

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 28 - Jamie Richardson

Peter: Hey, I've got Jamie Richardson with me this morning. He is the vice president of government and shareholder relations at White Castle Systems, Inc. I've known Jamie for a while and he's an extremely busy individual. He called me yesterday, he was in the state of Kentucky on a tour, and he's also the chairman of the Ohio Restaurant Association – and just an all-around great guy. First I want to thank you for joining me this morning on my podcast.

Jamie: Hey Pete, it's great to be with you. Thanks for the invitation.

Peter: So what you been up to these days? I know you're a busy guy, just from what I said. You also have a wonderful family with with five children, and I think your oldest one is a little bit older than my son. Is he about 16?

Jamie: That's right. Yeah, they're getting older every day.

Peter: [laughs] Well, yeah. Yes they are.

Jamie: and people say I have an amazing sense for the obvious captain.

Peter: There is Captain Obvious. And your youngest is how old?

Jamie: He is seven. Then we have a 14, 12 and soon-to-be 10, in between. It's a great crew. Brendan, Chloe, Mary Grace, Maggie and Fin.

Peter: Wow. I understand why you're on the road a lot, because there's probably a lot more work at home. [laughs]

Jamie: Yeah, my wife is the one with the conductor stick. She keeps us heading in the right direction.

Peter: And she's a wonderful woman. I've met her a number of times. You've got a great wife. So what are you up to these days? What's going on in Jamie world?

Jamie: Well you know, here in White Castle land we're always busy. You know, the Castle never closes. We're open 24/7, and we're having a blast. We're really having a lot of fun, hopefully making memorable moments every day for customers, feeding the souls of Craver generations everywhere. If you can believe it, this is our 95th birthday year. So it's 95 years ago that the epicenter of all cravings was launched and we're going better and bigger and having more fun than ever. So we're keeping real busy and just having a blast.

Peter: 95 years old – wow, that's awesome. So I imagine, within the next five years from now, you're going to have one heck of a 100th anniversary.

Jamie: Oh yeah, this whole year has been a dress rehearsal for the hundredth birthday party. We get up early, we stay up late, but but we're selling a lot of hamburgers in between. So, yeah, it's been a really, really fun year, and to be a family-owned business after all these years is really unique these days. We just transitioned from the third-generation family leadership to the fourth generation of family leadership. That's just been really, really incredibly invigorating and good, and we're really, really grateful for all that the previous generations have done to bring us to this point in time. Now it's kinda up to the 4th generation to see what's next and where we take it from here.

Peter: And running a family business is very unique compared to running any other type of business.

Jamie: Yeah, I think so. I think family owned businesses are unique in a lot of ways. They are very distinctive because, if you look around, a lot of the businesses that are known for treating their team members well, for taking a longer view, tend to be family businesses. Candidly, we believe that it's a better business model because it gives us the freedom and flexibility to make good decisions for the long haul, to not get caught up in what I would call the sudden tug in an emergency, but rather just really kind of taking the perspective of not only how that's going to impact us next week or next month, but what's this look like five years from now, if we make a good decision today? So we have that chance to pay it forward for the duration and we think that's really distinctive in a world that's, candidly, become kind of alphabet soup sometimes, in terms of this merger, that transaction or this takeover. We feel it gives us an anchor and we call it the base of all metaphysics here in Castle land.

Peter: I've talked to other individuals who have been part of family-owned businesses and it sounds like your family business, the White Castle business, is not dysfunctional at all compared to some other family businesses that I have talked to. I know at one time, I think it's been two years or so, weren't you travelling around the country speaking on family businesses to family business conferences and things like that?

Jamie: Yeah, good memory. We're part of a really great group called Family Enterprise USA and so I was doing some volunteer work as a member their board, and actually I did get to about 32 different family business centers around the country and was able to share more about our perspective on family businesses at White Castle – especially why it's important from an advocacy point of view for family businesses to share their story with thought leaders and lawmakers, whether that's at the state level or the federal level, just to make sure that, when they are putting policy in place, they're really taking into consideration the impact it might have on family business.

Peter: And that is primarily your role right now: the advocacy side of White Castle's business?

Jamie: Yeah, I'm really fortunate. I get to share the the story of White Castle with all kinds of different friends and our focus is really on making friends wherever we go. So, part of my responsibilities include our government relations, as well as our shareholder relations, our public relations and then actually our philanthropy, as well. Notice how I got Yes, And in there because you know what? Improv is no Joke. I read that somewhere.

