

All Up In Your Business: Walk-On's, February 2020

- Jay Socol: Welcome to All Up In Your Business. I'm Jay Socol.
- Natalie Ruiz: I'm Natalie Ruiz.
- Jay Socol: And I love what we have lined up for today's show, Natalie. We have Cory and Jenny Davis with us. They are the franchise owners who are bringing the new Walk-On's Bistreaux & Bar to South College Station, or as I like to call it, SoCol.
- Natalie Ruiz: SoCol.
- Jay Socol: We will meet the Davises in just few minutes. But first, Miss Know-It-All, this kind of relates to our talk with the Davises, but I know there are times when you and your office see an opportunity to assist new businesses or developers in finding the very best location for whatever they're wanting to bring to College Station. So, explain that to me.
- Natalie Ruiz: Well, we started a retail recruitment program several years ago, and the foundation of that is really preserving our local sales tax, and working with folks that want to either expand or open a new business in College Station. So, you may have a retailer or a restaurant that wants your help, and wants your most current information, wants to talk to you about new development, where they want to locate, and you'll have others that want you to stay out of their way. They don't... They know their business and they know where they want to locate, and they may or may not need help. This is a really unique situation. And once you visit with Jenny and Cory, you'll see why I really took a shine to both of them. They knew a couple of things.
- Natalie Ruiz: So, they came in and met with me. They brought in their real estate broker and said, "Look, here's what we know." They have a relationship with College Station. They knew they wanted to locate a restaurant in College Station. They knew that they wanted to be a part of the Walk-On's franchise, and bring that product and the people from Walk-On's here in town, but they didn't know where. So, we did. We looked all over town. We talked about, "Should you be in close proximity to Texas A&M? Should you be located a little bit further south?" And so, we talked about that for quite a while, and ended up finding them a location out at Tower Point, where they're currently getting ready to open.
- Jay Socol: All right. So, this is a great way to lead into our guests who you've been talking about, Cory and Jenny Davis, again, who we can thank for bringing

a Walk-On's Bistreaux & Bar to South College Station. Natalie, is there anything else that hasn't already been said about them that you can share to kind of set this up?

Natalie Ruiz: So, what I found really interesting about them was, they both attended Texas A&M but then they moved on and had careers in other fields, and didn't know anything about the restaurant business other than they wanted to open a franchise and come back to College Station to do it. And I admire someone who's willing to take that huge leap of faith and come back to College Station, come back home.

Jay Socol: All right.

Jay Socol: Cory and Jenny Davis, thank you for being here and prepare for Natalie and me to get all up in your business. Okay?

Cory Davis: We're ready.

Jay Socol: Before we learn more about the Walk-On's that you're about to open, I want to know more about each of you. So, I know you both attended Texas A&M, but where are you from? What was your time here like? And then, where has life taken you?

Jenny Davis: Well, we weren't here at the same time. I'm not quite a cougar. I'm more of like an ocelot, a smaller cat, so it's a good thing we weren't here at the same time, because Cory played football for A&M. And we probably wouldn't be married had we gone to school here at the same time. But I graduated in class of '01. I was a journalism major and a minor in Spanish. And long story short, did a career in television news and some PR marketing. And then met this guy, started my own television show on an ABC affiliate in Victoria, Texas called Fur Real TV, it was an animal show. Love shelter animals, love second chances. And so, we met in Victoria, Texas, but I'll let you talk about your time.

Cory Davis: Yeah. And so, I was born and raised in Conroe, Texas, just down the road. So like Jenny said, I was actually a walk-on for the Aggie football team, which correlates with Walk-On's, but it is awesome. So, my cousin, Lowell Hutchens, played football back in the early '90s. And so, when I was in Conroe, I came to one game. I always wanted to go to school here. So, that was a dream of mine. And so I was very fortunate to be able to come in as a walk-on. And actually, Jenny kind of didn't know this until after we got into this either, that I actually turned down scholarships to come to A&M as a walk-on because how much I want to go to school here.

Jenny Davis: So, major schools, not just small schools: Alabama, Louisville, Duke.

