

# Ben Marciano - Episode 816

Mon, Sep 04, 2023 4:47PM 44:19

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gym, ocala, years, feel, ymca, people, addiction, mental health, growing, community, money, day, fitness, work, recovery, lived, state, health, homeless, first responders

## SPEAKERS

Ben Marciano, James Geering

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### J James Geering 00:00

Welcome to the behind the shield podcast. As always, my name is James Geering. And this week I have an extremely important conversation for you. For many of you that follow the show, you will know I'm not a huge fan of most politicians. The backstory of this interview is when I moved to Ocala, Florida, I joined the YMCA and was doing my CrossFit workouts there much to the amusement of most of the gym goers who had never seen it before. At that time, the manager was Ben Marciano. Now Ben went on to transition out of the Y and own two gyms of his own zone health and fitness. But what really drew me to him was he is about to become our mayor here in Ocala. But he also has a very powerful story of overcoming addiction. So between his understanding of health and fitness and the mental health side, this is an individual that I'm actually proud to interview and to me is the kind of person that we need in these leadership positions. So we discuss a host of topics from his early life and some of the contributing factors that led him into his addiction. How a mental health and rehab facility helped him transition into the world of health and fitness, the obesity, epidemic, mental health and leadership, and so much more. Now, before we get to this incredibly important conversation, as I say, every week, please just take a moment, go to whichever app you listen to this on, subscribe to the show, leave feedback and leave a rating. Every single five star rating truly does elevate this podcast, therefore making it easier for others to find. And this is a free library of well over 800 episodes now. So all I ask in return is that you help share these incredible men and women's stories, so I can get them to every single person on planet earth who needs to hear them. So with that being said, I introduce to you, Ben Marciano enjoy. Ben, I want to start by saying thank you so much for coming to my home. And during this interview, someone mentioned that you are running for the mayor of Ocala, which is incredible. And when they said your name, I'm like, oh, that's the dude from from the YMCA from years ago. So here we are sitting in 2023. Now I know you've got a hell of a story to tell. But I want to start by welcoming you to my home. Oh, absolutely. I'm

### B Ben Marciano 02:32

excited to be here. Thank you.

**J** James Geering 02:33

So I'd love to I know we've got a shorter amount of time. So I'm going to compress it a little bit but get the backstory for us. So where were you born? And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic what your parents did? How many siblings? Sure.

**i** 02:43

I was born in Queens, New York. At the age of three, my parents divorced. And my mother followed my grandfather who is a retired New York City police officer who moved to Dunellen, Florida. So growing up we my mother struggled with addiction. So we we lived in extreme poverty. i One of my earliest childhood memories was her literally pushing me in a shopping cart from the grocery store, to subsidized housing, that we lived in the back of dwelling because she just didn't have money. So it was it was definitely a rough childhood growing up with all the different circumstances that were involved.

**J** James Geering 03:24

Now what about your dad with this perspective? Now the mental health lens that you have and obviously you soon you're going to be mayor of Ocala. So OPD and ofd when you look back, what are the elements of his job that gave him any mental health struggles later in life?

**B** Ben Marciano 03:40

So my grandfather being a cop, your grandfather? Absolutely. I would definitely say yes. It definitely affected him. He would never talk about he was very old school. He's not going to share his emotions. But I would tell you absolutely. And he he drank a lot. I think a lot of his drinking was to cover all that he had seen and been through.

**J** James Geering 03:58

So when you were young, obviously we're sitting here now you're still in great shape. What were you doing and playing as far as sports and athletics?

**i** 04:05

Yeah, so I was left up to my own devices. A lot of times, I really did not get into sports until my senior year. I like to share this story because I think it's powerful. My senior freshman year, I went out for basketball. And I tried out and I was the last guy to get cut. And the coach looked at me and said, You can do one of two things, go home and practice. Come back next year and hopefully make the team or go home and play video games and come back next year and you have no shot. I chose go home practiced and I practice four hours a day. I came back the next

year and not only made the team but started and it told me that if you want something bad enough, just work hard for it. And so it was a really powerful lesson that's helped me also in business in life.

 James Geering 04:42

So what about career aspirations? What were you dreaming of becoming when you were in high school?