Peter: I know you did. You were one of the first people that that got the preview copy and gave me a wonderful review. Thank you very much, but Yes, And – that was a nice plug.

Jamie: [laughs] Well, it's it's a good way to approach and I think, if I look at our family business and what's happened over the decades, candidly, the philosophy you talk about in the book has been the philosophy for how we built the business, in terms of not seeing things as a trade-off but instead how can we get to a situation where we're all better off. That's what we do in our communities every day. We have nearly 400 restaurants in 400 different neighborhoods and that's where we live, where we work and where we raise our families, and the heart and soul of it to us is how can we provide more jobs, how can we provide more employment opportunity for these individuals who otherwise might not have that chance for a path to prosperity? So, for us, it's about how we make a difference every day – not just in serving up hot and tasty food, but how can we nourish the souls in a way that's distinctive and we think that's part of what that makes us a little bit different.

Peter: And your burgers are never flipped at all on the griddle.

Jamie: You are a connoisseur. We have to get you into a Castle for National Hamburger Month next May, but that is correct, yeah. Five holes to allow that melding of flavors. You got it. You're making me hungry!

Peter: I think after this interview, since I live in Westerville and there's a Castle here in Westerville, I think I know where I'm going for lunch today.

Jamie: Tell Kathy Gunderson, the general manager there, we said hello. She's making it happen.

Peter: That's awesome, and I know that with this government and the advocacy piece you've been able to do some pretty cool things. I think you told me a couple years ago that Castle went to the capitol.

Jamie: Yeah, that's right. We actually had Castles at the Capitol – Wow, time goes by quick – five years ago. We celebrated our 90th birthday and actually set up grills and and, I know there's been a beer summit, but we had a beef summit and we brought members of both parties together to share some White Castles and everyone raved about it. It was a lot of fun and we

had a lot of hungry staffers lining the hallways of at the Capitol building that day and many members of Congress, and so it was really a fun and memorable moment.

Peter: So did to the lawmakers and staffers come out onto the lawn of the capitol, and were they served there, or did you have to take them into the capitol, and by doing that did you have to go through the metal detectors and screens and scanners.

Jamie: That's a great question. We were preparing the food just outside the Capitol dome and it looked something like Roswell, man. We had tents, we were sheltered, we had everything going on and everything was great. The morning of there been so much preparation, so much good work. I mean we would work with the Department of Homeland Security, the Capitol Hill police, the architect of the Capitol, the sergeant-at-arms, anyone you can think of we had the chance to meet with them and talk through this. We had measured twice and cut once – everything was perfect, until we realize that security was asking us that they would need to hand wand each single burger.

Peter: [laughs]

Jamie: Thankfully, someone had the foresight to bring crave crate packages with us that hold 100, and we breathed a collective sigh of relief when that crave crate very narrowly just cleared the bar and fit through the metal detector on the conveyor. So we were taking a hundred at a time versus one at a time. There's Yes, And thinking for you right there my friend. We didn't give up and we fed the masses and it was a beautiful day.

Peter: So about how many of those tasty burgers did you feed our capital with?

Jamie: About 5,850 at last count, according to the records. You know, it's government accounting, so it might have been off a little, but it was a great time and a unifying day for everybody who had the chance to take part.

Peter: And I do believe one of our, at the time, members of the house was a big, huge fan (and still is) of the Castle.

Jamie: That's exactly right. In fact, the gentlemen that we honored that day as we inducted into the Cravers Hall of Fame was then the Speaker of the House, John Boehner, who grew up just outside of Reading, Ohio, in the Cincinnati area, and he loved his Castles as a boy and loves them still today. His favorite is the double cheeseburger, but we inducted a speaker into the Hall of Fame and he told great stories about having his newspaper route as a kid. He'd stop on his bike and make it to the Castle now and then. So good times.

Peter: Wow, so how many are in the Hall of Fame?

Jamie: Well, I'm glad you asked me that, Pete, because many are called and few are chosen. So, in fact, we've done some pretty scientific research and – just for anyone who's listening – it is easier to get into Harvard than it is the Cravers Hall of Fame. Less than 1% of those nominated actually get inducted into the hall of fame and we're at about 120 members in the Cravers Hall of Fame and we just inducted our most recent class. Notably, in addition to Speaker Boehner, another notable nominee who was actually inducted is the only person in the Rock and Roll hall of fame who's in the White Castle cravers hall of fame: a gentleman by the name of Alice Cooper.

