

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 42
Heidi Beck Heser

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana's. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. My guest today is Heidi Beck-Heser, manager and Candy Chef at Phillipsburg's legendary Sweet Palace. Heidi is a stalwart advocate for the Phillipsburg community and she and her family have been at the center of the town's transformation following the closure of mines and sawmills.

Heidi Beck Heser Change is always for the better. It's just a matter of how you choose to receive it, understand it and use it to move forward.

Justin Angle Change and progress have not been linear, and COVID has brought unique stresses to this rural community. Stress is perhaps invisible to the many folks who passed through this wonderful Montana town. Heidi, thanks for coming on the show today.

Heidi Beck Heser Hey, thank you for having me. It's great to hear your voice.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Heidi Beck Heser I grew up here in Phillipsburg, Montana, and I was raised on a cattle ranch for my first 18 years of life, and we had to hike to see your neighbors, which we did. We had kids that lived up and over the hill, and we would meet and go do adventures in the mountains together, the six of us. And in terms of ranching, while you had morning afternoon evening chores, as always. And it was a looking back, probably one of the best ways to grow up. There are days I miss it. And days I wish I had it. But at the same time, there are days. I'm very, very glad when I'm not doing it with it. Like today, I'm not having to do with calves coming when it's icy.

Justin Angle So yeah, for sure. And talk about so does the family still on the ranch? Or at what point did the family's focus shift to the town and Sweet Palace and so forth?

Heidi Beck Hesper So we left the ranch in the spring of '90. In any case, they started their own business here in town. They got that off and learning that in fact, the Sapphire Gallery, I do believe, is 30 years old this year. And a few short years later, that was my senior year of high school. They started that. Mom, in the meantime, is doing the sapphires and decides that Phillipsburg needs something creative that makes people want to come on a more regular basis, something that's enjoyable for all age groups. And she did some searching and then did some remembering of when she was growing up. She's a blended family of eight, so they got to go on vacation. This is, of course, in the early 50s as a big family back then could only afford to take, you know, two three four kids max on vacation in a given time. So they only got to go like every two or three years as a kid growing up. And she remembers they would go in the Wisconsin area and she remembers going to Wisconsin Dells. And there was a candy store and she had saved her own money. And so she spends her own money on what she chooses. And she remembers that as a young person that people spend money differently even an hour away from home.

And so they went into researching candy stores. And deciding that that is what Montana's needed, and so about that time, I was graduating from the U of M and was checking out a job in Austin, Texas. And I turned it down and came back to Montana. And she offered me the position of starting this business with her and staying for the first year to get it off its feet. And so that's what I did. I went into construction. And so when you walk into the sweet palace, I help build the balconies on both sides. I help turn all the columns that hold up the balconies. I painted the ceiling. I did all of the original layout of the inventory. There's lots of funny inside stories to all of that. But so Sweet Palace is twenty five years old this Mother's Day.

Justin Angle Amazing.

Heidi Beck Hesper I feel like I've been doing it for that long, but it is.

Justin Angle It Mother's Day is a special place out there. I've been to the Sweet Palace on Mother's Day and it's a pretty incredible experience.

Heidi Beck Hesper Yes, we like to treat mothers and fathers as the incredible people that they are. And so moms and dads both get a free happen to fudge on their respective holiday.

Justin Angle So talk a little bit about that decision. You came to the University of Montana studied in our college business and then, yeah, like you said, you had you had an offer to go

work in Austin, which, you know, that's a big change and a cool, fancy town. You know what prompted the decision to say no to that and return home back then?

Heidi Beck Hesper The Sapphire Gallery was the first jewelry website in the United States. Okay. And I helped design and build it. We worked there with a company in Missoula that's no longer. I was a part of that and got into it. And upon graduating, there was a gentleman in Austin, Texas, who was starting up a website building company specifically for jewelry stores. It was a rapidly growing industry. And so I went down and found a place to rent and I had friends down there. And so I was looking and looking and interviewed with the guy, and he wanted me as an employee and got to meet some future possible fellow employees in the company. And all I can say is for lack of a better term, it didn't feel right.

Justin Angle Sure.

Heidi Beck Hesper There's this things when you know that this is the right choice and all of the things go the right way and the hairs on the back of your neck don't stand up. And so it just did not do it for me. It didn't excite me. Come to find out the company didn't last. I think maybe five years. And so it just didn't fit the bill. So I had to come back to Montana anyway because all of my stuff was here. And so it was a matter of, you know, coming back to the drawing board and seeing what I would do next. And in that time between graduation and me returning, mom had decided that this is what she and her business partner were going to do is to open the candy store. But she wanted someone of my ability and knowledge to be the front runner of the business side of it because she still had Sapphire Gallery, of course, to run.

