

Kara Snyder 0:00

Hello and welcome to the podcast a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Cody Whitehead. Cody is an alum of the Department of Family Consumer Sciences and currently serves as a franchisee manager and inspire brands in charge of franchise sales for Jimmy, John's and Sonic. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Cody Whitehead 0:31

Thanks Kara. Thanks for having me.

Kara Snyder 0:34

So let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose to Illinois State?

Cody Whitehead 0:38

Illinois State caught my eye from the beginning, I did go to a different university to start with. So I went to North Central College and Naperville my first year, I quickly found out that wasn't for me. And when I say it caught my eyes. So I had a bunch of friends going there. And I thought, let's give it a shot. And super happy I did.

Kara Snyder 0:56

And I see that you're an alum of the food and beverage management program. Tell me how you picked your major because that's a relatively new program on campus.

Cody Whitehead 1:06

Yeah, absolutely. Well, first, I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I started off in journalism, then went to elementary education. And then at that point, it was kind of an eye opening moment, it was probably sophomore second semester year where I was unsure if I wanted to continue, you know, with a bachelor degree. And then I stumbled upon nutrition. And I've always been interested in health and wellness. I used to be overweight as a young kid lost that throughout high school. So just had a lot of interest in that. And I was from a small town, I didn't really realize you could do something with food or nutrition. So I was in the dietetics program to start got accepted. I was ecstatic. And then right around my junior year, there is a transition from allowing a dietetics program. And at that time, it was called the food and nutrition management. I think the name has changed since then. But I think I was the first student who actually transitioned from there. I remember not really wanting to work in a hospital. And it felt like a lot of dietetics went that way, along with the additional education and cost that was associated with that. I ended up taking the jump and trying something new and went into that.

Kara Snyder 2:22

So how did you know that you had found your fit? You know, you tried a few different things ended up in Turner Hall. What clicked for you once you found that major?

Cody Whitehead 2:32

I never performed well in high school with grades. And instantly I was drawn into nutrition and restaurant experience. I started performing well. I enjoyed going to class. And that wasn't always the case. And it felt like something that was attainable. And a long term relationship. Whether it's a major or you know, after school, I saw myself in that field. So it kind of just clicked at one point.

Kara Snyder 3:01

And tell our listeners, how were you involved on campus while you were here. What did you do outside of the classroom?

Cody Whitehead 3:07

I tried a couple of different things. I was in a fraternity for about a year, I was a part of the food nutrition club, I think that was founded around the time that I was in school, maybe 2014. It was founded or maybe just before that, but it was fairly new. So got involved with that. I did some volunteering with local food banks. Quite a few of my high school friends went there, and they ended up being my roommates. So that's always fun when you're able to keep childhood friendships going. I went to kindergarten with some of the guys that I ended up living with. So get involved in those ways.

Kara Snyder 3:43

Oh, that's very cool. Especially I bet to be able to compare those pictures side by side. That's really special. Absolutely. What do you miss the most about your time on campus?

Cody Whitehead 3:55

I would say the social interactions. Once you get into the life after college, you don't have as many opportunities to meet people. Everything was just so condensed and yes, it was spread out at times. But it was just a fun place to be there was always something going on whether it was a football game basketball intermurals if you want to go to the pub, it was very dynamic place to be and I enjoyed it a lot.

Kara Snyder 4:18

So as you wrapped up your time on campus, you start this initial job search. Tell us what was that process like for you? And then where did you end up with your entry level position?

Cody Whitehead 4:28

Yeah, so I was extremely blessed with my entry level position. I'll go back a little bit. For the food nutrition management major. You had two internships somewhere, I think dietetics it was the same but you had to do a half semester of internship while I was working at the catering department at Illinois State which led into working with the executive chef there. That gave me a lot of insight on admin responsibilities and marketing food costs working. You know how management of a restaurant goes in with a dietician on staff, the Inside out that that ultimately led to me knowing I wanted to work in restaurants. So I had two things I wanted to do. It was work with restaurants and travel, I went to the ISU career fair, I didn't really know what I was

going to get out of it. And honestly, it was a last minute decision that I actually went, I almost backed out. And then I'm not even sure who I was talking to. But somebody convinced me to go, this was probably eight months prior to graduating. So I went to it. And Jimmy John's was there. And that was my first job. I talked to the director of marketing, went in for a group interview, went in for another interview. And then finally heard back about five months before graduation, that I had a job offer signed the offer letter. So for about six months prior to graduation, I knew what I was going to be doing. And it checked both of my boxes off, which was traveling and working my way up in a restaurant company.

