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Mike Paton:

Hello, everybody. This is Mike Paton with the EOS Leader Podcast, and today I have the great pleasure of speaking with Alethea Austin, co-founder and CEO of Achieve Wellness Spa, headquartered in Fort McMurray, way north in Alberta, Canada. Her mission and her company's goal is to help everyone achieve a healthier lifestyle. Alethea and her husband founded the business in 2009. And in that brief time since then, she's had to lead her company through more tragedy than any leader should have to bear. Nonetheless, Achieve Wellness Spas have won numerous industry awards, have attracted attention and mentorship from some of Canada's leading entrepreneurs, and have recently begun offering franchising opportunities. My hope is that Alethea can not only help us become better leaders, she can help us all as her company tagline urges live better. Alethea, it's great to have you on the show, thanks for being here.

Alethea Austin:

Thank you so much for having me, Mike.

Mike Paton:

So when you're describing your entrepreneurial journey to somebody that's never met you before, where do you start and how does the story go? Why don't you just bring us up to speed?

Alethea Austin:

Sure, so I usually start at the beginning of when we dreamt up this plan to start our own business. My husband and I were on our honeymoon. We were pregnant with our first son and we were both successful in our careers, but we were working for the man, so to speak, and we wanted to create something that was ours, that we could really grow and be together and work together and support our family together. So my background is a physical therapist, and so I knew it had to have something to do with wellness and rehab. And so then we just combined it and decided that we wanted to create this wellness luxurious wellness spa that was better than what had been on the market before. So like I said, I feel like my son was the inspiration. He was the key to setting off what do we want to do?

What big change we want to make in our life? And we spent three years planning and developing our business plan and finding the right location. And then a few short months before we planned on opening, our son passed away in a tragic accident. So we were left with we've already signed the lease, can we do this, do we want to move forward? And we had some difficult conversations, obviously losing a son is the most tragic thing a parent can go through, but we used that tragedy to fuel our passion, to grow the business in his name and in his legacy. So I think that that is something that I'm really passionate about and have been for many years as to why I keep going. He's my why.

We've been through a forest fire that shut our community down for a couple months. We've navigated through having to close down because of a flood. And then we're in our third shutdown right now due to the pandemic because it's still pretty bad here in Canada. So we've navigated a lot. It's been tough, but that's what started it and that's what keeps me going and makes me get up every morning is my passion to grow it in his legacy.

Mike Paton:

Man, thank you for sharing that story. What was it about working for the man that you wanted to change?

Alethea Austin:

I would say one of my very first memories as a child was working in my grandparent's laundry mat and figuring out how to count out change. So I think that came from an entrepreneurial background. So even if I had a lot of flexibility in my workspace, it still wasn't mine. And at the end of the day, that's what I wanted. I wanted something that was mine, that I could grow in the way that I thought was best.

Mike Paton:

That's awesome. So you and your husband hatched this idea on your honeymoon? I know some of our listeners are hearing that and thinking that sounds like the least romantic honeymoon ever.

Alethea Austin:

That's what fired my husband and I up.

Mike Paton:

And we don't need to go into additional detail about that, but if you want to, it is a PG rated podcast. So we're all good. Goodness. So as I understand it, when you first started your Achieve Wellness Spa, you looked at other opportunities first. This three year period of figuring out how you were going to do this. You didn't see anything on the market that met the standards you and your husband had talked about when you hatch this idea, correct?

Alethea Austin:

That's correct. There was nothing like it. Since then a few things similar have popped up, but at the time there was nothing. Because we were looking at, it'd be nice to go into a franchise model, something that's already set up and developed and we can just carry on with the model. But truly there was nothing out there. So we created our own.

Mike Paton:

What was lacking or what are the services or the style or the approach that you took that was different and better in your mind? Help the listener understand that.

