

John Gaiters Transcript

[00:00:00] **Andy Murray:** Hello everyone, and welcome to the bigQUEST Podcast. I'm excited by this episode because it's not often I get to have a conversation with a young entrepreneur who's in that early stage of his company and is experiencing such quick momentum.

[00:00:14] I'm talking about Mr. John Gators. You'd be forgiven if you've not heard of John yet as he's a recent N B A graduate from the University of Arkansas. He was born in Tulsa, spent a number of his growing up years in Little Rock and now lives in Fayetteville. They say some people are born to be entrepreneurs and others find that calling later in life.

[00:00:32] John is one of those people I think was born to be an entrepreneur, and what I mean by that, he is someone who has a clear purpose and a calling to create change with a profound desire to help others while still in college. He founded a nonprofit called Trendsetters, which helps underserved kids in high school with the skills needed to succeed in life.

[00:00:52] Most recently, he started a for-profit company called Unity Brands, which consults and holds conferences for corporate leaders with the aim of bringing together business and community to create more opportunities for those in the black and brown communities. He's already held a couple of Unity conferences, which have been well attended and attracted the support of leaders in some of the world's biggest companies such as Walmart and Proctor, and.

[00:01:16] I met John for the first time in a coffee shop in downtown Fayetteville, and when I asked him to tell me his story, I felt I was listening to someone who had a maturity and a humility well beyond his years. He had all the characteristics I've seen as necessary for what it takes to achieve big goals. He was focused on a problem we're solving.

[00:01:35] He had a keen sense of the biggest barrier he had to overcome, and he saw the outcome he could achieve by reaching his Destin. as I talked and we talked together, I felt I was being invited in to co-create and be part of what he was building. And actually he hadn't worked out yet all the answers for how he was going to achieve his goals.

[00:01:54] But what he did have was a keen sense of the right questions to be asking. I've been truly inspired by John's grit, humility, and courage to take on a big vision and bring others along. I hope you enjoy the discussion as much as . .

John, it is so great to have you on the podcast today. But before we jump into some of the amazing things you're doing with Unity, I love it if you could take a few moments and introduce yourself and perhaps share some of the experiences you've had that's helped inspire you to take on this quest with unity.

[00:02:26] **John Gaiters:** Thanks for having me on the show. I'm so excited and honored to be a part of your programming. As you guys know, my name's John Gaiters and most recently I just graduated from the University of Arkansas the Walton College Business in their N B A program, go Hawks and you.

[00:02:41] the purpose really in my why I would say is growing up I felt like I didn't belong. No dad, no tribe. But one thing I find is that everyone has something to offer and everyone can find the right tribe if they keep searching and stay true to themselves. I realize it may take time, but if you keep trying, you'll eventually find the right people and per people who can really.

[00:03:03] bring, which brings forth unity, really having good community. And born in Tulsa pretty much raised Mount Colorado little Rock and spent some time in New Orleans area due to my mother's military service. So I'm very grateful to our military and our community, and that was kinda my first introduction into doing some of the work that I'm doing.

[00:03:22] **Andy Murray:** You talk a lot about this word belonging, and obviously it means a lot to you. Take me to a time when you felt this idea of belonging really crystallized for you.

[00:03:31] **John Gaiters:** I would say, my whole life has been, I would say diverse. It really crystallized when in my college when I saw how much chaos there was going on from politics to just community efforts to just so many other segments, and I've realized that what people needed.

[00:03:48] and during this time was a leader similar to like Martin Luther King. And by no means I'm not trying to be like Martin Luther King. There's no way I could even reach that level. But I will say that in every region, in every community, there's someone needs to stand up, not complain about what's going on, but actually be solution oriented.

[00:04:05] And so my purpose has been, to your point, belonging, creating a culture, belonging and a strategy pipeline of really helping amplify. Specifically Minority Town in northwest Arkansas.

[00:04:21] **Andy Murray:** Outstanding. I love it. Now, what you're doing now is not the first startup you've done another initiative trendsetters and perhaps even one before that as part of us U C a.

[00:04:32] Correct. .