Cory Davis: And it was a very unique opportunity. So, I took it and it was amazing. I'd do it all over again. But I was here between 2004, 2008, the football team, majored in agriculture, and we went to three bowl games when I was here. We didn't win any of them, but...[laughter]

Jay Socol: But you went.

Cory Davis: We were having fun. We did beat Texas twice. So, that was-

Jay Socol: That matters. That matters a lot.

Cory Davis: That matters. So, and then after college, gotten into the oil and gas world and been at that 10 years and that's when I ended up meeting Jenny down in Victoria.

Jay Socol: And you didn't just jump from there to here. So, what happened in between?

Cory Davis: No. So, earlier you said it was just like the grand plan. So now, it's not in our grand plan at all. I mean, it might've been in God's grand plan eventually because of the way it happened. But no, Jenny and I never had any aspirations of, "Hey, let's open a restaurant one day."

Jenny Davis: And not open a Walk-On's. We were living in Lafayette, Louisiana, and we would go to the Walk-On's there. And the food is fantastic. Obviously, he's the sportier one of the two of us. But I liked the food, I liked the environment, and he obviously liked the sporty aspect to it. So, we would go there, and his company would do a lot of meetings there, and we would do that, take care of business and then, have fun and eat. And Cory would go home and he would be like, "Jenny, this would kill it in College Station. I mean, what better place than a Walk-On's than the home of the 12th Man? There is no better place in the world for a Walk-On's than College Station, Texas."

Jenny Davis: I'm like, "You're right honey, you're right. If they open it, we'll go." We come in for all the games, and we're local now. But before, we would come in for the games and I said, "You're right. If they opened one there, if they ever left Louisiana," because at that time, they were only in Louisiana. And I was like, "We'll go." Never in a million years did we expect that we would be doing this. It was no direct line to follow.

Jay Socol: So, that...you answered a question that I had and that was, how did College Station emerge as the location for this? Were we on some long list of cities you were considering? But that's not the case.

Jenny Davis: Oh, God, no.

Cory Davis: No, it truly was this town only. I mean-

Jenny Davis: Only.

Cory Davis: It was really that concept of Walk-On's in College Station. That's the reason that we're here today.

Jay Socol: So, it was never any other franchise or brand.

Jenny Davis: No.

Cory Davis: So, what's even better is whenever we got first... So, I guess the reason we even got into it to begin with, after the two years like Jenny explained, of going there for two years, it's kind of a very God-driven story as well, is I meet this farmer in the sugar cane field out in the middle of nowhere in Louisiana, and built a good relationship with him. And I'll just tell you, it's plain to him that we go to Walk-On's, my company and all this, and he's like, "Well, you should go meet my brother because he's the founder of Walk-On's."

Jay Socol: Holy cow.

Jenny Davis: Yeah.

Cory Davis: And so-

Jenny Davis: And we weren't from there to know the name. If you live in that area in Louisiana, you know the name and you can associate, "Hey, Landry, that's Walk-On's." But the founders, Brandon Landry who was a walk-on to the LSU basketball team, and didn't play a lot, he was not the all-star. He was not the one dunking it all the time. But he had the heart. And so, when he was in college, came up with this concept literally on a cocktail napkin on an airplane.

Cory Davis: On the way back from a game.

Jenny Davis: On the way back from a game. And that is how Walk-On's got started. Now granted, it has evolved over the years and the food has gotten

better, and it has evolved, but the same concept that that heart rings true. And I think that's the other neat thing. And Cory referenced that he always wanted to play at A&M for football, and that he passed up scholarships, full-ride scholarships to pay to come to A&M, which I think as a parent, I might've had a little hard time with. But when he was young, your cousin played football for A&M. And there's a picture of him when he is what, a chubby little boy.

Cory Davis: Three years old.

Jenny Davis: He's probably four years old on the sidelines of Kyle Field with his cousin, suited up. And he said, "I'm going to play for A&M one day. And just like that. How often does that happen? And then to follow through and then you've got the Walk-On's, that heart and that concept now tying in all these years later, it's pretty cool.

