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Come join us, explore the impact of small business here in rural Arkansas.

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What challenges would you face? Who can help you meet those challenges? How do you get in touch with others like you?

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This is Create Bridges, Arkansas. And we invite you to come cross these bridges with us.

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It is time for another episode of the Create Bridges podcast series, Arkansas Small Business,

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Big, Rural Impact. I'm Murriel Wiley, program coordinator for Sevier, Little River, and Howard Counties.

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We thank you for listening to our latest addition. And today we are sitting down with Cass Stanford of Riverside Machine in DeQueen. What's up.

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Hi. So this shop provides Sevier county with custom made knives,

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a cool local tourism stop, miling, drilling,

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sawing and welding services along with once a month community knife making meetings and fellowship, plus so much more.

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Riverside Machine also holds a historical value in the area,

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and the products that are created in-house are often designed for folks who live outside the region and even the state of Arkansas.

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In order to continue serving southwest Arkansas,

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they keep growing as a company and the business ownership has recently changed hands from one generation of knife makers to the next.

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And a story of local succession has emerged. Thank you so much for being our guest on the series, Cass.

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We appreciate you being with us. Thank you.

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Well, let's talk about Riverside Machine and how you guys have such a cool, unique local feature that has been around for generations.

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Let's chat about the history of this business and you tell us how Riverside Machine all began.

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OK, so I had to ask Al about this. I made a few notes. He said he started in 1981 repairing lawn mowers, fixing chainsaws and junk like that.

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He said he was just trying to buy food like the grocery bill, doing whatever he could.

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In 1983, he said he started selling chainsaws and lawn mowers like new stuff people would come in and needs to fix and whatever.

21

And he got some machine, whatever he needed to do the job, you know, 1986, 87, started making knives.

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That's back then. Now, is that something he taught himself how to do or how did he add the addition of knife making?

23

OK, so he was doing some stuff. You know, everybody knows Jerry Fisk. Al and a guy that worked with Al, they paid Jerry for classes. For them

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it was pretty good money, you know. So Al learned how to actually forge a knife instead of, you know, the basic way to go.

25

But he started making knives and then from there he started making tools and stuff like that to get into, you know, supplying the makers.

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So what kind of tools? When you say tools, what does that mean? And we're pretty famous for a hydraulic press. It's for Damascus.

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The press and a carbide file guide is our two biggest sellers, like we're literally, in the knife community, Al is famous for those two things.

28

There's several this and that. But those are two big ones. If you're wondering,

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Riverside used to be on the river, so that's where the name come from.

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Oh, OK. Like Cossotat River? Rolling fork. Oh ok, rolling fork on the state line between Oklahoma and Arkansas.

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Yeah, fascinating. So you mentioned Uncle Al and what he's famous for,

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but we're actually so interested in hearing about Uncle Al sort of handing this down from generation to generation.

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Can you talk to us about your story of how you started with the business and what your role with the company has grown to be?

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Just give us a little background on when you started and how have you ended up in the position you're in now?

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OK, so he didn't really hand it to me. He's paid me for however many years and now I'm paying him.

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He hasn't handed me anything, but he has helped me. He really is helping me.

37

But anyway, I started in 05. I was sweeping the floor.

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I would work in the in the summer with my dad. And then during school, my dad would already be done working.

39

So I needed a job after school. So I started working at Riverside, sweeping the floor.

40

Just little stuff like I didn't do any work. I just cleaned. And I remember one day he he came back there and he gave me a part super simple job.

41

And he's like, "make this." And I said, "what?" He's like, "go ahead and make that." It was a piece for like a lawnmower deck or something.

42

And I was like, "I don't even.. I can't. I don't know nothing, you know?"

43

So that's really, you know, how it was when I started.

44

This is kind of funny.

45

I had worked for a while and I learned stuff and I talked with the welders, the machinist, one of the welders went to jail for his music was loud.

46

He got pulled over and he was drunk, maybe. Oh. But anyway, when he went to jail, I had to do his job.