Peter: Ahhhhhh

Jamie: [laughs] And so he's a great fan of the brand.

Peter: So is Alice originally from Michigan?

Jamie: He is. He grew up in Detroit, or as we say here de trois, the Paris of the West.

Peter: Because I know my friend Mr. Richardson has Michigan ties.

Jamie: That is true, yeah. I've done the border crossing before, so I was born and raised in the state north of Ohio but I got here as quick as I could.

Peter: [laughs] Yeah, did you go to Michigan State?

Jamie: I did not. I have a two younger sisters who attended there, which converted me to be a Michigan State fan early in life. I attended Siena Heights University in Michigan.

Peter: As soon as it came out of my mouth I went, no no, he went to Siena Heights. Just for my audience to know, Jamie is actually a former student of mine. He was in the MBA program at The Ohio Dominican University in Columbus and he was in my MBA accounting class, and he's the only student I've ever taught that was able to get an F within the first five seconds of walking into my class.

Jamie: [laughs]

Peter: Do you want to explain how you got an F there, my friend?

Jamie: Well...

Peter: A metaphorical F.

Jamie: You know, before the first class there's always that pre-meeting to get the first assignment for week one, so in that pre-meeting Professor Margaritis mentioned, "Hey, if my

Kentucky Wildcats make it to the finals on Monday night, which they will, and if they're in that NCAA championship game, which they will be, we will probably not have class.”

Peter: [laughs]

Jamie: And in the course of that weekend, in that specific year, it turned out they came up against the mighty Michigan State Spartans and I was so overjoyous about this victory and, remembering that Professor Margaritis had indicated his Wildcat fanaticism, I thought that, well, he seems to have a good sense of humor. I thought I'd wear my Michigan State jersey to class and he wasn't smiling. In fact, he looked, shook his head, and said, “You can leave now.”
[laughs]

Peter: [laughs] Okay, it was something along those lines, because you had a little drama there because everybody was in the class and I was just about to close the door and you came walking through.

Jamie: Hey, that was not intentional.

Peter: [laughs] and I just looked at you and I went, “Wow, that's the quickest F I've ever given anybody, why don't you leave now?” [laughs]

Jamie: [laughs] That's okay. It was my coping mechanism. I repressed the memory of the F, but now that you say that it does come back to me. It's kind of hauntingly familiar.

Peter: And that was a very bold move, my friend, but, as we see in improv, you kind of assess the situation and took a risk and—

Jamie: It motivated me to work harder because I knew, if it was anything that was subjective, I was gone.

Peter: [laughs]

Jamie: I really had to nail it. I couldn't be somewhere in between. There's a precision to accounting and it inspired me to be precise.

Peter: I tell that story to so many people and it goes to the thing of the improv, but it also goes to the thing of developing a network. I mean, to get to where you are and what you've done over the years, you've called on me a couple of times to say, “Hey, do you know somebody, can you help me here” and vice versa. How have you been able to establish and grow such a very strong network over the years?

Jamie: I just think a big part of that is just making friendships wherever you go and really risking the vulnerability of putting yourself in situations where you might not know as many people, and

giving yourself the chance and permission to go places where you think you might meet those you want to spend more time with or learn about from an organizational point of view. I'm a member of our downtown Kiwanis Club in Columbus and I love it. Great friends and an incredibly great group that does so much for our community and our neighborhoods. Along the way, I've made friendships that last a lifetime and I think I found that having the chance to volunteer and serve on different charity boards has been another great opportunity to just meet incredible people who are dedicated, have similar values and care about our community and want to make a difference – but also it really opens you up to a more diverse network of friends from different industries, from different backgrounds, from different worldviews and perspectives. To me the greatest part of networking, which is one of those words that can kind of have loaded meanings, is about friendships, and part of that friendship is being a good listener and really getting to know somebody and appreciate who they are, where they're coming from, and then I think it does start to unlock a lot of doors, in terms of what you have in common. It also gives you permission to maintain those friendships. When you have that, you're able to listen. You're actually really listening, and not thinking about what you're going to say next. You hear things that you're able to remember so that next time you see that person you can circle back and say, "Hey, how'd that go," whatever it may be. I think there's so much fun in that and I have discovered so many incredible people that we have, wherever you are, wherever you go. I'm sure people from all over will be listening to this and I just think, if given the chance to be apostles of hope, we should just go for it and see what happens. We're given the gift of time, let's make something out of it.

