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Max Delsignore: Northern New York Community Podcast, stories from the heart of our community. Thanks everyone for tuning in to the Northern New York Community Podcast. We promise this will be another great edition you'll enjoy listening to.

Dick Alexander has always said, "In this life, you come in with nothing and you leave with nothing." That statement has really defined his journey; personally, professionally and in philanthropy. A general contractor, restaurateur and businessman for most of his life, Dick has also devoted his time to lifting the spirits of those who are at a disadvantage, and especially children.

We will touch on Dick's path to Watertown, engagement with local organizations, and what philanthropy has meant to him and where he lives today. Dick, it's great to have you on the Podcast and thanks for being here.

Dick Alexander: Well, thank you so much for inviting me, I appreciate it.

Max Delsignore: Well, certainly. So, just kind of a lighthearted, fun fact to start; your birth name is really Italian.

Dick Alexander: That's correct. My mother and father were both born in Italy and were immigrants.

Max Delsignore: So what was the Italian birth name that you had?

Dick Alexander: Alessandrini.

Max Delsignore: Should we try to spell that?

Dick Alexander: A-L-E-S-S-A-N-D-R-I-N-I.

Max Delsignore: So how did your family settle on Alexander as your name here in America?

Dick Alexander: Well, that's a fairly difficult name to spell and even for a lot of people to pronounce, and I already had an uncle whose name was Alexander, so my father wanted to keep it in the family as much as he could, so he shortened it to Alexander.

Max Delsignore: So you grew up in the Utica area and your professional career really began in your father's tiling business. You're a graduate of

RPI and you spent some time in the service; when you came home, you really dove in and it really came about because of an unexpected event. Could you tell us just a little bit about that story?

Dick Alexander: I came home from the Navy at 4:00 or 5:00 one Saturday morning and tried to get a few hours of sleep and that afternoon, my father was lying on the sofa in tremendous pain. And we got a doctor there and he'd had a massive heart attack. Way back then, when you had a heart attack, you were taken to the hospital and left there until you were cured and he was there for five or six weeks.

So, on Monday morning, I went to work. Running the show, not knowing anything about it. You learn fast under those circumstances.

Max Delsignore: What were some of the things you picked up or had to really pick up right away about running a business?

Dick Alexander: I had worked part-time there in the past but I was so fortunate to have an elderly lady who was doing the bookkeeping and everything. She had a hands-on on everything, so she was a great help. When I got there Monday morning and the employees were coming in one another, I had to introduce myself to them and they had to introduce themselves to me because I had no clue who they were.

Max Delsignore: So what were some of the things, the experience of that; being in charge of the day-to-day but having some help, too? How did some of that experience help you position yourself for your contracting business and really venturing out on your own, as you did, after the fact?

Dick Alexander: You grow up real fast under those circumstances and you have to put in long hours and learn it. You're not given a lot of time to learn it, so you better do it in a hurry. I always enjoyed that kind of... when I was in the Navy, I was a Personnel Officer and I also went to the Naval School of Justice, so that was a good background for me.

Max Delsignore: As part of the business, you made several trips to Watertown, New York. So, you were pretty familiar with the area at the time. What were those commutes and visits like when you were in this area?

Dick Alexander: Well, we actually did work in three states; New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Actually four, Pennsylvania. So,

I used to go on those jobs twice a week. So, I was in Watertown almost twice a week, every Tuesday and every Thursday.

Max Delsignore: What were some of the take-aways, the things that caught your eye about Watertown maybe in comparison to where you grew up in Utica?

Dick Alexander: Way back then, it was a small town. Of course, it was before Fort Drum became Fort Drum. It had a nice tone, you know, the public square was very pretty and there were a lot of nice, old homes. It was a very laid back, quaint town, whereas Utica was a mill town.

We had a couple of million square feet of factories that made sheets and pillowcases. As a matter of fact, Utica sheets and pillowcases were noted the world around. When all those factories moved south and then moved out of the country, it devastated Utica.

Max Delsignore: Tell us a little bit about the contracting business you had. The tiling business helped set the stage, I think, for your transition in developing a construction company. Tell us how you got that started and what that experience was like, too.

Dick Alexander: Well, we did a lot more than tiling. We actually became an interior contractor. We would do everything from ceilings to floors to walls. So, it was an evolution that eventually, if you were doing that much on a job, you'd start doing the whole job.