47

All right. I had to do it. I was the only one that could really weld.

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So at that point is where I really stepped up to, you know, that next level.

49

And then once you realize you you have a handle on it, like, well, I can do that, then you keep going.

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I mean, I kept going. And then I mean, we've been talking about me taking over for several years.

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I mean, that's that's kind of how I got there.

52

I just think it's so cool that you went from sweeping the floors to owning the business and it did not happen overnight.

53

Not at all, however many years that is, that's a lot of years, man.

54

You said 2005 to now this is 2021. Yeah.

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Oh, yeah. So for a decade and a half and some change, you've been working towards this.

56

The shop is located in historic downtown DeQueen. So you almost get folks from all over who stop and shop.

57

But I'm curious how many customers are locally based and how many would you say come from outside the area?

58

So locally is going to be more of the the welding jobs. Most of the machine work is local.

59

We do supply some stuff to, there's an interior design company and what they will buy usually is brass, but they'll buy just real elegant pieces from us.

60

Price doesn't matter. They're super high end people. We do a few jobs out like that.

61

But most of that stuff, welding and stuff is here. And Pilgrim's, Tyson's sawmills, local. The knife business is all over this country even more than that.

62

But mostly, mostly in this country, we ship presses all over, man, Michigan, California, all over the place.

63

I think that's incredible because if you're going to all these bigger areas,

64

who would have ever thought it's coming from little bitty DeQueen rural Arkansas population six thousand seven thousand?

65

Well, Al, he used to hustle, man. He would go. It really pays to go to shows.

66

Get out there. Let people know you. When they meet you. Man I've got friends I met at my very first Arkansas knife show.

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And we talk about, I mean, they buy knives, but we're more than that.

68

It's like we talk about fitness, we talk about stuff, you know, it's like they're friends, you know?

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So you got to put yourself out there and make the friends. And from there you get the business.

70

And and you said these are like trade shows. Like you guys go around to different conventions and things of that sort.

71

Custom knife shows it's a thing. There's gun shows.

72

Right. And there is knife shows and it's not the same thing.

73

And like I say, it's a gun and knife show. It's a gun show.

74

They say it's a knife show. There's no guns. It's knives. And I'm talking I'm talking.

75

One hundred dollar knives to twenty thousand dollar knives, Buddy. This is so this is a new world for me.

76

So I'm obviously not a knife maker. This is a whole new world.

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So I'm not I'm not privy to all this information. You're schooling me right now.

78

I love it. Beyond the knives, though, you guys make more than just these beautiful knives on display that are in the store.

79

There's a whole lot that goes on in the back of the shop and you've got lots of machinery.

80

I actually took a tour through it one day a couple of months ago.

81

So can you give us kind of a behind the scenes run through what sorts of things you work on during just a regular average nine to five workday?

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Man, it could be anything from a just machining work, lathe, mill, making shafts.

83

We do a lot of shafts and bushings and stuff like that out in the welding shop.

84

My buddy Jesse, mann, he's a really good welder now. He's he's really stepping up. Trailers, custom roll cages, firepit, signs,

85

just repairing lawn lawnmowers, even anything you can think of, we can fix it.

86

Do you have a favorite? A favorite. I have at least favorite. OK, my favorite?

87

Oh, shoot. I don't know, man. I can't I can't say I have a favorite.

88

OK, do you prefer to be in the back working on the machinery? Machine work.

89

OK, machine work is definitely. Yeah ok. Fair enough.

90

Now there's something we got to chat about even though everyone's tired of it.

91

But every business seems to have been impacted one way or another by the covid-19 pandemic.

92

Did it affect riverside machines production level. How or how not.

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I haven't heard of it. Corona, what is that? You can stop lying right now, OK?

94

We've all been affected by the same. When you first started, you know, we took it serious.

95

We were like, we need to be careful. And they we're talking about this lock down.

96

You're going to have to stay at home and stuff. And I was like, if they lock me in my shop, do you know how many knives I can make?

