

A New Angle

Episode 78

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

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. I'm joined today by Kris Boyd and Shawna Kelsey, the founders of Pink Bench Distilling in Troy, Montana.

Kris Boyd: And it's really a symbol of the artistic spirit that embodies the town but isn't always obvious. And so, we just love it as the symbol of the potential for creativity in small rural towns.

Justin Angle: This is a great story of community investment, engagement and revitalization. Kris, Shawna, thanks for coming on the show.

Kris Boyd: Absolutely.

Shawna Kelsey: Thanks so much for having us.

Justin Angle: Yeah. So first off, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Kris, let's start with you.

Kris Boyd: Well, I grew up in Los Angeles and my parents, my father's a pediatrician. And my mom went back to school when I was in high school and got her master's in early childhood education. And she worked for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles as their coordinator of early childhood education for that archdiocese.

Justin Angle: Okay. Give us the brief kind of how you made your way to Montana story.

Kris Boyd: When I was a kid, we went camping a lot every summer and it was a big influence on me, I decided that I really wanted some type of job that was in the outdoors. So, I went to school for biology and then I went to grad school for wildlife biology. And in the interim I worked all around the West doing wildlife biology jobs. And one of them brought me up to here to Montana. And I met a guy, and I went to grad school and then we got married and then I moved up here for good and that was over 20 years ago. So, I've been up here doing wildlife biology for a couple of decades now.

Justin Angle: Awesome. Shawna, how about you? Where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Shawna Kelsey: I am born and raised in Troy, so I'm this is my hometown. My dad was a carpenter, ran his own business, that type of thing. And then my mom worked for the United States Forest Service, which is a pretty big employer in our town. And she did tech help, so she was the helpdesk person for several different forests. Yeah. So, she had the mainstream job, and my dad was independent, creative type.

Justin Angle: So, you two have teamed up for a lot of reasons, but let's give listeners sort of the state of play in in Troy. Some of our listeners might not have even been to Troy, Shawna, since you've lived there your whole life, describe the town and kind of the general state of play up there.

Shawna Kelsey: Not only have I lived here my whole life, but since moving back after college, I worked mostly in economic and community development for the Troy area, so I'm pretty well versed in it. So as with a lot of these Rocky Mountain towns we're a traditionally mining and logging economy and over the years the mines have closed and logging has become more mechanized, so employs a lot fewer people. So, the economy is really different than what it was when I was a kid. And a lot of people work away, a lot of dads work away at other mines in other parts of the country. And we're just having to figure out what's next for the area. So, we are right in the mountains. So, recreation is becoming more part of the economy, lots of retirees moving in, that type of thing. We have tons of beautiful lakes to live on and wilderness to explore. So, it's attracting a lot of new people.

Justin Angle: Sure. And Kris, talk about your experience in wildlife biology a little bit. You mentioned that, but the two of you kind of came together around grizzly bears and apples. So, tell us a little bit about that genesis story.

Kris Boyd: I have worked in the area on wildlife stuff for a long time and most of it's large carnivore stuff. So, I did wolf stuff during the big transition of endangered to non-endangered and I have also done grizzly bear stuff. So, once I had a baby, all that stuff's very intense, and it was time for me to move into a position that was a little easier to handle with a dependent.

Justin Angle: Sorry to interrupt, Kris, but when you say grizzly bear stuff or wolf stuff, you're talking fieldwork, right? You're out there.

Kris Boyd: I'm talking field work like trapping and radio collaring wolves, going out and getting bear hair from snags and setting up big lure traps and yeah, really heavy-duty field work.

Justin Angle: Yeah, tough to do that and care for a newborn at the same time.

Kris Boyd: It is. It is. And my husband also works in the field, too. So, I decided to, I looked at what things I felt I was missing, and grant writing was one thing I was interested in. So, I got a job as a grant writer for a local nonprofit that Shawna was working for at the time, and she was doing community development. And so, I wrote a grant for the farmer's market that she had started that incorporated into it an apple festival in order to kind of raise the profile of the

farmer's market, create a celebratory thing and also incorporate bear conservation, a way that was fun and wasn't in your face and just brought community together. We got an apple press, and we did the Apple Festival, and it was just awesome. It was an amazing hit and we had so many apples and so much apple juice. It was crazy.

Justin Angle: And apple trees are kind of prominent up there. A lot of folks, you know, don't necessarily or hadn't been kind of gleaning their trees of apples toward the end of the season. Shawna had this been going on a long time or like what was the sort of bear aware status of the community.