[00:04:33] **John Gaiters:** Yeah. And it all started, I know you didn't ask me a question, but it all started with profess my professor, I'll never forget him, bill Doscher. He encouraged me to create a project that I was passionate about as a part of my college capstone requirement. And to be honest, I didn't know what to do.

[00:04:51] And so many times in life I feel we are stuck in a particular place because we don't know where to start. But I would encourage people if you don't know where to start, finding someone who's doing what you're trying to do, no matter what field it is or segment that it's in that's exactly what I did.

[00:05:06] And it wasn't an overnight situation. By no means at all. It was constant creation of just asking questions, being inquisitive, having a support system and creating that support system. No one's gonna come to you, right? You have to be the one. That's a great point. execute no matter what color you are.

[00:05:23] , be the one to be different and be willing to be made fun of, be willing to be looked at weirdly, and just all types of stuff. And I would say that I definitely I'm a loner inadvertently. I know people think I'm more extroverted, which I love people and I get my energy from people, but I'm just, to myself type of guy.

[00:05:40] And .

[00:05:41] **Andy Murray:** That's, yeah, that's excellent. And I'd love to see entrepreneurs take on Quest early in their careers and, try things and get out there and do it. It's not for everybody, that's for . For .

[00:05:50] **John Gaiters:** It's just . That's for you have to be a strong person. Yeah. Lots of great involved in entre.

[00:05:55] Yes.

[00:05:56] **Andy Murray:** For . John, tell me about trendsetters. What inspired you to start that and tell us a little bit about what trendsetters. .

[00:06:02] **John Gaiters:** Yeah. Andy, so trendsetters, the whole goal of trendsetters in a nutshell is really impacting high school students and really helping give, giving them opportunities or unlocking opportunities that they wouldn't receive elsewhere.

[00:06:15] And really trendsetters started as a result of having a leadership team or a personal board of directors. And I saw that sometimes it's not necessarily. The metric or the data, but knowing that someone can be present, like the power of presence, right? Showing up and being consistent it's hard to measure that.

[00:06:32] But one thing I will say is that I knew that growing up, I wish I had someone like me coming, bringing speakers and having workshops executed about just. , understanding morals and values and understanding self. Because I feel like if you don't understand yourself, it's hard to help other people and do your help under people and being your purpose.

[00:06:51] And so I I'm working with a lot of school districts here in the region. Most recently we did a trendsetters event last Friday was so awesome with chancellor Charles Robertson. We had so many students from Fayetteville High School participated. It was just incredible. I think it was way over three or 400 students that participated.

[00:07:09] And I'm just so grateful. And, it's all about, giving, paying it forward, and giving it to the next generation. So yeah, I'm really excited. And we still do programming now and we operate as a speaker series bringing speakers who have lived life and who have experience, just educating and mentoring the kids.

[00:07:26] **Andy Murray:** That's amazing. That's amazing initiative. You started it, good on you for seeing that, that need and paying it forward and executing against that. But if that hasn't kept you busy enough, you've decided to also launch another company that's going on now. I don't know what your second year with Unity Brands.

[00:07:43] Yeah. Yeah. Tell me about that and how has that different than trendsetters?

[00:07:47] **John Gaiters:** Great question, Andy. So Unity Brands is more focused on. Large corporations per se, and it's divvied out in two different ways. One way is consulting, helping companies who have historically not been diverse tap into diversity and understanding diversity as well, because you don't know what you don't know, and that goes for no matter what color you are.

[00:08:10] And so I saw opportunity here specifically in the region where there was a lot of room for growth when it came. Being inclusive, not just in the workplace, but externally as well, because a lot of corporate companies, they have events here in the region and they they don't know how to connect with minorities.

[00:08:29] And so I saw that as a way for me to, I saw that as an opportunity. And so another facet is we also produce events as well, so really strategizing with corporate companies and other companies on how to be more inclusive. In their events. And so one event that we're producing that I found is the Unity Conference.

[00:08:48] And the purpose of the Unity Conference was really to create a culture of belonging here in the region. And so we have several target audiences, one being C-level executives because we have a top-down approach that we execute from. And then another approach is really minority student.