Kara Snyder 5:59

You must have felt like you won the lottery to have a full time job six months before graduation, what a load off.

Cody Whitehead 6:06

Exactly, you can have said that better. And to go into a little bit of detail of what that job was. I mentioned traveling, but it was perfect. I didn't have to pay rent. I was traveling Monday through Saturday, essentially, they paid my mileage, I got a per diem, I was on the road for about a year and a half in that position. And then I was able to scale up into a management role where I had about 25 team members that was doing what I previously did report to me. So pretty quick growth, I was able to pay off my student loans and about a year, which was phenomenal. And it really led to I guess where I am today.

Kara Snyder 6:45

So tell me about that leadership opportunity that you attained relatively early in your career responsible for 25 other individuals? What kinds of traits did you look for people in the hiring process? When you added people to your team? What were you looking for them to bring to the table?

Cody Whitehead 7:01

Well, first you had to be adaptable, and trustworthy, were probably the two that I looked for the most. You're an employee that's out on the road, essentially, on your own acting on your own, where I would drop in though someone could be in Seattle, and I might show up unexpectedly. But with 25 people, you're doing that periodically, right? So those were the two traits that I looked for the most because if I couldn't trust someone to actually be working, I could trust them for the moments I was there, right. But the other six weeks until I get back with them might not happen.

Kara Snyder 7:36

That's a great point and something good for our listeners to remember or be thinking about that adaptability, that trustworthiness, how to convey that in an interview. So thank you for that. So how did you get from that management role to your current position?

Cody Whitehead 7:51

So it's kind of a long story. So went from a marketing specialist to a manager, marketing specialist was about a year and a half. And then I was a manager for about a year and a half. We restructured our company at that point. The previous department that I was on was no longer it changed into it was called the catering and community manager. So a CCM role and I was a team lead. Prior to that we, we didn't have store accounts, I was franchisee based. So transferring to that role. We basically broke the region down into 12 sections. I had the southern half it was kind of Tennessee, the Carolinas, Kentucky, part of Alabama, part of Georgia, that area, so there's about 300 stores down there that I was responsible for with like partnerships and catering. Catering is a large order. So like GAAP headquarters was one that we got a good order from. So we basically went from not having any specific responsibility to structuring it where you were working with specific stores that took off did that for about a year and a half. And then we actually got acquired by inspire brands, which is who I'm with now, during that time, wasn't sure exactly what was going to happen. So in the meantime, I was volunteering with the fire department. They had a local branch that had an opening. So I thought I'd take a shot at a full time firefighter role. So I did that for about a year, actually a little over a year. I loved every second of it. Great guys great job, and wanted to move back closer to family in Illinois. So that was down in Nashville, Tennessee, reached out to the COO CIO, the Chief Operating Officer of Jimmy John's, I had a great relationship when I left. They totally understood that that was, you know, a dream of mine to give it a shot at the fire department. So I reached out to her and she had an opening as an admin assistant. So at that point, I was able to develop my career in a different way. So I hadn't marketing, I had operations experience, I had management experience, I was able to give firefighting a shot. And I now I started working on projects or budgets, seeing some of the responsibilities in the office that they were doing. I did that for about another year and a half, and ultimately led me to the franchising world. So specifically sales now, there's a team of about five of us that oversee the Jimmy John's and Sonic concept. But yeah, there's about 10 total for all of our brands or inspire I won't go into on this question, but inspira has multiple concepts to it. But ultimately, we oversee Jimmy John's, and that's what led me to where I am today.

Kara Snyder 10:31

As you know, we have listeners from all across the college and the university. If you had to describe your current role to somebody outside of your industry, what would you say?

Cody Whitehead 10:42

I sell Jimmy John's stores to local members of your community.

Kara Snyder 10:47

That's great. I love it to St. Thank

Cody Whitehead 10:50

you. And I help small business owners and some large business owners.

Kara Snyder 10:55

That's awesome. What is your favorite part of your job?

Cody Whitehead 11:00

I'm glad you asked that question exactly that I enjoy working with the franchisees a lot, you're able to build relationships, you're able to help them grow a business, they might have the entrepreneur skills, but they just don't know what they want to do, or what concept they want until they maybe stumble upon restaurants or Jimmy John's right. And Jimmy John's doesn't necessarily need any experience to be able to open one. It's one of the few concepts that's so simple, that we're able to you know, train anybody, essentially. And that's my favorite part is just being able to work with franchisees build that relationship and ultimately help someone create their own business.