 04:45

Yeah. Glad you asked that. So I always wanted to be like my grandfather. It was law enforcement. Growing up, he would introduce me to the sheriff and I just wanted to make my grandfather proud. I wanted to hear those words. I'm proud of you. He could never do that. He the way he He was German and old school. But um, anyway, I actually went to school for criminal justice. I graduated from CFX, with a degree in criminal justice, went to FSU, and I was in my final year of, I was going to get my bachelor's degree in criminal justice and I got arrested for a drug charge. And it changed the trajectory of my life. That's when I got involved in the health club industry. And a kind of, yeah, it really was a reset for me of the direction of my life, it was really hard time in my life really low point for me, because I really did want to be in law enforcement. So

 James Geering 05:33

we you did you have that one moment, and one of the classes that we see in CF where you go down 200, and they're all practicing the speed gun? I pass those guys going. Right. Right. So going back to the childhood for a moment, I think one of the real elephants in the room of mental health conversation, certainly in the general public, but even in fire and police, is, you know, we look at soldiers, police officers and like, oh, well, James is struggling because you had that minivan that, you know, flipped and three people were killed. That's why you're going through it. The reality is there was two decades for me two and a half decades before ever put on a firefighter uniform that a lot of people exclude in the mental health conversation. You talked about drug charge, when you look back, you know, what was some of the compounding factors that led you into that in the first place?

 06:23

Yeah, I saw a lot of really bad things growing up. Being in a situation where my mother was in and out of relationships, and not healthy relationships in any way. We moved a lot. There was never security. There were many moments that I was just just wanted to be safe. And I was not in safe situations. The things that I saw growing up, I can remember one of my earliest childhood memories was being at a party, and there being a mirror there and white powder, and someone's snorting the powder. I had no idea what it was, and later in life, but that was something that that was the that was the environment I live lived in. So it was that constant

fear of Am I safe. And if you could think about it, happening to a child. Horrible things, most likely, it happened to me growing up. So it definitely laid an imprint on my mind. For later in life.

 James Geering 07:15

I was blown away, I've done over 800 interviews now. And the number of people, especially wearing uniforms, a lot of them are but some of them, you know, weren't the number of people that grew up in domestic violence homes in addiction homes, sexual abuse, you know, and they all cram it down. And a lot of us that are in uniform, it's that kind of it's that shield, it's the armor, it's that that keep that superhero facade. And it's honorable to be her and then want to be part of the solution. But if left on a dress that her child is still inside you,

 07:48

you just explained it a to a tee so and then. So I was with my mom until the age of 12. And then I moved with my grandfather, and my grandfather raised me and his message always was I fear, you're going to be emotional, I'll show you something to be emotional for. So it was don't express your emotions, keep it inside. That's what a man does. And that's what I learned. And I think that later in life, how it hurt me is that, you know, I used drugs and alcohol to mask those emotions and not really deal with them. So so you

 James Geering 08:19

get arrested for a drug charge. You lose this, this this dream career that you were hoping to enter? Where does that send you next?

 08:27

Yeah, so I started working in the health club industry. I was there was a gold gym in Tallahassee, I started working there and loved it, love what it did for me, it helped build some confidence for me, and I was really good at it. So from there, I got involved and I traveled with a consulting company fixing failing health clubs. But my addiction progressively was getting worse to the point where I lived in Miami and I really was not employable anymore. I was my addiction was so bad. The owner knew it. And he and he let me go and he said, I hope you get help. And I remember living in a high rise apartment 15 floors up. And I literally have to wake up in the morning to a drink to not go into a seizure. That's how bad the physical withdrawals were. And there was a morning that I had a bottle of vodka and I had nobody left in my life. I had burned every bridge and I grabbed the vodka and I swiped it. And I said if there's a God, you'll do something and I had every intention of walking to the balcony and ended my life. And as I'm walking to the balcony to open the door, my phone rang and it was my mom and she said something told me to call you I said while something told you to call me and she said yes. And she said I called the place in Ocala. Senators on Airport Road, they have a bed, would you take help? And I said yeah, I got my car left everything that I had I drove to the senators in 2005 and checked in.

 James Geering 09:45

So the Senate is actually a element of trauma for myself. That was a huge abuse of power in my son's Middle School. He was going through some personal things and you was just, you know, basically going through an emotional moment, not violent, not threatening, nothing just kind of breaking down and crying. And between the principal and the resource officer, they without even calling me they sent him to the Centers for a three day hold. Totally disregarding all protocol, which traumatize the shit out of him. Yeah. So you can imagine, absolutely. So I know the Senate as well. But that facility, and I'd be very clear, you know, that kind of hold is imperative for some people. That's what it's nervous why we shouldn't be cell sending, you know, upset children that are, you know, going through some stuff because one home is very, very, like you said that there's not a feeling of security in a home. So they're, you know, they're hoping that the school is going to be the one that helps them. But you know, there is a need for, you know, those kinds of facilities when it comes to deep addiction when it comes to suicide, ideation, homicidal ideation. So talk to me about your experience, and what was it about that that helped you start to turn the corner?