Peter: You said something really interested in that: friendships. I think most people, when they go into networking events, that's not a thought that they have (friendships). I think people, when they go into networking events, one, their mother is in their head, and I say that because your mother always told you, "Never talk to strangers."

Jamie: Right.

Peter: And that hampers people in networking because they view everybody in that room as a stranger vs as an opportunity, and that's the way I've always approached it, but I like how you put it: developing friendships, because I think that really does drop the whole stranger-danger out of it. For me, it even takes the cold side of business out of it and it becomes more embracing. There's more ability to connect easier with it.

Jamie: Yeah, and I think obviously there's benefit to mutual gain through voluntary exchange. That can happen when you meet somebody who might be in a role where you can help one another out. I think the less transactional feels the more authentic it will be, and then that transactional part, in terms of where there's an exchange that occurs later or whatever might happen, I think that can happen naturally. I think if it's forced then the other person feels that and that's like I'm just gathering names so I can put you in my rolodex, and it shouldn't be something that you're trying to to collect – it shouldn't be I'm missing that Pokemon card, let me get this person over here – it really, to me, should be about that authenticity piece, where

you're having a real exchange that may or may not lead to something that's actually tangible because then that part takes care of itself. It feels less forced.

Peter: Okay, so for my audience that like be in the Millennial generation, a Rolodex came before Outlook. It was a thing we used to put our business cards in to keep them, just so everybody understands what maybe a rolodex might be. I have 17 other antiquated references I'm hoping to weave in throughout the course of our time here this morning.

Peter: So, I want to share a networking think that happened between us around 2010. Because I knew of your advocacy work at the state level and at the federal level, the AICPA every other year goes to Washington to lobby Congress on issues as it affects the accounting profession. One of the gentlemen who was going up with us from the Ohio Society had a connection with senator Sherrod Brown. We were actually having breakfast in the Senate dining room one of the days that we were up there with him and there were about six of us from the how society of having breakfast with them. Before I went to Washington, I called you and I said, "I need something Jamie. I need *something*. I need a nugget. Give me something," and you gave me the best nugget ever. Do you remember what that was?

Jamie: I do. I think it had something to do with Senator Brown's desk.

Peter: Exactly.

Jamie: His Senate desk.

Peter: When you say the Senate desk, what do you mean?

Jamie: Well, I happen to be aware that Senator Brown was, at the time, working on a book about his actual desk that he had been assigned in the Senate. The actual piece of furniture that was on the Senate floor – not just because it was the Senate chamber but because of who had had that desk before him. I know Robert Kennedy was one of the individuals who had that desk and there's this whole line of incredible people who had also had that desk, and I knew, if it was something that he was writing a book about, he surely must be fairly passionate about. So I was able to mention that to you ahead of your visit, I believe.

Peter: Exactly, and you gave me a list of 5 names, but obviously Kennedy was the biggest name, and he started talking about his book and I made a comment: "Senator Brown, don't you have the same desk as Robert Kennedy?" And his eyes got big and then I rattled off three other names, and he said, "How did you know that?" And I just looked and said, "Senator, I did my homework before I came." He stopped the meeting. He says, "Do you want to go see it?"

Jamie: [laughs]

Peter: Everybody just kind of looked around as he gets up and says, "Let's go." Our whole group gets up and we're walking and the next thing you know we walked into the Senate chamber. I'm sitting there going what the heck is going on. He takes us over to his desk, opens it up, shows us – and then, Ted Kennedy was still alive at that point, we went over to Ted's desk and he had John F Kennedy's old desk. Then he goes, "Hey, let's look at some Republican desks. Let's look at Mitch McConnell's desk."

Jamie: [laughs]

Peter: He then proceeded to give us this tour of the Senate chamber and behind the back of the Senate chamber, to the Senate reading room, and we end up coming back for breakfast and had a great time and I saw Senator Brown a couple years later. He was coming in for an endorsement for the Ohio Society of CPAs and he saw me and he goes, "Do you remember?" and I said, "Of course." That was that was probably one of the coolest tips that I've ever gotten that opened some really unique opportunities, and if you hadn't walked into class with the Michigan State jersey this never would have happened.

Jamie: [laughs] That's true, that's true. See, there's a real call for bipartisanship embedded and all that. That's what the country needs.

