

Max: Welcome to this addition of the New York Community podcast. I'm your host, Max DelSignore. We have a special conversation here in store for you. It is our pleasure to have Frank and Ann Cean with us. We will chat with them about their love and appreciation for the North country. Frank will provide some insight in to the rise and success of Knowlton Brothers and Knowlton technologies in Watertown. And we will ask them both about why giving back locally is important to the future of Northern New York. Frank and Ann, it's great to have you both here.

Frank Cean: Glad to be here.

Ann Cean: Thank you.

Max: So let's start with both of you being natives of the North country. Can you just each of you briefly share with us, a little bit about the community where you grew up. And Ann, I'll start with you first.

Ann Cean: Yes, I grew up in Watertown on Stone Street. Went to St. Patrick's Elementary. [inaudible 00:00:48] graduated in 1960.

Max: And Frank, was it Brownville for you?

Frank Cean: Yes, I'm a general Brown graduate. Graduated in 1960. Born in Point Peninsula but I was two years old and moved to Brownville and that's where I spent my life.

Max: What were the communities like, respectively Watertown and Brownville, kind of in and around that time in the 50's and early 60's?

Frank Cean: Brownville's a small, very tight knit community. Everybody helped raise your kids so I didn't get away with a whole lot. It was pretty well managed by all the citizens in Brownville.

Max: What was it like in the city Ann, in that time?

Ann Cean: Well we lived in the 500 block and all the neighbors knew you and took care of you like their own, and we, as they said, you wouldn't get away with anything because there's people that knew you but you didn't know and they would tell on you.

Max: And the city, especially, has changed so much over time and I feel like in that era of the 50's and 60's, Watertown was still, not that isn't today, but a different but thriving city. Would you say that that's accurate?

Ann Cean: That's true. Yes.

Max: What do you love most about growing up in the North country? Place where again, lot of families took care of you, looked out for you, outside of just your parents. But what do you appreciate the most about growing up in Northern New York and especially given the time that you've spent here?

Frank Cean: I'm an outdoors person. I like to hunt, fish and those things are all available here. The small communities are very attractive to me, it's where I grew up and raised my kids, raised my grandkids, now raising my great grandkids, or helping. I should say helping raise my great grandkids. Or we are, Ann's doing most of the work. I get to participate a little bit every now and then.

Max: What do you love most Ann, about Northern New York?

Ann Cean: Well the four seasons and being able to I guess, grow with your children, your grandchildren and great grandchildren. We know quite a few around the area, and we used to live in Brownville as a married couple. When we moved to Tennessee, we were there for about five years and then we came back and went to Henderson and it's beautiful out there.

Max: I'm gonna get back to that part in a second, about coming back home after being away for a short time. To revisit something you mentioned too, about families around you helping you kinda raise you and grow up and of course you have your parents ... one of the things we do on this podcast is we peel back the layers of a person's or a couples values in giving back to their community.

Where would you say your values for giving back to the community and giving back to help others, where do those values come from, for each of you?

Frank Cean: My grandfather had a local grocery store in Brownville. He was a person that helped many people during the Depression. I heard many of those stories about some of the things that he had done and he was a person that continued to give all of his life. He's a person that I admired and tried to be like him in many ways. My folks were not well to do people, but they were people that volunteered their time and that's as valuable as donating money, if you can't afford to give.

Max: Where there certain things, Frank, that they always volunteered for?

Frank Cean: Community events. My father was an artist of sorts and he did all of the paintings and the uniforms for the fire department. He belonged to the fire department and his art was around the store when I was a kid. Where I worked, spent a lot of my time as well in my grandfather's store. Not just my grandfather but my aunt's as well. [inaudible 00:05:14] which I think is part of the history of Brownville. I was a paperboy there. I worked at the store and when I graduated and went in to the service, we returned to Brownville after I was married. Spent several years there before leaving to go to Chattanooga, for my employment at the time.

Max: Ann what about you, just the values of giving back, where did those come from for you?

Ann Cean: Well I would say probably my dad and mom were both very outgoing and he worked for a laundry and dry cleaning and Watertown linen supply so he was very busy. My mom also worked part time but they were in to the PTA and the schools and the fairs and all that.

Max: Is there anything your parents ever told you, a motto or anything that you can remember that's kinda stuck with you in the way you're living today?

