



# Next Move Group

## We Are Jobs Podcast

with Special Guest: Garry Clark

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**Chad Chancellor:** Hello and welcome to this episode of Next Move Group's We Are Jobs podcast. Today, we've got Garry Clark with us and Garry is the economic developer in Fremont, Nebraska, but he's also an author of a book called *Unlikely Viking* which is about coming from the D.C. projects to rural Nebraska.

It's just a great book and I think you all are really going to enjoy getting to know Garry's story today. I know I've enjoyed it. So, Garry, thank you for being with us today. Why don't you tell us a little bit *Unlikely Viking*?

**Garry Clark:** Thanks for having me, Chad. *Unlikely Viking* is about my journey from D.C. to rural Nebraska. It's my memoir that came out. I actually ended up becoming a national champion at Dana College in Blair, Nebraska, believe it or not, and also breaking eleven records in total in my time there.

So, the story talks about just the rough upbringing that I had in Washington D.C. and all the opportunities and advantages I achieved and received once I got to a rural place, which I did not expect.

**Chad Chancellor:** So, basically you grew up in D.C. and you were good at track and as I understand it from the book, you really didn't know where you wanted to go, but you had prayed that you wanted to help people and you knew you wanted a different life than you had and next thing you know you are on an airplane to rural Nebraska where you've been offered a track scholarship.

Walk us through kind of your upbringing and how the fact that you were good at track got you to Nebraska and what you felt when you first got off that airplane in Nebraska when you landed.

**Garry Clark:** Yeah, when I was growing up in Washington D.C., we were in public housing and we were homeless a few times and so my upbringing was really rough, but in track and field at an early age I realized I had the talent and the gift.

In a roundabout way, my senior year I had a scholarship offer opportunity to attend American University in D.C. and that opportunity fell through and last minute sight unseen, I agreed to a provisional acceptance at Dana without a full scholarship or anything initially.

A flight took me to Omaha. It was my first flight ever and I tell you when we were landing, I had never seen a rural place before like that and the tears started to roll down my eyes when I saw that approach of rows of cornfields and whatnot, but it turned out to be a great experience because maybe a few months later I had a 3.9 GPA, I had opportunities to run track and field and the rest is kind of history.

**Chad Chancellor:** So, you grew up basically in the shadows of the White House, right? I mean, when we say D.C., you were right there.

**Garry Clark:** Yes, I grew up just-- not too far from North Capitol Street and a place they call Brooklyn Manor off of 14<sup>th</sup> street Northeast D.C. In my later years, we had moved to Southeast D.C. which was even rougher at that time with all the gang violence and shootings. So yeah, we were in the area that wasn't necessarily the tourist attraction site, but maybe 15 minutes away from the White House.

**Chad Chancellor:** So, talk about it-- In your book you say that at a time-- at a young age, you prayed that you wanted opportunity to help people. So, take us back to when you were a little boy and you really knew nothing about rural. All you obviously knew is what you saw every day. What was kind of in you to make this difference that led you to be who you are now?

**Garry Clark:** Yeah, so I experienced so much at that time seeing how my neighborhood was and how difficult it was in the '80s and '90s-- early '90s and I used to pray that number one, that my family would be safe from the conditions that we were in and number two, that I would have an opportunity to impact the community and that my life would have some meaning because I knew that I didn't want to stay in that cycle and I didn't want others to have to experience it.

So, luckily through those prayers, they were answered because I ended up getting a full scholarship to the university in Nebraska at Omaha for Urban Studies Public Administration and I get to focus on economic development. I get to focus on community development in my current job, so it's a blessing.

**Chad Chancellor:** I'm a big believer that sports can change people's lives like change the trajectory of their lives. So, if it weren't for being good at track, where do you think you would be? That's what got you to Nebraska. Have you ever thought to yourself what if I wasn't good at track? Would you still be in D.C. or do you think you would have still found your way to rural Nebraska somehow?

