

# Ep.2.9 - Brandee Cooke

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Brandee Cooke

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- A** Announcer 00:02  
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:28  
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show. Today, we're very fortunate to have our guest Brandee Cooke Brown. She's the Executive Director for 100K Ideas. Welcome to the show Brandee, nice to have you.
- B** Brandee Cooke 00:39  
Thanks for having me Ed, I'm super excited to be here.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:42  
I can tell you, because you have a good voice. The I just want to, you know, 100K Ideas doesn't mean much to most folks. What do you tell people like say you're on the other side of the state? You're in Grand Rapids or down in Detroit? What do you tell people what it is?
- B** Brandee Cooke 00:58  
Yeah. So I start with a very basic statement, because I could go on and on. But I usually start with, you know, we're an organization designed to help people with ideas, move them forward.

And I think that is the simplest way to explain it. And as you know, you have that conversation, you talk, you know, everyone has had an idea for a business, a service or product, something, you know, whether they've done something with it or not, that's a different conversation. But everybody has had something in their head. And we were created out of that, you know, out of that fact that, you know, people have these ideas, they don't know how to get started, they don't know where to go, we can be a place for people to do that. And we do it in a way that's low risk. It's confidential, it's a safe place where people can share their ideas. And our focus is really on just ensuring people feel supported throughout the process. And even if it's something they don't move forward with, they have their answers and they're ready to continue innovating and creating.

**E** Ed Clemente 01:49

Yeah, in fact, a little bit further on, I'm gonna have you break that down more specifically what that means. But like, who were sort of the originators of this sort of idea, can you explain, because I know there's one or two people I believe.

**B** Brandee Cooke 02:03

Yep, yep. So we have two of our founders, Phil Hagerman, and David Ollila. So, David had actually created a version of this program in partnership with Northern Michigan University called Invent#NMU, that still exists today. And the governor at the time, which I believe was Snyder, had met, seen the space, and was like, oh, my gosh, we got to get this, you know, in the Lower Peninsula as well. So he actually made the connection, from my understanding made the connection between David and Phil to meet. Phil Hagerman has a background he was, you know, over Diplomat Pharmacy for a number of years, and was moving into the venture capital space with the creation of SkyPoint Ventures, and had just bought some property in Flint, downtown Flint, a couple of buildings. So right at, right, as Flint was kind of making that wave to where it is now, he was one of those at the forefront of that. And so, him and David met, they, you know, kind of basically really, you know, delve in the beginning and focused on, you know, let's create this space where people can come and create and, you know, be small business owners at the Ferris Wheel Building in which we're located. But also, let's bring this program for innovators that need help. And so the two of them, you know, kind of came up with this idea for 100k Ideas. And the name itself derives from the fact that our roughly 100,000 people live in Flint. So if we, you know, each one of them can come to us, share their ideas, we can help them move it forward, we'd be making some real economic change in the city.

**E** Ed Clemente 03:30

And they do this, do they come into the office, are they living somewhere else? Or do they live in, I don't even know, you know, like, I don't even know how the setup is there. What was the name of the building again?

**B** Brandee Cooke 03:42

Ferris Wheel Building, so we are right downtown Flint, it's right on Saginaw Street. It's a co-working space itself, but we share with two other companies. Flint Prints, which is a printing all

working space itself, but we along with two other companies, Flint Prints, which is a printing all-service company, and Foster's Coffee, which is a coffee shop, are located right on the first floor along with us and so we anchor that building. So when people come in, they're just trying to see what does this place do and learn, you know, what it can offer, we're right there with them. And they can come in, you know, some people decide to share with us right on the spot and we're like, oh, let's set up an appointment to learn more. Some people like, hey, I got something, I'll call you. yeah, I'll call you later, you know, because they're a little bit more secretive, which is fine. But yeah, people meet us from where they are and then obviously, with the onset of COVID, we switch to a more virtual opportunity. That has actually been very beneficial to us. People have been able to fit this into their daily lives in ways they hadn't before because they don't have to physically come somewhere. So they can, you know, schedule a virtual meeting. We'll do it over Google Hangouts, talk with them, and get to know what their ideas about and provide those full services in that same capacity.

E

Ed Clemente 04:46

Well, your background, you originally you're not a, I don't know what people from Flint call themselves, Flintsters, I don't know what you guys [Flintstones] Flintstones, I remember from MSU and they all played.

B

Brandee Cooke 04:58

Yeah, that's my rant.

E

Ed Clemente 05:01

Well, because you actually grew up in Lansing. I don't know what school you went to.

B

Brandee Cooke 05:06

Yep. I went to Sexton High School on the west side. So I'm a proud Sexton High School graduate. Yeah.