Justin Angle Sure. And so you mentioned, you know, your mother had the motivation of figuring out a way to attract more people to Phillipsburg on a more regular basis. So in the 25 years that you've been operating this business, can you describe kind of the arc of the changes that have occurred in town and, you know, for better or for worse?

Heidi Beck Hesper So change change is always for the better. It's just a matter of how you choose to receive it, understand it and use it to move forward. And that has taken me twenty five years to understand. When the businesses first started and growing up here, Phillipsburg was, I remember Phillipsburg, a very different community than most of my schoolmates because my schoolmates were in, their parents were in county jobs or in mining, which is, you know, anything anyone knows anything about Phillipsburg. The mining industry is what started this area. So they have a very great view of growing up. And mine, I remember is very colorful, but I wasn't raised in town. It's amazing the difference of that. That being said, when

people come back home who grew up here and no longer live here, you get two very opposing sides of a coin. You get I don't like it anymore. It's changed so much. It's not what I remember. And the other side is, you know, what a great town it has become and has made a place that you know we get to enjoy coming back to. And it's a place our parents can actually live out their older years in life and that we can visit with grandchildren.

And so it's amazing, interesting, I should say that the views haven't differed in all these years, that it transpired generations of how they feel about town. And so Phillipsburg has definitely become a very interesting town to a lot of people from the outside area. And now it's not even Montana's who is discovering Phillipsburg, it's United States is discovering Phillipsburg and that has growing pains. And I am thrilled with our mayor currently because he understands that, that we need to get ahead of it. And everyone hates zoning. But we're going to have to do something in that regard to protect what we have created that people come to enjoy. And he understands that and is looking forward in how to do that best to benefit those that are here, as well as the future generations that either want to do business and or visit. The community as a whole in terms of the downtown business community is very forward thinking, hard working. It's one of the hardest working dedicated groups of people I've had the pleasure to work with truly.

Justin Angle So let's maybe draw out some of those challenges you mentioned there. You reference zoning in particular, but there's got to be, you know, there's some issues with housing and issues with trying to develop a workforce, issues of trying to, you know, encourage people to have more children and raise families in Phillipsburg. I mean, how does it kind of develop all the infrastructure and population to support itself?

Heidi Beck Hesser Yeah, those those are all huge, huge veins of the community. As any community, I watch Whitefish on a regular basis to see what they're up to because they usually run up against something about the same time we do OK, even though they're considered a higher end community up north to phrase that. Yeah. In any case, yes, housing is a huge challenge and housing is a huge challenge because we did not get ahead of it. By that, I mean, we did not get ahead as a whole VRBO, airbnb, HomeAway. You know that industry that people from the Mizzou Helena Great Falls, Billings, Bozeman, Idaho, you name it, discovered property when it was inexpensive and snatched it up and fixed it up and now rented out. And all of these houses, I mean, five of them sitting right around my house are all empty as a whole because people rent them out or own them and live elsewhere, and only one understandably want themselves in their homes. But at the same time, when you're trying to build a community with young families, as you mentioned, that makes it a true, true challenge in then,

by not having that once again, you brought up the next prong on that issue. And that is a workforce. If you don't have the people, who are you going to get to employ?

So we ourselves have gotten as our businesses have gotten creative this year once again, mom and her great ability to observe and and be intuitive watched over the years as she in the tourism industry visits RV parks and whatnot. Because we hand out information on those very I'm sure you've seen that the Phillipsburg Territory newspaper that the chamber puts out each year. Oh yeah. So we deliver that around, deliver that around the state. And as doing that, when they go into these RV parks and state parks, they see all these volunteers and they're from Arizona and Texas and California and Carolinas and Iowa. And they're retired and they're easy and they're kind and they're helpful and they enjoy people. And Monares last year was a true challenge to find employees, and we did. And so she had mentioned this to me, probably about six months ago. And of course, when you have Christmas in your life, it's completely taken over by glitter and chocolate. And so finally, we get to breathe again. And I asked Russ, How serious are you about this? And she was turns around to me. She was dipping chocolate. She goes, Let's do it, OK.