[00:09:05] and then CPG companies that sponsor. So we have a multifaceted audience, but the beautiful thing about that is for this conference, there's something for everyone. And so that's something that I really wanna stitch strong to as we grow, is having, this as ability to grow into something much.

[00:09:21] **Andy Murray:** Tell me about then the growth behind this, cuz your first conference, was it a huge conference? And the second one and what, take me on the first, second, and third. What are your, what's your story behind that? Yeah

[00:09:32] **John Gaiters:** great. Great question. With this conference, this all started as an idea.

[00:09:36] Keep in mind I had no experience in conferences at all whatsoever. And there's a beauty about entrepreneurship because, , you defy the odds by doing things that haven't been done oftentimes, or that's not typical. You make your own box or make your own table. And here in the region there's really no diversity conference here.

[00:09:58] And so I saw an opportunity to not just complain about the lack of diversity, but actually be a part of the solution, and don't get me wrong, has been very challenging because oftentimes you're trying to convince someone who has not been exposed. Or someone that's not a part of their reality, convince them why something that's brand new to them is important.

[00:10:20] And that's not the case for everyone. This, the reality of it. Sometimes that is the case. And I reached out to some mentors who worked at Walmart given, how power they are in the region. I said, Hey, I don't know what I'm doing, but , I have experience in putting the events together.

[00:10:34] And you've been to some of my events. join us, our Fire First Inaug Gro conference. And they said, yeah, , let's figure this out together. And it was so beautiful because although I didn't have, a million degrees at the time, or I didn't, I didn't come from a prominent family.

[00:10:50] They were so willing to be able to sit down with me to work things out. And that's what it, you have to start somewhere, right? Don't worry. And this is for people who are listening. Don't worry about, not knowing because there's someone around you, or you could find someone that does know and it takes time, right?

[00:11:06] Building relationships requires times because Andy said something that was so key. You talked about, in anything you have to build. number one, credibility. And then what was the second thing that you, capability. Capability, yes. And that's something that is so true has been very true even as I've been along on this journey.

[00:11:23] So

[00:11:23] **Andy Murray:** John, take me to the very first conference. How well attended? Was it a big hit right off the bat or was this a trial and error and let's learn from

[00:11:32] **John Gaiters:** there? Most definitely. What's weird? Great question, but hard to answer. And let me explain why. So in our first conference we had, the CEO of Walmart, us, John Fern, we had the CFO of Walmart.

[00:11:45] We had a lot of executives. Following suit, the CMO and so forth. And a lot of suppliers come apart put, come together come together for the event. it was very small, I would say. I mean around 300 people, our first one, I was very intentional about that because we could have easily, I'm , sewed that place out.

[00:12:01] Had a thousand, 2, 3, 2 to 3000 people given who were speaking. But, I always I'm of the belief that it's better. have small successes and build your way up versus, saying, Hey man, we're gonna do 10,000 people and we're

gonna have, the cfo, Walmart there, the cmo, Walmart there, and then something it comes, it becomes uncontrollable and you don't get the results that you want.

[00:12:26] So I'd rather, one of the things that I just learned from Mark Pritchard, who's the chief brand officer yesterday or the day before yesterday, was he said, John, it's not about being the largest. But it's about having the most impact or having the greatest impact. And that really just changed a per gave me a different outlook because here I was thinking about numbers, but really it's about, maybe it is having the right 300 people in the room because you don't know where, how they can go back into their ecosystems.

[00:12:57] And because of your 300 pe person conference, now there's being, there's. Immediate change within their systems where wherever it could be corporate community, wherever. And so that really had me reflect even in our third conference that's coming up on some changes that we need to make. And yeah.

[00:13:15] **Andy Murray:** It's interesting you've gotten such support from such high level people in industry in this market. What, what resonated do you think with them that said, yes we'll do this very unexplored area with this young gentleman as a new entrepreneur. Why do you think they signed up?