**Garry Clark:** I probably wouldn't have come to rural Nebraska. I probably would have been in some other field or needless to say, maybe I wouldn't have gotten out of that cycle of violence and drugs and crime. So honestly, sports were-- it was a gateway to another opportunity for me, another

way of life and it taught me the opportunities that could come from being on a team and how to be confident and meeting new people. So, a lot of things came out of just being involved in track and field and cross country.

**Chad Chancellor:** I'm drawn to your story. It's almost like the two of us have swapped places because I was raised in a very rural town in Mississippi and I was a good golfer. I just stumbled into golf. None of my family had played and had a talent for it. I got good at it and that world ended up really taking me to a big city. My first flight was in the golf world flying to Far Hills, New Jersey to work for the USGA, so I got the same-- opposite of you.

I went from rural to-- that kind of exposed me to the big world and so I'm very drawn to your story and I've often thought to myself that if it weren't for golf, I'm sure I would still be successful doing something, but I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. It's just funny how sports can open you up just to a whole new world.

**Garry Clark:** That's right.

**Chad Chancellor:** So, given the fact that you choose rural life, having been raised in a metro area you don't see a whole lot of people go from metro to the rural. Usually, it's the other way round. What is kind of your rural sales pitch, not just for Nebraska but obviously you have a passion for rural communities everywhere, so what would be your sales pitch to people as to why the rural life is a decent way to go about it?

**Garry Clark:** I think one of the key things that I have learned is that if you believe in rural places, if you've never experienced them and you are coming from an urban place, you're probably having a difficult time becoming a part of the community, but in a rural place they need you and there's opportunity directly to be a part of leadership if you have the tools to provide those services.

Also, rural places are very welcoming. They are one of the places where you can still have some of the awesome discourse with people that you'll ever have in life. So, I just found the richness of rural places, the history, the fact that you become neighbors so quickly and people like the stability that you can find in rural places.

So, my pitch to most people would be that rural places we are the place that is the foundation for the food source for most of the country and the world. We are the foundation for a lot of the

historical ways in which communities have come together and so everybody honestly Chad, has a rural background in their story. That's my pitch.

**Chad Chancellor:** I love it and I want to ask you one more question about your story then I want to shift how good of an economic developer you are because folks, we're talking to an award-winning economic developer, but I'm drawn to his story.

So, in the book you talk about reading a book called...about a Maniac Magee and how that book really changed you. So, tell us the story of Maniac Magee and how that works into your story.

**Garry Clark:** Chad, in 6<sup>th</sup> grade-- 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was living with my aunt and uncle for a year because my mother was actually on the street at this time and my father was in prison and so I had nowhere to go. I was having a tough year and my 5<sup>th</sup> grade school teacher gave me this book called Maniac Magee and it had this little young guy who was an orphan who was out on the street and all he had was these rough sneakers and he could run this really fast and he ended up going from Pennsylvania to an all-white community-- to an all-black community and impacting that whole community.

I just looked at my life at that time and I said, man, I can relate to this kid. Feeling like you don't have a home, but through meeting people that you could build your own home in some way and so that book changed my life at that time. It gave me the confidence that I needed to run track. It gave the confidence I needed to try and fight for a different lifestyle.

I actually got an email from the author of Jerry Spinelli-- who is Jerry Spinelli of Maniac Magee and Jerry Spinelli said, "Hey, I'm buying your book and I think it's a great story." So, it came full circle that a kid in 5<sup>th</sup> grade with nowhere to go really would link up with an award-winning author like that.

**Chad Chancellor:** Before we shift over to more economic development, tell these folks the name of your book and where they might find it if they are interested in it.

**Garry Clark:** Okay. So the name of my book is *Unlikely Viking: From the D.C. Projects to Rural Nebraska* and you can find it on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), on [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com) or at my website which is [clarkspeaks.com](http://clarkspeaks.com)

**Chad Chancellor:** All right and we'll get another plug in it before we end because I want to encourage people to read it. So, tell us about Fremont, Nebraska. I know you've won some awards there for some of the deals you've done and tell folks where it is, how big it is and some of the good stuff going on there.

