

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 185: BEN SHEWRY

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. And today our guest is Ben Shewry, a chef, entrepreneur and philanthropist. Ben Shewry was born on a remote cattle ranch in New Zealand at the age of 14, he found his passion as a cook, taking jobs in a number of pubs and cafes. In 2002, he moved to Melbourne, Australia, where he worked as a pastry chef.

Then in 2005, he landed the chef's position at a struggling neighborhood restaurant named Attica, helping turn it around, eventually buying it.

Attica is now consistently named one of the best restaurants in the world. It was featured in season one of Netflix's documentary series, Chef's Table. With a pandemic closing all restaurants in Australia in early 2020, to save his business Ben disrupted himself, pivoting from High-End dining to take out and delivery. He's also created the Attica Soup Project to help migrant hospitality workers through the pandemic.

Ben, welcome and thanks for joining us.

Ben Shewry: Exquisite pleasure.

Whitney Johnson: As a teenager, you fell in love with cooking. How did this come about?

Ben Shewry: It's a little bit of an unusual story, and that's really knowing what led me to decide to become a chef because I decided to become a chef when I was five years old, and that's 1982, 81 in New Zealand.

And there are not a lot of reasons to become a chef like right now. And so I think it was probably the influence of two really important women in my life, my mother, Kay, and my late grandmother, Lois, who was a fabulous cook, and my mum, who is a great cook.

That was probably what ignited the passion for cooking early.

And then from there I focused so much everything around that goal in my life from, from a very young age. You know, I made sure when I'm, before the age of 10, that I'd mastered many of the techniques that are required in cooking, you know, like making béchamel sauce and baking cakes, like making custard a lot of, like stir frying, a lot of particular techniques that, um, that you need to know. I knew them before the age of 10.

Whitney Johnson: Your mother and your grandmother, were they surprised when you said, "Mom?" You probably didn't say mom, I would say Mom, but, "I want to do this. How do I do this?" Were they surprised or did they just say, "Yup, and let's do it?"

Ben Shewry: No, they always just so supportive. My mum and dad and everyone around me always been so supportive of that goal. There was no questioning it. Both my mother and father are exceptionally hard workers and my mum was a school teacher, principal, as well as raising us. And Dad was working on the farm and the farm was struggling financially. And there was a real battle and it was incredibly hard work. It is still the hardest work that I've ever witnessed any human worked my dad physically. I think I saw that and I thought, "Jeez, I just don't want to be a farmer at all." You know, I just I said that doesn't does not look like fun.

Whitney Johnson: So when you think about your parents, so your, your mother and your grandmother taught you a love of cooking.

Your father clearly taught you the value of hard work. Are there any other lessons that you look to your parents and think, "Wow, I'm really grateful to them for teaching me X?"

Ben Shewry: All of the lessons, you know, my parents are incredible people and I owe them just about everything. The other way that I think, my viewpoint of the world. You know, if you remember that I was growing up in the late 70s and early 80s and that an incredibly small place and sometimes, you know, small backwater places in all parts of the world can have a mentality that's out of sync with modern thinking and... but my parents were incredibly open minded, completely free of prejudice, wouldn't tolerate any B.S. at all around racism or belittling of people, or my mum has a radar for racism like few people that I know. And it was just absolutely intolerable to her. And she instilled those values into her children that I'm so grateful that I learned. You know, that was just normal for us.

I learned that so young. Back in those times, you know, that wasn't the general way of thinking. So just open-minded and loving people. Travelled the world as well. A bit unusual for people living the backcountry.

And they instilled a sense that the world was a greater place than just this tiny little pocket of it, that we were living it. And they also instilled in their children this mentality that that anything was possible as long as you were prepared to work hard for it. Nothing was going to come your way for free and nothing was going to be easy, but anything was possible. So I grew up thinking that whatever I kind of wanted to do, I could do, even though we don't have any money. But I thought I had the confidence instilled in me from them and it was always going to be coupled with extreme hard work that was going to be the thing that that was the number one thing that I learned from the talent would only take me so far.

Whitney Johnson: So in my work, I talk about the S curve of Learning™ and that whenever you start something new, you're starting at the bottom or the launch point of that curve. You have no idea what you're doing. It's oftentimes characterized by discouragement. But then you put in that effort, you move into the sweet spot, that steep part of the curve, you're exhilarated, everything's working. And then you eventually move to the top of the S curve where you know what you're doing.

You're no longer overwhelmed, but a little bit bored. So you jump to a new S curve. So you learn, leap, and repeat over and over again in your life.

And so when I look at your life and your, the arc of your career, I see that in 2002 you jump to a brand new S curve. You move from New Zealand to Australia, which for those of you who are not familiar, that is 2500 miles. So you

move a long way to follow your dream. How did you make that decision to move to Melbourne, Australia? And what was your first job?

Ben Shewry: I decided to move to Australia because had really worked in the places that I'd want to work at and New Zealand and I, at that point in time I've worked the best chef in New Zealand is famous Michael [inaudible].

