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>> Like, – I mean, sometimes the conversation is a 30-second one because there's not much in common. But other times it's like, oh, you know, I went to this school. I took this program, or whatever it is that comes up. And you've got some common ground and you start talking and stuff.

>> That was Kevin Browne. This is the Extra Mile Podcast. And I'm your host Elyse Pipitone.

[ Music ]

Kevin Browne is a Mohawk Award of Excellence recipient and a professor in the computer engineering and information technology. We talked about his passion for connecting others and tips for introverts at networking events. He also makes the case for coming to these events because you never know who you're going to meet, your future wife or your MC at your wedding. Here's my conversation with Kevin. I am here chatting with Kevin Browne and we are in the International Department, which is under construction. So if you do hear some pounding and hammering, it is because we are in the midst of a bunch of cubicles going up. So Kevin I know that from briefly meeting you to work on a project for an open house we wanted to do for International, you came up with a brilliant idea. You came forward to say I really want to work on this interactive map. And by the way, I'll just make it for you in five minutes and send you the link. [Laughs]. So upon meeting you I really understood that you were someone that was very engaged, wanted to help and connect people and use your skills. So let's talk a little bit about your background before coming to the college, what drove you to teach, and some of the great initiatives that you've done since starting. So before you joined Mohawk, what were you up to?

>> Thanks for having me. So before I joined Mohawk, I was doing my PhD in computer science at McMaster. And when I was there, I really wanted to stay in Hamilton, just because I grew up here. I'm a big Tiger Cats fan. I couldn't really imagine being somewhere else. But there wasn't really a lot of tech jobs and there wasn't really a lot of awareness about tech jobs in like the last decade. And so, what really kind of drove me to start doing a lot of community building and community outreach stuff was that problem of like why are none of my friends at McMaster, that are getting this great education and what not, staying here. And I noticed the same thing at Mohawk as well. Many students would go to [inaudible] and this kind of stuff. And so, I was really motivated to start doing some community building to change that. When I talked to a friend of mine from Toronto, he was actually my brother-in-law's brother. He said if you wanted to have a strong tech industry in Hamilton, you should start

organizing events that will connect people. That way they can learn from each other, grow their companies, et cetera.

>> And find the community here.

>> And find the community.

>> That wasn't there before.

>> Yes. And so he suggested this event called Demo Camp that his work colleague, David Crowe was organizing. And I basically just took that and ran with it and started organizing these sort of tech shows and televents where people would show up. They'd demo their app for five minutes. They get feedback for five minutes. And it was just basically like really geeky show and tell. But –

>> Yes. I like that.

>> – people really loved it. And it was really fun. And, yes, and then it just kind of blossomed from there in terms of doing community engagement things. So there's been all kinds of stuff like conferences and hackathons and just general talk events and all kinds of fun stuff.

>> Okay. So when you started Demo Camp, what kind of people were coming out?

>> So we had a bit of everybody. And I kind of – I rotated them around McMaster and Mohawk and just downtown Hamilton, just to kind of try to integrate the whole sort of Hamilton community. And we would get a bit of everybody. We had a lot of student startups. So we had a lot of students that just – they made something cool, they wanted to show it off. They had no way of doing that before. We also had a lot of – there was a little bit of a gold rush going on when the mobile app stores first started up. So we had a lot of people that were just trying to like cash in on something. They were just trying to like, oh –

>> They heard they could make money making apps.

>> Yes. And like there was a little bit of like naïveness to some of it in the sense that people thought I'm going to make the next Space Book because this thing you get a smiley instead of a like or something. And that said, though, we did have – the good thing was we did have a lot of companies that they would come out and demo. And they didn't have to do something necessarily flashy. But they had good underlying technology. They were good technologists. They had, you know, enough business sense, et cetera. So we had companies like Weaver Apps, that they came out and it was two guys that just had this app. And now it's like it's been seven years now, seven and a half years. But now they've got like 20 people working downtown. And they're just taking on like big international clients. So there definitely was lots of successful companies, as well. And a lot of them they didn't have the flashy thing that was kind of

exciting to people necessarily. But what they had was a good underlying, you know, technology and good underlying business.

>> And what was the benefit of connecting them with other app developers then?