**Garry Clark:** Awesome. So, Fremont is outside of the Omaha metro area. We're about a good 40 minutes from downtown Omaha, about 25 from the outskirts of it. We're Northeast Nebraska. Currently, a community of 26,000 people and our name and claim to fame has been just rural agriculture. We have always had a focus on food production. We used to have Hormel plant which is now WholeStone.

We most recently received an award for acquiring and accomplishing the gold project which is now Costco Lincoln Premium Poultry. They are adding 800 to 1,000 jobs and starting a launch of their facility this fall.

So, we became Community of the Year from the State of Nebraska Diplomats and then I recently with the help of some of my team we raised just about \$2 million for workforce housing funds, which garnered me the award of Midland's Business Journal's 40 under 40 award which was really awesome.

**Chad Chancellor:** Awesome. Well, I have to tell you I haven't been-- I went up for the College World Series in Omaha here a few weeks ago. My team is Mississippi State. Unfortunately, we didn't make it past Vanderbilt like nobody else did, but you guys are really leading probably the country on your efforts for housing.

Iowa also-- I spent some time both in Nebraska and Iowa while I was up there and I know both those states. They are really working hard on workforce housing. So, talk about how long you all have been doing that. Is that a new idea? Is this something you guys have been-- I just didn't know a whole lot about it until two-three weeks ago. So, is this something you've been working on for a long time or are these new ideas?

**Garry Clark:** Yeah. So, Chad, this is kind of a new idea for our organization. I came on two years ago and that burning platform was recruitment of big projects. It was the recruitment of going for

big projects and once you landed them you started to realize hey, this isn't the end of it. You've got to also have workforce. You also have to have housing.

So, when I came on, it was my job to create programs that would complement projects that we bring in. So, housing has only been a year and a half project, but in a year and a half, Chad, we've actually raised close to \$3 million. We've just added another \$1 million for low to moderate income housing through our organization and I think it's something that the State is taking up really quickly now.

**Chad Chancellor:** And are those grant monies you are getting or are you getting some private money? How are you raising that money?

**Garry Clark:** I've done a combination. We did a local-- I was able to raise private dollars up to just over \$1 million in a short span of three months and then we matched those dollars with the state funds which is about 800,000 that they gave us and then most recently with local options sales tax dollars I gave a pitch to the City Council and received an additional \$1 million and that was tied to some efforts that we needed to do for low to moderate-income housing and also flood relief.

**Chad Chancellor:** Wow! Talk about the floods. I was going to ask you about that. I know you all have had a lot of flooding up there and down where I live in New Orleans we get all that water and so we're having it too. So, talk about how you all are recovering from that.

**Garry Clark:** Yes. Unfortunately, none of us are immune to the flood issues in the U.S. and so my sympathies to every community that has to go through that. We most recently had one early spring and it actually impacted over-- about 1500 units in our community.

We had a housing study done in 2017 that said we needed to add about 1500 units and we'd be increasing our growth of the community by 2,000 and now we need to add an additional 1,000 units to offset those issues. We've been able to do that. We actually have about 1,000 units that are going into the ground now; apartments and single-family homes.

**Chad Chancellor:** I know there's a rural development organization that you're a member of the board. I think you might be in line to be chair on the executive committee. Talk about that organization and what you've learned through it.

**Garry Clark:** Chad, you're great man. These are great questions. The National Rural Economic Development Association which was established many years ago before my time, but they are partners with places like Touchstone Energy, a lot of the rural telco organizations and their goal is to create capacity, opportunities in rural places. So, I've been on the board for about three and a half years and I am currently the second vice president and I will be president in about a year and a half or so.

**Chad Chancellor:** So, part of our podcast series really is to let economic developers hear best practices in almost as a little training opportunity for them. So, you've won Community of the Year, Deal of the Year in rural Nebraska. You're on the National Rural Organization board to grow the economy. Your story is powerful. You choose rural America because you want to be there. So, what tips would you give? What have you learned I guess is the key to really having success in growing economies in rural areas?