Kara Snyder 11:38

On the flip side, I have to ask, what's the most challenging thing about your job?

Cody Whitehead 11:43

It's boring, but staying organized, I would say ultimately, but a little bit more context on that, I guess, ultimately would be making everyone happy. Multiple franchisees want to expand in the same area, that's always a tough conversation to have. If they're looking at, say the same town, you kind of have to go through some analysis and figure out who you're going to grow with.

Kara Snyder 12:06

While making everyone happy is an impossible task, I think in any industry. So that's a great answer. All right, Cody, we are going to finish with a speed round so our listeners get to know you just that much better go with your first instinct on these questions. The first thing I have to ask you is what is your favorite Jimmy John's sandwich?

Cody Whitehead 12:25

Oh, man, I I have eaten so many sandwiches at this point that you to answer that because they're all my favorite. I think at each point in my life, I've had a different favorite Jimmy John's sandwich. The one that tends to stay at the top is the number nine Italian nightclub that has capicola salami, provolone, cheese, Mayo, onions, Basil, basil, oregano sauce and onion on it. And I like to add hot peppers to it.

Kara Snyder 12:56

Nice. What's your favorite season?

Cody Whitehead 12:59

favorite season is right now. All the 50 to 65 degree weather is beautiful, crisp air. The leaves fall and Halloween. I've always loved it always will and there's no better place for fall than the Midwest.

Kara Snyder 13:14

Well, you are living your best life right now. That's for sure. What are you reading or listening to right now anything you can recommend to us.

Cody Whitehead 13:24

I don't really read a lot of books. I do love listening to podcasts. I'm more of a mystery murder type person with podcasts. However, I do like some history, like intellectual history stuff as well. So if I had a suggest one for anyone out there, it would be radio rental. I'm also a fan of the office, which the host for that is Rainn Wilson are also known as Dwight Schrute. So highly suggest that one, there's a little bit of humor in it. It's all real life stories, whether it's impossible explanations, or anything along those lines, highly suggest it.

Kara Snyder 14:02

Nice. What's your favorite board game?

Cody Whitehead 14:07

Favorite board game by far is monopoly. Family and friends don't enjoy playing with me. They ended up teaming up against me. But I do think that that might have led me to the franchising world because you're buying locations right and you're able to charge your rent or a sales on you know, sandwiches or or rent in this case in the game. So I would say it's applicable to what I do on a daily basis.

Kara Snyder 14:34

I was gonna say if I had to pick a favorite board game for you, that would have been top of mind so that tracks.

Cody Whitehead 14:40

Yes, right Kara.

Kara Snyder 14:42

Where did you go on your last vacation?

Cody Whitehead 14:45

Last week Haitian would have been I went to a music festival actually down in Florida. It was a country music festival called Tortuga. It was just really neat because we were on the beach, listening to country music and then they sprinkled in a few different genres and they're so nice whether you're on a beach, you know, great music, a lot of food and one of the other brands for Inspire is actually Dunkin Donuts. And they had a big marketing concept going on down there. So that was cool to see that in action as well. So all around it was a great couple of days off.

Kara Snyder 15:18

Well, doughnuts and music. What else do you need? All right, I ask everybody that comes on the podcast. What's your preference of Auntie's gondola or pub to cheese balls?

Cody Whitehead 15:30

Oh, great question. You can't go wrong with either one of them. I've always been a big sandwich guy. So it's kind of fitting on with Jimmy John's I've always loved a good cold cut sandwich. So I

have to go with a Monty's the gondola. And I I got one not too long ago actually, as I was traveling back north, going through Bloomington, I had to stop and grab one.

Kara Snyder 15:52

It tastes the same I bet. Absolutely. If not better. There you go. One last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Cody Whitehead 16:03

I would say put yourself in uncomfortable situations and say yes more often. Most of the opportunities that I've had within my career or life in general, has been from saying yes to things I was unsure of. It might be comfortable at times, but typically that's where the most growth comes from is being uncomfortable and it ultimately leads to great experiences.

Kara Snyder 16:28

Say yes more often. That is great advice to end on. Thanks so much for being here. That was Cody Whitehead franchising manager at Inspire brands. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.