Max Delsignore: How important was it to have a business or to realize with a business that you had to evolve over time? As the mills began to close, as industry began to change, what were some of the keys that you saw to say, "If our business is going to survive, we need to start doing these things to make ourselves relevant."

Dick Alexander: Well, that's why we expanded. When I first came to work there, we operated in a very small geographic area and then over the years, we kept making the circle wider and wider and wider until 1974 when I sold out.

Max Delsignore: Was there ever a vision when you were making trips up to Watertown where you said, "You know, I could see myself actually living here someday." Was there any kind of that forward thinking or not so much at the time?

Dick Alexander: Probably not. I was pretty much entrenched in Utica and had made a lot of friends and a lot of acquaintances. I was lucky enough to be on quite a few boards in Utica, non-for-profits.

Max Delsignore: So perhaps, I guess, in some respects it may have been destiny that there was an opportunity that presented itself here in Watertown in the mid '90s, where you came up and saw a good opportunity. Can you tell us a little bit about purchasing the Carriage House Inn?

Dick Alexander: I had opened a hotel in Utica, a Ramada in '93, and the gentleman that we had bought all the furniture from suggested to go up and look at the Best Western in Watertown. I had actually worked at the Best Western when Mr. Capone had put the third floor on there years before, so I was pretty familiar with the building.

I pursued it and sooner or later, we ended up buying it. That was what really changed me from a Utican to a Watertown man. The people in Watertown that came there were wonderful people. We made so many friends and they would come back week after week. We had so many loyal customers. It was just a great experience.

Max Delsignore: And you also met your wife here, correct?

Dick Alexander: Yes.

Max Delsignore: How did you meet Pat?

Dick Alexander: We used to have happy hour every Friday afternoon and she was employed at the State Office building right across the street, so a whole bunch of girls, after work, would come over to the Best Western. I spotted her and I decided that was where I was going. It took me quite a few months for her to finally say, "Oh yeah, I will go out with you," and then we've been together ever since the first day.

Max Delsignore: Another piece of your involvement in Watertown really has been Sunrise Rotary Club. Rotary, I know, means a lot to you. What has participating in Rotary and its mission, what have you learned from that and what are some of the values you've taken away from that experience?

Dick Alexander: I joined Rotary when I was a young man in Utica and at that time, and still today, Rotary's motto is, "Service above self," so it wasn't very long after you were in a Rotary club that you were asked to do something.

I had a very close friend who had a handicapped niece, so his focus was on helping the handicapped people and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. So, we got started on a handicapped committee and then we would have spaghetti dinners to raise money so we could do more for these handicapped people. We would put on dinner dances for them, go to Camp Goodwill, which was a handicapped camp near Utica. We built places for them to lodge, we remodeled the dining hall.

There was a little group of us that we were all in the construction business in one phase or the other, and we all got together and it was like a posse. We'd go there and we'd start on a Thursday and by Sunday night, no matter what it was, we were done because we had to go back to our jobs.

Rotary actually gives a little guy like me from a small town called Utica, New York to help in a small way, make a change in the world. They really do; Rotary has virtually eliminated Polio in the entire world. It's 99.8 percent stopped and it was Rotary and the donations.

The first Rotary, they wanted to raise \$100 million, pledge to eradicate Polio. In three months, they raised \$140 million. Then when I started coming to Watertown more, I needed to get an affiliation, so I joined Sunrise Rotary.

Max Delsignore: What are some of the values? You mentioned, "Service above self," as one of the primary tenants of Rotary. What are some of the other values you've taken away from Rotary that you've used, either in your own personal philanthropy or even just in the day-to-day work that you've done professionally.

Dick Alexander: If you live by the Rotary ideal, you live a pretty good life. Rotary has been very good to me; I have made so many friends and although Rotary is not used for business contacts, it automatically is business contacts because you're dealing with the other members of the community who have businesses. So, you end up with contacts. You're able to do so much that you can't do by yourself but you can do as a group.

Max Delsignore: One of the nice transitions or affiliations that Rotary has is with the Dodge Pond Camp that's affiliated with St. Lawrence NYSARC. What compelled you to participate in helping with the programming that happens at Dodge Pond Camp through NYSARC?

Dick Alexander: Well, Dave Mance, who's very well-known in Watertown, is the one that's elected Dodge Pond to be the Rotary handicapped camp. Dave and I were good friends and he got me involved and over the years, Pat and I have been very devoted to Dodge Pond. We've bought land for them, I've helped remodel buildings, I put buildings up. It's a great place and the give-back you get is when you go there and those people run up to you and give you a big hug and that smile, that's it. What else is there?