And I felt like I've kind of gone as far as I could at that point and I needed to get experience overseas. And a lot of people in my industry have always looked to Europe and to France to Italy to Spain.

Is that sort of summit, you know, that place that they really want to go to work. And, you know, the grail restaurants are all there. And for me, being so far away from Europe, I couldn't relate to that. No, I would see the books of those chefs and those restaurants and they were just foreign to me and I... it was unrelatable to... To New Zealand. And later I would learn to Australia in some ways. And so I didn't have that same fascination with the great chefs and restaurants of Europe as many of my colleagues and I had a fascination with more local things, local chefs and local ingredients, you know, more of a fascination with things happening in the Pacific. So it was natural for me to want to come here to learn. I was only ever going to come here temporarily. Arrived on, on.... November the 1st, 2002. And it was a 40 degree day.

And I have never experienced a 40 degree day before that. That's just like so hot, from [inaudible]. But I quickly fell in love.

Whitney Johnson: Centigrade, right? So we're talking 100, over 100 degrees.

Ben Shewry: That's right.

And I moved to Melbourne, you know, having never been here. I've been to Sydney before, but Sydney, is a little fast paced and little harsh for me. And I just thought, you know, Melbourne is the food capital of Australia. That's where I should go. And I came here and fell in love with the city, never intended to stay. And I guess, what is it? 18 years later, I'm still here.

Whitney Johnson: What was your first job when you got there? Did you have a job or did you have to find one once you got to Melbourne?

Ben Shewry: I went and worked at a little place called Luxe, and I only went there because my best friend from New Zealand was working there and I was pastry chef there for about two years until it went bankrupt, unfortunately.

And I remember this very clearly because it was a very, very important lesson and it would help me a great deal in the future. But at the time it just hurt.

We had been on holiday and we were to come back from our summer break for two weeks and I was the first there being the pastry chef, and I went to put my key in the lock and the locks had been changed and my, my key wouldn't work. "This is so strange I can't get into the building." And, you know, a strange man came to the doors on the other side of the glass and asked me what I wanted. And I said, "I've come to start work." And he said, "No, it's, it's all over. The, um, restaurant's been put to administration." And, um, all my knives are in the building. So he supervised me while, I, he allowed me to take my chef knives out. And that was, it we were out. And, um, it was such a brutal experience to lose a job that way because I took everything so personally. I thought that I was to blame for the failure of business, even though I was just a pastry chef. Well, that's not good enough, you know what I mean? Yeah. What, Where did I go wrong? And it really stunned me and it really stayed with me. And I think a lot of people who have lost jobs in that way, where the business has been, gone broke and through no fault of their own, um, it still takes its toll. And so that was a traumatic experience. But, you know, I wouldn't have changed that experience for anything in the world because, you know, as I thought about it over the months and years and examined why, why it didn't survive and why it went broke by, you know, I learned some really important lessons.

Whitney Johnson: What did you learn?

Ben Shewry: Well, I learned to never give up, and I felt like the owner of that place gave up on his people too quickly and gave up on this business too quickly and he got spooked. So that was one thing. The other thing was to be present always and not necessarily in person, but in mind and have your finger on the pulse of your business as you, because, you know, business is problems and, and it's not going, it's not going to be whether you have problems or not.

Every single one of us in business has many, many problems. But it's, it's how you will overcome those problems and who you will overcome those problems with. So perhaps I learned then that I need to instill the strongest team around me possible in the future, you know, on all aspects, including the things that I would not be good at, like financial control and analysis and these types of things.

So I perhaps didn't learn all of that and that one traumatic incident of losing a job because the business went broke. But I certainly, I certainly knew that if I ever did go into business for myself, that it was going to be one hell of a fight.

Whitney Johnson: So now it's 2005, you start working at Attica, you have this dream of someday owning a restaurant, 2009, you have this major bout of depression.

You almost give up and you are this hard worker. Your parents taught you this. You learned this lesson in 2004 with Luxe. And I don't know what it was like in New Zealand, in Australia, but in the U.S., even ten years ago, we didn't really talk, we just we still don't even talk that openly about depression and mental health. And so there's the challenge of dealing with that and the permission to deal with the issue itself. So just wondering, what did you do? And I think more importantly, because we're talking about lessons learned, how did that period of depression change the way you work and how did it change the way you live your life?

Ben Shewry: Going through that period and suffering from that depression and my depression was circumstantial. The depression brought on by several circumstance in my life that I felt were out of my control. So things like, you know, probably a combination of being overworked, you know, in excess of a decade, not seeing my family, not seeing my children. Breakdowns in the business relationship. Just a general funk, you know.

So I was in a bad, bad place, you know, for about eight months.