E

Ed Clemente 05:12

And then from there, you went to U of M Ann Arbor, right? [Yep.] And now you're going to U of M Flint, correct?

B

Brandee Cooke 05:20

Yes. Because it's not enough to graduate years ago, you decided to go back in.

E

Ed Clemente 05:24

Ed Clemente 05:11

Oh, yeah, well when you get more money to.

B

Brandee Cooke 05:26

You know, there's something, there's something to that. Yeah. So I joke about being from Lansing and, you know, people were like, Oh my gosh, why did you go to MSU? I'm like, because I'm from Lansing, you know, right down the street. But no, I went to U of M Ann Arbor and had an amazing time, I learned so much. And that really prepared me for that next level. And so between, you know, graduating college and you know getting to where I am now, you know, I worked in different fields, I was actually an AmeriCorps member initially working...

E

Ed Clemente 05:56

Why don't you tell people what AmeriCorps is. I know what it is, but I think it's fascinating.

B

Brandee Cooke 06:01

It is, it's, I recommend it to so many recent college grads who aren't sure what to do. So it's a service program. So you do get paid. And you you know, you get an education stipend, which is probably the most appealing part of that program, right now that you can use for loans or you know, your future education. But it allows you to work in nonprofit organizations or, you know, municipalities and spaces that really just serve people, that's really the biggest thing is getting people in a space to serve others. And so the program I joined was actually in the Mission College Advising Corps out of U of M, at the time they had started they were within their second year. And Sexton was actually added as a location at that same time and the stars aligned and it worked out. So I got to go back home, work from my high school for two years in that capacity as an advisor for the students to really help them through that college process. Seeing as I went through it, and was the same as them, you know, I didn't have parents, I was first generation, they didn't go to college, I didn't know anything about that process. I didn't know anything about financial aid, learned it all on the fly. And, you know, I was able to provide that knowledge and my experience, as well as what we were learning in this job, and, you know, help these students get get to that next, you know, level in their lives. And it became, you know, while yes, it's about college and getting them you know, a credential, it also is just about making sure they have a plan, you know, they don't feel too lost. And so I enjoyed that that's where my startup nonprofit work really came from. And then after that I, you know, transition to Corporate America for, you know, a couple years working for a consulting firm. And that is where I feel like I honed in on most of my soft skills, I really understood customer service, I really got a handle on how you run businesses and how you treat people and how clients should go. And you know, just how to do business in general. So I always love to reference that opportunity. And then I happen to stumble across an event where the Ferris Wheel Building was hosting a networking event and that's where I met David and next thing, you know, you know, I was, I was on my way to Flint, so, yeah.

E

Ed Clemente 08:01

Well, you know, just so you know, I had a similar experience, because my folks were basically

immigrants, but so they really didn't even go to high school. So it was kind of a challenge for me to kind of get on that path as well. But I, I know how hard of a struggle that is, especially, you know, and that's, that's why I wanted you to kind of walk through that experience because I know 100K Ideas is important, but I think also, the foundation you had to get this job is as important too, right?

**B** Brandee Cooke 08:31

Yeah, cuz so much of that work, like, I mean, I was coming in as the first college advisor in this building, and it was me and another, you know, current and recent college grad being placed in Lansing schools. So we were the first two, to kind of introduce what this position is, why we're here. So a lot of our work was going out into the community and talking to parents and talking to people and saying, hey, know we're here, if you have kids there, you know, let us know. Because that's some of the work, you know, yeah, you're there and the students kind of get to know you, but there's some buy in that comes when the parents know you exist. And you can you can help out and to get them to come to your events and learn about, you know, all of the topics related to college access that they just may not know. And so that's really where, you know, I think I've again, honing on that skill set of just community, service to others, and how I'm able to kind of, you know, build that passion and also know how to run an organization. And it just kind of all came full circle. When I joined 100K.

**E** Ed Clemente 09:26

Yeah, I wish I would have had that when I was in high school.

**B** Brandee Cooke 09:28

I said the same thing it is such a cool program. And actually funny story; I recently did a TEDx Detroit talk in November, and one of my former students was there. And so it was so funny because I was checking in and and, you know, person checking was like he's like oh yeah, one of your students is here, and I was like, What are you talking? What are you talking about? And he came up to me afterwards and I was like, oh my gosh, like that is so awesome to see you and see you're doing well. So it's so funny like, how that's still kind of is a part of my life. After all this time.

**E** Ed Clemente 10:03

This sounds like a goofy question but tell people what TEDx is.

