Peter Margaritis: Hey, welcome back everybody. My guest today absolutely shocked me when we get on the Zoom call because she's wearing a shirt says Ohio CPA Proud, and she'll vouch for this my jaw hit the floor. So, she was surprised to find out that she has done some work over the years with Ohio Society of CPA,and they don't pay the her in cash, they just give her swag. So, I guess that's a good swap. And Natalie, welcome to my podcast and thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule.

Natalie Siston: It's my pleasure to be here. Pete, I look forward to whatever we dig into today.

Peter Margaritis: Well, the thing I really want to dig into is this business that you have cultivated that you're growing, and the title just intrigues me Small Town Leadership. Let's talk about that.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely. So I am , I'll say first what it's not. So, I am not the place where leaders of small towns come to get their leadership training. I'm not the like the, you know, the training mechanism for that. What small town leadership is for me is a definition of my leadership style. I was born and raised in Republic, Ohio, population 600. And as I progressed into my career, which started out in California brought me back to Ohio into the fortune 100 into entrepreneurship. Everything that made me successful along that path came from things I learned growing up Republic, Ohio.

Natalie Siston: And so about five years ago, and I was working with a coach and talking about what’s bigger in my life for me. I said I love to speak and write. Those just come naturally to me. I love to do those. That's why you and I are connected. And as I was thinking about that, I'm like, but there's something specific that I like to speak and write about,and what I typically spoke and wrote about was things I learned growing up and Republic, Ohio. So, one night that middle of the night thought that happens, was I think this thing is called Small Town Leadership. And so, very soon thereafter, I went to see if that domain was available. It wasn't so someone had to go buy it for me, and the rest is history. So that that was 2016, when I put that live out into the world. And here we are over four years later, and it's growing and growing and growing.

Peter Margaritis: So, for those in my audience who are not from Ohio where exactly is Republic, Ohio.

Natalie Siston: Republic Ohio is considered North Central, northwest Ohio. If you look at Columbus, which is almost smack dab in the middle of the state just draw straight line up in about 15 degrees to the west and there you will find Republic. So, we're about two hours from Columbus two hours from Cleveland, an hour from Toledo straight shot up to Lake Erie.

Peter Margaritis: Perfect. And you grew up in this town 600. So, what lessons did you learn from growing up in a small town that you're sharing with folks to enhance their leadership skills?

Natalie Siston: Yeah, that's a great question. I have a whole litany of them depending on the audience and depending on what they're after what their goal is, but I can give you a couple as an example just to whet the appetite of your audience. When I talk about a lot is the idea of work ethic. And I talked about the idea of when you grow up in a small town you see people working hard every day and typically from a young age of a child. You're doing the work too. You're working in the field, if your family owns a farm you're working in the family owned business. You're doing odd jobs around town for neighbors and others in the community. And that instills in you. This idea that no job is beneath you. No job is too small for you. No job is outside the scope of what you should be doing.

Natalie Siston: So, when I entered the workforce and things were put on my plate to do. I always said yes. I didn't care if it was pushing tables and stacking chairs, before, after an event. Or if it was greeting the, and I didn't get to greet him but I did see him an event, but like the Dalai Lama was in the building where I was. And I got to stand in the hallway, so there's the moment where you get to like be amidst the Dalai Lama. You know, it didn't matter what was happening on those given days. I was willing to step in and do the work.

Natalie Siston: And so. I often invite the audiences to think about their work ethic story. Where did they start to learn about rolling up their sleeves and saying yes and not worrying about things being outside of their swim lane.

Peter Margaritis: So let me ask, what types of jobs did you do growing up in Republic?

Natalie Siston: Oh boy. I did some fun jobs growing up in Republic. So by the time I was old enough to potentially have worked on a farm, my family had sold our farm. So I was spared from that. But the main job I had growing up was cleaning. Oh I cleaned my Uncle's, my aunt's house I eventually turned into, you know, we all know B2B is where it's at. So I turned the commercial cleaning of my mom's office. And then before I started college, I started cleaning dorm rooms at Heidelberg college for a few weeks before I decided I don't want to do that. And I ended up finding a different job, but that was cleaning college dorm rooms just recently vacated dorm rooms. Let's just say, I've seen it all.