Cory Davis: Yeah.

Jay Socol: So, you mentioned something about two years. What are some of the milestones in the two-year journey that you kind of referenced? It cannot have been all rainbows and butterflies.

Cory Davis: Technically, well, two years was actually just how long we first got introduced to Walk-On's. We started going there for two years, but actually, since we started us with this process of us actually bringing it to College Station has been three years.

Jay Socol: Okay.

Cory Davis: It's actually been, yeah, a little over three years now. So, after I met Brandon's brother, got on the phone with Brandon and we talked, had a really good conversation. We hit it off immediately with the Walk-On's connection. So, he's like, "Well, hey, we should get with me and the CEO. Let's get together." And so, we met with him, I think December of 2016 in Lafayette at the store-

Jenny Davis: Crazy.

Cory Davis: With Brandon and the CEO. We met for two hours, an amazing meeting, and going into this, we had no idea that they were even already expanding. When we met with them, there was only one open in Lubbock. It just opened. The first one in Texas had just opened in Lubbock, and we had no idea. When we were meeting with them, we

were hoping like, "Hey, maybe they'll be open to expanding, to bringing one to Texas," but.

Jenny Davis: And it was not a sales kind of pitchy meeting. It literally was putting a name with a face. The farmer, the sugar cane farmer brother said, "Hey, y'all should do this." We're like, "Okay, we'll meet." And our story is very, very different from a lot of the franchisees who come in and say, "Look, I have a lot of these current restaurants," that might be a different chain, or "I have a whole line of this fitness" or "I have this." And they go in intentionally because the brand, the concept, and everything about it and the team is phenomenal at the corporate level. But for us, it truly was, I mean, we couldn't have done it if we tried. Truly, God just opened one door after another after another for us. So, that's how we got to that meeting. And I mean, I'll never forget, I literally, I think I'm probably the only person in the world who looked at the founder of Walk-On's, Brandon Landry, and the CFO and said, "We're good doing what we're doing."

Jenny Davis: I think Cory probably wanted to kick my chair. I said, "We're good doing what we're doing. I think we really need to go home and pray on this." And they said, "Well, we really want, it's a two-fold decision." So, I think two months later, two or three months later, we went and met the rest of the team in Baton Rouge at the corporate location. And I mean, met everybody from their marketing team to their architectural team. We just kind of went through and that's when I drank the Kool-Aid and I was on board. Cory was already there.

Cory Davis: Well, yeah, I was, but that sealed the deal though, after meeting the corporate team and knowing the structure they already have in place and the people that are there and the passion they have. I mean, it's just like us here. I mean, they had the same passion for every single location. I mean, Brandon truly has... Once you go there, if you don't like Walk-On's, you will after you go up there and met that team, because they're passionate about what they do and they had the processes in place. It's just up to us to uphold it and do it here.

Natalie Ruiz: So, fast-forward just a little bit when we first met, because we've been working together for a while, two or three years?

Jenny Davis: A hot minute.

Natalie Ruiz: A hot minute. But I just remember and I mentioned this to Jay earlier, y'all's passion and knowing that you wanted to be here, but we had to find you guys the right location and-

Cory Davis: Right.

Natalie Ruiz: Talk about that a little bit. And here in College Station, we see really two markets emerging in terms of retail, close to the university, really more student-driven, more urban, and a more suburban location further south of town. And I know we talked about both of those. What made you decide on South College Station?

Cory Davis: Well, so the original Walk-On's is actually right next to LSU stadium, like right next to Tiger Stadium. So many people in that place, those crazy numbers on game day, because people go there and walk to the game. And so, when we first got into this, we're thinking, "Oh, we've got to get Northgate. We got to be right next to the bar scene." And so... But then as we've evolved, as we kind of learn more about Walk-On's and the direction they were going and the food and everything, it truly is a family-friendly sports place. And so, that's when we realized looking here, we're like, "Well, we don't want to be next to Northgate. We want to be where everybody, where families are going to go. College kids are going to drive anywhere. I mean, I remember that most of college-

Jenny Davis: I did.