>> Well, I think it's good for the companies to see who they can hire and to see, you know, first hand interacting with them in social environments. So I think that was a big thing. It's just making the connection between the developer that thinks that they can't work at Hamilton because they don't know of any companies here and the company that is looking for people and can't find anybody because they think that there's no tech in Hamilton. And I think there – they actually always kind of was tech here. If you go back there were companies like Fluid Media that were quietly doing cool things here for years. Mable Labels as well. They're not really quite a tech company. They're more of an ecommerce company. But, again, they were quietly here – well, not quietly, but they were here for years doing good stuff. And I just think the awareness wasn't there as much as it was before. So that was just a big part of it. Just when people are aware that each other existed, they were able to connect and have good things happen.

>> So this is where you come in. Where you know about these quiet, quote unquote developers. You know that there really is a tech scene in Hamilton but maybe the awareness isn't there. What drives you to connect people and to build this awareness. I just like to see people grow. Like, I just see people reach their potential and what not, really. That's just the biggest thing. It's just because – I mean, for awhile there, as a millennial, especially like after that – the last economic kind of slowdown in 2008, things were looking bad in terms of just the amount of good fulltime jobs out there. And I just love it when somebody gets into the right role and they take on more leadership and they just – their career blossoms. And they just do things that they didn't think they could do before. That is just a big, you know, life motivating factor for me. So that's kind of the motivation to connect people. The other thing that [inaudible] connecting people, too, is that just people that – it's kind of like sports. If you've ever coached like kids' sports. It's like there are some kids that have this instinct to defend the net. There are some kids that have this instinct to go and score. There are some kids that have the instinct to, like, be in the middle. And –

>> It takes someone like you, though, that can recognize that in someone that can't recognize it in themselves.

>> Yes. You kind of want people that can kind of look at that situation and be like, well, this person is really good at this. And this person is really good at this. If they work together, I bet you they're going to do much better than they could on their own. And that's another, you know, big benefit of doing networking. It's just you can have a full team [inaudible].

>> Yes. So did you meet your wife at a networking event?

>> Yes, actually. One of them at Mohawk College. At the time, this is like 2012. And myself and some people from Innovation Factory, and some others in the community, we were organizing a tech event called Start Up Weekend. And the idea there was – it was a totally like connector of different kinds of people thing. The idea was you connect business people that have a business idea with developers and designers that can build a product around it. And is kind of like a big hackathon like that. Where the end goal of the weekend is to produce a prototype of the product and then you'll have a business model around it. And people pitch and they have prizes. That kind of stuff. It was very successful in that. But it was interesting just because my wife, she happened to be there. Like, she – I didn't know her as my wife at the time, obviously. But she was there as part of one of these teams. And –

>> What was she doing there?

>> She was there as a designer. So, she was helping design this kind of like gym motivation application. And I think they did pretty well after it. I think they were one of the winners. And then just afterwards we got talking and then started going out. And yes, we actually kept bumping into each other at all kinds of networking events in the city. And just slowly, you know, got to know each other. And yes and then she –

>> Have you guys developed any programming or anything like that together?

>> Well, we do own a business together. So we own Commotion downtown, amongst other people.

>> Really?

>> Yes. It's a co-working space where people rent desks and private offices, that kind of stuff. And the idea is they don't have to rent, like, a five-year kind of lease on a building. They can just rent for like one month at a time. And so we own that together. We work on that together. We're both co-owners. She kind of manages the space. And that's like – I contribute to that a little bit on the side.

>> Nice. So how do you get people out to these events who may be introverted or not really into networking.

>> It's interesting. Sometimes it takes some coaxing. So one of my good buddies now, he was actually the MC at our wedding. It's all very small communities –

>> You met them all through your –

>> Yes. I met them all through networking. But what the MC at my wedding, he was once messaging me on Facebook and he was just like, I know I said I could demo this thing but I'm getting nervous. I don't know if I can do this. And I had to kind of like, be like, nah, don't worry. It's okay. We all get nervous at these things. Just go and do it and you'll have a good time. And he did it. He gave this awesome demo where – it was actually at the REN Mohawk [assumed

spelling]. And what he did was he made this application where you could hit a button on the web app and it would actually open or close things in your house. And it was kind of like IOT and [inaudible]. He actually showed a live stream of his garage door. And then he opened and closed in front of everybody. And everybody just loved that. And so it went really well for him. And it was really great. But it is tricky sometimes to get out people at networking events because they think they can't do it or something like that.