Alethea Austin:

More one-on-one care for the client. It wasn't just about numbers, get them in, get them out, bill their insurance, let's go and just rolling people through like cattle so to speak. That model is not for me. I wanted to create a place where people could truly feel luxury and wellness and one-on-one care from their service provider. So we have individualized rooms and dedicated time. So in many clinics, physios will jump from patient to patient. There's no jumping. It's dedicated one-on-one time with the client.

Mike Paton:

Awesome, awesome. And how long did you operate one facility before you opened your second company owned location?

Alethea Austin:

So we opened our first one in 2014 and then we opened our second one in 2018. After we got that one up and running, I said to my husband, "Okay, I think I'm running to franchise." He's like, "Are you crazy?" And I put out into the universe what it would need to take. Because who are Tom and Alethea from Fort McMurray, Canada? I'm like, "We need a strategic business partner." So I reached out to Arlene Dickinson's team. She's part of Dragon's Den, which is like the Shark Tank in the US where are you going? Yeah, so I didn't have to pitch on the show, but I reached out to the team to see if they're interested in our business model and they were, and so then we started working with her. We signed our first franchise deal in January of 2020, and then the pandemic. So since then, we still managed to gain some traction. It's been slower than anticipated, but we're still getting traction. So we open our first franchise next week, actually, another for the fall, and two more scheduled for early next year.

Mike Paton:

What's the geographic footprint? All Alberta? Are you expanding across Canada? What's the plan?

Alethea Austin:

Western Canada, yeah.

Mike Paton:

Got it.

Alethea Austin:

Manitoba to BC is our plan for now.

Mike Paton:

Got it. So let's change subjects from the business to leadership in general, if we can. I want you to go back to your earliest days and maybe it was your grandparents as entrepreneurs, but who's the first leader you remember looking at and saying, "That's what leadership is or isn't," in your life?

Alethea Austin:

Preparing for this I thought a lot about that because I'm like, I don't know that I had that many great influential leaders in my life and I just kind of figured it out the messy way. I grew up in a small farming community and I think that that was very integral in teaching me work ethic. Farmers work hard. And that instilled a good base for me. I knew I never wanted to be a farmer or marry a farmer I knew there was bigger and better things for me personally. And so I hit the books hard I studied and I was preparing to do my own career.

I had a few good teachers were helpful in my life. And my aunt and uncle owned a mining company in Ontario. And from the age of 13, I started spending the summers there, babysitting, eventually working at their front desk as a receptionist, things like that. And so that was interesting because it was working with family who I loved and it was a good relationship and he was a strong leader. He was stern. He made sure I was there on time, things like that. So I would say it was my uncle and aunt that were the first good leaders. And then after that I had many bad leaders and I learned a lot about what not to do.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, so let's play a little word association game. Starting with the good leaders that have influenced the way you've developed. Give me three or four characteristics or tendencies you hope to emulate when you're leading and managing people.

Alethea Austin:

Passionate for what they do, dedicated, and driven, driven for constant growth.

Mike Paton:

When you are looking for a new employee, are you trying to hire for those natural tendencies or are you feeling like you can infuse that and people who may not possess them?

Alethea Austin:

No, I am looking for those natural core values that... I use top grading when I'm doing interviews. So we go right back to high school. Tell me about your high school, who are you? Because that's when your personality is forming is in those critical years. And I don't believe people can change that easily. They can try to fit into your mold for a little while, but eventually their color is showing. So I need people that emulate the same things as I.

Mike Paton:

So Alethea, if you go back to high school when you're interviewing, I'm going to take apply for a job at Achieve Wellness Spa off the list, because you would not hire the high school version of me. If you have any sense at all.

Alethea Austin:

Well we can also see how you grew after that. What are your core values?

Mike Paton:

Yeah, well the people who know me best may suggest that you should just stop at the high school years. That's good enough. Now give me a couple tendencies, characteristics, attributes, flaws of the leaders and managers you don't want to be like

Alethea Austin:

That they're not honest, that they don't lead by example and that they are unable to delegate, they're unable to trust their team, and they're focused on themselves and the business and the dollars, not the people.