Cory Davis: You're going to drive anywhere. You're going to go anywhere. Family, they might not want to drive back. They're not going to want to drive at Northgate to go eat dinner at night. So, we were keeping that in mind when we were looking. And after meeting with you and me talking to other people around town, it was just very clear that all the growth was going south in College Station. So, and all the families are moving south and so, we just knew, let's say, that's where we need to be.

Jenny Davis: And you have that iconic water tower. I know it is simply a water tower in many other markets. You're going, "Really, you're basing your entire location around a water tower?" But here, it's kind of a source of pride. You're like, "I'm next to the College Station water tower." And Cory being from Conroe, when he would drive in, that was always a very iconic, you knew you were getting close to your home away from home when you got to that water tower. For us, when we would come and go from Conroe, it was like, "Oh, the water tower." And so, when we found a location on that south side that was open, it was kind of like, once we saw it the very first time, and actually, it's more a testament to Cory. Props to Cory on this. He just... I knew it was that south side, but Cory knew it was that spot the entire time. And we never really deviated from that, despite a lot of challenges being lobbed our way. So, we are literally like the little engine that could of Walk-On's.

Jay Socol: So, I imagine there are a million things that logistically, legally, and otherwise, you have to take care of a knockout to make this entire thing a reality. Loaded question but Natalie's got thick skin. You can be honest here. How has the development experience been in College Station?

Cory Davis: So, from the city side itself, it's actually been fantastic.

Jenny Davis: Wonderful.

Cory Davis: The people there in the permit section have been fantastic. Everyone we've talked to, Natalie and everyone here has been fantastic, helped us out, and just kind of tell us what's around. And then so, with the city itself, has actually been really great to work with. We did have... So, our ups and downs weren't necessarily in the city side. It was more of from the development side, when we got involved in that.

Jenny Davis: We've learned a lot.

Jay Socol: I imagine.

Cory Davis: And so, it's actually been a phenomenal learning process. I mean, I feel like we've gotten our own temporary bachelor's, I mean, master's in business and development skills.

Natalie Ruiz: School of hard knocks.

Cory Davis: Right. And so, because we truly did and I think the developers had good intentions going into it each time, but we've truly gone through four developers.

Jenny Davis: And four developers, meaning, each developer commits to six months, eight months and you are completely transparent. Hopefully, you can see that. With us is that, we're somewhat open books. So, we would be like, "Look, here's everything. Can you do it?" Each developer would say, "Yes, yes, we can do it." And some of these developers are very well-known, others are not. And literally, the first would and then six months down the road, half a year, oh, right before we're supposed to actually, something's supposed to happen. "Oh, we can't do it." Then you're left going, "You've got to be kidding me." And so, then we go to the next and we'd start over. Eight months later, boom, start over again. And literally, it was just, I mean, it was just that determination of, "No, we know this is in the cards." It is just a matter of how to make it happen. And four, four developers. So, that-

Cory Davis: I think those were over a span of two years that that went down. And so, we originally were planning on opening before football season of 2018.

Jenny Davis: There are koozies circulating somewhere that say-

Jay Socol: Collectibles.

Cory Davis: Yeah. For the LSU game back in, I think this was '17. I think it was in LSU, they had a yell practice at Walk-On's and they passed out koozies, College Station 2018.

Jenny Davis: So, if you have one, that might be a collector's item.

Jay Socol: Missed it by that much. So close.

Jenny Davis: So close but so far.

Jay Socol: So, what will your roles be when you open the doors? Daily, weekly. I mean, what does that look like for the two of you?

Jenny Davis: Well, we are the franchisees, so we have an amazing team and Walk-On's, as Cory said, has all the systems in place. We have six main managers. And our building's over a little over 8,000 square feet. We've got a beer garden, indoor patio. So, we have handpicked our management team. We've almost taken too long to handpick our management team, but we have a rock star group that we trust implicitly that has a lot of wonderful experience, and they have that, the heart that fits the brand. And so, for us, we have moved to College Station. We've made a lot of personal sacrifices because we want to be close to our business. You should not see us flipping burgers or frying shrimp or doing anything like that. But we're going to know how to, so. But yeah, you should see us out and about. We will both be kind of continuing in our own normal lives and then Walk-On's is our baby.