Shawna Kelsey: When Troy was kind of founded it's the most mild climate in Montana. So, we like to think of it as like a little bit of a banana belt. There was an effort to get it to be like, you know, like the Okanagan Valley, like a heavy fruit producer. So, there's a lot of apple trees here and on these old homesteads and, you know, in people's backyards all over, it's just hard to know what to do with all those apples. A person can only eat so much applesauce. There isn't a ton of incentive to pick your trees clean, except for if you don't, the bears are pretty likely to sniff a mountain, come on down out of the mountains.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And how many years is the Apple Festival been going on now?

Shawna Kelsey: I think this was the eighth years?

Justin Angle: And now you two are kind of taking the next step with this collaboration and launching a distilling operation. Shawna, tell us about Pink Bench Distilling and what you're up to there.

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah, so we've been working on this idea for several years now. I'm sure you're aware that distilling is a pretty capital heavy business to start.

Justin Angle: Yeah, maybe describe that a little bit. Like what do you need to, you've bought a building together, but like what do you need? What other stuff do you need to make booze?

Shawna Kelsey: And so, we did buy a building. We bought it in March of 2020, oddly enough, before the market went crazy.

Justin Angle: Wow. Well, that's good timing.

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah, it was really good timing. We've been looking for a building for quite a while. We really wanted to have ownership of the building rather than renting a place, because one of the things we knew we had to do was a lot of renovation just to make it specific to the needs of a distillery. So having ten strains in the floor and, you know, really tall ceilings and all these different things that a lot of buildings around here wouldn't have already. So, we wanted to make sure we had ownership. So, we, you know, that that investment wouldn't be all in

somebody else's hands. And then of course, the equipment is pretty pricey to get a still of a decent enough size where you can scale.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And it's not like you can just sort of go over to, you know, wherever the nearest Wal-Mart is and grab one of those like how do you even, how do you even get a still delivered?

Shawna Kelsey: It was specially made for our purposes, and I think, Kris right, it's in Illinois?

Kris Boyd: Yeah, it's in Illinois. Right. Yeah.

Shawna Kelsey: And it's yeah. So, it's American made.

Kris Boyd: The still that we got is a brandy still so kind of the connection that I wanted to make was we've got this fruit and brandy is the type of spirit that is made from fruit. So, whiskeys are usually made from grains and brandies are made from fruit. So, the still we got is specially built to make things like brandy and whiskey that pulls like the really delicious essences of those base products into the final spirit.

Justin Angle: Okay. I've never had an apple brandy. How would you describe it?

Kris Boyd: I think it depends on the apple brandy, like any brandy. But they're pretty fabulous. What I really like about brandy is that you can make it from apples or plums or pears or peaches, cherries. And they really do, if you can get it right, it really does bring the essence of the fruit through. If you don't age it, it's just this bright, fruity flavor that packs a punch. And if you age it in oak, then it becomes even more complex like whiskey does. But you still have those delicious like fruit essences, and you have the kind of grounding base of your oaks that bring that tannin in. So. They're delicious.

Justin Angle: Awesome. So, you're pulling from a variety of natural resources in the community, not just the apples. Kris, describe all the pieces of the puzzle here.

Kris Boyd: So, yeah, so we have apples and plums and pears in the area that we'll use for brandy. And we also are surrounded by a lot of national forest. Lincoln County is 75% national forest. And around Troy it's more like 95% national forest. So, there's tons of trees, but in addition to trees, there's a bunch of other plants. So, the FDA is the government agency who approves ingredients. And we went onto their website to look at what you can have as ingredients in distilled products. And it turns out that our forest has got somewhere between 35 and 40 different botanicals that you can use in distilled spirits. So, we've worked with the Forest Service to come up with a harvest plan for those types of botanicals. So, we've got Juniper Berry for gin, we've got Pine Tips, which are also a big gin ingredient. We've got elderberry and elderflower and yarrow and tons of different kinds of berries. Mountain maple bark is something you can use, cottonwood buds. I mean, there's just a wide variety of flavors

that you can sustainably harvest from the forest. So that's another angle that we're pursuing. And of course, we have a lot of small farmers in the area, so we're working with them to see what they can grow for us that we can use for base. There's this route of Iris, so it's called orris root, and it grows in really good Mediterranean climates like this. So, it's mostly grown in Italy, but we would love to get an orris root producer up and running here because not only would it sell to us, it would sell to, like, other distillers in the region and potentially become an international market.

Justin Angle: Yeah, that kind of leads into the economic development. Shawna, you mentioned your work in economic development in the region over many years. An operation like this has got to not only, you know, will bring people together once you're open as a place to gather and socialize. But also, it's going to create some jobs. I mean, I would assume, you know, there's a lot of pieces here, whether its people producing the botanicals or going out and foraging for them or working in the distillery. Talk about the ripple effects of initiating a business like this.