97

You know? Forty hours a week I'd be working all night long. Turns out that didn't happen.

98

Yeah, it did, seriously though, it did affect the knife shows. Myself,

99

I only go to two shows a year. I go to Blade Show in Atlanta.

100

It's the world's biggest knife show. I go to the Arkansas Knife Show, which is more local but still pretty big.

101

I guess what it hurt is meeting new people. It didn't slow us down.

102

Not at all. In terms of services and production. Yeah, we never slowed down making parts or, you know, stuff like that.

103

But, you know, it's always nice to meet new people, make new contacts and stuff like that.

104

But but that's really the only only thing that it hurt.

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That's good to know, because I feel like there are a lot of businesses that had to close their doors or shut things down - restaurants.

106

But yeah, I know. But as far as gathering's go, did you guys continue your knife making meeting,

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fellowship,

108

because I know there's a lot of dedicated knife makers who come to that meeting once a month and who love to look at new knives and talk about,

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you know, their passion. Are you guys continuing that? Is that still going on?

110

We slowed down. We skipped like two months and then we were like, man, we need to get together.

111

So, I mean, we only skipped just a couple of months. That's good, though.

112

How many folks would you say come out to that? Yeah, 20, 30. Not a lot, right?

113

Yeah. Oh yeah. I mean, some people would struggle to get 20 to 30 people to come to a birthday party or to a wedding even.

114

But I mean, that group of dedicated folks that come once a month. Well, there's free food.

115

So is that all it is? I did barbecue one day and it was pretty good, actually.

116

I think I'll be at the next meeting if there's going to be free barbecue. And let's move on real quick.

117

I wanted to talk about advice.

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You know, there's probably a lot of people out there who think that's so cool that you guys are able to make these custom knives.

119

But what advice do you have for someone who wants to learn a trade like knife making?

120

I would say work with somebody that does it, which then might not be an easy thing to do.

121

But if somebody would let you help, even if you clean and be around while they work,

122

I was just talking about this with somebody, you know, like college debt. And bro, when I left school, I had no idea what I wanted.

123

You know, I was thinking, like,

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if you could start at 30 years old and say what you want to go to school for with the experience behind it, that would make more sense.

125

But coming straight out of school and no idea what. Heck, yeah.

126

I mean, I want to be a vet. I want to be a veterinarian or whatever.

127

I mean, you don't have any idea until you're around it some, right? You need to work around it.

128

Hands on experience. Hands on experience.

129

So I would say get with somebody that knows what, you know, that does what you want to do and work for them. Get a feel for it.

130

No, I agree completely because I kind of feel that way.

131

When I was in school, I was going to school for journalism and I felt like, you know, man, I think I'd be so great at it,

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but I had to get in front of a mic or get in front of a television screen to figure out how to actually do it.

133

It's not like you can just take a test to say, are you going to sound good on the radio?

134

You got to actually get on the microphone and figure out how you can sound good on the radio.

135

So I think that's a great advice. Speaking of advice, I also wanted to chat about your succession story.

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So it's not every day that folks are able to stay with the same business and

137

grow to new positions and come up like starting from the bottom as you did,

138

and sweeping the floors to becoming the owner of the business. How would you suggest employees work their way to the top?

139

So a boss is going to see you working. Al is the worst.

140

Like always thought, like he's just over here. You don't know what we're doing.

141

Now that I'm writing the paychecks, you're going to notice things, right?

142

So I get a kid come in, I say I want you to sweep the floor. And he's sweeping the floor and he runs out of, you know, the floors clean.

143

What does he do is sit down, get on his phone or does he look for something to organize?

144

Maybe, you know what I mean. If I do this writing you a paycheck, he's watching you.

145

So I would say, you know, don't be lazy.

146

That's kind of a good you know, be up to do the job and offer yourself, you know, don't don't sit back and let somebody else do it.

147

I like that because even when it seems like nobody's watching, somebody is probably watching his watching.

148

If they're on your paycheck, they're probably watching.

149

But that just that just kind of gives a testament to your own story, because obviously Uncle Al was watching you, I guess.