Mike Paton:

Let's talk about that word trust for a little longer. So what are some of the behaviors you see in managers or leaders or supervisors or team leaders or even independent contributors that have done enough in their career that they feel like they're always right? What are they doing that erode trust around them?

Alethea Austin:

They're not listening. They don't care about other people's opinions and they don't make people feel heard or respected or that their opinion matters.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, so that willingness to acknowledge everyone's gift and allow them to contribute feels really important to you as a leader.

Alethea Austin:

Absolutely, my team knows they can always speak to me. I don't always listen, I'll be honest. I'm sometimes arrogant and that's my way, but it has to be a discussion. I have to understand their point of view and why, and then we can have a discussion of what's best moving forward.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, so we talked a little bit about the tragedy of your son and the difficult circumstances around the forest fire. Here we are attempting to come out of a global pandemic. What are the characteristics or tendencies you rely on most when you're in pain and when you're scared and frustrated as a leader? How do you get through those moments as the kind of leader you want to be?

Alethea Austin:

I'll be honest that this one, because it lasted so long, the pandemic has been the hardest thing for me to lead through, trying to stay motivated and keep everybody else motivated and calm and moving in the right direction when there's fears and there's financial lulls and things like that, it's been tough. And prior to the pandemic, I was on a plane every week, I was jet setting around, I was doing business deals, I was building relationships. And then all of a sudden, nothing for such a long period of time, it really threw me off my game because I'm a doer, I'm a visionary and I'm a doer. And when you sit me down and say I can't do anything, I don't know what to do. So it took a lot of willpower to start putting one foot in front of the other again and lead my team out of it. And we're still leading the team out of it, but it's about showing up. It's been tough, but I show up because this is my baby, who else is going to do it if I don't show up?

Mike Paton:

Yeah, and there is a future out there in which operating as whatever normal is, is going to happen. And if you're not ready for that future, it was all for not, right?

Alethea Austin:

Absolutely, so I just have to be creative and find other ways for me to stay busy. So I read 60 books a year. I took a Yale, a Harvard, and an MIT course online over this past year because... And all on leadership because I need to grow. I need to stay motivated. I need to do. I can't just sit on the beat.

Mike Paton:

Wow, yeah, for the record, I feel like I need to work quite a bit harder just talking to you for 10 minutes. I'm super motivated here. So thank you for doing that for me. I don't know that they'd allow me in an MIT course, just so we're clear. Let's talk about living better and where that comes from. I love the mission of the organization. Why do you feel so passionate about that and how do you think helping people live better is going to change the world?

Alethea Austin:

I'm somewhat of a spiritual being, I believe in karma and I believe in doing good. And I've always been, I feel like, on my own wellness journey. Everybody's on a journey. So I was on my own wellness journey. It's something that I was passionate about. It happened from a car injury that I got passionate about helping others. So I think every tragedy is an opportunity. So being severely hurt in a car injury led me to become a physical therapist, which led me to my first job where I met my husband, which led me to all these different things, I think they lead you in the path that you're meant to be and helping others is really rewarding to me.

And then when I got out of the hands-on, so as soon as we opened up the business, I became a full-time leader, no longer treating clients or patients, helping others turn into growing other leaders. And that is what I became passionate about. And even if they're not going to stay with the company, I felt good about helping these people on their journey. And I've had them come back to me many years later and said that I inspired them to do great things. And that's just the best feeling.

Mike Paton:

What impact the business's journey and your evolution as a leader had on your relationships at home?

Alethea Austin:

I think I am raising two of the strongest fiercest little girls that are going to be something someday.

Mike Paton:

That's awesome. How old now?

Alethea Austin:

Six and nine.

Mike Paton:

I can only imagine. I can only imagine. Do you see parallels and differences between growing as a parent and growing as a leader?

