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PERSPECTIVE



Saiffuddin Sepehr

# 30 HOURS

## Never underestimate the power of community

On Friday, August 20, a man named Saiffuddin Sepehr reached out to a WhatsApp group I belong to. It's a cheeky group for startups and founders connected to each other by a single theme: the global creative industry. Each member of the group is in some phase of starting up a business. It is unique in its reach because it is a geographically dispersed group of people. It's a community of makers, dreamers, poets, dissidents and creators.

Every region of the world is represented within the chat. And because of that, there are no geographic boundaries or geopolitics, so ideas flow. That's what makes it so captivating. The channel is used primarily for sharing updates and cool stories about creative and entrepreneurial ecosystems blossoming around the world.

My friend Sepehr is a tech founder and a member of the creative industries and the aforementioned WhatsApp group. We met in Copenhagen in 2019 at the Creative



# ROLL OUT THE BARREL

Even after 40 years, the peanut shells on the floor still irk Joe Bell. Because of the slip-and-fall liability, the Peanut Barrel in East Lansing, Mich. (across from the campus of Michigan State University) had to stop letting customers toss their peanut shells on the floor.

“Now we offer a bowl for the shells,” says Bell, who together with his wife, Jennifer Bell, bought the bar in 1980. The only liability insurance provider that would cover the bar was Lloyd’s of London, which was too pricey.

The Bells also wanted to change the bar’s name when they bought it, but “Papa Joe” says they couldn’t afford \$2,500 for a new sign. “We just didn’t have the money,” Bell says. So the name “Peanut Barrel” is permanently etched into East Lansing history.

The Barrel, as it’s known to locals — many of whom have been regulars or employees, or both, since the Bells bought it — has some serious staying power. Employees like Skooz (*not* Skuz), Little Skooz, Rod, Jill, Eric and Mary typically stuck around for 20 or 30 years, or try their own hand at the restaurant game. (Author’s note/ full disclosure: I worked for Joe, Eric and Mary at a “startup” fine dining establishment called the Evergreen Grill from 1989 to 1992 as busser, dishwasher, food expeditor, waiter and Mary’s errand boy and and tutor of her children.)

The Bells added food (burgers, a giant hot dog, sandwiches, chili cheese fries, etc. — the Papa Joe burger is still a fan favorite), and the menu hasn’t changed much since the 1980s. “The kitchen is too small,” Bell says. But the

Barrel’s biggest claims to fame are its patio facing the MSU campus and the wickedly potent Long Island Iced Teas (limit two per customer).

The Bells are succession-minded. Their daughter Megan has been general manager for five years, and Megan’s three kids are all interested in working there when they come of age. “They think it’s cool,” she says. — *Jason Meyers*



# IN THE KABUL AIRPORT

Business Cup. I did a story on him. His company, Maktab e-learning, is a blockchain/AI startup based in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Or, rather, it was based in Kabul.

On that day in August when my WhatsApp alerts went nuts in the middle of the night, his messages had nothing to do with startups or funding. He, his wife and young son were trapped in Kabul as American forces prepared to withdraw from the Longest War. Sepehr and his family were unable to get past Taliban checkpoints to make their way to the airport. His harrowing story unfurled in real time on WhatsApp over the course of many days. Things happened along the way. His son was injured during an airport skirmish. He was stuck outside the airport. He couldn’t get past the Taliban. His assets were frozen. His phone was lost. He spent 30 hours in the Kabul airport only to be denied over and over.

I watched my phone helplessly for many hours and then days, as the story went from bad to worse to silent. But in the background of Sepehr’s

desperate journey, a team of strangers, connected only by the creative industries on WhatsApp, banded together to get Sepehr out of Kabul. Senators were called. Embassies were contacted. Journalists got involved. Eventually, and with the help of the French Embassy, a French journalist named Margaux Benn got Sepehr and his family out of Kabul. The family safely landed in Paris, and the last I heard they were heading for Bordeaux.