And I think, um, the number one thing that I learned was that it humbled me somewhat, um, and I became a kinder person than I was before. And it's not to say that I necessarily would view myself as a mean person ever, but it has humbled me further and it helped me to understand the situation of other people who are struggling and going through a hard time. It probably raised my level of empathy. And I think, you know, when you're in your mid 20s and you're a chef and you're a male, there's a lot of bravado and a lot of kind of aggression that you can have. You know, you have some unhealthy tendencies, I think. And it did help me overcome, you know, some of those things. I think, um, where I come from, you know, and this probably speaks to rural communities, just, you know, more generally as well in the back country, you know, if you suffered from depression in the 70s and 80s and even today, I believe it wasn't something you talked about.

You know, you internalized it because, you know, stoicism is, is a real big thing and on farms and in the back country. And so if you were to reveal that you were having a mental health struggle, you know, you would be viewed or you'd be imagined to be viewed by your community as damaged goods. As, I think it's a very dangerous thing. And I probably, I probably believed that myself for quite a long time.

And that's probably why I didn't tell anybody about what I was going through.

It wasn't until, um, I recovered that I, uh, was able to share that I felt like it was important to talk about it and to give light to it, to give light to this thing that is, you know, can be so insidious and people who are going through it. And I can speak to, you know, just really only my own personal experience. When I was going through it, I was the only person in the world going through it, and it was very isolating and that it would just be impossible for anybody else to understand. And I was having such trouble getting out of bed in the mornings.

And I do recall this one morning, though, you know, I had, um, a friend who was a fishmonger, Jason, and he I had agreed to, to go and visit a Muscle farm with him this morning. And it was Jason's holiday and he still agreed to do this with me. He was our supplier and that morning, I woke up and I just felt so low that I just want to cancel so badly. Then I felt really, really guilty because I knew that he had arranged this and it was taking time away from his children to do this for me.

And I ended up getting out of bed and going with Jason to this Muscle farm. And we took this trip on this boat with this fisherman called Lance with. And Lance is 25 years older than me. And he starts to talk just so openly about his life and about what a struggle it had been, but not in a, in a way that I feel any particular. So this is just such a beautiful, eloquent way. And he talked about how his industry had been decimated and about how his livelihood nearly been taken from him through the drought and his, his struggles with family.

And I've never met anybody like this before who was incredibly helpful.

And I felt like if I hadn't gone that day and been around this person, then I might not have got better. It was the first thing, it was the first thing I thought, "Jeez," you know, and basically what he was saying to me was, he was saying, "I had to change my life. I had to change my situation. I had to make better decisions and to take better care of myself and in the weeks and months afterwards began to understand the factors that are affecting me." And I began to make changes.

And every time that I made it a better decision to change something, I would describe it as the gray clouds parted just a little bit and like a ray of light would come through until I made enough change that the sun was shining and it was just the most incredible feeling. When the sun was shining, I, I knew there was like a day like where I just felt like I was getting through it. And then after and since I now know the triggers and the situations and the types of people that I can't be around and I really got myself in that way, you know, I'm, I'm I can't be around negative people. I wasn't a good recruiter around that time. Like, I was employing people for the wrong reasons. I was employing them for their skills, for their practical skills. I wasn't employing them for their integrity or their heart or their care.

And I learned a really hard lesson.

Whitney Johnson: I really appreciate your going in, providing this detail, because I think a couple of things. One is that, you know, we're in a period now where a lot of people are dealing with mental health issues. And so your willingness to talk about it, I think right now we've got a lot of perfect storms. So I think that that's really helpful that you made that decision to talk about it. Was it this conversation with this fisherman where he talked about his own experience? That was a bit of a catalyst for you of saying, "You know what, this really helped me when he talked about what he went through." Was that what made you say, "I need to talk about this because I'll be able to help someone else?"

Ben Shewry: Absolutely.

Whitney Johnson: OK.

Ben Shewry: If... Bring it out of the light, you know, bring it out into the light. Bring it out of the darkness, into the light. You know, that was my experience. You know, give what you're feeling and what you're going through, I was able to give a voice to that. I was able to express that to people. And every time that I did talk about it with somebody, I started to feel a little bit better. And when I was listening to him, I honestly actually started to empathize, empathize with him. And I thought, "Gee, my situation doesn't even seem as bad as his," you know, like I wasn't, going to be comparing, but I was like...

Whitney Johnson: Yeah,

Ben Shewry: "Well, what have I got to complain with this 65 year old man has been through all of these crazy things and the industry's on his knees, you know, and I like, got this award winning restaurant and I have all this privilege

and what the heck?" You know, like. Yeah. "Drag yourself up, man." You know, there was a bit of that sort of realization, too. I think being Yourself in somebody else's shoes is really important.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you again for sharing that. I think it's incredibly helpful. And, and you came out of it and so and now you're able to talk about it.

Ben Shewry: I came out of it, you know, not like a super human, perfect person. You know, like I, you have, have your days, but I will never linger on it anymore. It'll be for half a day or a day. I'd never let it go any more than that small amount of time, you know.

Whitney Johnson: Good advice. Everybody who's listening, you be sad, but then let it go. OK, so 2015, your dream comes through... True, not through and true, I suppose. You jump to this new S curve. You become the owner of Attica.