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah, that's our goal, is to create a meaningful impact on the economy here, not just to provide jobs for ourselves, but for people picking for us and working in the distillery, partnering with other companies, doing agritourism kind of endeavors. And just generally being an economic driver in the area, especially as other folks are looking at starting new businesses and capitalizing on some of the recreation that we have going on. There's a lot of improvements being made in the town and just in there on the forest for bike trails. And we have a new skate park and a nice walking path that goes right by our distillery. Yeah, handily

enough. And yeah. So yeah. So, we do hope to have a good impact and in a way that's different than has been here before, especially with the botanicals of the forest. It's a really interesting new way to use those resources that the forest provides in a way that encourages conservation of different ecological zones, because the only way for these botanicals to flourish is if the forest is taken care of. So, it's different than previous extractive industries.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to our conversation with Kris Boyd and Shawna Kelsey after the short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. We're talking about Pink Bench Distilling with Kris Boyd and Shawna Kelsey.

Justin Angle: Yeah, talk about the kind of cultural disposition to this enterprise up there. You know, the deeply embedded identity with logging and timber and mining that sometimes is harder to overcome than simply learning a new skill to do a new job. It's sort of transitioning in your identity. Has the community embraced what you're up to? And it sounds like they have with the Apple Festival. What's the attitude towards Pink Bench?

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah, I really haven't seen any kind of cultural pushback like that. I think especially because we are looking at building jobs in the woods and this is my opinion, but I think the reason people identify so much with the mining and logging and those types of jobs

is because they like to be in the woods. It feels good to support yourself by working hard in the woods, and that's, we're just providing a different way to do that.

Justin Angle: And along the lines of kind of the spirit of the community, you're entering into the alcohol industry, basically. And, you know, alcohol kind of cuts in many directions. It can be a wonderful way to bring people together, but it can also be a mechanism for harm. People can abuse it. So, I know you're committed to having a family friendly enterprise and offering nonalcoholic drinks. Talk a little bit about that balance of entering into this category that sort of needs to be marketed and consumed responsibly. Kris, you want to take that one?

Kris Boyd: One of the reasons we thought this business would be pretty appropriate and when we approached it, that was definitely on our mind. We've been working really hard to get the word out that really our business is about flavor and not about inebriation. And there's lots of good flavors that can come off the forest and off local farms, and there's no reason for it to be just alcohol. A distillery tasting room can only serve two ounces per person per day. So, it's already a model that requires moderation. And we've been doing a lot of outreach at local events with mocktails, which are mock cocktails and working to show people that we know flavor. And if you come to our place and you want to get something that's nonalcoholic, we have delicious drinks that you can sit down and sip alongside other people who may be sipping on alcoholic drinks. It's a way to create a safe environment that is welcoming to everybody and that doesn't expect anything on either side of the alcohol spectrum.

Justin Angle: I love that. In our remaining time, let's talk about kind of how you get this thing off the ground or how you are getting it off the ground. As you mentioned, it is capital intensive, I assume, well, I know that you are kind of engaging the community for support in some interesting ways. We did an episode several months ago with Andrew Connor from Crowdfund, Montana, and my understanding is you're engaging with Crowdfund Montana to raise some capital to support this venture. Talk about that process. How are you pulling together capital and how could people get involved if they want to learn more about it? Shawna, do you want to take that one?

Shawna Kelsey: We've been working with Andrew for several months now to do some creative fundraising. Yeah, so we're working with Andrew with Crowdfund Montana to put together an investment opportunity.

Justin Angle: The plot with Crowdfund Montana is that they try to create investment opportunities where people can invest in local enterprises, which historically has kind of been difficult to do, whether it's, you know, a local hardware store, grocery store or business that, you know, is passing from one generation to another and needs some support or whatever the case may be. It's kind of been difficult for individual investors to get into that space. If folks want to kind of learn more about opportunities with Crowdfund to get in to Pink Bench, where would you direct them online?

Kris Boyd: You would go to Crowdfund Montana dot com and you'll see active campaigns that are on there currently. And there's also more information about Crowdfund Montana and probably the Center for Community Ownership, which is Andrew's organization. So, it's just a really fabulous thing that Andrew's doing. And it's a way for communities to kind of share the wealth and to be agents of their own change. Yeah, we're happy to be involved.

Justin Angle: Super. What are kind of next steps for you? I mean, you're going to do this capital raise, but you mentioned you're kind of working on getting the still installed and the floor all set up. Like what are kind of the key steps and milestones you have to get through between now and when doors are opened at some point in the future? Shawna, do you want to take that one?

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah. Doors. We need doors.

Justin Angle: That's good. You can't open your doors without doors. So.