Peter: Exactly, but I mean it's amazing what you can do in networking if, one, you just ask and, two, if you just do. But I think a lot of times it impedes us in and what we're trying to accomplish, or just that fear or I don't want to bother this person. You could've said I got nothing and that would have been fine, but you did take the time to give me that and, by the way, the monthly check for that is in the mail again. [laughs]

Jamie: [laughs] Nothing like royalties to keep you going. Yeah, I think I think you're absolutely right. There's always that risk of vulnerability and I do think that, by reflex, so many of us are more inclined to say, I don't want to bother someone or I'm just going to do this myself or not seeking that larger circle of influence or that chance to connect to others who, candidly, might have something meaningful to share – and do it willingly, and I think that's definitely situation where one plus one equals three. Where we will have the nourishment that comes with that. If people don't want to help they're not going to, but I think more often than not people are are happy to and want to see you be successful.

Peter: I agree that. I think I think that people in your network, to your point, who you've developed a friendship with (and we'll use that friendship in a broad perspective versus a business transaction) are always willing to help in any which way shape or form, whether it's a professional perspective or even in a personal perspective. They're always there willing to be able to help

Jamie: Absolutely. I absolutely believe there's a Beatles lyrics embedded in this. Do not play this backwards on a vinyl record. I know I'm bringing in more archaic references, but on Abbey

Road, in the end the love you take is equal to the love you make, and I think there is like something where if you do the right things for the right reasons good things are bound to happen.

Peter: And be genuine and be vulnerable and just be willing to help.

Jamie: Yeah.

Peter: I think that goes a very long way. So, we were talking about business, we were talking about the Craver world. Now, if you could put on your economic binoculars and look into the future. We are sitting here today on October 26 and by the time this airs we will have a new president in the White House. What do you see on the landscape?

Jamie: Well, you know, it's really interesting. That's a great question. It might take a Hubble telescope to get that close enough to really be able to predict much certainty but I think that we have an incredibly resilient economy. We definitely have seen more people in our neighborhoods in the past year-and-a-half eating out more often but I think, when we look at what retail and restaurants have been through the past eight years, there's always some hesitancy with good times because, candidly, there were some tough years in there where people weren't dining out as often, where it was a real scramble to make sure we were maintaining visits, and to provide the hospitality we know we're known for to be able to hold onto those visits. So I think, economically speaking, we're gonna head into a brand new administration, a brand new year in 2017, and I think there's grounds for incredible hope. We live in the greatest Age in the history of humankind with regard to technology and the possibility for productivity gains and just the general notion of human progress. Where we live, sometimes the people in government, despite the best intentions, find ways to make that harder and so you what we're facing every day are things that increase our food costs, things that increase our cost to hire people and maintain the the number of employees we have. That's real world. At the same time, a nice counterbalance is this notion: the idea of progress and creativity and the fact that you really can't hold technology back, you can hold the human spirit back. Creativity is the great equalizer so it will be interesting to see what emerges from a policy point of view and I think we're likely to see a lot of energy and effort on both sides around comprehensive tax reform. It needs to happen. From a bipartisan point of view, there's acknowledgement that are our tax system is broken, that we have the highest corporate tax rate in the free world, and there's a hunger for that. So I think that we might have a window of hope where there's enough common ground that some good things might be accomplished. But, you know, we'll take it as it comes.

Peter: The whole about tax reform... that's gonna take a lot of work. Even as a CPA, you're right. The system is broken. There's gotta be a better way. It's just way too complex, but it's going to take a huge effort because there's been enough tax reform pieces done that are still sitting in the bowels of Congress collecting dust that have never been acted on and there's been some really great ideas but something bogs down that process. I know you have been

interviewed number of times for Business First (the Columbus, Ohio business periodical) but I just saw something recently about on the cover of a Business First about some of the struggles that some of the restaurants are having here in the Columbus and the Ohio area. What are some of the causes of these struggles and how have you guys been able to avoid them?