**B** Brandee Cooke 10:07

Oh yeah. So it's similar to, you know, the TED Talks that you see where people are, you know, communicating on topics. And TEDx is kind of the ability for local regions and areas to do their own version of that, where they invite, you know, local or regional speakers to come and share

their stories and share how they relate to the work they're doing now. And so our talk, and I say 'our,' I'm a very big we and us person, if you haven't noticed.

E

Ed Clemente 10:34

As long as it's a you're a psychology major, as long as it doesn't mean anything else.

B

Brandee Cooke 10:37

No, it doesn't mean anything else. But um, but yeah, our talk really focused on our journey, you know us as 100K Ideas. So we started off, you know, as the new kid on the block that was you know, a lot of fanfare, a lot of you know, news and press about it, because the building was opening and it was this great partnership among all of the stakeholders to get this done. And then, you know, as we started listening to what the community was saying, because my job initially was, you know, just over projects, and you know, helping clients move forward, but eventually it moved, because I had that skill set in community, to going out into the community talking about what we do, sitting on panels, talking to residents interacting. And how I started to realize, actually, you know, Flint itself doesn't know us as well as it should by this point. So how do we focus our energy and you know, our efforts to ensure that we are closing those gaps so that people, you know, we are designed to serve, don't feel left out. So that was such a great, and everybody had such amazing stories, and that they talked about things that inspired them, or how they got where they were. So you know, you just go out there and you hope you do great. You know, you just have a good time. So it was such a great experience and I was so proud to be able to do that.

A

Announcer 11:46

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E

Ed Clemente 12:02

Why don't you walk me through a good example of like those steps you'd mentioned earlier. Can you give me like a real world example of someone you guys worked with?

B

Brandee Cooke 12:11

Yeah, so there's a couple I can actually talk about, but the one of my favorites I like to talk about is actually Peter Deppe. So one thing I forgot to mention in our overview about 100K Ideas is we actually employ current college students to do the work of you know, being a project manager and having a set of clients that they work with, to be our graphic designers or engineers, you know, those type of roles. So they're getting real world experience to complement that classroom experience that we're able to offer. Again, something I wish I had within undergrad. So the way our process works, and Peter is a little unique, because he

actually worked for us as an electrical engineer from Kettering University. So he he got an exposure, even, I remember in his interview, he was very adamant that he didn't want to go into industry, he wanted to start his own business. And he looked at us as a place that he could do both, you know, he could start his own business, he could learn industry, he could learn, you know what his next step is, and get that exposure. And so how it starts really is, you know, a free meeting, we tell people, hey, you know, you can call us you can, you know, go on our website, set up a meeting. And from there, in that meeting, we just listened to people talk. You know, Peter's a little different because obviously he's used like, our system and kind of skipped some steps because he knows how the system works. But for anybody else coming in, we just listen, we just say, hey, tell us about your idea what you're trying to do. And then we have some questions that kind of guide the conversation to make sure we have an understanding of the skills that you know, they have themselves. So if somebody can code, that's a great skill set that we want to make sure we know you can do, or you know, you're doing something you're like, actually, I don't know how to do XYZ, I'll need help there. So we can kind of get a full picture, because we've realized the idea is only as viable, while it's great, the entrepreneur, the innovator itself also has to be able to move it forward and you know, to help it be successful. So how do we combine those two components, where it's not just an idea, but it's also the full package? And so, from that initial meeting, if people choose to move forward, which is usually after a Google search we with them, right there we Google and see what else is in the market. We determine, you know, how do we want to move forward from there? So some people we find it right away, they're like, okay, great, I know what I need to know, I'm done with this, thank you for your time, I'll come back with my next idea, which is what we want, you know. For those that it you know, we kind of find it or we don't find it, they do want to move forward, we have an assessment, research assessment that we put together. And from that assessment, we fill it with who their competitors are, in the sense of who solving the same problem. So we're really big on problem and solution and making sure we're orienting the research towards that. And then we also look at market analytics, you know, are people asking for this? A high level financial overview, we pack it with additional research, so, not just the things that you know, they told us but whatever we used to kind of base our findings on, we try to make sure they have access to those documents as well. And then we end with next steps. So we really focus on two to three things they can do right now, to move it forward, because we know sometimes that long list of 20, 25 can be overwhelming. So how do we streamline that? And so we focus on two to three things that we can help with, or maybe we can't, but we know somebody who can. And that's our biggest thing, you know, if it's not within our wheelhouse, that's totally fine, but we have really spent the last several years you know, building our network of resources to ensure people have connections to keep it moving forward, and it doesn't stop with us. So for those that we can help, that's where our designers our graphic designers, industrial designers, or engineers come into play. They help, you know, create concept sketches and CAD design and prototype, logo design, website development, so the gamut of what could potentially be needed. And that's how they develop. So Peter streamlined a little bit of his assessment research because he knew the process. But he, you know, used that space and the understanding of how next steps work to build this charging mobility charging infrastructure created called Kuhmute. And, um, so they it's weird to see, you know, the transformation of that, and basically, commute is a charging infrastructure for scooters, e-bikes, e-skateboards, which I think is very dangerous, but e-bikes, any type of E-thing. But the goal behind it is kind of, I mean, I am from Lansing, and when the Lime and Bird scooters descended on the city, it was a lot. So his, you know, infrastructure helps organize that event, you know, you can plug it in there, and there's like a whole thing. So he built that he started with, you know, his CAD and his, you know, using his engineering background and his partner being able to code and they created this prototype. And then next thing, you know, he piloted, you know, the process in downtown Flint by having his charging hubs up and scooters available