So I went and found a website, put an ad out, put a post on Facebook, and within 12 hours we had four people contact us for jobs that are retired. And the only way we're getting away with this, because once again, the housing's an issue is that they have to have their own RV because we happen to own a piece of property in the downtown area that's tucked away. That would be perfect for two to four RVs, depending on their size, that they could actually live there for a summer. And so we have hired so far one couple and one single. Not a single lady, but she's working for a single, her husband's going to be here as well. One couple is out of Billings and their families on this side of the state, so they're excited to be close to family, and the lady is actually she's from Louisiana and they're building up here again and they've been building for 15 years. And so she's going to come, stay and get out of the heat and work for us. So we have a few more interviews with a few other people. And that is the route we're going to take is that we're going to go get some of these retired people who aren't quite done working yet and want some people and some human interaction and some socialization and some new skill sets and see what we can do.

Justin Angle I mean, that's such a creative response to a problem. You know, the problem you talked about earlier with, you know, the Airbnb VRBO real estate effect. I mean, is there anything the community can do to to manage that? I mean, it's sort of like a market based effect. But at the same time, it has these, like you said, it's it's hard to build a community when you have all this real estate that's unoccupied until, you know, tourists come in on the

weekend. The money the tourists bring is nice, but it's not something you can build much culture around.

Heidi Beck Hesper True, true. And so I honestly don't know. That is once again, when I say I watch Whitefish that is one thing that they are trying to hammer out is how to put the rabbit back in the hole as it were. Are there stipulations that you can put on houses that are not lived in 12 months of the year? That if you are not going to do that, or you are going to use it as a vacation rental, then you are automatically having to pay make up an amount that's reasonable is paid into the town coffers as it were. So that money goes toward developing housing, possibly on other areas of town that haven't been built on yet. There's all kinds of things I think that can be done once again. It's a matter of having the time and money and people to do it. And with our infrastructure as it is, you know, we have a pretty heavy load just dealing with the water lines in the sewer system. But once again, if you had the money from the vacation rentals, then maybe that would help with those costs. And so it's a tangled web to undo and you're not going to make everybody happy. That is for sure. And the other snag on that particular thread is the people who are doing their vacation rentals. Most of them are not paying the state tax, which they should be by law, because when you go stay at a hotel, you have to pay a tax, a bed tax. And the thing is, I don't think people understand what they're by not paying that they are robbing the business community in Montana of something very vital to bed tax money that's collected by the state goes all into a grant, all of it. And that grant money goes up once a year and different entities in different communities can go after it every year. Well, it is because of that grant that it circles me back, that we have refrigeration for our ice drink, but by people not paying their bed tax. That money isn't now going back into something that can turn around and help Montana.

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Heidi Beck, Hesar after this short break.

Welcome back to New Angle. I'm speaking with Heidi Beck Hesper of the amazing Sweet Palace. Let's pivot a little bit in our remaining time, Heidi. There's two things I want to hit. I'd love you to talk a little bit about how the experience of the last two years COVID has affected the community. I mean, the health care infrastructure in the town has had to have been stressed dramatically. And then you've got this influx of people. As you mentioned before, a lot of the country has discovered Phillipsburg. A lot of you know, a lot of urban America fleeing to rural communities. And sometimes notoriously we hear stories of, you know, city folks bringing COVID to the country. I think some of that might be overblown. But yeah, what what has been the most salient issues to you and your community members during COVID?

Heidi Beck Hesper You know, COVID did not do us the blow that it did everybody else. It really didn't. And we didn't have a case in Grant County when it first started, I think all the way, almost until Memorial Day weekend.

Justin Angle Wow.

Heidi Beck Hesper We were we were one of the last to actually have a case and the health department and health environment in our community, we are very, very lucky. We've got people at the top with level heads and we have done very well or they have done very well. I can't take their credit and the community has done a good job at keeping their employees and their families cared for and safe. And in terms of people from the outside, for the most part, they have come here because of that that we are respectful of health and well-being and a community versus do what you want and heck with the rest of you. I think that was part of the draw as we've been once again very lucky in that regard in terms of business. This poor community got completely run over like a freight train. Yeah. Such that I don't know if you've watched because I know the University of Montana is tied to travel Montana. And so if you've picked up on anything that they are doing, for instance, Glacier Country, Yellowstone Country and now Whitefish is doing it, we have started it. And that is almost a campaign of being kind. And it's not just being kind to people, it's be kind to your place, be kind to the environment, be kind to the people that are coming after you and leave it better than you found it.

And so we have really jumped on that, and a lot of the Western states have as well because everybody got hit so hard and it wasn't that they were beat up because people weren't kind. It was that they were because there are so many our numbers out here in the West compared to the south, in the east and the southwest are quite a bit less and we don't have the numbers of people to draw on to buoy ourselves up and bring in the second and third string as you were. You know, it's we're trying to once again put the rabbit back in the hole and. Ask for, you know, we only want people to truly come that are going to enjoy and be kind, this is not. We don't want to have that stigma where people it's like we have become this overrun community that no one wants to come to anymore because you can't get in there and you can't do this and you can't go there. You know, we want to be able to be open and available and inviting and accepting on a regular basis. And so we have to wrap wrapper arms and our brains around that collectively and see what we can do to continue what we have created.