Jamie: What restaurants represent, I think, is probably one of the more pure symbols of creativity and entrepreneurship. Whether it's that family recipe that has been handed down for generations until someone finally takes that leap of faith and decides, hey, I'm going to open a restaurant and serve this famous Greek chicken that's been a part of my family heritage for generations, or whatever it may be. What we see is bigger barriers to entry than there have been and, candidly, a lot of those barriers, whatever the good intentions are coming from regulators – whether that's at the federal level, whether it's a state or city level, whatever it may be. So when you have an industry that typically runs on pretty compressed margins and the typical net income for a restaurateur is somewhere in that range of 1-3% percent, in terms of what they're really able to capture at the end of the day. That puts a lot at risk if you crank up the cost of food, if you crank up the cost of investment in people. So, for instance, the new overtime rule that's set to go into effect on December 1st: many in the restaurant world are hoping that the six-month delay that the House passed is also passed by the Senate and signed by the President during the lame duck session, because people need more time to absorb what that means for their costs. That's just one small example. We hear a lot of talk around the state that the city of Cleveland is going to have on the ballot, in May of 2017, something that would raise the minimum wage to \$15 for starting pay. We're 100% in favor of high wages for our restaurant employees. We're against the idea of a government thinking they know what it's like to work behind the counter and telling us how to run our business because, candidly, it's unworkable so many times. So those are real world struggles that I think some face and, candidly, what's hard is we've been seeing, since 2008, with some of these new laws and regs and everything else, is gonna make it tougher for restaurants to stay in operation. We've gone from 418 restaurants in 2010 to 390 today, so the the impacts are real but you struggle through it, you make it work, and you find a way to continue to be profitable – but it's not easy and it's it's tough because sometimes those threats are more external than they are the result of your own decisions.

Peter: Exactly, and when you say that, at the end of the day, you hope that you've got a profit margin somewhere between one and three percent, I like to put it in a different way, for someone who may not be as financially astute, to get their mind around it. For every dollar that your customers give you, out of that dollar you're able to keep a penny to three cents of it.

Jamie: Right.

Peter: Off of every transaction. So your payroll costs, your food costs, everything else is eating up so much of that dollar that, at the end of the day, you only get a penny. Now multiply that by the number of transactions that go on, but those are really tight margins and, if you sneeze the wrong way, you're in the negative.

Jamie: That's true, and we we understand that. We come into this eyes wide open. We've been in the restaurant business for 95 years now, but we do think it's important that policymakers, especially, understand that there are unintended consequences to an idea you think is a good idea. On the surface it might appear to be that way, but did you know the rest of the story? We think it's our responsibility to focus on being good citizens and let them know what the real world looks like.

Peter: That's right, and I imagine that it falls on some deaf ears because not everybody, in any legislature, will be as fiscally conservative or fiscally knowledgeable that they think they're doing something good, which could ultimately put you out of business. How many associates do you employ?

Jamie: Thank you for asking that, because if you asked what's allowed us to continue to be successful over all these years and really, truly the the secret for our success is incredible team members. We employ 10,000 people in 12 states around the country, and of those 10,000 people – and this is hard to believe in fast food – more than one in four of those 10,000 team members have been with White Castle 10 years or more, so there's incredible loyalty. The other thing that I think really stands out about our business model is that, of our top 450 restaurant leaders, of the top 450 people in restaurant operations management, 444 started behind the counter at an hourly job. Many of them when they're 15. You know, we love the six who didn't–

Peter: [laughs]

Jamie: –but it's awesome that we've got this incredible loyalty and this promote-from-within opportunity that we've created to provide people a path to prosperity and a chance to allow their dreams to come true. For us that's a sacred trust and it is really the heart of hospitality that motivates us every day. That comes from each of those individuals who make it possible.

Peter: So if I said that you, White Castle, really embraces the fact that they're in the people business, first and foremost, everything else comes second, that would be a valid statement.

Jamie: Yeah, absolutely, and I think the people business and how we do that is.. it's not just a vision statement we put a piece of paper and throw in a folder somewhere. To nourish the souls of Craver generations everywhere is what motivates us, is what guides us – it's what helps us make our decisions. Then the secondary part of that, our mission, is to make memorable moments every day. That gives us the chance to not just give someone a sack of ten.

Peter: [laughs]

Jamie: But it's also about what goes with it: it's the smile, it's that connection point, and it's being there for people when they need us the most. We're that Oasis, man – one on the highway of hope and life.

Peter: Exactly, and I know you guys do a lot here in the community. We've met a couple times up at the Kidney Road location. What was going on that one day? There was some voluntary effort that you were working on and the next thing you know the restaurant was full with all these volunteers. You guys were going out to... I'm blanking on that.

Jamie: We have so many really nourishing partnerships with so many really great groups around town, and I think that day we might have had our friends in the American Red Cross coming in for a check presentation for dollars that we had raised around the Castles, where customers donated to turn White Castle red before Valentine's Day. We have a great friendship with the American Red Cross. Autism Speaks is another group we work with in town, and our hope is to feed hunger, hopes and dreams. To really look at how we can empower the human spirit so people have the best path forward, and so we do give back quite a bit to community. It's not to pat ourselves on the back but because we think it's really important to put our money where our mouth is and to really help those individuals in the neighborhoods where we are everyday.