Peter Margaritis: Yes you have. Wow.

Natalie Siston: Yeah, then, but then, let me pivot. Just tell you a couple of the other jobs I had, because I think these would be interesting for people to think about, you know, because if you live in a bigger town or a suburb, some of these things are like baked in as professional positions, but in a small town, you got to call on everybody for everything they can bring. So I taught piano for very long time. I took piano starting in first grade. And by the time I was in high school, I was the one giving the piano lessons. I was the church accompanist and choir director at one of our local Methodist churches as a high school student. So, these were just things that you know I had a talent and there was a need. And so, I showed up and for $25 a week led the choir.

Peter Margaritis: That is, do you still play?

Natalie Siston: I play a little bit. We finally have a piano in our house. So, on the rare moment that I need a stress relief. I'll grab a sheet music and play something.

Peter Margaritis: So, I'll get back to some of the other lessons that you've learned to instill on others. But I do have a question about growing up. What did you want to be when you grow up? Because first, I've never figured that out yet, because I think I'm still growing up. I'm not quite sure. But yeah, we all had actually somebody asked me that question. I said what I wanted to be when I grew up. I want to be a professional water skier, because I loved water skiing. Clearly, I never made that. But that was my dream grown up. What was yours?

Natalie Siston: My dream was to be a lawyer, journalist and then eventually, the President of the United States.

Peter Margaritis: Wow!

Natalie Siston: Why, and I had that written in more than one diary entry as a very young girl.

I'm not quite doing that job for my on that path. But yeah, those were the big dreams I had in that small town.

Peter Margaritis: Sounded like, it sounds like you like helping people.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely, yeah, making an impact, inspiration, motivation, enacting change. Absolutely.

Peter Margaritis: So what are some of these other stories, and things that you're helping folks today because used to work at what as of right now, you still do work at Nationwide, and you've been there for a number of years. Correct?

Natalie Siston: Yeah, absolutely.

Peter Margaritis: And you probably had the most difficult employee ever ever reported to you. A guy by the name of Ruben Minor.

Natalie Siston: Those of you listening, Pete and I are both good friends with Dear Mr. Ruben Minor also fellow podcaster. And I've been on his show as well so I've had some amazing, amazing people who have worked with and for me over my 12 years at Nationwide, it's pretty incredible to think about that journey. But as I think about kind of what I learned in the small town and how that helped me be successful in a corporate setting. Gosh, there's so many to unpack that. I think one of them. That's really important right now is for us to think about agility. And our ability to be able to pivot, because clearly sitting here in the middle of 2020 we haven't even made it six months, through the year. And it's been a ride.

Natalie Siston: But I think the idea of pivoting and being able to use what you have on hand. And so this, this is a story I share a lot, Pete, you heard this when I spoke to our Ohio National Speakers Association group. Senior year in college I hosted a group of my classmates to come stay at my house before we all headed to Cedar Point, which for those aren't familiar, it's an amusement park up on Lake Erie. My parents live about 45 minutes away. And so about 20 of my college classmates were coming up. So I saw them all pulling up the driveway. They pull in and, you know, up the gravel driveway that you have in a small town. And my college friend Vince gets out of his car, and he said Nathalie we knew we were getting close to your house, when we started to see basketball hoops on the side of barns. And I, I remember my parents standing there with me, and we all just laughed. And I carried that memory with me for a long time, and I never really unpacked it until I was starting the small town leadership lessons. I'm like, what does that have to teach me about small town leadership. And what it reminded me of, you use what you have. I think right now we are all being called to use what we have, whether that be from a physical, you know, physical standpoint or from a mental standpoint, emotional standpoint, whatever it might be. This ability to pivot and use what we have and have agility is only going to get more important as we all move forward in time and identify what are in horrible term quote unquote new normal will be.

Peter Margaritis: Right, because I don't think we're quite there to the new normal. But I do believe we're at the now normal.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely and that's all we can. That's true.

Peter Margaritis: That's true. That's all that we can do, and the ability to be able to adapt to a very changing landscape is critical. And as we are talking through this, I grew up in Lexington, Kentucky, which was not a small, not as small as a Republic, but we weren't large by any means. And I'm going, Okay, so when I was 12, I was working in a restaurant. My father had a liquor store. Go figure. And I would work three days a week, cleaning up his back lot there. And that's back to the days, these guys who come through get their liquor, sit back there and talk and stuff, and I'm back to clean up their mess. It's not a dorm room, but it’s close.