[00:13:31] **John Gaiters:** I think also they're looking for ways and speaking on behalf of Walmart in general, not just a specific person, but. on how to build relationship with black, the black community. And I think also, I think that's personally, but I think professionally as one of the largest companies, they're also trying to figure out how do we execute racial equity in such a way to where.

[00:13:57] It also makes sense, not just for them, but where ways they could affect their supplier community. And so I think, working with me is a great start because at the end of the day, there's so many different solutions on figuring out how to improve D E I. Right? I'm not the only solution, but I think, another thing too is having a separation of difference.

[00:14:15] I really don't know a lot of young African American men in this region that are doing some of the work that I'm doing. And so I think too, that. A another reason why they would want to be a part. I need my assumption,

[00:14:30] **Andy Murray:** I can tell you from my perspective getting to know you a bit and watching what you're doing.

[00:14:34] You certainly have a humility about you and approach that people want to help. Be part of what you're doing. I think that's really powerful on your part. And the second thing is, I think you come across this area of diversity, inclusion in the sense of belonging and inclusiveness and education in ways that really feels powerful.

[00:14:54] And, people want to come together. They want to, grow. And I think the whole idea of unity in itself is about bringing people together to really get those valuable experiences working. With each other to make that happen. And I think you highlight that really well. So I'm not surprised your message and your your honest humble approach to the topic has been yeah.

[00:15:15] So good and working so well for you. And congratulations, man, on getting so many. Big companies and big names in so quickly would take other entrepreneurs years and years to reach their kind of access. And so you've been you've been blessed with some really good supporters with you on that.

[00:15:29] You talked about making an impact. You look at this conference, you know what you're trying to do in April and where it goes from there, what kind of impacts. Do you hope to make over time as you look out, a couple, three years what's your

[00:15:43] **John Gaiters:** dream? Great question, Andy.

[00:15:45] First off the bat, my goal as of my goal of making this conference, not just to create a culture belonging, but eventually I would love to create job opportunities and entrepreneurial opportunities. These students and other leaders who are a part of this conference. Because my thinking is we have these con, these companies already involved, already present at the conference.

[00:16:08] Why not? We add additional segment to where this can, there could be a call to action at the conference. And which gives you KPIs, gives you outcomes that just really promotes and reiterates your purpose. And , I'm really excited. We're working on our third conference coming up in April we've been working really hard.

[00:16:27] I have a agency shout out to V Y L M R commerce. They're great and they've just been just killing it and yeah, I'm so grateful. outstanding,

[00:16:37] **Andy Murray:** and I can't wait to go be a part of that conference when it comes in April and yes, see you in action and watch it. Watch it happen, man, and be part of it.

[00:16:45] It's a quite a thrill to see the energy behind what you're creating. I'd love to hear your thoughts on how you might inspire companies to take action today. Obviously come to a conference and learn and, experience that and participate, but, what advice would you have for.

[00:17:03] Business leaders, especially perhaps in northwest Arkansas, but any community really. What are some of your thoughts that they might, that you might have for them as a takeaway that could be helpful?

[00:17:13] **John Gaiters:** . I believe like in a, so where I live is a majority majority white area. I really believe you have to be strategic and intentional and to identifying people of color, which it takes work.

[00:17:25] This is not. And I think from a leadership perspective, a great leader takes time to building, build relationships because I think that's where true change takes place. Like I said, showing up and, this is not a one to one and done thing, this is like a, this is only the beginning type of attitude that.

[00:17:43] we need around us and around the community impacting the, this region. It's about really getting out there and honestly having a genuine connect connection with people. Shaking hands, taking calls, having lunch, grabbing coffee. Oh, it all helps build meaningful relationships and foster to foster success.

[00:18:01] And that's all I've been trying to do, especially in this region. Really being thorough about taking the time to getting to know some of the Walmart executives, some of the Walmart managers, some of the SVPs. And same goes for ARC Best and JB Hunt and Tyson, which are leading companies here in the region.

[00:18:16] It requires. Building relationships all around which, requires, and I realize that a lot of these executives and people who are, in leadership roles are busy. But I think if we want to have true change, that's what it's going to take. .