Peter: And since we've met back way back when, in talking to you and your brother-in-law John, who is the Senior Vice President of People? What's his title?

Jamie: He is our Chief People Officer.

Peter: That's right.

Jamie: He has the conductor stick when it comes to empowering all of our people. He does an awesome job.

Peter: and that's John Kelly III. Having gotten to know you, and actually John was in the class with Jamie, but having gotten to know these guys over the years I've seen White Castle in a completely different perspective – one of community, of how they treat their people, their team members, of how socially conscious (and I use that a very broad sense) that the organization is. You're a family business, so we can't see the numbers behind it, but you've been around for 95 years – that says a lot. The company's well-respected, well-known, and even to the point that – I remember it was doing that the NCAA tournament and you, me and our good friend Dr. Jay Young (who will be on a future podcast) were at a local restaurant and one of those specials was sliders

Jamie: [laughs]

Peter: and I went, "Wait a minute guys, you've got that trademarked," and you said, "Yeah, we have a trademark," and you said early on you may have challenged a few, but after awhile you went, "Why? We're just throwing money down a very deep hole," and actually when you say the word slider we all know we think of: White Castle. So it's like a subliminal advertising.

Jamie: [laughs]

Peter: You have other restaurants advertising for you! How do you do that, my friend?

Jamie: Hey, you just revealed our secret plan to win the war.

Peter: [laughs] That just happened.

Jamie: That's alright. We'll leave it in. Sharing is caring you. We were open source before it was popular. I think, for us, it is about being comfortable with who we are. The brand itself has meant so much to so many people, but also, as our CEO said to the first group that was inducted into the hall of fame, "Do you realize that your love White Castle has led to the scorn, ridicule, and derision of others because they simply can't understand your deep and unending devotion?" At that point Michele Purcell, who was an inductee that year, started to cry. Then he shared, "Do you realize that, this year, more people won super bowl rings, more people won nobel prizes. You are a very elite group of people and you might be made fun of by others, but in our hearts and hallways your names will always be held as sacred," and that's when Michele Purcell, who was weeping, gently raised her pant leg to reveal a White Castle ankle tattoo.

Peter: Oh, nice!

Jamie: And tattoos, by the way, since we're sharing all the other secrets I might as well share this one too – a White Castle permanent tattoo is a guaranteed shortcut to get you into the White Castle Cravers Hall of Fame.

Peter: Oh, my wife's not gonna like you at all.

Jamie: No, but you know what? You will be famous for the ages. Your name will live on.

Peter: And just having the White Castle candle doesn't help at all?

Jamie: White Castle candle, for those who are unaware, you have to experience this: it is aromatherapy for the modern age. Our good friend Laura Slatkin, who is known as the queen of home fragrances (she has designed for Elton John, Vera Wang, Martha Stewart, the British Royal Family and White Castle) created the original White Castle hamburger scented candle, which has a base of bun, a great amount of beef, the perfect blend of onion and the top note of pickle. It's available on the House of Crave.

Peter: The House of Crave, yes. I actually may have to get another because I think mine is completely used up.

Jamie: You're on your path to the Hall of Fame doing things like that.

Peter: Thank you, I do love your business. It's great. I love when I've been able to come and visit, and before we leave we have to talk about, because you guys said you're comfortable in your own skin, what was that movie that came out awhile ago? Can you help me here, Jamie, I'm drawing a blank.

Jamie: Well, we're still a little bit upset it didn't win the 2004 Academy Award for best picture, but the film I think that you're referencing, Pete, is Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle.

Peter: Bingo. Yeah, and what role did you play in that?

Jamie: I was fortunate enough to answer the phone call when one of the entertainment clearance individuals from LA was calling and she was telling me about this great film about these two likable underdogs who spend a night of misadventure, as she called it, searching for a White Castle. I honestly, truly believed it was an April fools prank or one of those deals where they get you all excited and then they tell you, by the way, for small video \$350,000 dollars you can have your name in this. So they sent us the script and turns out it was real and it also turned out it was rated R for "somewhat raunchy."

Peter: [laughs]

Jamie: The language is a little rough and she failed to mention that the Cannabis sativa was involved in their hunger pangs, and that after smoking some weed they went out in search of White Castle, but that we were fortunate enough to be able to participate. I remember some trepidation in asking our CEO about it, to make sure he was okay with it, and Bill Ingram (he just retired as our CEO last year, God love him, he's the best, he's still chairman of the board), when I went into chat with him about it, I thought I'd better be straight ahead. I told it's rated R for raunchy; it has sex, drugs and rock and roll; and, other than that, it's a love letter to White Castle. He got really quiet and I thought, oh boy. He looked, he paused, and he said does it make fun of our team members? And when I said, "No, it's actually very complimentary," he looked and said, "I'm okay with it then." That was it. That was the approval process that allowed us to participate.