Jay Socol: Got it.

Jenny Davis: Failure's not an option at this point. And I really believe God has blessed us so much to get to this point that, I truly believe that. We look forward to serving the community and it's kind of all in that, God has given you all the tools so that you can then give back and do what you need to do. But yes, and we wouldn't even... And I do have to give a shout-out. After four developers told us no, we finally decided we're going to take things into our own hands and do things a little different. We went to the Small Business Development Center. And Jim Pillans here in town was such a

wonderful, wonderful blessing to us because before, we didn't think we had time on our side. It was like, "Okay, here's the land. You put money down on the land, and you've got all of this going. Then the developer backs out. And then it's sitting there going, 'Is this going to go back into the open? Are you going to lose this spot that you've known?'"

Jenny Davis: So it has been very, there were very high-stress times through this. I'm not going to lie about that. But Jim Pillans came in, we got things going. And then, even that wasn't easy. We met with four banks that told us, "No, we don't do restaurants. Restaurants are too risky." And we're going, "But you haven't, this is Walk-On's. Drew Brees is a co-owner. You've got such great food, you've got this, you would want this here." Four said no. Then finally, two drove to Waco, tasted it, and one called us from the parking lot and were like, "We want it." And then we had two saying, "Please, please." But literally, even the bank side. And when we went with Jim, he had it all teed up and he really was a huge, huge blessing to us. So, it truly was, even though Walk-On's is a corporation, a chain, each franchisee, it is like a small business. And for us, it is our small business. So, yeah-

Jay Socol: That's a good story.

Cory Davis: Yeah. Yeah, and it's literally, this thing has been much bigger than just Jenny and I. I mean, there's truly been so many people that have bought into this and have committed to this and had drank the Kool-Aid like we have, that made this happen. I mean, it really is. I mean, there's hundreds of people. And we could list off a whole ton of people that made this happen. It's really been a group effort.

Jay Socol: How has it been moving back to Aggieland? Is it surreal? Is it comfortable? Is it alarming? And how much it's grown even since-

Cory Davis: I love it.

Jay Socol: You guys were here.

Cory Davis: I absolutely love it. I mean-

Jay Socol: Yeah?

Cory Davis: Well, and it's unique on that south side of town too. Just because we moved on south side and, I mean, it's so different now than it was when we were here.

Jenny Davis: It was pasture when I was here.

Cory Davis: It was pasture up there. And so, you actually do get a little bit of that disconnect from A&M being out there. So, you kind of don't get the bigger, like at the campus every single day. But we love this community. I mean, we're excited on jumping in and getting involved in everything. I mean-

Jenny Davis: Literally-

Cory Davis: Planting our roots and getting in.

Jenny Davis: I walk outside and it's like, "College Station air." It just feels so good. I mean, it just feels so good. I will say, here's something that's... You said you wanted it all. So, this might get me into trouble and I hope not. But the one thing that has taken me most by surprise after living here as a student and coming back, is that you meet people and everybody wants to know where you live. It blows my mind.

Natalie Ruiz: Really?

Jenny Davis: I can't tell you. Like you go to a chamber event, literally every other person, "Where do you live?" And you're like, "Oh, on the south side." Because we came from the Spring-Woodlands area and it's a great area, but you don't tell people where you live. So literally, I swear, it just happens and they want to know the neighborhood or they want to know the street. And I'm going-

Jay Socol: Creepers?

Jenny Davis: You know? But I think it's also, once I kind of got over the shock of it, it just kind of shows the testament of what a close-knit community College Station is. We went to a chamber event and we couldn't believe, we had to park in the ditch. I mean, hundreds of cars, and there's just something you don't see in other markets, and it feels really, really good. It's kind of a back to the basics, if you will. It's where you really get to know people, and that's really refreshing.

Jay Socol: Okay, so tell us, when do you expect to open the doors and what happens between now and then?