for people to use for him to get a sense of what this works like any kinks, they might need to work out. And then next thing, you know, he's kind of, you know, his own business now, which is crazy. He's, you know, in a warehouse space, doing amazingly well, he set up shop in Flint, Michigan, which is also something that is beautiful, and we love to see. And actually, I believe he was just awarded a grant through MEDC. So that was, you know, also again, around mobility, and you know, what he's solving in that particular world. So, that's just one example, but the projects range across the board, nothing's ever that simple.

E

Ed Clemente 17:20

Give us a quick sample of like, just like generic examples of what you think might be something people would be surprised by, or just regular, sort of average things.

B

Brandee Cooke 17:31

Yeah, so, I mean, it ranges from clothing lines to solutions for laundry to, you know, obviously, you have apps that solve specific problems that, you know, someone may have experienced themselves, to things regarding cars and automotive and how to improve that structure. So they, range, which is why that circle of friends we've developed is so important, because it really does help us, you know, where we can do the general research, right, we are equipped to do that. But when it does come to be more specialized in needing that support, we have someone we, you know, in each kind of industry we try to lean on to provide that expertise. And they've been very gracious with their time to allow us to do that.

E

Ed Clemente 18:09

So it's sort of like, I think you said this in our pre-call, but necessity is the mother of invention, right? And I need I need a laundry solution too, I don't know who they are, but I have my own. The, you know, I think also though, it's kind of weird, but the way you describe it, it sounds almost like a YouTube, like, you know, you have all these fix-it YouTube things, I gotta figure out how to reprogram my phone, or I got to do this, I gotta do that. And people are just sort of figuring out, oh, not only that, I could probably make money at figuring out how to do this.

B

Brandee Cooke 18:42

Yeah, cuz I mean, if you're having the issue there, chances are others are as well, right? And there's a market out there. I mean, one of our mottos is 'we never say good idea, bad idea,' even though people want us to, so bad, but we don't know, because we don't know. I mean, if you see 'As seen on TV' commercials, you know, there's things that are created that you're just like, what the heck, but then they sell crazy amounts.

E

Ed Clemente 19:03

Snuggly.



B

Brandee Cooke 19:04

Yeah, you know, so it's just you never know what will catch you know, somebody's, you know, interest in wanting to purchase. So we, we stick to the research, we stick to being objective, and you know, they make the choice on whether to move forward or not. And that's on their that's on their end.

E

Ed Clemente 19:21

Well, you're gonna be surprised, but we're down to the last couple of questions. [Wow, that went so so fast.] Yeah, so you've kind of touched on this already a few different places, but what are some of the other like, future challenges you think you're gonna have or disruptors? Especially with all the technology that's involved with what you guys do too.

B

Brandee Cooke 19:37

Yeah. Yeah. I think what's interesting is a lot of it isn't even so much technology. And Flint, I think is incredibly unique in just respect of, you know, the historical and the talent that we have there. You know, apps are one of the smaller categories of things that we see come through our doors and I think services are going to make a huge kind of burst onto the scene just because that's something, not to say, you know, starting a businesses that easy, but you know, your overhead is low, it's really just you. It's you getting out there putting yourself out there showing your skill set and selling that to someone. So I think you're gonna see a real huge burst of like services and anything that allows you to be mobile. So like those food trucks, you know, that we're seeing pop up where, you know, hey, I don't want a restaurant, I don't want to invest in that brick and mortar. But, you know, I do still want to do this and, you know, serve people. So here's a way to do it. And so I think you'll see a lot more of those types of ideas that allow people to work remotely or you know, when they would like to work, you know, within their own leisure, you'll see a lot of that starting to pop up over the next couple of years.