 11:00

Yeah. So when I got there, I remember begging them to let me in, I had no money. So they had to scholarship me. And, you know, they say that what happens with your addictions, I started drinking when I was 17 years old. So essentially, your your growth stops at that point, I think I was 20. I was 25. When I went to the Senator. So I would say essentially, I was a young 17 year old boy, I would, I would say, honestly, probably closer to 12, if I had to guess, with my emotions and where I was. So essentially, once the drug and alcohol was gone, we had to get to the root of what was going on. And they had therapists there that could help me that and, and really work a program. But it really was ripping the layers of the onion back to get to the core of what was causing this addiction for me. And a lot of it was that trauma that I experienced things that I just never wanted to talk about, I was not going to share with anybody. But the more that I could get that stuff out and realized that it was not my fault. And really start to process it, I was able to start to heal. And so I stayed for six months, I built a program of recovery, I got a sponsor and in recovery and someone who kind of who's been there before, who guided me through it. And he, I remember when I checked out, he said, Listen, I don't want you to go out and try and hit a home run, I want you to stay humble, I want you to focus on your recovery, and serving God. And so if that means cleaning a gym, let's do that, as opposed to managing a gym. So essentially, there was a gym called Lord gym on 200. And I went there as a trainer and I would help with whatever he needed. But it was it was not a big commitment on my part, because my commitment was to build a rebuilding my foundation in my life.

 James Geering 12:34

Beautiful. Well, so what took you from there to? Actually before you say that, you have six months sobriety, you have a sponsor, you know, so you're starting to build some of these tools. What were other tools that allowed you to continue down the road of growth, rather than fall back down into despair,



12:51

you know, putting really good people around me, one of the things they teach you early in recovery is don't hang out with the newcomers. Because again, you have both have really bad habits, you don't have a positive way of thinking you can identify your issue. So I put myself around really good solid people. I had a really good faith foundation. That was important. I will tell you why I was at Lord's gym. I was in there one day, I see this beautiful woman walk in and I'm in awe of her I run to the front. And I meet her and there was something about her, I could tell she was special. And I felt like this is gonna be my wife. And it was just by looking at her. This one was way too good for someone like me. Anyway, I offered her free personal training session we, we had a training session and we went on a date. And we dated for a couple of weeks, and I couldn't share my password or I was too ashamed. And we were driving back from St. Augustine one day and I felt this guilt over me and I pulled over the car and I said Danielle, I said I got something to share with you. I said you are way too good for someone like me. In fact, I was pretty much homeless from drug addiction. And I've done some bad things in my life and you deserve way better for me. And she looked back at me with tears in her eyes and said that's not who you are today. And I see who you are and who you're going to be and I want to be there for that and I love you regardless and I've never felt unconditional love before. And I really think that propelled me into the next level gave me hope something to push for feeling that love that I've never felt before. So that was extremely powerful in helping me become who I am today.



James Geering 14:26

It's amazing how often the words guilt and shame come up. I've got a friend Chad Belcher who's actually a BC and obtain chief in Marion now. He's been on the show twice. The first time we met was right before he was on this massive spiral down. And now he's I think it's three plus years sober runs a recovery program and a CrossFit gym. Amazing. But again, that aha moment of realizing if these things happen to you as a child, you know, Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Security is the base that's the most important thing. And so to get that mindshare, gift from, you know, I'm so ashamed of what I did too. I was a victim, you know, no one, no one asked, you know, I didn't say, hey, come into my room and do this thing to me or, you know, take drugs around me or beat my mom in front of me, whatever it is. And the moment you can shift from that guilt, and like you said, you are good enough for another human being. That was a massive shift. Oh, yeah, it was tremendous. So I just really want to say as well as your wedding anniversary today. So thank you, Danielle, for allowing, you know, this this conversation on this special day. Absolutely. Um, so you said about Lourdes gym? How did that take you to the YMCA.



15:35

So I was there. And it was a couple of weeks later that a woman walked in to tour the gym. And I took her on a tour and she said, I'm not here to buy a membership from you. I'm here to take you to come work for me at the YMCA. And I said, Well, ma'am, I appreciate that. But I have no intention on staying in Ocala. Well, one day, I'm driving by this wall. And I just felt this desire to go check it out. And I pulled in and I walked in and she was standing at the front. She goes, we've been waiting on you What took you so long? So I was thinking she was gonna make me this unbelievable offer. So I was excited to sit down and talk to her. And she said, Ben, listen, things are in dire constraints. We're in a point where we don't even know if we'll keep the doors

open. Would you consider working for me for \$10 an hour, I was making more as a as a trainer at this point. And we're probably gonna need you to work like 60 hours a week. But you can only get paid for 40. But I promise you, if you can help turn things around. We, we will take care of you. And I remember telling her well, thank you, but no thank you and kind of walked out. And I remember going home that night. And I was I was dating Danielle, my wife at the time. And I'd shared with her. And she's always been the voice of reason for me. So Danielle, I felt like I was being called to work at the YMCA. I can't take this major step back financially, we, you know, trying to build a life and some stability. And she said, You need to take a leap of faith and trust. If this is God's plan for you, you need to do that. So I went back and I accepted the job. And that was in 2005. And really put a lot of the things that I learned in the health club industry in place and the Y took off and did very well.