>> Yes. What's some advice you would have for people that are new to this?

>> The biggest thing is to kind of just give more than you get. So the idea is to just show up, not trying to like be there with a certain outcome in mind. Like, I want to sell people on this thing I've got. Or I want to find customers, or whatever it is. If you just kind of go out there and listen to people, listen to what their issues are, what problems they have, and then you help them by saying, hey, I actually know this person that can help you out or I know this person that could benefit from what you're doing. In a weird organic way it ends paying forward because people just kind of then say, oh that person really helped me out. I'm going to keep them in mind if I can ever help them out.

>> Sure. Your approach is always like calm with some good contacts in your back pocket. Not there to sell yourself 100 percent necessarily –

>> You know what, I mean –

>> To help other people out.

>> Totally, yes. You don't even necessarily have to come with contacts in your back pocket. You just kind of have to come with the attitude, like you said, just come with the attitude I'm here to help other people out and it's very surprising how that ends up just helping everyone.

>> How did you become such a natural at connecting people?

>> So, yes, that's funny because I'm not really – I didn't think I would be natural at any kind of connector role because I'm introverted by nature. But it is interesting because when you're able to listen to people you can kind of understand what they're about and where they're coming from and that kind of stuff.

>> This goes back to recognizing, like, the sports analogy. Recognizing skills, talents in others.

>> Yes. Yes, you can recognize what kind of person they are and what their skills are and that kind of stuff. And when you're a good listener because you're quiet or shy, whatever, it actually ends up putting you in a good position to recognize, hey, this person should really talk to this person because they can do cool things together. And so, that's been a big help, actually.

>> I think for a lot of people going to a networking event or going to a conference where there's like an hour block of time to network is like the most painful,

awkward part of something like that. So I think those tips around coming with the intent to help others and knowing that even if you are introverted, listening is the key or some really good advice.

>> Oh, yes. Even just listening and learning so much from other people, you just – there's just this like, there's so much like human experience out there. That if you just go along and listen to other people and things they've gone through, it's going to help you so much when you go to do things yourself.

>> Do you have like a common question that people ask you at these events that comes up over and over again?

>> I mean, people always say, like so what do you do? Like that kind of stuff. So it's pretty normal to do that. I think that's what we don't realize. It's actually pretty normal to just like at a networking event, walk up to somebody, say like –

>> Right, like it's expected.

>> Yes. It's almost expected to say like, oh, so who are you. What do you do?

>> Who are you?

>> Like, – I mean, sometimes the conversation is a 30-second one because there's not much in common. But other times it's like, oh, you know, I went to this school. I took this program, or whatever it is that comes up. And you've got some common ground and you start talking and stuff.

>> So is that what brought you to teaching at Mohawk then?

>> I think so. Yes. The aspect of just helping people reach their potential and that. And Mohawk – it was interesting because I didn't really have much connection with Mohawk at the time. But a lot of the idea works and [inaudible] people at the time, as soon as I started saying I was going to Demo Camp, they were all over it and they were really interested in helping out and that kind of stuff. And they, you know, had me up here and we just got talking and then we just got working together and that kind of is what connected me to Mohawk. And then just from that point, just it became natural to work here and teach here. And I've loved it.

>> So you teach in the – which program do you teach in at the college?

>> So the software development program. So there's a three-year diploma and two-year diploma that we have.

>> Okay. So then your background founding Software Hamilton where you connect employers with people in the community who have IT skills, and running these Demo Camps, that got you connected in and realizing that you like that role of networking and connecting folks with the right people. You come in and you start teaching at Mohawk College. And you have other initiatives that you've also started since working here. Can you speak a little bit about those initiatives?