Ben Shewry: I should probably qualify that. Becoming the owner of Attica and owning my own restaurant was a dream come true and a culmination of a life, life's work. Yeah, something that I thought would never happen. Um, and I want to say that because for those young hospitality people and our hospitality people and any hospitality people out there, listen to this. You've got to keep that dream alive. It's a low paid industry. And therefore, for a person to save the capital or find the capital independently without partners is incredibly difficult. And I am the only owner of Attica. And it was something that I never thought would actually happen. I really, truly, Whitney, I did not really believe that I would ever come, become the owner of a business. I always wanted to, but I actually thought that I couldn't. And part of that is this mentality that hospitality workers have sometimes, which is that we are not good enough. And yes, we need to we just need to work for people that have money that run businesses. And in some ways we sort of hold ourselves down and we are held down. So when one of us comes through an independently owned business, that's a wonderful thing.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, wait, wait. I want to, I want to... Let's analyze this for a second, because this is really interesting to me, because I think generally we think, "OK. If we believe something can happen, it happens. If we don't believe something can happen, it doesn't happen." And so you had a piece of yourself that thought it wasn't possible, and yet it did happen. So there is some part of you that believed you could own a restaurant. So talk to us about that mental jujitsu that was going on for you.

Ben Shewry: Well, it comes back to high school and failing math chronically because, you know, there's this there's this feeling that you got to be good at math, to own a business. Some of us, we have a bit of an inferiority complex as well. But also, many of us in industry, um, are really are downtrodden as well. Um, it's always been a bit of a haven for the disenfranchised of society.

[Inaudible], though. And again, I just come back to the fact that it's just so lowly paid generally that you just live week to week as a hospitality worker.

And even, you know, somebody in my position as who I was employed at the kitchen of Attica prior to owning it, I was still living week to week, you know, paying my mortgage. I had a family of three children and I was commuting four hours a day, um, round-trip to work. And it, it still is almost an unimaginable dream to own your own business, but strangely, it happened. You know, it wasn't easy. I scraped together everything that I owned. I bet my house on it. And I was really, really determined to not take investors. And I did read this book when I was 18 about hospitality management and I don't really remember anything about it. But there was this one passage that the guy talked about how you should never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, never take part in a restaurant and never thought, "Wow, okay."

Whitney Johnson: Ever!

Ben Shewry: Ever. And, and then of my favorite places that I've ever worked that were, were like single chef or hospitality owned businesses.

As I said, I gathered everything that I had. I sold a lot of personal things like bikes, and I scraped together the sum of money. I was \$50,000 short and I had some really good friends that would have, would have, would have, would have given that money to me for a share in the restaurant. And I would find people and but I didn't want that. I wanted to own it outright. I maxed out what could I get from the bank and I wasn't looking likely that I was able to get the 60000.

And then at the last moment, my mother and father said to me, we have \$60000 in an Australian bank account and we will loan it to you.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Ben Shewry: And it was \$1 million the purchase price, so I was 50000 short. So they came through in the biggest way. It was the first time financially that they'd ever be able to help me. And I know I mean so much to them. And it was it was a loan. So they were very kind. I didn't thankfully, I still didn't have a partner. And I paid it back in a year. And, um, basically I had the money and, and the transaction went through and I was petrified.

"Oh, my God. Now, I actually got to do this," you know.

Whitney Johnson: You know what's interesting about you, Ben, and I think most of us are this way is you talked about a few minutes ago about when you first started as a chef. You know, you're in your mid 20s and there's sort of this bravado and there's this confidence and maybe even hubris. And then there's also this terror. And it is interesting how, you know, in buying this restaurant, if there is this amalgam of both, right? "I know I can do this. I'm terrified that I can't." It sounds like both of those two things, you were holding them together, is that right?

Ben Shewry: Yeah, this, you know, always an internal sort of conflict and dialog, some people speak about how, you know, they just went down to any point.

Whitney Johnson: Mm hmm.

Ben Shewry: I'm a bit more measured back to, you know, like all aggression and all bravado and all that posturing. It's all derived from fear.

Whitney Johnson: Mm hmm.

Ben Shewry: Because I saw my parents struggle. It made me very conservative with money.

So I'm two unusual things as an entrepreneur or a business owner. I am very conservative with money. Very, very conservative the way that I run the financial, financial aspects of my business. But I'm a risk taker and I am, I suppose, avant-garde with what I, what my business actually physically does. So I'm old fashioned on one hand, I basically all of the bills that Attica get paid every Wednesday, every single piece of outstanding debt gets accounted for and pay every single supplier. So we don't carry debt beyond Wednesdays. And so that is sort of one side of me. And that is probably like the fearful side of me. And then the other side of me is that I love to roll the dice and take risks with what we do, you know.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Ben Shewry: And I, and I'm fearless in other ways. So I guess I'm, I'm conservative and fearful of the financial aspects of the business. And immediately when I took ownership, I searched for the very best people to put around me, to help me with the financial aspects of the business. And I think most leaders that I admire, they always employ the best people around them to do the jobs that they cannot or will not do themselves. And I certainly very, very strongly believe in that.