 James Geering 17:03

So I've told YMCA stories before because I think we came I moved back here in 2008. And I had just got in being exposed to CrossFit when I was in Huntington Beach, one of my friends there when I was at Anaheim as a firefighter. And so I came to the why my little boy who's in the other room right now, I think he was God, two and a half three or something. So we put him into your daycare, which was always awesome, by the way. But then we either play racquetball, or I do my CrossFit workout. And I just I told the story before I just the looks on the faces. When I was flinging myself around. It was one dude from PD that put some rings up I don't know if you remember that. He and I bet the only two people in the whole gym that knew what the hell was going on right? And he will be like, why you're killing yourself. And now the guy that high school guys would be laughing but I've talked about this in the past. Fast forward about two more years, three years now it's on television, the same high school kids look, Bro, can you show me how to do that? Right, exactly. So but it was a it was a great great gym, but one of my memories is just trying to figure out a way to do a CrossFit workout, you know, amongst all the machines and regular people.

 18:13

Right, right. Right. Everybody's watching you. You were there amusement, remember?

 James Geering 18:17

Absolutely. Yeah. So you were in the Y for a while. What made you take the leap of faith to actually start your own gym?

 18:25

Yeah, so I worked my way up to vice president over 10 years at the Y and you know, it was just an amazing career. I learned so much. But one day I was driving to I had locations in Orlando. I remember driving and I just felt like there was an uneasiness about where I where I was in my life. So I just kept praying and one day my wife and I went out on our boat to Eton's Beach and we ran into a businessman out there and his name was Tommy Grom. Any. He said, Ben, he said, You've done a great job with the YMCA would you ever want to open your own gym? And I

said, Tom, there's no way I said I just raised \$5 million to expand this location in Ocala. I don't think it would look too good. If I were to open a gym in Ocala. He said, Well, if anything ever changes, you let me know. Well, that night I went home. And in my dream, I had a dream that I was I opened my own gym. So I woke up the next morning and shared it with my wife. And we had been offered all kinds of great opportunities in the community to take over businesses a lot of financial rewards, but nothing felt like my purpose. And Danielle would always realign me to my purpose. So she said I really feel like this is a calling for you to do this. So let's pray on it. And we this was 2014 or 2013. And I knew the guy who bought Compass Health and Fitness. It was Brick City Fitness. I called him up one day and I said Bill, can I meet with you and I drove up to his gym and we had a conversation. I said bill, would you ever want to sell your gym? And he just looked at me with like a stare on his face. And I knew I hit a chord. He said I cannot believe you're in here today. In two days. We're going to shut this gym down. He goes whatever you need. I'll help you to help with the transition. So that's how it started.

**J** James Geering 19:57

Amazing. Yeah. So So we were talking before we hit record about you know, the kind of the genesis and the metamorphosis of the gym from a gym space to some of the more holistic healing elements as well so kind of walk me through that you remember Brick City so you go initially you kind of a, a regular what they call quote, quote unquote Globo gym with a super fancy bathroom that felt like you were in a country club. Sure. So walk me through that kind of timeline.

**o** 20:25

Yeah, so when I, when I did buy the gym, it was probably more like a body builders gym. And I'd had about 1000 members at the time. And we had a vision that we wanted to make a gym for everybody, not just one particular market where people will feel come in. And they may be coming for fitness, but they feel like they're part of a community or a family that was extremely important. So we, we had to hire, we knew we had to hire staff that had the heart to serve, and it would start with our staff. And if their heart was to serve, hopefully, that would infiltrate down into our members. And I'll tell you when I was in the first, when I was in the first couple months, members were so angry from the experiences they had, they didn't trust me, they didn't like me. There were many times where I had really bad confrontations. My wife was threatened a couple of times, literally had to call the chief of police to help me down the street. And we went down the street to help with the transition. The gym was losing \$40,000 A month when we took it over. We bought it for \$1 and just took over the debt of the facility. So we had a major obstacle to overcome, in fact, nine months and we ran out of money. And we had \$10,000 and bills on the counter. And I remember thinking, Why did I do this. And I had a sharp pain in my chest, I think I'm having a heart attack, I scream for help. They rushed me to the hospital, I had a panic attack. And the doctor looked at me and said, I don't know what's going on. He was 35. At the time, he said you have to make a change. Otherwise, I'm afraid the next thing will be the real thing. So that night, I went home and I prayed and that month zone made money and did very well. But as far as how it's, it's transformed over time. We the staff we hire like I said it's about their heart. But there's also a lot of people that we hire, it's their second chance in life. Because of me where I've been from that's important to me is to first and foremost serve the people that work for me. And so we hire really good people that care. So that's what creates the community environments, it's different than most facilities, you don't feel that you might be