>> Yes. So it was fun. When I started working here it just – I just kind of started talking to different people around the college and getting to know different people. And at that point, like, I didn't really know anybody but as I started to get talking to people, I found like opportunities to work together with people on things. The big one was Emily Ecker and Beth Gibson and Bryan Ledgerwood at City School, when I started talking to them, and IEC Hamilton is a nonprofit, Hamilton that I do a lot of work with. When I kind of started talking to them, actually at Hamilton Chamber of Commerce type of events, when I started talking to them, we realized there was opportunities to do things like get grants to start a Hamilton coding program to get kids into coding. Because that's a major problem. We started realizing there was an opportunity to do a conference at Mohawk. To have a bunch of kids from different elementary schools come here for a day. And that was actually a kind of situation where you had that sports team situation. Where, like, they were really good at writing grants and identifying opportunities and positioning it in such way that people would give us money to do things. And I was really good at content development in terms of like, okay, this is probably what a coding club should look like and this is what it should, you know, be structured and what not. And so we had a good connection there. We were able to work together to do a bunch of cool things.

>> You mentioned that kids learning these skills in coding is a big problem. Can you speak a little bit about what you mean by that?

>> So it's kind of – it's really bizarre but, tech is like a huge driver in the Ontario economy right now. But coding is not a standard part of the elementary school or high school curriculum.

>> So you saw a big gap there.

>> Yes. There's a massive, massive gap there. And so, when I was chair of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce Innovation Technology Committee, and one of the people on that committee is Cesar Di Donato, who is the Executive Director of IC Hamilton. And I just kind of threw it out there and I just said, like, this is a major problem, this is going to prevent your companies because you're not going to have enough, you know, of a work force. And then me and him then started working together on the code club program. And basically, the idea was we borrowed a model from the UK –

>> Which this is – they're kind of ahead of the curve in terms of running these coding camps for kids.

>> Yes. They're kind of just ahead of us on this. And what they've done is basically like lunch hour and after school, kids learn how to code using a lot of the fun to use, you know, available online platforms. And then there is usually a mentor in the room that kind of guides the kids through the process. And so, what we did is we got grants to start this up. We hired a coordinator. We had a lot of students from Mohawk volunteer. And they're basically like, –

>> Almost a mentor to these younger kids?

>> Yes. I almost think it's like kids' sports, actually. It's just like you'll have a high school kid that acts as the coach to the elementary school team. That kind of situation. So like our students were going into these schools and they were kind of like the team captain. They were like, well, let's learn about coding. Let's learn about –

>> It's an amazing learning experience for students, as well.

>> That's the thing that's awesome about it, too. It's not just the kids in the classroom that are learning. Our students are then getting this awesome developmental experience where they have to like communicate to people that are nontech about tech. They have to be a leader in that position. So for half hour, they are the person at the front of the room. And, you know, they learn that things are messy. Like, even just getting in the room and the AP doesn't work. It sounds like such a trivial thing but then they have to figure out what to do.

>> They probably sympathize with you now.

>> Yes. They probably sympathize with us a little bit more after that. Right?

>> What kind of things are the kids learning?

>> They're learning like basically programming fundamentals. So probably like the most important thing in programming is the idea that – the most important – three probably most important things are that you can store data and name it. You can basically put data in a box and say like I want to store the current score of the game as 20. And you can do that. The other thing would be loops. So doing something over and over. And like if statements, where you say like, if this is true, do this thing, else do this thing. So like if the ball hits the paddle, bounce it back. Otherwise, just let the ball keep moving. That kind of –

>> And they see it in real time the effects of their coding?

>> Yes. A lot of the platforms now Kahn Academy and Scratch, they're really, really good for just letting kids see visually what's going on. And it makes it a lot easier to teach these concepts. So yes. The platforms have really helped in that area.

>> Do kids come with a lot of ideas of things they want to develop on their own?

>> Yes. It's kind of mind blowing because some of the kids, they've got parents that are into this. So the parents have introduced it to them. And so, those kids, they end up kind of being like – they end up showing up with something like, – we showed them how to make Pong. They end up showing up with like something that's far more advanced than they've made. And at that point, we kind of tend to like deputize the kid and be like, well, you're the deputy code club leader now. And like you lead us. Like, you lead the other kids and show us what you did and explain how it works. And I think that makes it super engaging for them as well. When they can kind of see that this is a peer-to-peer



activity where people learn from each other and they kind of – it’s got to sort of like hobbyist maker gear head kind of aspect to it. Where it’s like – it’s not, you know, this is the way it must be done. It’s sort of a creator-maker kind of aspect to it, too, where people can say I made this thing. I just felt like it should exist and I did it and explains to the other kids.