Whitney Johnson: Before I go on, you just mentioned leaders that you admire. Is there a leader or two that you like to tell us about that you do admire?

Ben Shewry: There is you know, there's Yvon Chouinard, Patagonia, is, um, who I don't know personally, but I've read his books and I really admire their company, um, as a big company, you know. And there's lots of small companies that I admire, but that's a big company that I admire.

They like their, their environmental outlook. I think it's a holistic kind of a business to me, you know. It's considerate. No business, I think will do no damage. I think that I think it's to environment and to people.

I think it's about, about treading lightly and business and, and having a bigger view than your immediate needs. And that's what I see in that company. So that's, that's one, that's one great company that I really admire. I mean, I, I have a friend in California.

He's a person that has had a lot of success in his life. His name is Bruce Dunlevie and he's up in San Francisco. He's an investor in his company, Benchmark Capital. I don't know much about it, to be honest. But he, he reached out to me at the start of the pandemic and said, told me to lead positively, without exception. And I really took that advice to heart. Bruce is the person I really admire in his mentorship that I appreciate. You know, he's a person that came to my restaurant. We became friends. Michael McMeeken is a chef in New Zealand. Michael's a person that has a lot of integrity. In Australia, we would say that he he's the person that would call out all the bull and just leave things as honestly as possible.

Whitney Johnson: Love it. So I just have this thought in my head. I'm thinking, "I think you should reach out to the owner of Patagonia after this podcast is over and tell him that you admire him and invite him to come to your restaurant."

I think that would be a really lovely thing to do.

Ben Shewry: That's a good idea.

Whitney Johnson: So as a chef, tell us about how you've evolved. You jumped to some different S curves around the kind of food that you cook.

How did you make those decisions and how have you evolved as a chef?

Ben Shewry: But I think all young chefs early on are really, as some of the people that I've worked for and the influences that they've, that they've had. So, you know, when I started at Attica in 2005, I was very much, you know, sum of a lot of different people, if you like. And I had, you know, at 27, I hadn't had an opportunity yet to find out who I was.

And that takes time. And so initially, the menu at Attica, you know, sort of spoke of the European training that we, we all have the sort of formal training that I had, had in New Zealand, and it spoke of influences of other chefs. When I started, the menu was all kind of all over the place, you know, and it really took a long time for me to find my own voice. It was a path that was just absolutely littered with mistakes and failure.

And by every time I failed, I learned something. I can pick myself back up and I tried again.

And, you know, we had a very empathetic and understanding dining public here in Melbourne, very sophisticated.

And I'm very thankful that I was learning by myself in this city, not somewhere else, that was harsher. Eventually, I moved away from all of those influences and I started to look for things that spoke of this place in this time.

And what spoke the most clearly to me were the plants and food that were endemic to Australia. We have a huge set of indigenous ingredients and we have culture attached to those ingredients of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And that was something that was, was beautiful and something that hadn't been tapped into by restaurants really before. And so slowly over 15 years, I fell in love with, with, with that. And that was the path that I took.

Whitney Johnson: The part that was you, you started cooking you and who you are.

It's beautiful. All right, COVID hit your thrown like the rest of us, but more so than the rest of us. You learn that restaurants have to shut down. So what did you do when you found out that you were going to have to shut down? How did you decide what to do? What did the process look like?

Ben Shewry: Well, on the first day that I found out that we were going to be shut down by the state, I thought that everything that I worked so hard for my whole life was being stripped away from me. And I thought that we would go broke. I was almost certain of it. And it was actually my birthday. And I was trying to celebrate it with my children and my partner, Kylie, and, and I was smiling on the outside and tears on the inside. I felt horrible. I felt, um, it's as bad as it felt for a very long time.

Whitney Johnson: What day was this, Ben?

Ben Shewry: It was The Sunday, Sunday, the 15th of March and I had two things happened. The next morning, I got up and the sun had come up again, it was another day and I checked my emails and Bruce Dunlevie, my friend, had sent me an email and it said, and it said, "Ben, I'm thinking of you that lead positively and made that you got in life." Something to that effect.

The second thing is, is that Kylie, my partner, had said, "It'll be okay, we have to do something." You know, and, and I took both those things on board and the fact that, you know, it was a new day and I went to work. And we made plans to change everything to revolutionize just start new businesses, to fight. And have that one day of self-pity, I allowed myself. I think probably look back now that that was important.

Whitney Johnson: Agreed.