Alethea Austin:

I have more patience as a parent, so maybe it's taught me more patience. Definitely taught me more negotiation skills. [crosstalk 00:15:34].

Mike Paton:

Yeah, I'm a push over with the kids, that's for sure. That is for sure. Oh my goodness. If you had to point to one massive success in your business life, what is it? What'd you do? Do you feel like you were responsible for it, or you just fell backwards out of a boat and hit water? What'd you learn? What are you going to try and do over and over again?

Alethea Austin:

I'm a relationship builder, like I said, and I'm active in volunteering. So I sit on a lot of boards and I surround myself with other great minds. I always said if I'm the smartest person in the room, I need a new room because I want to be growing and learning from other people. And I give a lot of my time

back, like I said to different boards. So that has helped open up doors for me and the business. We won top 25 spas in Canada two times, simply from the relationships that I built to the people in the industry even knew we existed. And then, like I said, when I decided to franchise, I thought about it and I researched it and I did what I needed to learn. And then I figured out we needed a strategic partner and I went out and sought one. So I don't think that I've just fallen into luck anytime I've worked hard for it. And I've been strategic and I'm constantly learning when I don't know to move to the next step.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, those are a couple of words that are resonating with me as I am engaged in this conversation with you, unbelievable courage, an unquenchable thirst for learning, two really important ingredients that obviously play a powerful role in your life. And then the third is just spirituality and really feeling your way and trusting that gut and asking for help. And that's really impressive. Really impressive. If you had to change one thing about yourself as a leader that you know would make you better, what's that one thing?

Alethea Austin:

If I could be a morning person. Being a mom has taken a lot of my umph.

Mike Paton:

That's why I'm very grateful for caffeine. Very grateful.

Alethea Austin:

Yeah, I tried that 5:00 AM club for a little while. It turned into the 7:00 AM club. That's the best I can do.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, I'm with you. I'm with you. Yeah, the morning routine when it's got to start at 4:30 is pretty rough. And your kids have their own clock. Wait until they get to be older and their clock has you up later and later and later. So if your employees were talking to friends about why they like working for you, what are the characteristics or attributes they'd call out?

Alethea Austin:

Well actually I have asked them because it was part of one of my Yale courses to get feedback on my leadership. So I actually do know the answer to this, and I'm not just making it up. They love my communication style and my dedication to growth of them and myself. And then I lead by example, I'm not too high and mighty to go and flip some laundry when I'm at the spa or to jump on the front desk and help hang up jackets, I'll do what needs to be done.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, awesome. And then as you contemplate this transition from two company owned locations to a franchising organization is going to involve a lot of change in the nature of the organization, your roles. Walk us through how you expect this is going to play out over the next few years so we get a sense of your journey in the future.

Alethea Austin:

Well, one of my managers, Jacqueline, I wish I could clone her a million times. She's fantastic. She worked for me for the last five years. She went away and came back. She said, "I can't work for anybody else." I'm like, "Thank you, I'll keep you forever. So that's fine." So she is now going to be the head of the franchise field consulting. So she'll be doing the franchise training and the field site checks and I'll be overseeing her and other trainers. And so I have worked my way out of being the director of the spa, the ops managers, and the general managers, they handle that.

I'm probably in the spa for an hour and a half a week just to do a few things that I haven't yet delegated out. And that's the way I wanted it. I'm ready for my next challenge. And that's the franchise side of things. Growing out the different locations across Western Canada, helping those entrepreneurs become successful business owners, it just brings me so much excitement and passion. And so I feel like the excitement and passion and running our core companies, we've done it so well, I don't need to be there. I can delegate this out and move on to something I'm more passionate about, which is helping people grow businesses now.

Mike Paton:

Prediction for where you'll be in 2030 in terms of number of locations?

Alethea Austin:

The big, hairy, audacious goal is to have 60 locations.

