lessons, too in just her golf playing and about strategy. I use it a lot sometimes in our work and talk about those things. She's going to graduate in May and life is going

to be great for her. She's a smart young lady and my other daughter is in Los Angeles. So, keep her in your prayers. She's actually in Burbank and right now she works in the production industry and that shut down. So, we got both our girls in hot spots.

Chad Chancellor: Looks like today-- in all honesty, we're recording this on April 8, so we don't know if this is going to be on our channel tomorrow or next Thursday, but it looks like today the number is getting a little better in New Orleans. So, I hope that we're making some kind of a turn and also this week, women's basketball coach which Mississippi State when I was in school, we didn't really follow that much because we were never any good. We got this coach Vic Schaefer and the next thing you know, we're dominant and playing in national championship. He up and left us for Texas this week.

Gray Swoope: It's kind of funny. When I was in college, I actually was one of the 15 students that actually would go and watch a game of women's basketball because I kept stats and that was because at that time, my girlfriend was also keeping stats and that happens to be my wife today, Mary. So, she made me keep stats for basketball and for a while I did the PA announcements. So, that tells you how small the crowds were.

Chad Chancellor: Well, I went and watched when we played Tennessee because they always had such a good girls program and I thought of Pat Summit. She's one of my heroes and so, I would always go watch it as much for Tennessee and then we got this coach and we should have won the national title a few years ago and everybody-- they replayed the Connecticut game the other night on ESPN. They didn't have anything else to show and I sat there and watched it. So, I hated to see him leave, but he did a good job for us and he really improved Mississippi State will support a winner. They were selling that colosseum up for women's game. So, I'm proud of what he built there.

Gray Swoope: Well, the good news now is he helped build that program back, but also in my new home Florida State Seminoles. There women's basketball is great, too. We've got a great coach and the men's have been fun to watch, too. I don't want my gang of friends to get mad at me, but I do live in Tallahassee so sometimes I will be watching some of their sports.

Chad Chancellor: Well, they had the Memphis coach. I think he'll probably do a good job. Well, Gray, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you'd want to share with the folks?

Gray Swoope: One thing that we mentioned about Melissa I'll just in closing share. A lot of people ask me what would she be thinking today with COVID-19. One of the things that we found on her desk was her personal goals for 2020 and just for your listening audience, if you knew her and knew her drive, this one of her goals of what she wanted to do in 2020 is really a lesson for us and what we need to do today in order to come back and bounce back from COVID-19 pandemic.

She says I shall seek to direct my destiny as much as possible with the strongest tools I have available, self-discipline, intelligent planning, the power of choice, and determined action. I thought there are no better words today than for us to try to control our destiny as much as possible as economic developers and professionals in site selection using the abilities that we have been given, being disciplined about it, plan, power of choice and just really determined action.

Chad Chancellor: Again, go to blog.smei.org and you can make a donation. Next Move Group is going to make one today before 5 o'clock. I know these are hard times right now with the economy, so if you can't do it today, come back and do it six months from now hopefully when all is better. We'll push this out several different times as Gray was exactly right. We met her once and loved her. I think Alex might have seen her more after that at different events, but I was around her literally two days and felt like I knew her all my life. So, Gray, give these folks your website in case they want to learn more about VisionFirst.

Gray Swoope: It's visionfirstadvisors.com all spelled out. All the eye doctors had visionfirst.com, but it's visionfirstadvisors.com.

Chad Chancellor: Yes, and if it doesn't work, put it in again. I couldn't make it work yesterday and I told Gray his website was down, but I was punching it in wrong so it was user error. All right. Well, Gray, thank you for being with us today.

Gray Swoope: All right, Chad. You take care. Thank you.

[Music]

Chad Chancellor: If you want to join our movement, which is to create economic growth for small to mid-sized companies, communities, and non-profit organizations, please go to our website at thenextmovegroup.com. Browse around and you can see the different services we offer all designed to create that economic growth for the small to mid-sized companies, communities, and

non-profit organizations. Most of our leads and growth has come from word of mouth referral. So, even if you don't need a service, we want you to know what we do so when friends and contacts of yours might need something, you know what we do and you can refer us. So, again, go to thenextmovegroup.com to learn more about the Next Move Group.

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