Ben Shewry: And then after that, you know, there was no tolerance for any self-pity or any feeling sorry for ourselves. And we went at it and it was an exhilarating time. Really, really exciting. I like a fire, I like a battle. And the early years of Attica had been such a struggle and it would be so many times when that's when the business in going broke. And I thought back to that restaurant that failed and I'm like, "I just can't fail." We won't fail. We will it. You know, we will not fail. And, and we had a meeting with all the staff and we have the most wonderful team, 40 employees. And I said, "Guys, you know, this is a situation. We can, we can close down, try to put our business into hibernation. I'm not sure we will ever reopen. Or we can meet this and we can positively overcome it. And I'm not sure if we will succeed, but we can dead-well try. But I'm going to leave the decision with you. I don't want to force you to do this thing. It might be dangerous, and so if you want to take a vote on it, basically, you know, you don't have to do it publicly right now. But you can come to us and say, if you're out here you don't want to do this, then I understand there would be no hard feelings at all."

Every single person said, "No, we're with you. We want to do this."

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Ben Shewry: And that's very empowering, very empowering. And we went at it, you know, we just, just transformed the place. And honestly, I wouldn't change anything, you know, that I wouldn't, I would never have a moment like that in my life. OK, I'm sure, you know, I'm getting emotional talking about it. You know, it's just crazy.

Whitney Johnson: So you said that was one of the most exhilarating things that happened and it made you emotional. Can you describe one day or you talked about this moment of voting, but is there one day or one moment that you just you all did this and you just said, "Wow, look at what we've done to respond to this crisis." Can you describe one of those days or moments for us?

Ben Shewry: There was this moment when, you know, my, and I'm, I'm hesitant to talk about this because. What I'm going to talk about is, this sort of social aspect of my business that has been largely unspoken because I feel like as an entrepreneur and as a business owner and as a company, you should do good work and not seek to benefit from it and not seek to use it as PR. I always felt strongly that a lot of the things that we do in community will go unspoken and unknown, the ways that we help people both financially and not financially.

And then, but there was this one day to start with. Kylie said to me, "Will people care about us?" And it was around this idea that. You know, what she was saying was, we've got a lot for other people. Is the community now going to? She bought us. In our time of need and I, I should, I should never have doubted that they would because it was this moment at the start we would buy all these plans and the staff already had where we were. We were opening two new businesses in one week and we'd closed our whole business and we were doing a bake shop, a physical shopfront which sold cakes and sweets and all kinds of stuff. And we were opening it on the same day, opening a delivery and Safeway food service with ten cars on the road delivering and a bike radius around the restaurant.

And up to that point, you know, I worked 100 hours to get to that moment.

And I'd had no sleep and I, and it was this at the moment when you don't know if anybody will actually want any of those things. You're hoping that they will and I go, "Ah, will the community care?" Because really, you know, it's a restaurant. It's not it's not life and death. You know, like we're not like the front line workers, you know, and, um, and then people came and, a group of people came and they were so, like, at the same time sad and joyous, and they lined up the bakeshop, you know, I served every one of them.

And, um, and so many of them said, "You know, this is my last paycheck. But I wanted to come and spend time with you. And I'm like, Oh my God," you know.

Whitney Johnson: Now you're making me cry, Ben. I'm crying too. Oh, wow. Wow.

Ben Shewry: It is such a powerful emotion.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Ben Shewry: And I think. You can't forget those times.

Whitney Johnson: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Ben Shewry: So, we always wanted to believe in the good of people. Yeah. And that week, you know. Life changing.

Whitney Johnson: Mmhmm, thank you for sharing that with us. I think, I think, you know, one of the things that's interesting for me, Ben, is that, um, talking to so many people and it is so hard for so many people, pretty much everybody right now in very different ways, no matter who we are. And so just hearing this story of how people cared about you, you were caring and then they cared about you so deeply. It's really inspiring. And so I know it was hard for you to share, but thank you.

And I think that it will really uplift other people who are listening. So I really am grateful that you were willing to share this.

I want to just talk briefly as we wrap up is this you started a soup project and I know you said you don't want to talk about it.

And yet at the same time, I know that you've got these other hospitality workers that you want to support and people who are listening might want to be able to donate. Just tell us a little bit about the soup project that you started.

Ben Shewry: Well, one of the strangest things about the pandemic for our company was that, that huge shift from being a community-minded company and really doing things for the community to being, to have, to being forced to solely focus on the company and nothing else but the survival of the company. And once, when we had pretty early on, we, we got to the point where, you know, well, we're certainly not out of the woods and I don't think anybody could really say that we are out of the woods yet either.

But we've got to the point where, we're, felt strange to just be focusing on a company pretty much within a couple of weeks or three weeks, four weeks. I, we saw this problem that was, that was happening in the community and that

was that we're very, very blessed in Australia that we live in a country of such privilege where the government is helping us so much. And, and I just want to express that gratitude.

You know, workers here are being taken care of, you know, if they're out of work in some way. But unfortunately, a certain category of worker visa worker fell through the cracks here in Australia. And that is people that have come here and are on, on a visa or the government said, "Well, we're not going to offer any financial support to you at all."

Now, for most of these hospitality people, they are unemployed because most Australian people are unemployed at the moment. So, they, they are stuck in Australia without the means to return to their home country or this is their home now.