Natalie Siston: There’s probably lots of similarities there.

Peter Margaritis: Yeah, very much similarities, and that is a critical part we will you do get your, your work ethic and what you do as well as I love the attitude. Just say yes. And do it because we all report to somebody. Why not say yes and figure it out, versus saying no.

Natalie Siston: Right, and then the day will come when you realize you can't say yes so much

or you know you're in a position where you can help other people feel empowered to say yes. And I think that's been something that as I've grown in my leadership over, over the years, is what I'm most proud of, and now I'm a coach and I help lead a team of coaches and help others become coaches and that's where that all comes in is when we can empower the people who work for us and with us to say yes and come up with the solutions and ideas. That's when magic starts to happen in any workplace we're part of.

Peter Margaritis: So, think about over the last I guess really since about mid March and we're recording this on June 12. So three months ago, when this all came down and we were, I don't remember which one of my guests. Actually, it may have been Ruben I who I interviewed said we get we got sent to our rooms and quarantined. As a coach, and you've got these people who were working in a building, who are now working from home with teaching their kids and husband home, wife home. How do you, how do you coach them through that massive of an immediate adjustment so that maintain their sanity?

Natalie Siston: Yeah, well, I don't know that we can take credit for helping people keep their sanity. But I think what we reverted to and what I've reverted to even in my own coaching practice is going back to basics. I think this is what the entire quarantine has taught me as we go back to the basics and from a coaching perspective, it's going back to the root level of what makes a good coach. And that is, building earning and keeping people's trust. Because if we can be tried in a trusting relationship. We can then say how we're feeling like, ‘Hey, Pete, I can't today because my kids have had me at my wit's end or I have I have stresses beyond what's the work assignment today and I just need some grace on that.’ If we're not in a trusting relationship. It's really hard to say that. And then we have to be, you know, completely active listeners. I mean, active listening right now in this moment in time. This moment in history has never been more important.

Natalie Siston: To be able to really, really listen between the lines. That's my terminology for what it means to be a really good active listener is maybe not the words, you're saying to me, but the inflection with what you're saying them or the body language with what you're appearing, if assuming we can do that the right way through Zoom. But getting people back to the basics of what they learned and 101 coach training is sort of where the magic happens. And I think we've also gone back to basics in our life and that's where this whole idea of sanity comes in. You know, I put a big post up on social media over the weekend that I live in a cul de sac with six houses, and generally have a good relationship with the set of neighbors. And then our friendly with everybody else. But until the pandemic hit. We never put chairs on our front porch, because we were so busy running. Going, going, going, going, that we didn't stop to actually have meaningful dialogue with our neighbors. And we've done that in a way during the pandemic that we haven't before, and that's made me really happy. That's what the small town leadership feel is to me. It's the pausing, getting back to basics and remembering what's really important.

Peter Margaritis: I did see that post that was really cool, and I love the fact that you talk about that we need become better active listening. The way the way I explain it is, we all have agendas and we all have biases, and it's pushing those agendas and biases completely to the side and not letting them be a distraction in your listening process. And truly, try to hear and understand what the other person is saying before, injecting back to them. And if we can do this in a civil manner because once we start say like, ‘No, and But,’ that evokes that emotion and what's those negative emotions go. Rational thinking flies right out the window.

Natalie Siston: Oh yeah, I mean, rational thinking is really hard for a lot of people right now because it's so unbelievably crazy, what we're going through from a pandemic to social unrest to economic stress. I mean, it's crazy. Like everyone's like, what's the, what's the next month going to bring? I think you've probably seen on your social media feed all the different all the different things that are that are happening and coming through that are like, is the volcano going to erupt? Is the snowstorm going to have it in August? And I wrote, I grabbed a paper behind me while you were just saying that. I was listening. I promise, Pete. It comes from, I believe, the mayor of Atlanta did an impromptu speech when protests started to break out in Atlanta. And one of the lines, she said, and this might not be exact so please don't take this as the full quote, but it's to the effect of...You aren't listening, if you aren't willing to change your mind with the information you've been given.