Justin Angle So we've talked a lot in this conversation about some of the macro issues facing the community I'd love in our remaining time, Heidi, to kind of focus the lens more on kind of your experience operating the Sweet Palace. Like, I mean, the number of things on your plate

running a small business like you do. I'm thinking about, you know, wage pressure, inflation, you know, the influx of demand like you just mentioned with the number of people coming to town supply chain management, both trying to make your own product, but bringing in other vendors product like tell us, give us sort of the state of play and a day in the life of Heidi.

Heidi Beck Heser Well, it is an adventure that there is no doubt. And you know, I don't think about these things until you say them. And then I'm like, Well, yeah, that probably is a challenge that people don't think about. So when you have a business as big as the Sweet Palace is, you have to plan at least six months out for inventory. And so there are so many products like, for instance, I don't know who's more upset or who's more happy that we can't get the giant gummy snakes anymore. I mean, that just has little kids, just unhinged and it has mothers, you know, praising as, Oh my gosh, thank you, how have those anymore? But those kinds of things every day. The inventory changed for me. This year, I had to continue to find new ways of getting product, new companies to get product from and how to get it here the most efficiently, economically. FedEx Freight saved my bacon so many times this year. I tell you I sent them candy this last week because, oh my goodness, they're that fabulous people in Butte that take care of us. And in terms of wages, we are right there, competitive. We feel the people need to make enough money to live on. You can't just pay somebody minimum wage. You've got to pay them money so that they have enough money to do what they need to do and have a life and enjoy where they live. With everything going up around us, that means that we need to accommodate that. But my gosh, they work hard enough. That's not a big deal, and you should be able to do that for your employees in terms of manufacturing, oh my heavens. I was making candy 12 hours a day this summer to keep up. I made 800 pounds of fudge a week to keep up. And you think about that walking out the door in quarter pound to one pound chunks? That is a lot of people. That was a wake up call to, OK, so do we need to revisit our business plan and you know how we charge for fudge, how we cut for a five year, what we're going to do for the upcoming summer? So that is one of the things on the table this spring that we're going to revisit and how we can take good care of our customers who love our food and love our product. But still, man, hopefully not have to crank that kind of product out the door.

Justin Angle Gosh, I mean, as you're laying this all out in the entirety of this conversation, I mean, Heidi, you impress me as somebody who you know, you have fierce commitment to your community, to your neighbors, to your business, to your family? How do you maintain this? Just sort of what appears to me as an outsider like just a firmly positive attitude about life? How do you endure?

Heidi Beck Hesper That is not always the attitude people get from you. So thank you. There are days when I am ready to just toss it all in the air and say, Well, good luck and I'm out. But everybody has those and you have to allow yourself, I think, to have that. Because whether you believe in a higher power or not or the universe, because the minute you do that, I have found almost every time I am put right back in my place, there is somebody who is suffering something so much worse, whether on a personal level, on a business level, somebody who is enduring something that I don't even think I have the ability. To help them or cope with and they are doing it and doing it beautifully. And so that makes me just get my ducks back all round and back up and hopefully in a row, not always sometimes are zigzagging and get back to it because I have I have nothing to complain about on the grand scheme of things I truly don't. And this community continues to. do what the people began at the very beginning. These are miners who came here and yes, miners, when money last, they left, but at the same time when they were here, they were here. They were in 100 percent every day, all day long and gave this community everything they had. And so I guess this community draws that kind of person because I feel that I'm not the only one with that aim and that goal in that daily push because there are several that I have walked in the steps out of and walk along beside who are just as good, if not better than myself.

Justin Angle Awesome. Well, Heidi, I can't thank you enough for the work you do. The example you set for so many small business owners and so many community leaders in the state. If folks want to learn more about Phillipsburg Sweet Palace, the Sapphire Gallery, where would you point them online?

Heidi Beck Hesper Each entity has their own individual website, so sweetpalace.com, sapphiregallery.com, Phillipsburg.com. Or better yet, just, you know, come to Phillipsburg and spend a day and enjoy it all influencer has to offer because there are many people and many discoveries that I think would improve your day and make you smile.

Justin Angle I think that's well put. Heidi, thanks for joining us today.

Heidi Beck Hesper Thank you for having me. You have a grand afternoon.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amment and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.