**Garry Clark:** Well, I think the first thing is to be fearless in your ideas and concepts and to believe in your leadership team as well. We do a lot of things in economic development especially in rural places, but none of that is done without a good team of leaders, a good community to back you and you cannot take no for an answer sometimes. You have to continue to find solutions to the problems that exist in your community and I love that. I love that energy about the job, that every day it's a new opportunity to do something or impact something differently.

So, my first and foremost example and advice would be to never give up, always have that energy and vigor to impact a community and if you can do those things I think impacts and opportunities will happen in your community.

**Chad Chancellor:** I'd be curious to ask you when you talk about creating a pipeline of leadership in rural communities, so this is a weakness that I see as I travel the country. So, this is no community in particular, but I used to be an economic developer. I've been in this business now five years, so I still remember some of what I used to do.

One of the frustrations that I had and I see across the country is no matter how successful an economic developer is on an annual basis or every few years, we change their chairman. They have to deal with politics. There's a new mayor elected. Constant change! A good way to run any



organization-- look at the Pittsburgh Steelers. They've had the same coach, they've had the same owners for-- stability is the way you run any successful organization.

As I talk to folks in economic development in all my travels, one of their frustrations I see is even when people are successful, we are constantly changing who they answer to and how to structure and all this kind of stuff. So, what have you found is best practice for creating a pipeline of leaders so that when you do have a new chairman, that person comes in there and they have some knowledge or-- you know, you're not just totally changing horses every year. This really frustrates me for the whole country and I'm not picking on anybody in particular, but what are your thoughts on that?

**Garry Clark:** You know, Chad, you make a good point and my experience, I've lived in Gainesville and Newberry, Florida. I've lived in Washington D.C., but for the bulk of my career I've been in Northeast Nebraska and my first job as an economic developer here in Northeast Nebraska was at a place called Cuming County.

I was the county economic developer and I didn't start it from scratch. For six years I was there and I had the same board chair all six years and we worked behind the scenes to keep that entire board intact my entire six years, but when I left, that board kind of changed. They shifted. We had a lot of success with sustaining that board. Now, the key to it really is that you are not overworking your board leadership so that they--

**Chad Chancellor:** Never thought about that.

**Garry Clark:** Yes, that they are not inundated with emails and meetings and whatnot. That you spread it out so that you are having impact, but you're also not burning them out. Now, in my current role, we have had the same board chair for about-- almost three years, but he's going to rotate off, but now we've had enough time to build up a base of knowledge for that next president to come in and take leadership.

So, there are two ways to do this. One is to find people that are willing to stay on board a little bit longer than normal and another way is to make sure you have a committee that focuses on your policies and focuses on leadership growth.

**Chad Chancellor:** I love that. One of the things we do is executive searches and so we're often helping communities hire an economic developer after one has left or they let him go and you'll be shocked how many places I go where the economic developer was having some success and next thing you know they've got a new chairman, a new mayor, a new city manager and you can imagine--

I'm sitting and thinking this is no way to run something. Stability is how you build almost any organization. So, I love your thoughts on that. Garry, give these folks your book one more time. I want to encourage them to go out there read it and tell them how they can find it.

**Garry Clark:** Thanks, Chad. I will say one final thing about that policy thing though. You mentioned the county board and the city board and organizations. As long as these organizations that are economic development organizations focus on public policy, they can impact who's coming on as leaders too.

They can find *Unlikely Viking* at Barnes & Noble. They can find it at amazon.com as well as my website which is clarkspeaks.com and I'd really appreciate the support.

**Chad Chancellor:** clarkspeaks.com folks. I hope you all have enjoyed Garry as much as I have. I'm drawn to his story. I was drawn to his story before I found out what a good economic developer he was, but then seeing the stuff he's done, it just gives me great encouragement for all of rural America. So, Garry, thank you for being with us today. We really appreciate it.

**Garry Clark:** Thank you, Chad. I appreciate it, Sir.

[music]

**Chad Chancellor:** A special thank you to Younger Associates for recording, editing, and publishing this podcast for us. I encourage you to visit their website at younger-associates.com.