Peter: Did you talk to LA at all?

Jamie: You know, Kate, my brother-in-law John, my sister-in-law Meg and I had the opportunity to go to the premiere and it was a blast out in LA. That was fun, but nothing was more fun than the day the movie launched and we encountered something we hadn't encountered since 1921 – we literally almost ran out of hamburger in the restaurants. The sales spike was so strong and so incredible. It was unprecedented, and the only time that happened again was when the DVD came out had the following winter. So it was historic. It hit some highs, in many ways, metaphorically, and also it hit historic highs that from a sales point of view, as well. Our thought was that the nature of the film was good-natured. It wasn't mean spirited at all.

Peter: Right.

Jamie: and that it connected to a whole new generation of Cravers. We might not, otherwise, have had the chance to meet like we did. It was a lot of fun.

Peter: I can't believe it was back in 2004.

Jamie: Me neither. We maintain a nice friendship with John Cho and Kal Penn, they're great guys. They have gone on to do great things in their careers and, actually, that resurrected the career of a gentleman by the name of Neil Patrick Harris, who appeared in the film and when we had the opportunity to meet him a few years later he thanked us profusely because, in that film, he says he was able to kill the ghost of Doogie Howser. If you haven't seen the film, you'll understand when you see some of the scenes. I won't get into the granular details at this point.

Peter: I have to go back and watch it because I forgot that he was even in that movie.

Jamie: Yeah, he's in the film playing himself and yeah... it's out there. It's good.

Peter: Isn't one of the characters, one of the two guys, isn't here in Washington?

Jamie: Kal Penn continues to have a very successful acting career – he has actually taught film at USC, he's been in all kinds of films, and he's currently starring in a new TV show – but he also took time off from acting and worked in the Obama administration. He worked in the White House and was part of the cultural office. His heritage is that he's Indian, and so he worked in the cultural affairs for Pacific affairs and Asian affairs. He's really a great guy: super smart, well informed, and just a good friend. Nice, nice person.

Peter: That's really cool. So after this interview is over, I have to go get a sack of sliders and then maybe I'll just take the rest of the afternoon off and watch the movie. [laughs]

Jamie: Do a critique, man. Be a film critic. Critics are craving.

Peter: As we wrap up, I know you love to read you read a lot of interesting books. What book are you reading today? What's out there?

Jamie: I am reading a historical fiction book called The Last Days of Night and it's actually about the legal battle that happened in the 1880s between George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison, through the eyes of this young attorney who has been hired to represent Westinghouse. It is a really interesting perspective because I know we, appropriately, have a lot of reverence for for Thomas Edison, but this book is not so flattering. It's a whole new picture of of Thomas Edison I hadn't expected, so that's pretty intriguing as we go.

Peter: Wow, so what is your favorite book? If someone said you can pick up another book and read it again, what is your go to?

Jamie: You know, there's a a an Irish author who I think is just brilliant. His name's Colum McCann, he lives in New York City, he's from Ireland. He has written a number of incredible works. They have the the poetical sense of a Dylan Thomas but he's able to weave a tale and just do it so vividly that it really stays with you, and of all of his books – they're just all fantastic – my favorite is one called Let The Great World Spin, and again it takes real world events that happened. It re-creates the scene when highwire artists actually walked between the world trade centers back in like 1974. Let The Great World Spin is just an incredible read and I recommend it to anybody, if you're looking for something good.

Peter: Cool, I will definitely pick that up. You're a really cool guy and I love our conversations that we have. My only complaint is we only do this on a quarterly basis because both of our schedules are extremely busy, but I look forward to those times. Whether it's breakfast or, as we say, getting the band back together, and apparently getting the band back the the Monday before the election. Me, you, John and Jay Young to talk a little political season, a little politics, which is always good – and maybe share a little bit of that Kentucky brown water.

Jamie: [laughs] Sounds like a good plan.

Peter: Yeah. So, one, thank you again Jamie for taking time out. I've really enjoyed this and I hope you have too. It's been very informative and I know my audience will enjoy this as well, so thank you so very much.

Jamie: Pete, Yes, And crave on my friend.

Peter: [laughs] Thanks.