Mike Paton:

Wow, amazing. And are you full-time in the visionary seat when that happens?

Alethea Austin:

Absolutely, I'm really trying to be full-time in the visionary seat in the next two years, to be honest. Right now I'm visionary and integrator, but I'm hopeful that I can move my way into straight visionary in the next two years.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, I'm seeing some things in you that I could see you being a great integrator to, but I'm guessing that your natural gifts fall into the visionary seat and you'll be living a better life yourself when you're able to spend all your time there. So is there any big mistake or do over you wish you had as you look back on the spas journey?

Alethea Austin:

Big mistake at first was hiring just anybody who wanted a job because we live in a bit of a remote place and it's hard to bring people here for employment. So we just recruit all across Canada. Okay, you have your RMT, your massage therapy, yeah, just come. Not doing proper interviews. So we had such a mish-mash of people that didn't fit a culture, the culture wasn't clear. I wish I didn't do that. I'd rather have fewer people that are the right people than how this huge team of people that are fighting and caddy and it just doesn't work.

Mike Paton:

I'm with you. Now I want to talk about this because I think the number one problem my clients all have, all the leaders I'm talking to have in common right now is it is darn hard to find world-class talent. And

once you get them to keep them. And so you are in a very remote part of the world, you have very specialized hiring needs. How have you cracked that nut and attracted and retained some of the great people that you've got?

Alethea Austin:

We're very clear up front about what our core values are. We put them right on the ads, wherever we're advertising. And the fact that we've built such a quality tight run ship and that we've been recognized through leading spas of Canada and through different things as a top spa, people are drawn to that. They're drawn to the quality, they're drawn to our mission and our vision and our core values. And if they're not, then they're not the right people.

Mike Paton:

Nice. And then from a retention standpoint, what is it that keeps them engaged?

Alethea Austin:

I pay a lot. Every quarter, we do something fun with the team as a team appreciation and team building. We're just always like a go, go, go. If anybody gets a positive review, it gets stuck up on a green sheet. We're always just having each other's back and we pay for extra education per year so that people can always be growing within their field.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, I always joke there's nothing wrong with competitive wages, but if you read Daniel Pink's Drive, it really is the ability to make a difference, the autonomy to make your own decisions, the meaning associated with the work that people are doing. And it sounds like you're really clued into that part of it as well as compensating fairly or well, that combination is pretty solid. And then if Jacqueline's story is anything worth repeating over and over again, the fact that she can't work for anybody but you is something I hope the listeners heard. Lead in a way that your people can't imagine not working with or for you, and it'll be much harder for them to accept opportunities outside the organization. And if they do, they may come back. So really good stuff. So if I asked you to go back to pre your honeymoon, when you're dreaming up this whole thing and give yourself one piece of advice before you launched your career as an entrepreneur and business leader, what would that piece of advice be?

Alethea Austin:

It would be you're on the right path. Do it. It's scary. It's very scary, but that's where the magic happens.

Mike Paton:

Yeah, awesome. Thank you. Alethea, this has been a really fabulous conversation. I'm so grateful that you took the time to share your wealth of knowledge and your real world experiences with the listener. Where can they learn more about you and your organization?

Alethea Austin:

I would say our website's the best place. So www.achievethebest.com.

Mike Paton:

This transcript was exported on Jun 18, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Yeah, perfect. And I'll be watching with great curiosity and as a passionate fan, as you grow and cheering for 60 locations way sooner than the due date.

Alethea Austin:

I appreciate that. Thank you so much.

Mike Paton:

My pleasure. This has been Mike Paton with the EOS Leader Podcast. I hope you enjoyed today's conversation as much as I did. It's all about making ourselves the best leader we can be every single day. Thank you for joining. If you're interested in applying what you've learned today in your own business, the five books and the traction library can be helpful resources on your journey. You can learn more about those five books and actually order them at a deep discount by visiting eosworldwide.com.