They're without work and without any income. And I just think that that didn't feel like the country that I've moved to, which is a caring, inclusive society, largely. And I wanted to do something about it. So along with Kylie, my partner, and Danny [inaudible], we started the Attica Soup Project to, we just started initially making soup and offering some sort of support services to some of these hospitality visa workers who are unemployed. And that's grown to providing almost enough food or pretty much enough food to get them through the week. And so, if you want to learn a little bit more about that, you can go onto our website, attica.com.au, and then click on the Attica Soup Project. And there is ways that you can support that by basically making a donation. It's not a charity, but by making a donation of food that we will then pass on to these out-of-work visa workers. We do this every week and it makes a huge difference in their lives.

And I serve them each week along with Kylie and Danny, and their problems are real and their fears, fears are real. And I just think that business, you know, needs to remember community.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Ben Shewry: It's just so important.

And, uh, it's and, you know, it's, it's also really important to be able to see, you know, that was always going to be a person out there doing it harder than you are.

Whitney Johnson: First of all, I'm going to make a donation today or tomorrow.

Ben Shewry: Thank you.

Whitney Johnson: Shortly. But it's just interesting to me to hear, you know, thinking back to your parents about how, you know, if you work hard, anything is possible. And also thinking about when that restaurant closed, I think you said it was called Luxe, and, and just that experience of how formative that was and how traumatic that was. And yet, and yet it feels like it was really important for you in terms of your, how you have shown up over the past six months and what that's looked like and how you have comported yourself when it has been very, very difficult and challenging. And so I look at that and I think I'm sad that it happened for you, but I'm also grateful because I think a lot of lives have been blessed because of that experience and what you learned because of it. Any thoughts on that?

Ben Shewry: I know, I mean, I would say that, Whitney, I learned nothing from any praise that I ever received, you know, any compliment that I ever get. I appreciate it, but I never learned anything from it. I think most of, you know, all of my learning and life is spent from the critical aspects, you know.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Ben Shewry: And that was one of the biggest you know, I, I learned, you know, when I've had bad experiences in my life or I've been treated poorly in my life.

I've thought, "I'm not going to be like that," and, um, so every time that happens, I said, that's not how I'm going to be. It's not how I want to be or that's not how I want to treat a person. That's not acceptable to me. Therefore, my company won't hire in that way.

I think it was so, so important. And I think it, it in some ways that in the early struggles of Attica in 2005, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, all of those incredibly lean and hard years, where you're not sure if you're going to make it through the week. That gives you reserve. And so when this came about, you know, I had the experience that was similar already, you know.

Whitney Johnson: You were ready. You were ready.

Ben Shewry: I was ready. I also owe it to my people, you know, they're not my people, but the team, you know, who worked so hard for me and have helped build this thing, you know, that's bigger than just a little restaurant. And so I really felt like, "What would happen to all of our staff if this fails? It can't fail." It doesn't fail, you know.

And there's a symbol of what, you know, our restaurant stands for in the community as well. And if it fails, how does it affect other people. Mentally as well? You know, so you do battle on it. You don't ever give up.

Whitney Johnson: All right, then, any final thoughts as we close?

Ben Shewry: Well, this is one thing that I didn't, I didn't talk about, and I do think it is also completely essential to surviving this.

And that is the culture that, that we've built at the restaurant with our staff. And I think, um, that in the early years of the restaurant, you know, I didn't, I didn't understand what it meant to be a leader and I didn't lead well. And it led to problems. And at some point in time, I think it was probably around, I reckon, around 2010, that I, I just knew that, that what I was doing as a leader in the restaurant wasn't good enough. And I needed to try some new things. So I had this idea, you know, this problem that exists in restaurants and, and in many businesses which have different teams doing different jobs. And in our business, there is one team, but there are there are two groups of workers doing very specific and very different things. And they are the people working in the kitchen who are making the food and there are the front team who are delivering that food. And so there can be a real disconnect between those two teams. As much as you might try to avoid it, there can be a disconnect. And that disconnect comes through a lack of knowing each other and a lack of understanding. So we might not know each other at all, really. And what happens is that in the heat of the moment, during service, when the pressure is on, if we do come into contact and we don't know each other, we could be a little harsher than we wanted to each other, I think.

So I had this idea that we would do this thing called staff speeches where we would meet a couple of times a week. The entire team.

We sit in a circle and there's a roster and each member of our team has an opportunity to give a speech to the to the rest of the team. And there's just really no rules to what that speech could be about. The only real rule is that it can't be negative in a way that basically is critical of or complaining about the restaurant.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Ben Shewry: Now that, it can, it can be critical of the restaurant in terms of like how we could improve it. But it's not a veg session if you want if you want to be polite. So there's a different staff member speaking a couple of times a week. And we have heard speeches from people on a myriad of topics over the year, saying that we, for example, we've heard from a Korean, South Korean staff member about how her family fled persecution in North Korea and several of her family members were killed and murdered. We've heard, you know, speeches about staff members have had suicidal thoughts. We've had speeches about, you know, our staff members, favorite team. We've, We've laugh with cry all the while, you know, allowing our staff members to have a voice and to reveal something of themselves.