left up to your own or people don't care, our staff truly do care and make a difference. But also, we wanted to look at the whole wellness perspective. So our gym is called zone. So it's broken up by zones of things that people might like to do or level of, of fitness that they're comfortable in. So like you said, we actually have a CrossFit facility at our gym that is very unusual for a big gym to have a CrossFit zone. And it's extremely popular. We have a boxing zone, we have a cardio group exercise zone, a meditation zone. And when I talk about meditation, we offer yoga, but we actually have a room where you go in and you shut your mind down. And it is really set up to really train your mind to start relaxing. And I'm really love that. And I tell myself, that is something I want you to do every day because we want our staff healthy so that they can push it to our members. We have cold plunge pools, which are amazing not only for recovery, but the mind, and I use that and it's been amazing for me, sauna steamroom. So it's really the whole level of fitness. Why say spirit, mind and body at zone?

 James Geering 23:24

Beautiful? Well, I want to get to the mayor position. But just before we get to that, chronologically, you're a gym owner. There's a pandemic. This is James Geering is opinion. Now what I saw through my eyes was you had an opportunistic virus that is extremely dangerous for people that have vulnerability that might be obesity, diabetes, it might be some sort of, you know, abnormality physiologically or like a lot of people listening it might be that you do shift work and your immune system is destroyed. Well, what should have been done with those two years in my opinion, is the priority prioritization of fitness time in nature, meditation, sleep community, but what I saw was gyms, parks, beaches closed down and alcohol and fast food delivered to the house. What and then obviously, the economic element of closing gyms. You know, Ted and I are legion, they did great work, and they started and everyone shut down when they were supposed to. But then the moment the tap was even opened a little bit. They were you know, outside classes and just figuring out a way to get everyone back into the gym and have community again. So what was that experience for you as a gym owner who had a struggling gym finally starts making money? And then this comes through?

 24:38

Yeah, no, it was definitely a tough time. Even when we were shut down. We knew we wanted to keep our employees employed making money. So we had a cafe. We had cleaning supplies, so we would do drives where we just let people come up for food. First responders. We were feeding first responders we did cleaning supplies that we were giving away. We had tons of sand advisors and solutions. So we were constantly just trying to serve the community during the time that we were shut down. But I will tell you that as soon as we could reopen, we reopened. And it was I'll tell you that people were so thankful. And I will tell you that people that that were away from the facility, there's you have to realize there's a lot of people that come in to zone that are older, that were their family, so they're away from their family for a month or two. And they were falling apart, they would literally come up to me with tears in their eyes and say thank you for this place. Thank you for this community. And thank you for opening up because there still were a lot of restrictions in other areas, even in states of hard depending on the local government, or local government or mayor was no open these facilities up we need this and and to me it made no sense, like you said is we're gonna shut down a health facility that can help build your immunity helped build your physical health, which can

compat can combat this. It just really made no sense at all. So we really got out and it really, and the people were so thankful that we were open and ready for them when they can get back in there.

**J** James Geering 26:06

Yeah, I saw the same thing about sorting across the gym. I saw it in my jujitsu, you know, the the we'd have to go in the back door for jujitsu for a while. Is everyone cool with being on top of each other? Okay, let's let's go. And everyone was very responsible. And we're all you know, testing everything. But there's a certain point where that okay, we everyone shut down. We waited to see what happened. I have to say, a politically, the decisions that Ron DeSantis made for the state of Florida, I thought were excellent. Take it seriously, you know, release a little bit reassess release a little bit. And the irony was we've got a high population of Geriatrics in this state. And actually, the numbers were pretty good compared to a lot of states. So I think that speaks volumes. It does. Absolutely. So with the health lens now. You are about to be the mayor of Ocala. Congratulations. With this health and fitness lens. We have an increasingly obese population, especially, you know, our young kids. What is your perspective of trying to to make a dent in that whether it's in the general population or within our schools?