My mind was blown by this story. Keep in mind, I did not do the heavy lifting. I was a voyeur. I watched as the events unfolded and I vowed to share this because it matters. It matters because we all have it in ourselves to impact this world in a positive way as a community of voices and connections and focus.

It’s not about politics or borders, either. It’s about humanity. It’s about community. It is inspiring. It is chilling. It is a unifying tale in a divided world.

In family business, you have that power, too. When we put our collective voices together to make a difference, no matter how big or small, the possibilities are endless. — *Amy C. Cosper*



## FAMILY FIRST

WHAT'S HOT IN FAMILY BUSINESS

**Andrew Truett Cathy** is the new CEO of Chick-fil-A, effective Nov. 1. Andrew, 43, succeeds his father Dan T. Cathy, 68, who has served as CEO since 2013. Dan continues in his role as chairman of the board.



Andrew, grandson of Chick-fil-A founder S. Truett Cathy, has been the company's executive vice president of operations since 2019. He began his Chick-fil-A career in 2005, serving two years as operator of a Chick-fil-A restaurant in St. Petersburg, Fla. In 2007, he joined the support center staff as a franchisee selection consultant. After subsequently leading franchisee selection, Andrew became a member of the executive committee in 2015 and was named chief people officer in 2016.

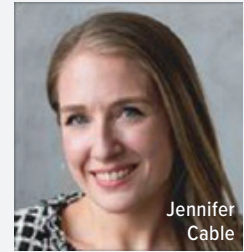
During Dan Cathy's tenure, annual revenue at the Atlanta-based company grew from roughly \$1 billion to \$16 billion.



**Lewis R. Smoot Jr.** has assumed the roles of president, CEO and chairman of Smoot Construction Co., based in Columbus, Ohio. Smoot, a third-generation family member, succeeds his father, Lewis R. Smoot Sr., at the helm of the general contracting, design-build and construction management firm.

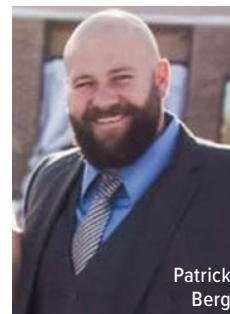
Smoot Construction's major projects include student union and Wexner Medical Center facilities at Ohio State University and the Columbus Zoo Adventure Cove.

**Jennifer Cable** has been named president of Thorlabs Inc. The company, which has its headquarters in Newton, N.J., is a vertically integrated manufacturer of photonics equipment.



Cable's father, Alex Cable, had held the titles of president and CEO since he founded the company in 1989. He will continue as CEO.

Jennifer Cable joined the company in 2015 and has served in a variety of roles. She previously led a team that developed and executed strategic plans for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield. She has an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Vassar College and a master's degree in bioethics from Columbia University and worked for Population Services International in Laos as a Princeton-in-Asia Fellow.



**Patrick Berg**, a fourth-generation family member, has been named president of DeBourgh Manufacturing Co., a locker manufacturer headquartered in La Junta, Colo.

The family business started in 1909 in Minneapolis as a sheet metal shop called Berg Brothers. After an attempt to sell the company in 1930, the family resumed operations but were prohibited from using the Berg Brothers name. They rebranded their business using an old family surname, DeBourgh. The company built lockers for the University of Minnesota's hockey team in 1931. During a downturn in the steel industry in the 1980s, the company liquidated its fabrication division. In 1990, the business moved to La Junta. Today it specializes in lockers and storage systems.

Patrick Berg joined the family business as supply chain manager in 2010 and became sales manager in 2013.

**Craig Briess** has been named CEO at Briess Malt & Ingredients, Chilton, Wis. Briess, who represents the fifth generation of family leadership, succeeds his mother, Monica Briess, who became CEO in 2001 after the unexpected passing of her husband, Roger.

Monica Briess will remain on the board of directors and will serve as a strategic adviser to the company, which supplies breweries as well as makers of bread, pet food and malted milkshakes and milk balls.

Craig Briess has worked at the company for more than 20 years in a variety of roles and has served on the board since 2001.