>> What’s the craziest thing you’ve seen a kid come up with?

>> Some of them – so you can make mods in like certain things like Mine Craft and that kind of stuff. And the craziest thing that I’ve seen in kids that do that kind of stuff, where they’ve obviously spend – and they’ll show me something they’ve made, and I don’t even really know how they made it because I’ve never used these tools before. But they’ve obviously spent like hundreds of hours just developing this unique level or unique thing for a game that they like. So that’s actually been a big thing I’ve noticed.

>> Have you noticed a change in the students or the kids that are coming to these camps in terms of their ability to talk in tech terms to understand technology in a different way just because of the pervasiveness of technology in their lives. Like I know young kids watching Twitch for hours and hours or playing Mine Craft, has just become common place.

>> I think what’s interesting is the terminology has become very familiar to them. Because even like these TV shows, and I don’t know if they should be watching them at their age, but like even the TV shows like Silicon Valley and that kind of stuff, it’s like the terminology of tech. It’s like they know now. They just know the terminology because it’s just so out there, like everywhere. But the only thing I’ve noticed actually on the opposite side of things is when I grew up, you had to like type to use the computer. And you had to like type in commands in a like, Commodore 64. And then you had to click and do things. Where some of the kids we’re getting now, they’ve only swiped and tapped. Like, they’ve only used the iPads and the iPhones. So they swipe and tap. And we actually sit them down at the computer where they have to type in instructions and tell the computer what to do. In some sense, because the technology is better, they don’t have as much experience with that. So the gap is actually kind of widened in some sense, which is interesting.

>> It’s almost going backwards to them.

>> Yes. It kind of is.

>> What would you recommend then if there is a student out there that wants to develop something, there’s a kid that’s interested in getting into coding or faculty or community members that just don’t know where to go next, what would your recommendation be? Just contact you?

>> Well, the great thing is they could do that. But the good thing is there are all kinds of good resources now. So, like the best one, I would say would probably be Kahn Academy. And it’s just that there are many, many good resources online now that you can use to get going and just learn the basics of

things. There is a certain point where you kind of either want to go to school and like formally get some education in or you've really then got to be dedicated to learn on your own. I don't think that's for most people. But yes, you can get started pretty easily with these online tools and Kahn Academy is probably the best one.

>> Kahn Academy. That's K-a-h-n right?

>> Yes. So all of this work – this is outside of your 9 to 5 day job. I'm curious to know why this is a passion of yours? How it came to be?

>> So I grew up in like a nice area. I went to high school and a lot of the friends that I made, you know, they were from areas of work, well-to-do and it was just mind blowing to me that I'd go to their house or their apartment, or wherever, and we'd be hanging out and they didn't have a computer. And they didn't have the internet. And it was like 2000 or 2001. And I just – like, it just really, really blew my mind. Because in contrast to the experience I had growing up and I guess, like, I must have been really lucky, but when I was growing up my parents, they sent me to like McMaster Venture Engineering Camp. And I don't really like – they also sent me to, and I don't usually like to admit this, but they sent me to NASA Space Camp.

>> Why don't you like to admit it?

>> Well, because that's like pretty dirty. That's like NASA Space Camp is like, I don't think you tell people that. But –

>> It is pretty impressive.

>> But I got to do some really cool stuff like that. And then I look at a lot of kids in Hamilton especially and they're growing up in like – and there's nothing wrong with it, but they're blue collar background. And so they're not getting exposed to this stuff. And that just drives me crazy. Like, I just can't believe that. That's a thing. And then we just kind of go on having that be a thing. That's something that needs to be fixed.

>> That's interesting that you note that there's probably a lot of first-generation students/people interested in tech, in the city, because a lot of industry folks ground steal and now that's changed.

>> Yes. And I think there's –

>> So the roots really haven't been there until recently.

>> Yes. And there's a huge demographics there that, like, because it's not in the school programs. Which is like, school is supposed to be the great equalizer. Where it's like everyone goes to it. You can figure out what you like and you have a chance at pursuing that thing. But if we're not exposing them to it, they don't have that chance. And that's increasingly the thing that, you know, people do if they want to have the middle-class kind of lifestyle. And it's the kind of thing where like if you came from a background where maybe the parents

were more like white collar or they were more technical, or whatever, you've got that. And so it's a weird unevenness in society that I don't really like. I want to fix that. I want to make it so that all these kids can have a shot at it.