Frank Cean: Yes. One time I had borrowed a dime from a friend. I had to take it out of my allowance and I was complaining about ... my allowance at the time was like 50 cents. So I was gonna have to give up ten cents of it and I was complaining a little bit about it and my father looked at me and says, "You know, if you borrow a nickel from somebody and don't pay 'em back, they bought ya for a nickel. How much you worth?" Yeah, that stuck with me.

Max: So where did the two of you meet? Do you remember how you met or ...

Ann Cean: Definitely.

Frank Cean: We met when I got out of the service in 1965. It was an evening when we were both out and there was a song on the jukebox that I thought I'd like to dance to. I wasn't much of a dancer but I thought I could at the time, and we danced and then went to a local diner, drank several cups of coffee, and the rest is history.

Max: Do you remember the song?

Frank Cean: Yes I do.

Max: What was the song?

Frank Cean: It was called The Jolly Green Giant.

Max: Did you play that at your wedding?

Frank Cean: It was one of those silly songs?

Ann Cean: You can't find the song.

Max: It was that good?

Ann Cean: It was that wonderful.

Frank Cean: But it was at the time.

Max: So to look at after your time in the service, when you came back and sought employment, your specialty, or part of your college studies, Frank, was in paper science engineering, correct?

Frank Cean: That's correct.

Max: When you came back from serving overseas, did you know exactly, I wanna continue on this track, this is the profession that I wanted to be in?

Frank Cean: No, I actually was in electronics in the service and I had interviewed with Bell Telephone when I got out of the service and I was going to college at the same time. They asked me when I would graduate from South Sound Community College and I gave them a date. In the meantime, I had no job. Actually, that's not true. I was working for the State in the Department of Environmental Conservations as a state trapper. But the job ended in October/November and I got married in August. Friend of mine said to me, "What are you gonna do in August/September when the job goes?" I said, "I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it."

Now I'm married. You're supposed to be able to support your wife but at that time, I was a little carefree, it wasn't my number one priority. Anyways, he said to me, "If anything comes up at the mill, I'll give you a call." I started in September on 1965, working at Knowlton's with the intent that I was going to ultimately end up at Bell Telephone in the electronics field. After I was there a couple years, David Knowlton, owner of Knowlton Brothers at the time, offered me the opportunity to go to Syracuse and start a paper science engineering. I accepted that offer and graduated a week before my 30th birthday from Syracuse in College of Environmental Science Forestry. Came back to Knowlton's to work. I interviewed with 31 companies at the time. I had 31 job offers. Obviously I was a little older, I had experience, I had a family so I was the type of person that people thought they wanted to hire. But I came back to Knowlton and fortunately that was a good decision on my part.

Max: Was it difficult, was there a draw to come back home, was that one of the deciding factors in pursuing that opportunity? Saying this is the one?

Frank Cean: Definitely. Yes, this was home and I had a good job and opportunity to come back here and it was easy to accept to come back here. It's home.

Max: Was that part of your thinking too, Ann, as you're kinda making this decision of do you stay or do you go? Was home kind of an important thing for both of you to make sure you're here to raise your kids and your family?

Ann Cean: Oh yes. Our kids had been raised through General Brown and the families, both families were here ... aunts, uncles ... but that was where his job was going to be in Chattanooga, so, we moved. My mother-in-law made the comment, if I'd known we'd see so little of you, and see him all the time, she wouldn't have let us go because he was home every week.

Frank Cean: Not every week but I was here frequently. I was [inaudible 00:11:49] of Vice President of Manufacturing for all five plants at the time so I traveled to all of those plants. Somehow I seemed to be able to return here on open day of duck season, or bass season, or whatever else it was. I was home frequently and I guess I never really left.

Max: In the mid 1980's Knowlton Brothers was in a precarious position and the business was slated for closure. What was your plan to save the business? Can you tell that story?

Frank Cean: I was involved in making the decision to close the plant. Our corporate officers studied the opportunity or the lack of, at the time. We put together a scenario after studying all potentials and what would have to be invested in Watertown. The decision was made to close. Myself and another gentleman, who was also from Watertown, bought a water well. Actually resisted that sale and we were able to delay the closing and take a second look at it. Bob and I both worked at putting together at what I called scenario number two and while it showed the potential of some profits, it did not have the return of investment that the corporation required.