Peter Margaritis: Perfect

Natalie Siston: Right. I mean like Mike drop moment on that one, because, you know, from a coaching perspective, you know, the idea of listening is just baked in, and in coaching you have no agenda. You're not attached to the outcome. You're there to fully bring the ideas and gifts forward from the person that you're with. And I've never really thought about it from a mind changing perspective. You know, if you and I were in a coaching session right now would be your agenda be what you're working on and I'm not here to impart anything on you, unless that becomes necessary. And I'm like, “Hey, you know, Pete, I can think I can help you solve this quicker. Do you want that?’ And you'd say, ‘Absolutely.’ But this quote shifts that to say, wow, I want to enter into dialogue, I want to enter in a conversation because maybe the way I'm thinking about it isn't the way I want to keep thinking about it and I need someone to help me pivot that.

Peter Margaritis: Exactly. It's also to that point. It's also having the ability to change. Okay, let's call it change your mindset. But, really that’s,what it's all about. We have some old time beliefs, whether it's in our leadership style or social lifestyle. I have some friends of mine. We're not going back to the 80s. Have you looked at a picture of us from back in the 80s? We don't want to look like that again. But that whole value system and way business was done, and how it leaders reacted, doesn't work in 2020. Actually doesn't work…I've said in the 2000s, but we still have that mindset attached and grounded an anchor to the point that they don't want to listen.

Natalie Siston: And I think, I 'm going to make a pivot and it's gonna sound self- serving, but I think it's appropriate right now. Everything you're telling me is saying that we've been trained to do something that might not be inherent to us. We've been wired, and then rewired to show up as we've seen it happen before us. And that's not working anymore, and I completely agree with that. And so, I'm working on a project right now. It's a book project called *Let Her Out*, where the whole idea is we got to get back to that, in my mind, that small town girl. We have to get back to that person who knew authentically how she wanted to show up in the world. And she would be an amazing leader because she would just show up and kind of have no filter, and be vulnerable, and cry if it was what she needed to do, or shout if she needed to shout.

And not apologize for who she is. And I describe it as those little blocks that our kids play with where the little pegs and they beat it with a hammer. Until the peg goes through the whole, you know, then you push them back up and keep hitting the hammer. And as adults, we've just been like beat down like our pegs are all the way down and through and it's flat on top and we're doing everything because we've been programmed to do it the way we've seen it done before. And you know, I'm encouraging people to this work to like know push that peg back up and stand tall and get rid of the hammer. And be full out as your true, authentic self. Because that's not going to lead you wrong. It might. Yeah, it might push people off. You might not like people but least you're not covering. You're not hiding, not pretending.

Peter Margaritis: That's brilliant. And exactly. But in the world that we live in, and I'll just say the corporate world that we live in, you to act, look like everybody else. And I've always said I don't want to look like everybody else in this whole place would be boring. When I was at Price…. No, I was, I was working for a local firm here in Columbus, and it was during tax season. And I walked in on a Saturday I thought it had some fun. I was wearing a t shirt to said math is hard. One: Nobody laughed, Two: they didn't get it, and Three: They said, Don't wear it again. Okay.

Natalie Siston: And how much longer were you at that firm?

Peter Margaritis: Oh, I made it through. I started in January was gone in May.

Natalie Siston: See you made it through the tax season. You make sure the math is hard part and then you're like, ‘Yeah I’m out.’ Because you knew you weren't a fit, and I think right now what we have is we have companies who are finally, unfortunately, because of all the unrest because of the death of George Floyd, I think we're finding companies who are in a way that I've not seen. And I've been trained to lead unconscious bias sessions for the last three years. So, this is something I talk about regularly. But right, I don't think until right now are we giving voice to say, It's okay to be you. It's okay to show up in whether it's your skin, your belief system, your, whatever it might be. I think, I think, and I hope that this is kind of the way that we can allow you to show up with the Math is Hard T-shirt and it'd be like, “Thanks, Pete, for being who you are.’ And you know obviously, my hope is that this all is toward the end of having a more peaceful, just and equal society. And I'm hoping that that's… Hope is not a strategy, but I think it's what we need right now more than ever.

Peter Margaritis: So, what is your definition of unconscious bias?