150

And look where you are now. I feel like, man, Al could you have caught me sleep and I...

151

He was that sucker. He's the easiest guy to work for.

152

It's been a while, but we've been planning on me taking over for a while.

153

And even before we talked about it, I wanted it. Yeah, you know what I mean?

154

So it's not like I didn't care. I always cared.

155

And that makes a huge difference. Man, if you care another thing as a boss, you need to appreciate the people when they work, right?

156

Yes.

157

I always thought about it because there's stuff, you know, we'll be working, working hard on a job and just this random junk rolls in and OK, do this.

158

Now, what about this job? I was seriously trying to do a good job on.

159

I don't worry about that, you know, work on this junk. Well, I think you need a reward for a crappy job, you know what I mean?

160

Like, there should be something where where you're not dreading the job.

161

And I'm happy I'm happy to give out a little extra or, you know, by the lunch, you know, something to show that, hey, you did a good job.

162

I appreciate it. That probably shows, too, when your employees see that reward and they notice like, hey,

163

man, you know, boss got us lunch today, like a little extra pep in the step for them, too.

164

That's right. That's you know. Yeah.

165

Well, I want to know if you have any other advice out there for small businesses or folks that are trying to work their way up from from the

166

bottom to the top. OK, it's not about money, OK, it's not about money, but you need money.

167

OK, OK, contradictory advice. Yeah, I want to listen.

168

Money is confidence. OK? All right. I talk this stuff a lot with different people.

169

I like to rub shoulders with people that have money. But people that's been here and done that, you know, they, they think different.

170

They really do. So save money. If you're in a position to make a lot of money, it's easy to save money.

171

It really is. You don't spend all your money if OK, imagine this.

172

If you have 10 grand in the bank for a business, 10 grand isn't very much, you know,

173

when you're out there writing three thousand dollar checks at a time or more, whatever, you need to take a risk here, in there.

174

If you have ten grand, how are you going to take any risk?

175

You're trying to pay the your hands. You don't have any room to do anything.

176

I think it would be best if you, you know, build up your money. And like I said, money is confidence.

177

One thing I do, I'll post on social media to regulate business.

178

All right. If I'm too busy, I don't make a post. If you see me posting a lot, that doesn't mean I'm slow.

179

It's either I have a lot of cool work going on I want to show you or I want you to bring me something, right.

180

Mainly with my knives. But I'm trying to be more active with Riverside too. With knives, man,

181

if I'm posting every day, that means I got a lot to show. But if I slow down, that means I can't keep up.

182

And it's very easy to get behind on knives. Honestly, I'll never catch up on knife orders.

183

And that's a good thing. You know, if you catch up, what are you going to do, spend a week not doing anything?

184

That's a lot of wasted money. Save up, stay busy. Yes, but definitely you want to rub shoulders with people that are into money.

185

And I'm not saying money is where it's at, but if you make the right choices, you're going to make money.

186

Right? Right. There you go. I love it. Thank you. So one more thing.

187

Go ahead. Go ahead. Do hard things. Go to the gym. It's a discipline thing.

188

It's going to sound stupid. Do something that is hard. Take a cold shower.

189

Right. Do something that is uncomfortable and hard and it will make everything else easier.

190

If you can get past it, get past it in your mind. Right. Mental toughness.

191

Yeah, I'm not great at that, but I would give it a shot. Save money and do hard stuff.

192

That's it. I love it. #LifeLessonsFromCass.

193

I started at the bottom. Thank you so much Cass.

194

We really appreciate you. And everybody can keep up with Cass through social media or swing by Riverside Machine in downtown deQueen, Arkansas.

195

You guys are open nine to five right? Half a day Saturday. Half a day Saturday.

196

Hey, I like your style. All right.

197

Thank you guys so much for listening to the Create Bridges podcast series, Arkansas Small Business, Big Rural Impact.

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That is a wrap on today's episode, Cutting Edge Commitment.

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I'm Murriel Wiley.

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