**i** 27:10

Yeah, no. And so I saw yesterday or the day before, it came out in a news article that we were rated one of the most unhealthy cities in the state of Florida. And that just breaks my heart. And I do believe that everything starts with physical and mental health. If you're if you're not dealing with chronic illness, or a major physical problem, then it's just not important to you. But once that happens to you, that takes precedence over everything. So I tell people don't wait, don't wait until that that heart attack occurs or diabetes or a major health concern. Because fitness is a lifestyle, it is something that you are I tell people all the time is that you want the Fountain of Youth workout, eat healthy, and train your mind. And then the other component is Mount mental illness. One out of four of our local residents that we know of, or struggle with mental illness, I tell you, it's probably closer to two out of four, because there's a lot of people that just don't share it. And so for me as the next mayor of Ocala big focus will be the physical and mental health of our community. And for the physical aspect. There are so many ways that we can get people active and moving getting together, I look forward to partnering with the gyms, I'm going to form committees with fitness people in our community and come up with a game plan of how we can really get our community active and moving. From a mental component, my story I will use to educate people on mental illness and hopefully provide courage to step out and know that it is okay to talk about it and get help. I think that's the biggest barrier is nobody wants to talk about it, they're ashamed. But the true courage comes when you bring it to light. And we do have facilities in our community that are available, but I just think people just don't know about it. So we need to make sure that people are aware of those, those those programs and make sure that they know the door is open for them. So we're really going to I want to be an example for the country of how we can be physically and mentally healthy. So I'm excited.

**J** James Geering 29:02

Now what about your perspective, I know Marian is basically overseeing a lot of schools. To me,

when we come out of two years of a pandemic, I was going okay, well beautiful. Like for example the environment Mother Nature showed us if we stop polluting this shit out of her she actually recovers yes dolphins in you know, the the Nile i think the Venice the Venice Canals and the LA was clear and up and it was just beautiful. And then you know, short time later, bomb it was forgotten and now it's masks and gloves on all the payments. But it was an amazing opportunity. You had a captive audience to really share the health message. We have soda vending machines in our school. The cafeterias are serving Cisco processed food I mean Cisco's the delivery company I know but you know processed food. And then we have P programs that are slashed and slashed and slashed. I know you know it's bigger than just the mayor of Ocala. But if there was a message to everyone that actually gets to make a decision, Walker we do in our schools to improve the health.

 30:02

Yeah, you're starting, like we talked about your childhood years are so important. You're forming the habits for later in life. Let's teach them these skills now that they would carry into their life later, bigger. And we know that nutrition plays a role in your mind. Yeah, I mean, when I eat healthy, my mind is so much clearer, right? So we're going to feed them processed food, things that creates brain fog, and makes it really hard for them to be able to focus. So I, I think it starts with the right message, it starts with the right person, the way that AI will lead it will, it will, it will be not to beat people over the head, but to build relationships and trust with people. And hopefully it'd be able to educate them on the importance of this. But um, the way that I look at the mayor is your voice for the community, and I will be that voice for our community.

 James Geering 30:45

Now, what about from a holistic, you know, going to organic food lens, we are surrounded by incredibly fertile soil, not for all foods, obviously. But you know, we're surrounded by farmland. If we saw that there was a huge bottleneck when it came to the food supply, but yet so many, you know, states around this country have the ability to grow all kinds of things locally. What about with that lens, kind of bolstering local farms and trying to to I don't know if see, Ocala is the city but Right. But again, that philosophy of bringing agriculture and supporting local clean food that doesn't have to be irradiated and shipped 2000 miles?

 31:22

Yeah, no. And I think it just again, you have to educate people, I hate to say it, it's almost like you have to scare people with the reality of what's going to happen, right? Because really, when people change is when they hit that, that moment of man, something bad happens. That's what we see, a lot of times when they walk into the gym, something bad just happened. So now I got to make this change. So as much as we can educate, we can show the benefit. We all know that any kind of fitness regimen, you want to see results. 80%, I think even higher is through nutrition. We have a really, if you haven't had time, we have the downtown market where a lot of our local farmers come out and sell produce and different things. That's been great. And it's really busy, I think we need to do a better job of marketing that I don't think people realize that we offer that and the benefits of that. So that would be a focus that I would like to do my wife personally has, we have a garden in our house, and we homeschool our kids.

So part of their education is being out there learning that starting this at a young age. So hopefully they will carry it later in life. I think those are things that we could do at our schools. But also maybe we can do classes for parents to teach them how to, to do their own gardens at home. Because for my wife, it's part of it is the healthy food, but part of it is for her mind, she loves it. She loves being out there in nature and doing this. So I think there's a lot of benefits to that.

 James Geering 32:39

When we talk about multi generational trauma, and obviously, in your case is a perfect example, because there was a reason why your mom drank, you know, and like you said your grandfather's struggle with things from from his service. Yeah. But I think there's also a multigenerational deficit when it comes to education. And you know, if you grew up in, you know, where you were born, if you're in the inner city in New York somewhere, how you really get to know how potatoes are grown and you know how to prepare cauliflower and all these things you're not so there's a lot of again, looking down the nose kids today rolling their eyes, and yeah, all these families they need to have, you know, family structure. Yeah, but if you're two generations in, you just don't rain, just don't say you're too late. So it's rebuilding and educate. And I love that idea, not just children, but give the opportunities for the families to get involved. Because the pride of actually, you know, long term growing, but if not, at least going to the farmers market, buying fresh veg and learning how to make a basic meal, you know, that would that would then send them down a rabbit hole of oh my god, this tastes amazing, right? You know, let's throw away the frozen pizza. And let's, let's start doing this more often exam when you have fast food once in a while. It's okay. It don't need to be extreme.