Max Delsignore: You've really devoted a good portion of your life, as part of your philanthropy, to help those who are disadvantaged, whether it be children or adults. Why did you feel compelled, you and Pat together, to help those that are in that situation or in that position?

Dick Alexander: Well, when you get started... as I say, we started in a small way in the handicapped committee in Utica. You begin to understand the need and the gratification to help them is fabulous. These people who were given a bad deal to start are so appreciative of everything you do for them. You can't help not doing it.

Max Delsignore: One of the amazing stories, I think that you've been a part of, certainly, and Pat and NYSARC as a whole is being able to take some of those folks to Disney, which is a tremendous trip. What was that experience like, to be able to take some of those folks on that experience?

Dick Alexander: It was one of the most fabulous things I've ever done in my life. Pat keeps saying, "If you keep talking like this, you're going to say it was better than our wedding." When we got on the airplane in Syracuse and they revved the engines and they took off, these kids were screaming, and just to see them. They were so well-behaved.

We took them to Disney, we spent three days there and they were all able to get together with Mickey Mouse and have their pictures taken. Some of the kids didn't want to leave, they wanted to stay at Disney. We were fortunate enough, we ended up with 35 people going and we ended up with 35 people coming back, so it was a good thing.

Max Delsignore: I know, when you head to Disney, nobody seems to want to come home. It's such a magical place.

Dick Alexander: No. To this day, when those kids still come up and hug you and say, "Oh, it was the trip of my life."

Max Delsignore: Dick, your generation, I think, has really done a nice job demonstrating how important community philanthropy is at any level. Being able to either make a gift or your time and talent to volunteer, your generation has provided such a great example. In thinking about the next generation, the younger folks in that group, what message would you share with them to maybe inspire them to give as you have?

Dick Alexander: The rewards in giving are phenomenal. My daughter wants to do more than I was able to do because she started out higher than I did. My son-in-law, who is an ex-Army General, is very involved with Wounded Warriors and anything to do with the military. He's also a professional dentist and he has set up clinics in Mexico to try to help people from all around the country.

Max Delsignore: Why did you decide to be as philanthropic and willing to give back in Watertown as you have, and doing it together with Pat?

Dick Alexander: Watertown may not be my hometown, but it's my town now. It's always nice to be able to see the results of the seeds you plant while you're still alive. After you're dead, you can do whatever you want but you can't get the joy out of it that you can while you're still alive.

Max Delsignore: How important is giving back and philanthropy; how important is it to the future of the North Country?

Dick Alexander: Oh, I think it's very important. There are a lot of places and people in Watertown that have needs and to find the need and to fulfill it is just overwhelming, the results that happen.

We just took a busload of kids to Old Forge this summer and most of these kids, their mothers and fathers said, "We could've never done this." We were there for a day and to see the smiles and the kids having a great time, Pat and I just spent the day walking around seeing these kids having so much fun it wasn't funny. We took 55 and 55 came back; that's two in a row.

Max Delsignore: You're batting 1,000 on these trips, which is good.

Dick Alexander: Yeah.

Max Delsignore: Last question for you; so you have a couple signs in your office currently. "Tough times don't last, tough people do. Success is spelled work." A couple key tenants or things that you believe in. There's one I feel like that really fits your values and I want you

just to talk about how meaningful it is. I think you know which one I'm talking about, if you could mention which one it is.

Dick Alexander: Yeah, "If you see a need, find a way of filling that need." I think that's very important. God's been so good to me and so why shouldn't I and everybody else give back to him like he's given to us?

Max Delsignore: Well, you've made this community your home, Dick, as you said. Thanks for all that you've done and through the organizations you're affiliated with to address those important needs in Northern New York. We hope your example can be replicated by the next generation or inspire the residents to help those in need. Thanks so much for joining us on the Podcast and sharing your story.

Dick Alexander: Well, thank you for having me, I appreciate it very much, Sir.

Max Delsignore: Remember, you can listen to this edition of the Northern New York Community Podcast and all of our episodes on a variety of platforms. Subscribe to the Podcast on iTunes or Sound Cloud so you can listen online or on your Smartphone, or you can go to our website to see the profiles and a photo gallery with each interview. Just log onto www.nnycp.org. Many thanks to WPBS TV and the Northern New York Community Foundation for their support of the Podcast. Thanks again for listening in and stay tuned for more great stories from the heart of our community.

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