[00:18:31] **Andy Murray:** Yeah, I agree with that a hundred percent.

[00:18:33] And I've seen that work all throughout my career. One of the areas you'd like to think you've told me to build relationships with would be HBCUs. Yeah. Historically, back black colleges and universities. How is that going and what kind of interest are you getting in that space?

[00:18:47] **John Gaiters:** Yeah, so I think everyone.

[00:18:49] Very excited about connecting with HBCUs here in the state because I have the mindset of, you need to clean your house before you try to clean someone else's house. And so there's so many schools here in our region or in our state, specifically HBCUs, that would love to come to Northwest Arkansas, but it's about building that pipeline, right?

[00:19:09] And so I envision helping I envision with the. Utilizing that platform as a way to bringing HBCUs as well as other minority groups here in the region to take part in connecting them with companies here that they hadn't been connected to before. And maybe they have, but I think, building that relationship is so important.

[00:19:29] **Andy Murray:** Yeah. That's great. That's very cool. Thought that you've incorporating that into the Unity conferences and the other pieces of work you're doing. Yes. John, what gets you you've got a lot to be excited about. You're driving a lot of change. You're entrepreneur and building a company but what gets you up in the morning and drives you?

[00:19:44] I certainly have to believe there's some days where it feels like you'd rather stay in bed, perhaps, but, oh gosh,

[00:19:50] **John Gaiters:** yes. You

[00:19:51] **Andy Murray:** know what drives you and keeps you.

[00:19:53] **John Gaiters:** To be honest, there are low days and there are high days because I would say I'm pretty much a loner, honestly. like I, I have, my core group of friends, but I'm just so laser focused on trying to do this work.

[00:20:04] And I really do believe, I was inspired to, I think because I have hope that there's so much potential to growing where I am in this region and across America, that's what keeps me going. And then, praying mother. I think her prayers keep me going too. . Excellent. And honestly, you I, there's a lot of progress or oppor.

[00:20:22] There's a lot of opportunity for progress here in No Fri Arkansas compared to 20 years ago. And I really feel like Walmart with his home. have, are realizing that the power that they have to create positive change which has a ripple effect here on the supplier community there's still a lot of potential for growth by putting emphasis on d e I, but I think we can really make a positive impact.

[00:20:43] So in a nutshell, I think what keeps me going is realizing there's a lot more work to do. . And so I know I'm not gonna be on this earth forever, but I think, really creating a platform so I can pass a torch on someone else and really raising up a generation that really cares, truly cares about one another.

[00:21:02] **Andy Murray:** Wow, John, you're a unique fellow. What a great ambition and thought thoughtful approach. And giving back early with trendsetters to help, lend a hand to others to be successful is quite remarkable. How can people get in touch with you or follow what you're doing or participate with you in some way?

[00:21:18] What's the best way they could? .

[00:21:20] **John Gaiters:** The best way they can reach me is we're working on our website currently and I can send that to you and you can send it out to somebody. We can send it out in the links for . Yeah, I think that'd be, we're currently working on. I'm really excited. We'll have tickets to be sold and so please.

[00:21:34] Please come buy a ticket. We're looking at having the conference on April 26th, 27th at the NBC Suites convention Center or John Ham Convention Center, which is connected to NBC Suites and Rogers. So feel free, please come. We need all the support and a network we can get, and Excellent.

[00:21:51] And I really thank you.

[00:21:52] **Andy Murray:** We'll put the show notes and the show notes, links to your contacts and details and hopeful you, hopefully they'll get in touch with you and get engaged in the conference. John, blessing to have you brother and I hope. Thank you. Have a great have a great success at the conference and I can't wait to hear more.

[00:22:08] Thanks for listening to the bigQUEST podcast. If you like this episode, make to subscribe and leave a comment, and if you want to share it, we're available on Apple, Spotify, Google, and anywhere you listen to audio. If you're leading change in your company and you wanna know more about developing the mindset, methods, and motivation needed to deliver big outcomes, I'd love to talk with you if you can reach me@bigquests.com.

[00:22:30] Until next time, I'm Andy Murray reminding you to think big in Quest.