Natalie Siston: Oh, gosh. So, you caught me there. It's actually really funny because I tell people, and I deliver unconscious bias sessions, I said it's actually really hard to describe unconscious bias because you don't know that it's happening. And then I play a great YouTube video for them. That's how I so speaker to speaker tip. That's how I get around it, but it's really those things you aren't aware of that maybe others do see, and they need to bring it to your attention, but they are truly the automated things that are happening in your brain. And it might turn into outward action, and you might not realize that it's doing any harm until it becomes a conscious bias. So ,there's always a continuum that I talked about in the session just going from the unconscious bias to conscious bias, and then you've got a choice to make. When you get to that point, you say, am I going to stay here or am I going to go into the place of inclusion, which is where all voices matter and all voices need to be heard.

Peter Margaritis: Right. And I've heard it related or defined as the blind spot.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely.

Peter Margaritis: What I don't see it at all. Everybody else sees it. And nobody's telling you about it.

Natalie Siston: Yep. You got it, and then until one day then that car and the other lane smacks you so hard that you wake up and you're like, ‘Wow, gosh, where they driving in my blind spot that whole time.’ And then all of a sudden you have your on high alert you have awareness and when we have awareness is when we can change.

Peter Margaritis: Most of the time, I still believe there's some people even when they see this now. It's a conscious bias, but that's just who I am. And I’m just going to say that I'm not going to change. Yeah.

Natalie Siston: Yeah. And I think for somethings, Pete, like that is completely okay. Like I show up to my sessions and say, ‘We are not here to change your mind. I'm not here to change your mind. I'm here for you to recognize that this is this is a belief system you have, then you're the one who gets to make the choice of whether you stay there or not.’ Because some things are conviction and will not budge. But some people will use those as eye opening a moment to say that's not how I want to be anymore.

Peter Margaritis: Right. And I've gone through in the past, some unconscious bias and they became conscious. And I went, I'm going to adapt to a new mindset and it takes a little bit of time. It takes a little bit of time, but it's… you know, we evolve as leaders we evolve. I always feel the best leaders are the ones that will listen. The ones that’ll take the information and make some type of decision on action. And in the sense of relating them to themselves, that when they see the landscape evolving into something different, to embrace the change. Learn from the change and apply the change and become a better leader.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely. We call that personal, professional growth.

Peter Margaritis: I call it the adaptive leader, which sometimes you just can't…They can't help themselves. What other tip from growing up in small town world? That you share with your coach-ese in to enact change.

Natalie Siston: One that is really powerful. And this is specifically when you're trying to talk to people about purpose. So when you're trying to talk to them about their *Why* that we hear so frequently talked about. I point people to the, the town motto and sign that stands in the this weird like three way intersection that happens in Republic, Ohio. There's no stoplights because that wouldn't happen in a town of 600. It’s a weird three way stop. So, it's a triangular sign. And when I was in elementary school there was a competition to write the town motto and come up with the town logo. And my sister's friend Michelle won both of those contests and the motto is Republic Ohio? Small in Size, Big in Heart. So, six words there, boom, smack in the middle of town, no matter which way you're coming, you will see that sign. And to me that's the sign that we all can have six words to connect to, or 10 words or 12 words. And we have to think about what's pulling us to our cause. And our mission. If we lead a team. How do you come up with those 6-7-8- 9-10 words for your team?

Natalie Siston: How do you come up with them, then for yourself? So that way you can see yourself fitting fully into that mission of the team. And if you're not feeling connected if you show up with the Math is Hard T-shirt, and you're like, maybe I don't belong here, then that's a great exercise to do to say, The team mission is X. My personal mission is Y. Can I connect the two? Sure. Great. And if you can't. That's a good sign that maybe, maybe I need to move to the next town over.

Peter Margaritis: Right. I don't know if you can see with this microphone in front me, but I'm wearing a t-shirt says, Be good to People.

Natalie Siston: I do. I see that.

Peter Margaritis: And a friend of mine from Cleveland. My friends, Don, and Bill Tomoff.