 33:46

Exactly. And I'll tell you like I've gone through diets, but I will tell you, you know, they may they make this food to be addicting, like you literally crave it when you're on it. But when you come off of it, and you will go through some sort of feeling. I don't know if it's a withdrawal but it's uncomfortable for a couple of days. But once you're done you you feel amazing. It's just getting through those first couple if it's a week, two weeks of that, that that food coming out of your system, and but when I'm eating healthy, it's amazing how you feel. So you got to feel that you got to feel the benefit, then you want more of that.

 James Geering 34:20

So another thing on the mental health side before we get to the first responder community, I was talking to the CEO of new calm. We're just talking about the app today. And he was in the psychology world his whole career. His parents were both psychologists and he said a lot of the homelessness I didn't know about this was actually caused by a lot of the mental health facilities that they defunded, basically, and put them all out into the street, and again, multigenerational you know that was a huge thing. We do have homelessness in the city of Ocala. I personally struggle with people that I talk about us a lot that spend a certain day of the week in a religious building, and then come out and look down at someone who's homeless. To me You know, the origin story is always going to be trauma. You know, some of us are

fortunate enough to have mentors and the ability to take that right path and some just don't devoid of that that person. So what is your perspective of how we, you know, proactively addressed that rather than just ferrying them off to a different state? Or she County?



35:19

Yeah, so I'm pretty much at a point of where I was homeless. You know, I have a unique perspective on it, I will tell you that you hit the nail on the head when you said they definitely have mental illness, I would imagine, if you're homeless, you probably are struggling with some sort of mental illness. But it's also then layered with some sort of drug addiction. Most of the time, I have a theory that I think would work. You know, I I've hired people that were homeless, that that are rebuilt their life back on their feet and are successful today. And one in particular is a good friend of mine him, his name is Jeff. And he was homeless for 25 years. And if you look at him, you could tell that he was homeless for 25 years, but he's, he's doing great today. So I asked him, I said, Jeff, what, what changed it for you? How did you get off the street? And he said, you know, Ben, he said it was on the street. He'd make about \$60 an hour, being on the street corner, and people given him money. And then you take the money and go buy drugs. He was heavily addicted to drugs. And I said, Jeff, so how that change, he said, One day, a guy walked up to me that was homeless than I remember. But he would look different that day, who's dressed, he could tell that his life was different. He said, Jeff, do you remember me? And he said, I do. He said, Jeff, I changed my life. And I'm not gonna give you money today. But I'll give you something much better. There's a program out there right now that has a bed, would you take the help. And he was at a point where I heard the message, I knew the guy, I knew where he was. And I believe that something there was better give me hope. And I got in the car, and I went, and he checked in. And he stayed there for six months, and the guy mentored them through the program. And then he got out and rebuilt his life. So my theory is this is that I believe that we can, we can get people off the streets, get them help with the right help with the right message. And I'd love to utilize people that have been down that road. And now on the other side, it's a whole program of recovery is you've been there, I can connect with you, I can share my story with you now, let me help you. And a lot of the problem is, is that there's somewhere along the way that the piece of the puzzle is not completely put together. So for example, if that guy walked up to Jeff, and there wasn't a bed available, at that time, when the guy was ready to make help, then you've just lost the person. So there has to be a system in place. So what I'd love to do is, is have beds available on the spot. Us guys like Jeff, we go on the street, we talk to them, we connect with them, we let them know, Hey, we know that it's been hard, we've been there. But we also know that there's a solution, let us help you. And then we try to encourage them to get to a program and we mentor them through the process. And now those guys get better and now they become part of the program. And I think I think it will work. In fact, I know it will work I feel I feel like it is an answer to our problem.



James Geering 37:57

One of the programs that works well in in the first responder profession now is called peer support. And really, the simple concept is someone that understands what you're going through, is the person that you go to now they're not the counselor, they're not the addiction specialists there appear that they're the conduit between you and you know what that ultimately is going to help. And that makes perfect sense. Who better and I've had this so often, people who overcome addiction, overcome, you know, a near suicide attempt, have this

post traumatic growth and then all their peers come out the woodwork like, hey, you know, can I tell you something a sec, I can imagine it's the same with homelessness when you and I've had people that were homeless on the show that became you know, fire chiefs and all kinds of incredible things. We're all people. We're all that little toddler once that was laughing and chasing butterflies. None of us dreamed of living under a bridge or selling our body for for money. Yeah, you know, so to have that humanity and put it back into this proactively as a Christian as a Hindu as whatever you subscribe to. That is how you fix it. And I would argue even monetarily, you're going to save money hand over fist not having to pour all these reactively but rather proactively.