Now, there's a point to this, and that is, that it creates empathy. When you understand somebody and when you know somebody, it's easier to feel empathy for them and for their situation. So if you don't know that somebody suffers from bipolar disorder, then their behavior might be a little random to you. But if you do know that they if, they reveal that, the brave enough to reveal that part of the group and you do understand that, then it allows you to

handle the situation a little bit differently, I believe. So what started to happen was that we had a closer and closer team, understanding more and more about, about each other. And so these situations that would arise in the heat of the moment became gentler and softer and more respectful. And the ultimate goal and the point of this, as well, was that, you know, if we all feel empathy for each other and know each other, then that is passed on in our service and our connection to, to our guests and the people that are coming.

And so I think that that sort of idea of reducing a workplace that is kind of inclusive is not counterintuitive to high performance and militant discipline that some kitchens and some restaurants are ruled by.

I found that this softer, more inclusive approach has led to high performance and a better work environment.

Whitney Johnson: Mm hmm.

I'm really glad that you shared that. I think that's really important. And it's interesting, actually. So just this earlier today, as an aside, I interviewed for our podcast, a fellow by the name of Zaza Pachulia. I don't know if you follow basketball. He played for the Golden State Warriors.

Ben Shewry: I'm a big basketball fan.

Whitney Johnson: OK. All right. Anyway, well, so it's really funny is that he shared something very similar where he's now moved, you know, he's not on the court anymore. He's now doing basketball operations. And he talked about now that he's on the business side, he's having this experience of recognizing how the players need to know the business people and just this empathy and compassion, which is very similar to what you just described and expressed. And so it's just really interesting to hear, um, what you've put in place in order to foster those relationships, which people are happier, it's a safer environment. And like you said, your guests are benefiting as a consequence. So thank you for sharing that.

Ben Shewry: No, I think my success has been mostly because I've been really fortunate to hire the best people and I feel lucky that I that I have the best people that we, that we hire for a certain type of people, a certain type of person who has certain attributes.

And they are, um, absolutely key to our business. So what kind people, you know, who are curious. I want people that have integrity, people that are really hard-working. I think those sorts of things that can't be taught. You know, I think most skills in a restaurant can be taught, but those things can't be taught. And so we have a saying that you can only work here if you have no negative attitude. And that's a question that you'll be asked to interview if you ever go for a job, Attica, and that'll be asked directly of you, "Can you guarantee that you won't have any negative attitude?" And I qualify negative attitude, a negative attitude is dropping your shoulders is talking bad, coming in, in a bad mood. You know, you have to leave it at the door, but it's not it's not putting up with any form of harassment or abuse or anything like that. Those things I want to know that immediately if they were have to happen.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Ben Shewry: It's not putting up with anything, but it's basically coming in with a positive attitude and being kind and doing the job to the best of your ability every day.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, I love that.

Ben Shewry: By that rule has seen us through this really hard time, I believe.

Whitney Johnson: I love that. So I think, "Can you guarantee no negative attitude?" And I have to tell you, Ben, at the start of the interview, I was in a good mood and I'm in even better mood now, so no negative attitudes, here. No. Thank you very much for being with us. Take care.

Ben Shewry: Bye. See ya.

When we think about failure and what it teaches us, we most often think inwardly to our own failures. We may notice the failures of others and for a moment glean a lesson or two, but rarely does it imprint on us in a meaningful and lasting way. However, for Ben, someone else's failure, the unexpected bankruptcy and closure of a restaurant at which he was working, deeply impacted him.

He grieved the loss as though it were his own and resolved to avoid the same fate should he ever own a restaurant.

Ben gave failure its due.

The experience was painful, yes, but there were important lessons. Some were new, some simply reinforce those he learned from his frugal and resourceful parents like the value of not carrying debt. Approaching his finances, conservatively, Ben was prepared when upheaval came in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. When many, if not most, other restaurateurs were struggling to stay in business, Ben and his team were in a position to not only manage through, but thrive in disruption, keeping the community fed, the employees employed and his restaurant, his creation, operational.

But he didn't stop there. After witnessing the struggles of migrant hospitality workers, Ben and his team started the Attica Soup Project. I wonder if he had any idea, as a young boy where his love of cooking would take him.

And I wonder if you had any idea when you were young where your life would take you. If you're enjoying these podcasts, if you're finding them useful, would you leave a review of the podcast on Apple podcast or wherever you listen?

Not only does it help more people find these wonderful humans that we interview, it lets us know that you are listening. It lets us know who you are.

Thank you to Ben Shewry for being our guest. Thank you to our team, Jennifer Brotherson, Sarah Duran, Whitney Jobe, Steve Ludwick, Melissa Rutty and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson. And this is Disrupt Yourself.