I continued to work on another scenario, which I called scenario number three and I was unable to convince them that this scenario was one that was real and as a result, had to cast my vote for closing it as well. I came to Watertown to close the plant and immediately ran in to one of my friends I had grown up with and I spent the last two or three days touring the plant, meeting all my friends I'd grown up with, worked with, and made the decision that I couldn't close it. I went back to corporate and they asked me how everything went. I said, "Not very well." Why not? "Because I didn't close it." So they were asking me what I was going to do and why I wasn't gonna close it. I said, "I'm gonna make ya an offer." Said, "You're gonna make me an offer?" "Yes." Well, he says, "Make your offer and I'll take it to corporate and we'll see what happens." I took a sheet of paper from a yellow notebook pad right off his desk, made the offer. That was my official offer. 13 months later I was the proud owner of Knowlton Specialty Papers, which I renamed Knowlton Brothers at the time to Knowlton Specialty Papers.

23 years later when I was planning to leave the company, retire, the name changed to Knowlton Technologies, which it is today. It's a very profitable company. It's a very proud company. And I'm glad to have been part of it. The subsequent owners have continued progress that I started and continues to expand and grow, and that old paper mill, which is the oldest, continuous operating paper mill in North America, is still operating today continuously since 1808. Continues to grow ... while the outside of that building is old, the interior is state of the art. While it's turned to a paper mill, it's doesn't really make what we determine as paper. It does engineered composites and filtration media primarily today, still today. I'm very proud, as I said, to have been part of it.

Max: You were the leader of the local business that employed so many folks for decades, and as you said, some of your friends, families that you knew ... what did that experience as President of an important local business teach you?

Frank Cean: What does it teach me? Perseverance. Patience, which I was not blessed with a lot of, but was able to acquire some patience as years went by, I guess, maybe time took care of that. I don't know for sure. I did learn that we have a workforce that bar none, is superior to any of the other locations I managed. The North country employees supported me every day I was the there. The 22 years that I was owner of that company. I'm so proud of what they were able to accomplish. I provided the opportunity, the men and women of that company made it happen.

Max: Now even though you sold a stake in the business, as you mentioned, a few years ago. You're still looking to innovate and generate new business. There's some ventures that you're exploring at least. The question is will you ever officially retire?

Frank Cean: Theoretically I retired but no, I have several ventures which I've been involved in. Everything from a marina to a [inaudible 00:17:36] plant in Utica, to raising exotic animals in Texas, and hopefully I'm going to be constructing a bile digester on a local farm, in the Spring.

Max: So of course, all this happens and such a transformational change for the business. But it doesn't happen without having a spouse by your side to support and help you too at the same time. How important was it or how critical was it having Ann's support and her love and care with you along the way of this professional journey?

Frank Cean: It was critical. Ann has been by my side, now for 51 years. Been very supportive all the way. Hopefully I've been supportive of her as well. But she's carried the load of raising our children, grandchildren, working raising our grandchildren, great grandchildren. Managed our home and while I was away quite a bit, she kept things going and still does that today. I'm a very blessed individual.

Max: On top of that, too Ann, it was for you also working at Niagara Mohawk, and helping to manage the marina too. So how did you juggle all of the moving parts to keep the family going strong and everybody on the straight and arrow?

Ann Cean: You just did. It was just the way of life. When he was going to school, I worked at Marine Midland and through pregnancy and his college, it was just what we did. You just didn't think about it ... I also was a brownie leader for a number of years, then when I moved to Tennessee, I had to give that up, but ...

Max: Did you pick it back up when you moved back home?

Ann Cean: No, I had other things going on.

Max: One of the things that, and being a brownie leader's a good example and segue in to this question, but whether it was through the business, or doing it personally, you always felt it was important to give back to the community where you lived. What were a few of the community organizations or causes that you felt were most important to you?

Frank Cean: I'm with the (Samaritan) hospital foundation and I support that through my efforts in work and also financially. I've continued to support the college, the Frank and Ann Cean aquatic research station on Governor's Island, was a venture that I supported through the college, and again, supporting the North Country. But I think that it's very important that anyone can support the needs of the North Country, which are many, unfortunately we do live in the country, we do live in a part of the state that I don't feel is recognized by our politicians in New York City. Therefore, everything that we can do for ourselves is going to benefit us, the future of the North Country, the future of our children,

grandchildren, and if it's possible I think anyone should involve themselves, either through volunteer work, financial work, anything they can do.