39:06

Absolutely. And it all starts with love and compassion, right? If I go there, and if I'm trying to beat the message over someone's head, I've never been able to be effective that way. The message has always been delivered so much better when I show love and compassion and understanding. And then people are willing to listen and so I'm excited to try that we are going to try that no calla that is a program that we will be working to put in place and I'm excited to see what the outcomes will be



James Geering 39:34

beautiful but I got one more topic because I'm gonna be mindful of your time. The first responder profession especially fire which is obviously the one I know best, Marion is the worst case example. Ocala is a little better. But my brothers and sisters in uniform traditionally work with a call 24 on 48 off, which we mythically refer to as one day on two days off now no civilian works 24 hours a day so it's three days on one day off, actually, I mean, it's not 10 days a month, it's 30 days a month when you add it on. So, Ocala I think they have the Kelly day, if I'm not mistaken. So every three weeks, they'll get an extra day. But still a 48 hour week, when the average civilian is tapping out, usually, you know, on paper, at least at 40. I have talked about this a lot. It's I think it's behind. So much of the obesity, cancer, mental health issues that we suffer from is the sleep deprivation element. And address childhood trauma is a big thing. I mean, I know two people from the city of Ocala fire that we've lost drug overdoses so and it's not a big departments, just a few stations. My goal is to make the what we call 24/7 e to the industry standard, because if you look at the true economy of investing in your people, and giving responders the rest and recovery they need, you again would save hand over fist over, you know, workman's comp claims, overtime covering you know, lawsuits because we make mistakes, etc, etc. So, with that lens, I mean, it's it's probably kind of new information for you talk to me about the first responder professionals, because I think if you improve the conditions around them, and you put the bar back where it needs to be, you're gonna have a lot more people lining up to do that job. Right now, I think we've had that 18 In a heartbeat mentality. And clearly, Marian is a perfect example. You can't hire enough people because everyone can look on the internet and go, Oh, firefighters are dying, left, right and center. So any any perspective that you have on that, first of



41:29

all, I have so much respect for first responders, I in the last two months, I've had the opportunity to do ride alongs with both and I'm just blown away with the scenarios they have to

be in every day, you know, you have to be a mental health counselor, you have to save lives, you have to be a dad, in certain situations, I mean that it runs the gamut. It really does take a special person to serve and do that. So I just have the utmost respect, but I do I'm a huge component of proper sleep. I can tell you when I sleep well, I'm a completely different person. So to have that night of where you're probably being interrupted every hour, maybe less of having to go out. I'm imagining that storing in your mind. And then the next couple of nights, you're probably not sleeping as good. So I think that I think that yes, we have to look at new ways to be able to take care of our first responders if something that we're doing is not working, we have to look at it and look at what is the best options out there. And I do believe I see the county has stepped up and recently made some changes and and I'm excited to see that they're doing what they need to do. And I believe the same thing will be for the city. But I'm always going to be for supporting our first responders and taking care of them because that's who takes care of us. You know, why does everyone want to move to Ocala, Florida? Well, we're one of the safest places to live in the country. Like we talked about, I want to be safe, right? That's first and foremost, I think that's the foundational we need to feel safety. Well, that's what you guys provide for us every day. So we have to make sure that we're taking care of you guys, I'm looking at what's going to be the best way to keep our guys safe so that they can keep us safe.

 James Geering 42:57

Beautiful. Yeah. And in November, we have the research project with HMC one of the most revered research companies in the states, if not the world, where they'll finally collate all the data and will be able to present it to these city and council members and be like, Look, this is this is how far from human performance you are. And this is hopefully there'll be a storyteller. This is the immense money that we're wasting by destroying our people.

 43:21

And that's what they need to say, right? They need to be able to see how is it going to not only benefit our guys, but benefit our community. And I think once they see that they they'll How else would they not be on board?

 James Geering 43:30

Absolutely. Well, I'm gonna end here you have a, you know, an anniversary to spend with your family. So thank you so much for coming on. Thank you also for your courageous leadership. We were raised as young men with you know, especially as you said, with your granddad with this facade of masculinity that erupts into and you know, boys don't cry. And that's created so many coffins and folded flags in the world. So we need the leaders of the world to be vulnerable, tell their stories, and normalize his mental health conversation. So I want to thank you so much for coming on the show today.

 44:02

Thank you. It's been a pleasure. I appreciate you