Jenny Davis: We have an exciting announcement.

Jay Socol: Let's hear it.

Jenny Davis: We are opening, our grand opening is March 2nd. It's a Monday, so we are less than a month out, and we are hiring right now. We are hiring right now and all positions.

Cory Davis: All positions. We already hired, I think, over 115 staff so far. So, all members still need to be filled, or all positions still need to be filled. But we're looking to hire over 200 people right off the bat. And so, we're already over halfway. Our management team's done a great job so far, and there's people pouring in left and right but so, there's a lot of excitement.

Jenny Davis: Literally, people are coming in just 9:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday, to the restaurant. So, it's also a good way to get a sneak peek.

Natalie Ruiz: I like it.

Jenny Davis: Just on the down-low. But yes, and then we will be doing a soft opening before, that weekend before, which is the last weekend in February. That is invite-only, in which we will be doing... Our food will be free and you'll be able to order off the menu. And the food's free and all alcohol sales will go to a charity of our choice. So, that's really exciting. And if you're wondering, "How do I get in on this free stuff? How do I get in on the treasure and the good stuff?" Go to our Facebook page. It's Walk-On's College Station. You could just search it, Walk-On's College Station, the page, and we'll be doing a lot of contests and some giveaways there for tickets to those things.

Jay Socol: That's phenomenal. Well, we're so glad you're back in the community, and that you're bringing us something wonderful in addition to that, and that you're investing here with us and you're tolerating Natalie.

Jenny Davis: We love Natalie.

Natalie Ruiz: It's a full-time job.

Jay Socol: It's all good.

Jenny Davis: Well, talk about blessings. Natalie, you have been such a blessing. And from the first time I met you and maybe this is your secret weapon that you make everybody feel like your best friend. I was just like, "I just love this lady."

Natalie Ruiz: Oh, good.

Jenny Davis: Yeah, you're a definite asset. College Station's lucky to have you.

Natalie Ruiz: Thank you.

Jay Socol: Well, Cory and Jenny, thank you for being here and thanks for letting us get all up in your business.

Cory Davis: Absolutely.

Natalie Ruiz: Welcome home.

Cory Davis: Thank you.

Jenny Davis: Thank you.

Jay Socol: Okay, Natalie, this is where you leave us once again with something really good, some kind of reward for sticking with this show until the very end. So, what do you got?

Natalie Ruiz: Well, I think one of our very first podcasts that you roped me in, I mean, I'm sorry, we talked about doing it together, but when we talked about South College Station at that time, the complaints that we were getting was, "We've got to have something out here other than chicken, right?" We had the Chick-fil-As, we had the Zaxby's, we had very limited offerings when it came to fresh food other than fried chicken.

Jay Socol: Right.

Natalie Ruiz: And so, we've really worked hard with other retailers, other developers in that area to bring some new concepts to South College Station. Walk-On's is a big one, a big win for us. TaD's is another one that's under construction. They had halted construction a few months back. They had an ownership partnership issue that they needed to resolve and so they halted construction, dealt with that particular issue. Now they're back under construction. But we're also seeing other new restaurants. Costa Vida is a new one that's under construction on Arrington Road. That'll be part of a two-story. The offices on the second floor, some retail and restaurant offerings on the first. So, it's nice to look back a few years and to see how far we've come in such a short period of time.

Jay Socol: That's great news. That's a good, you did a good job this time.

Natalie Ruiz: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Jay Socol:

You're so welcome. So, All Up In Your Business was written and produced by absolutely no one, as you can tell. You can air your grievances as always toward Natalie Ruiz at nruiz@cstx.gov. And of course, send your questions, your show suggestions, your effusive praise to me jsocol@cstx.gov. All Up In Your Business is available on Apple Podcasts and Google Play and Spotify, Stitcher, Podbean, and YouTube. Please rate and review if you have an extra minute or two. That'd be really great. Find out how easy it is to do business right here in College Station, Texas by visiting grow.cstx.gov and please shop local. Thanks, Nat.

Natalie Ruiz:

Thank you.