Shawna Kelsey: I mean, as you know, construction in Montana is just going up. And we are a part of that. You know, as with any renovation project that requires contractors there's ups and downs. But we've had some really great contractors come in recently and get the plumbing going and got concrete coming soon. And we had someone in there very generously spending his weekend putting our subfloor in the tasting room area. So that is a really big weight off. But

yeah, so now we just need to get the rest done and I think it will go pretty quickly over the next few weeks, month.

Justin Angle: Super.

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah. And it's a cool old building. It's I think about 100 years old with a lot of great character. And people in Troy, people that grew up here and have lived here for a good amount of time, have a lot of really great positive memories of it. So, it's been really fun to bring that back to life.

Justin Angle: It's right on the main drag. Is that right?

Shawna Kelsey: It is in the historic part of Troy. So, when the highway came through, it rerouted the main street. So, it's on the original Main Street, so it's right across from City Hall and two doors down from the movie theater. And there's a lot of opportunity on that street to bring back some businesses. And we're already seeing other locals invest in that street since we bought our building. We don't want to take all the credit, but we'll take some.

Justin Angle: Well, that is fantastic. Final question for the two of you. You've had a long working relationship. You seem like great friends and partners. What lessons have you learned about entrepreneurship and how to sort of maintain a friendship and partnership as you tried to bring a venture to life? I mean, I'm sure it's not a linear process necessarily, but what advice

would you have to two people out there that might be, you know, working on a business with somebody they care about?

Kris Boyd: Well, I think Shawna and I have both always been leadership minded. So, we both have gone through pretty extensive leadership trainings, and I would say I sought all of my leadership training out on my own. I haven't relied on work necessarily to give me those opportunities. I would recommend that highly. Search out those leadership training opportunities or those personal growth opportunities where you really get to understand how you communicate, how others communicate, and how to bridge those gaps in communication and understanding where you come from and where other people may come from. That, I think has really helped us when we come into like, I wouldn't say difficult situations, but, you know, like I know how I react to things. And Shawna also knows how I react to things and vice versa. So, we can read each other really well and treat each other as gently as possible. As we go through the ups and downs of having a business, we have very complementary personalities. We do not have the same personality, but it's really complementary and we just have grown to appreciate that we complete each other in that way.

Shawna Kelsey: Yeah, that was very well-put. Kris is really good with words in each other. We've really luckily found very complementary, not just in our personality but in our strengths and I guess weaknesses too, you know, where we struggled, the other one doesn't. So that's been really useful. I think we've been really conscious of talking about the hard things before they come up as well. Not that we won't run into trouble over the coming years, but you know,

we've sat down and gone through like strategic planning of how our partnership can work.

And, you know, if we run into certain obstacles, what are we going to do about them? I

wouldn't want to do this with anyone else. I mean, I've had dreams here and there, like when

I'm sleeping, those kind of dreams of having to do this with other people. And I just I can't

imagine.

Justin Angle: Right. Well, those are both great points of wisdom and thoughtfulness there. I

appreciate it. And I lied. I do have one more question, and that is, what is the pink bench? Tell

us, is there a story there? Why Pink Bench? Is that a thing?

Shawna Kelsey: The Pink Bench came about after several months of trying to figure out a name for a business that we could trademark, hopefully avoid any kind of litigation future with other beverage businesses in the world. So, we had been working on different kind of more unique, artsy kind of names and it just wasn't working out. And so, then we looked at our building, you know, and there's a hot pink park bench right next to it. We were just kind of taking it for granted, you know, that there's a hot pink park bench in the middle of town and it's ours. And then, yeah, just kind of a light bulb of like, oh, that's the iconic landmark that we're working with. We may as well go with that.

Justin Angle: The answer was right in front of you. And it works.

Shawna Kelsey: And it's easy to pronounce. It makes sense to people. It's visually interesting. So, it's worked really well so far.

Justin Angle: It checks all the boxes for great branding.

Kris Boyd: And it's really a symbol in town of kind of the artistic spirit that. Embodies the town but isn't always obvious. So, it's been there for 20 years. It's a pretty enduring, bright pink bench. And so, we just love it as the symbol of the potential for creativity in small rural towns.

Justin Angle: Well done. That seems like a great place to land it. Kris, Shawna, best of luck as you pursue this venture, getting it off the ground and doors installed and opened. And let's keep in touch because I want to bring the family up when you all open and check out some of the wonderful spirits and botanical drinks and all sorts of fun stuff you're all putting together up there. So, thanks for joining us today.

Shawna Kelsey and Kris Boyd: Thank you so much, Justin.

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 UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: 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. Keely Larson is our producer.

VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj

Williams. And Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.