E

Ed Clemente 20:37

I would imagine too, if after going through the pandemic, that you just saw a huge spike in people doing like, handy kind work around houses. And, like, you can't even reach anybody now to do it. So there's a huge demand for people that can just do that. I know, I can't do so. So I just think you're right, it's necessity, once again, fill in that. So I'm gonna ask you, this is more of a personal question, but what advice would you maybe give to anyone going into careers beyond what you do for your job? But like you said, going back and talking to high school kids, you probably have a direct influence. So what would you kind of either give yourself for kids today for career days?

B

Brandee Cooke 21:21

Yeah, so really, it's just, you know, don't doubt yourself, you know, trust your instincts. I'm, I'm a big person, you know, when it feels right, it means it makes sense. And sometimes it might be scary, you know, like, what feels right can be scary, like, those definitely can go hand in

hand, but trust yourself. I mean, opportunities, you know, arise, and sometimes it does make sense to go after them, and sometimes you are the fit. And you can't be scared or think, you know, hey, I'm not qualified, or hey, I don't think, you know, I'm the right fit for this, you kind of have to put yourself out there because again, every, you'd be surprised what conversations open what door. So you know, maybe you do interview for a job or a position or an internship that you know, you really wanted, but maybe you didn't get that exact one, that connection you made with that person, that matters, and that is long term. And so you want to make it, you'd be surprised what comes from those connections that you're making. And then the other thing that I always like to let people know, is just also be prepared for the opportunity, right? So, you know, you can have it you know, happen but if you're not prepared, you know, if you can't give, you know, kind of a quick spiel about yourself to someone and hold their attention for a little bit, because sometimes you only have two minutes with someone, you know, you, want to get used to that and getting comfortable in that space. So those are my two pieces of advice I would definitely pass on.

E

Ed Clemente 22:38

Its like the old Michael Jordan, quote, 'don't go where the ball is, but you should go where you think it's gonna be.'

B

Brandee Cooke 22:42

Yeah, absolutely. And there's, and again, like, I'm in that weird space where, you know, things were developing as I was, you know, graduating but weren't used as much as they are now. So like LinkedIn is a crazy tool that was kind of just coming around when I was in college, but not really. The level of access you have to people these days is is unbelievable. You know, before it you had to get a meeting you had to know somebody to know somebody to even get a conversation or you happened to be at an event that they were at, like you had to kind of, not that you don't work hard now, but it's a little different. So I think you know, use those use those tools to your advantage.

E

Ed Clemente 23:17

Yeah, I your last question's pretty easy. But you've lived in Michigan your whole life, I think, so what would you what do you consider to be one of your favorite festivals or events you go to every year?

B

Brandee Cooke 23:30

I don't know. There's so many. I, I love going, so here's the thing, I'm not a nature person. So I'm very, very clear that I'm not going to spend a lot of time outside, but going to Traverse City in the spring is probably one of my favorite things because it's so beautiful, the trees are turning actually, it's spring and fall, because they have like it's the transition seasons and in that area. And so those are like my favorite and even though it's in the same state, it feels like a world away and you can kind of get away from things and relax. And yeah, so that's one of my favorite, favorite things to do. And then locally, you know, being in Flint, you know, August

is full of everything from you know, you have to Crim race, you have Back to the Bricks, you have Artwalk that happens, you know, every weekend in the summer, you also have you know, Alley Fest that's a huge thing that takes over the alleys and downtown Flint. There's so much to do in the summer, I can't pick this one. It's just great to see energy and see people out so I'm excited to see happening in the summer.

E

Ed Clemente 24:31

Right and what's that great museum up there, Sloan?

B

Brandee Cooke 24:34

Oh yes, Sloan. Oh my gosh, it just got a renovation, so their giving people sneak peeks, I'm trying to like work my way in there so I can get one too, but they completely have renovated the, you know building from top to botto. Actually one of our board members works at Sloan so I gotta talk to Kathy to see if I can sneak in there, but it is beautiful. I've you know heard nothing but amazing things so I can't wait till it opens. It's such an incredible update.

E

Ed Clemente 25:01

Well, I just wanted to say you've been very good you passed the test you, you really did a nice job today. But once again, our guest is Brandee Cooke Brown, she is the Executive Director for 100K Ideas, and thanks again for being on the show today Brandee.

B

Brandee Cooke 25:17

Thanks for having me Ed, I really apprecaite it.

E

Ed Clemente 25:18

Join us next week where our guests will be Mike Piskur, he's the Program Manager for the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers and learn how the Great Lakes are important to all of us and for economic development.

A

Announcer 25:33

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