The North Country is blessed with people that have done that. Always continues to amaze me the amount of money that is donated by citizens of the North Country. And I hope that someday I'll be able to do more than I'm doing now. These efforts that I'm involved in, hopefully they'll be profitable and I'll be able to do more.

Max: Ann, is there a way ... Frank makes a good point about being able to help the next generation share those same values so that hopefully they give back the way that really your generation has. I mean there are a number of folks, citizens in this North Country who have demonstrated significant means of giving back to helping others in the communities where we live. How do we inspire younger children or young adults, to think about giving back to their community?

Ann Cean: Well the great-grandchildren, they're at that ... like a sponge, so no matter what they see, that example, they will participate and we go to church on Sunday and we bring the great-grandchildren, and he is the oldest is seven and he is right in there, singing every Sunday and he knows when it comes time for the basket that you donate. His sister is a little younger so she hasn't quite had the influence but it's coming along and the youngest is two. He hasn't stopped running, so ...

Frank Cean: It's by example, in other words.

Ann Cean: Yes.

Max: Well it's a terrific point you make too, Ann, about the church being an instrumental reason for why folks learn to give or how they learn to give. We've had other folks that we've been fortunate enough to interview on the podcast that have actually expressed the same thing. That that was a vehicle or a place where they actually learned some of these same philanthropic values.

You live near Henderson Harbor, you mentioned now, you've made many commitments, helped many others, either through the business and the marina or personal philanthropic endeavors to support Southern Jefferson County. You made a lead contribution to support the six town community fund through the Northern New York community foundation, which supports programs and projects in Southern Jefferson County forever. Why was giving to that particular effort and fund important to you both?

Frank Cean: I think the community foundation and what they've been able to accomplish speaks for itself. I'm proud to be able to be involved with the community foundation, and it's something that I've known about for years but only recently been involved in. It's an organization that has helped us North Country in many, many ways. Our home towns. Again, it's through the Philanthropic efforts of people that maybe not be here anymore ... passed on. Or in many cases, people that are here day to day and they donate from their working lives, things that they're able to do. It's a great organization.

Max: Frank said, in fact it was part of this interview, that one of the words he used was perseverance. We had a previous conversation and I asked if there was a word that fit or described him pretty well. He mentioned the same thing. If I could ask you to share a couple of other words that might describe Frank best, what would you say?

Ann Cean: Very honest. What you see is what you get. He's very much part of the community and if you need help, he's there.

Max: At the same time, you've shared this journey with Ann for more than half a century, what would be a couple of words, Frank, that you would use to describe your wife?

Frank Cean: Dedicated. I'd have to also say perseverance. Not that it's a favorite word, but she's stuck with me for 51 years. It wasn't always easy, I can guarantee you that.

Ann Cean: It's 52.

Max: Ann, did you just confirm it was 52 years now?

It's been an amazing journey for you both. How important, just to kind of wrap up with the interview here, how important is it to educate the future generations? We talked about this a little bit but not just about the importance of Philanthropy but just giving back, whether it's a monetary gift in the offering plate or it's volunteering an hour to help some place else? How important is it to educate young people about supporting your community in any way?

Frank Cean: Without educating the young people, and showing them what can be accomplished, they'll not have the interest in the North Country that we have today. It's imperative that we spend time with them, set examples for them, correct them on the do wrong, and our future depends on them, and you know, my grandfather was concerned about the next generation. My father was concerned about the next generation. I'm concerned about the next generation. But somehow, each generation manages to do better than the previous generation. And I expect that that's true in this case as well.

Max: Well Frank and Ann, thank you for investing in Northern New York the way that you have. If it's a business, if it's personally, or it's part of your family, being able to find innumerable ways to make this community better is something that we, I can say are truly grateful for. Thank you for setting such a good example that the next generation will hopefully be able to achieve and strive for. We appreciate you also just coming on the podcast and just sharing your story with us.

Frank Cean: Thank you.

Ann Cean: Thank you.

Max: Thanks for tuning in to another edition of the Northern New York community podcast. We are grateful to our sponsors, WPBSDT, and the Northern New York community foundation, for making this podcast possible.

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