Turn me on to these. I saw they were wearing the shirt. I'm , ‘Oh my God would you get it?’ Then this person up in Cleveland has turned it into… it’s a foundation, turned into a wonderful business. And it's just so simple. I would wear it on airplanes. And flight attendants would always say, ‘Oh my god, I need to wear that. Oh, could you just walk up and down the aisle and just point at this.’ So, you know, just be kind to people. Why can't we just, I mean that's the foundation right there. Everything builds from that.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely. And I think growing up in a small town you see kindness manifest very differently than I see in Dublin, Ohio, which is a suburb, where I live right now. You know,

kindness manifests in not head nodding at the grocery store and maybe a way when you leave your driveway from with your car. But kindness in a small town manifests in… ‘Hey, our house burned down and we need a place to stay, or we need furniture. We need clothes or we need whatever.” And Boom, the next day, those things are at the door. I'm not suggesting that stuff doesn't happen in the suburban setting, but you don't really hear about it, unless it's really immediate to you. Whereas in a small town, it's those things just happen and come together. The way I like to say it is you could have a horrible fight with somebody during the day. And that night of tragedy would strike either one of you or your family's you'd be there for each other and you knew that would be genuine.

Peter Margaritis: Yes, yes, I've had a number of friends like that. We could have disagreements, or whatever. But in time of need, It wouldn't even be… Actually I'm experiencing one right now. A friend of mine stepfather passed, and I just learned about it this morning. What can I do to help? Just let me know I'm there. I know we're hundreds of miles apart. But we can figure it out. I can help some way. Yeah, and actually. So, I had to go get some blood drawn the other day, and with the social distancing and stuff. There are these chairs, and I was sitting in a one of them. I was, you know, doing like everyone else was doing, and looking at their phone. And I looked up and there's this woman just standing there. She checked in and she was leaning up against wall because there wasn't enough seats. So, I just popped up that please take my seat and she was, ‘No, no, I'm fine.’ I assume is older than I was, “Please take it my back’s bothering me. I need to stand anyhow.” And she goes, ‘We need more of that,” as she passed me. And I went, that is just how I was raised.

Natalie Siston: We back to basics, Pete, we're back to basics.

Peter Margaritis: Yes. And what a good circle that was we started with back to basics and we’re coming up to the end, and back to basics again.

Natalie Siston: Again, imagine that

Peter Margaritis: Go figure. It's so simple but it's so hard.

Natalie Siston: I know.

Peter Margaritis: So, what would you tell my audience or what would you, yeah, just tell my audience the most important thing, if you're starting at ground zero? We said we start at basics. Okay? But what is, what is the other secret sauce? In order to grow the starting from basics. I mean, I can say I can start, but there's got to be other motivation there for me to begin to instill that change.

Natalie Siston: Absolutely. I think that's where we bring in the concepts of empathy, compassion and acknowledgement. These aren't necessarily small town lessons. They're universal lessons, but I think I saw them demonstrated in a small town in a way that is very unique. But, you know, empathy is the idea of putting yourself in someone else's shoes, which can be dangerous, because we really truly can't put ourselves in other people's shoes. Very often, and Those who want to know more about this. There's a great Renee Brown video that's about three minutes long and she describes how empathy can work really well. So, I would leave it to that expert. Then you get to compassion, which is I can, I can have an understanding of what it feels like to be in your shoes, but I'm not going to try to put myself into your shoes. I'm just doing going to acknowledge and that's where we get to this point of saying, ‘Okay, Pete, I acknowledge that you're having a bad day you know anyone who's experiencing what you are might be having a tough time,” and then we talk about it and that defuses so much tension. It defuses shame, defuses this need to explain myself away when we can do that continuum of not really stepping in their shoes but just acknowledging their shoes are different and then saying it's okay to feel the way you feel.

Peter Margaritis: Wow what great advice. And I wrote that down empathy and compassion, Natalie. Once again, thank you so very much. Before we say goodbye, how can people find you?

Natalie Siston: Excellent. Thank you for asking. It's very easy to find me. I am Natalie Siston and small town leadership. You can find me on LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram with both of those handles and I invite people to connect with me there.

Peter Margaritis: Do you have a website?

Natalie Siston: I do SmallTownLeadership.com.

Peter Margaritis: Perfect now. Thank you so very much for taking time. I've enjoyed this conversation. And I'm looking forward to more future conversations with you.

Natalie Siston: Thanks so much, Pete.