>> So do you credit your parents then to giving you that exposure?

>> Yes. I was really lucky to have parents that were just, like – I remember my Mom brought home a computer program that she saw at a science fair. And she was just like, Kevin, like this is some computer thing. I thought you might like it. I was looking at it. And I was like, I get all of this. This is awesome. This is cool. And I just piped into my computer and it worked. And I was like – I was into it. So, yes, I was really lucky to have parents that, you know, nurtured that and allowed me to explore that.

>> So you've talked a little bit about where this has come from and how our students benefit. But can you – do you have anyone that you want to shout out to, in terms of someone who has gone the extra mile for you, to get you here today?

>> Definitely Cesar, Executive Director at IC Hamilton. So he was just the guy that – like, I was kind of showing up and I was that person that knew a lot about creating educational content, knew a lot about tech, but didn't really know about creating a program to help people and how to scale something like that. And I really had no idea. And I was just very, very fortunate that it was actually another connector, Caroline Reid at Hamilton Economic Development. She was the one that connected us, which was like, you guys should really talk. Because Cesar, they would run programs to get kids into things like the trades. That's another area where it's like there's all this opportunity but not a lot of awareness. So he would run those programs. So we were connected. We met at these innovation technology committee meetings a lot. And we really kind of were able to work together to do – to get program. And so he's definitely somebody that I'd give a shout out to as somebody that's helped me a lot.

>> Do you have something that's coming up next?

>> So –

>> In the works?

>> The biggest thing, I guess, is we're working on Codes Fest, again, this year. So Code Fest is like the day conference where we have about 400 kids from different [inaudible] schools in Hamilton area, come to Mohawk and learn about tech career paths for the day. And the idea there is to really show them that it's not just programming. It's also graphic design, it's also stuff for architecture, it's user interface design, it's all kinds of career opportunities in tech. And that's the biggest thing we've got at [inaudible], now, I guess.

>> Yes. It's interesting to explore that and for students probably to realize that it's not that person sitting behind the computer coding and that's all they do.

>> Yes, that's –

>> The industry is widespread, supports many other industries.

>> Totally. That's one of the biggest things we're trying to come across with them is that, I think, for the kids that haven't been exposed to much, they have the impression that it's still like this dude sitting in their parent's basement, like working – you know, like that kind of weird or stereotypical impression. That if they come here and they see like, you know, different people in different age groups and all these other things and different skill sets that they bring to the table, then they can see themselves in it. Because they see people that look like them and that have interest like them doing this kind of stuff. So that's a big idea with it, is to have them exposed to the diversity of everything in tech.

>> Yes, that's what career exploration is all about. It's amazing. One last question. Who else at Mohawk is going the extra mile that you want to recognize.

>> Oh, definitely, my partner in crime Beth Gibson. So when Cesar and me started the code clubs, we had to find somebody to coordinate the program. And that's when Beth, she was the coordinator of that program. Now she actually works at Mohawk College now. And she was just texting me this morning, being like, Kevin let's have a coffee, le, le, le. Because whenever me and her have a coffee we just start talking about ideas. And –

>> So you have to be ready for those.

>> Yes, yes. But whenever we get together we share our ideas and we start coming up with stuff we could do. Because she's very much the coordinator grant mind and I'm very much like the content kind of mind. And when we get together we're able to come up with cool stuff like the Code Fest and Coding Boot Camp and all kinds of stuff. So she's kind of my partner in crime on these things.

>> That's great. Anything else you want to add?

>> No, not really. Just thanks for having me.

>> Thank you, Keven. Thank you for everything that you do for our students and for everything – everyone you connect to promote all of these awesome initiatives.

>> Thanks.

>> Thank you for listening to the Extra Mile Podcast. And an extra shout out to my colleague Shawn Coffee for recording my conversation. If you know someone who is going the extra mile for students at Mohawk College, send an email to [extramile@mohawkcollege.ca](mailto:extramile@mohawkcollege.ca). And if you like the show give us a five-star rating. Thanks for listening.

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