

Frederick Factor Season 2 Episode 2: The Participation Factor with Jason Lando

Ashleigh: Welcome to the Frederick Factor, my name is Ashleigh Kiggans, and I'm the host of Season 2. Everyone who's lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick, Maryland knows there's just something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible diverse community that continues to grow. Here on this podcast, we bring you Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight, share their stories with you, and find out: what's their Frederick Factor?

I am lucky enough to be here with the Frederick City Police Chief Jason Lando. Welcome.

Jason: Thank you so much for having me.

Ashleigh: You may be one of our favorite guests, but I do say that to everybody. <laughs> First of all, I want to talk to you a little bit about your background and what brought you to Frederick County. Of all the places -- you came from a larger city, from Pittsburgh. Why Frederick?

Jason: I was born and raised in Pittsburgh. I spent my entire career with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police -- 21 years. And as I got towards the end of my career, a combination of things led me to want to pursue a greater leadership opportunity. We're eligible to retire at 20 years. So in my 21st year, I wanted to start looking for some police chief opportunities around the country. I love the profession. I love working to bring police officers and community members closer together. Especially with some of the things we see going on around the country right now. I just thought that this is something I wanted to continue to do, but on a little bit bigger of a scale as a police chief. I interviewed at a number of police departments all around the country, and ended up three hours down the road from my own house. I always say everything happens for a reason. I'm really glad to be here. I feel very lucky. The community's been extremely welcoming. Frederick's a great city.

Ashleigh: I have to agree. I mean, Pittsburgh's a great city too. I got to spend a weekend there, went to a Pirates game, and I did enjoy Pittsburgh, but I have a soft spot for Frederick of course.

Jason: Of course.

Ashleigh: And so we got to sit together at a dinner and discovered that we knew probably the smallest town north of Pittsburgh -- Lake LaTonka, which is a lake community, and had the ability to talk there. And that's where I went right in to ask you to be my podcast guest -- because if you know Lake LaTonka--

Jason: Yeah, you wasted no time with recruiting me for the podcast.

Ashleigh: <laughs>

Jason: But yeah, it's crazy. It is such a small world. Who would've thought that we both knew this tiny little community an hour north of Pittsburgh?

Ashleigh: Every time I think about it, I think about Tonka trucks just because of "LaTonka." So you said you've already completed your 20 years and retired. How did you end up in law enforcement? Was it something, when you were younger, that you always wanted to be an officer?

Jason: Always. I've always wanted to be a police officer since I was five years old. There was just nothing else I ever wanted to do. My brother actually will tell the story that I got a set of toy metal handcuffs when I was a kid. And I say toy handcuffs, they had like a quick release on 'em, so you didn't need a key or anything like that. And I would routinely chase my brother around the house and handcuff him to whatever I could -- railings, you know. And so my brother and, and actually my whole family said, "We knew you were destined for this career." My mother would come home from work and find my brother handcuffed to things in the house. And, so fast forward, it was just always something. I think it was in my blood. I grew up next to one of the city police stations. I was in awe -- I'd see the police cars coming and going, and I had such respect for the officers and that they put their lives on the line every day to go out and make our city a safer place. And my mother, when she heard that I actually was going through with this, when I was younger, was terrified and forbid me from doing it. But now, my family's extremely supportive. I got to do a lot of cool stuff in my career. So now, the family's very supportive. And I'm the only police officer in my family. A lot of officers come from a long line of officers. Not me. I'm the only one.

Ashleigh: Also, I will make sure my kids don't listen to that first part where they get to hear about, hey, the police chief says it's okay to handcuff your sibling around the house. <laughs>

Jason: I mean, listen, my brother broke the rules of the house, so he had to pay for it.

Ashleigh: Did he become an attorney? <laughs>

Jason: No, we joke around that he said it took him a long time to get over that, but he's actually a mortgage broker in Chicago.

Ashleigh: Oh. So he's handcuffed in other ways. Right. Completely makes sense. So also, one of the things I wanted to ask you as well is, when you were looking at communities and choosing where you want it to apply, where you want it to go, what is important to you when you're looking at a community?

Jason: Well, I think open mindedness is really important. I really appreciate the way the community supports the police here. And also the fact that the police in Frederick do so much to support the community. And I say open mindedness -- maybe that's not the right word, but you see it around the country -- everyone's so divided right now. And almost like in some cities, the

police are on one side and parts of the community are on the other side and they see each other as adversaries. And there's a lack of dialogue and a lack of willingness to understand each other. And here, I just really haven't found that at all. Both sides really want to be open-minded and find out what the needs of the other side are. And I think that's how you make a successful community. We're all part of the community. And so I thought that was really cool to see here. Even the individuals that I have met in my time here that have not always agreed with the police are willing to have a dialogue and say, "Can you explain to me why the police do this, this, and this?" And, when you have that dialogue, it really helps bring people together.

Ashleigh: Yeah, absolutely. And I will second what you're saying. I've participated in the March for Justice for the last two years, and I've watched the marches obviously happen across the country. And there's something so nice about what we have here in Frederick: the participation that the police have and the community has. And seeing everybody standing around. I think one of the coolest things was last year we were all in the park and everyone was standing around talking. Those who were participating in the march, the police, and everybody was just kind of hanging out, talking. This is something you don't see in a lot of communities that you wish you could see more often.

Jason: Every academy class that comes through -- so far, there's only been two since I've been here, but this is something I did back home as well -- I ask for some face time with the new officers, because I want them to understand how important it is from day one start to build those personal relationships. That's the only way that we will stop painting each other with a broad brush, is if you go out in the community. You've got to get out of your police car and you know people and you know where they live and you know about them as opposed to just an us-versus-them kind of thing. So when you're at a march or a rally, and instead of the officers just standing on the perimeter, with their arms folded and their sunglasses on, but they're actually engaging the participants -- that helps both sides. It really does. And then it leads to smoother interactions out in the street when there are tense moments.

Ashleigh: Absolutely. So you and I actually have another connection because we're both in Leadership Frederick, I'm a graduate of class of 2018. And just so everyone knows, that was the best class ever.

Jason: Second best class ever.

Ashleigh: <laughs> That was one of the greatest programs. So I am a transplant to the area, have only lived here 10 years and came from Northern Virginia. Very, very different type of community and participated in the Leadership Frederick so I could learn more about the community, and learn more about the history. So I know in my experience, I was one of those people who would talk to people who would tell you, "oh my God, it's the greatest thing ever." And I'd be like, okay, "You're really drinking that Kool-Aid. Let's calm it down a little bit." And then after I finish my nine months, I literally walk around raving about the program, how great it was. So I am now on my Kool-Aid. So, how was your leadership experience since you guys just wrapped last week, I think, right?

Jason: Yeah, so our last session was last week and pretty much identical to what you just said. On day one when I got here, people were saying, "Hey, we would love for you to do Leadership Frederick County." And, they were just talking about it nonstop. Now, I actually had the benefit of being a presenter in Leadership Pittsburgh. So I knew foundationally what was going to take place. But, for me, having the opportunity to have a seat in the class, and really from my first few months here, being immersed in everything, getting to meet people from all different communities across Frederick and all different businesses and what-not -- it was a great way for a brand new person, especially a brand new police chief, to get to know the area pretty quickly.

Our class gelled really, really well. Everybody gets along. I don't know if your class did this, but we established social chairs and after every class, the social chairs designate where happy hour is gonna take place. And when I say the whole class shows up, I mean, the whole class shows up. So imagine you're down on Market Street and forty-five people show up at Brewers Alley. We can be a little overwhelming, but the group gets along really well. And, we said that even though it's over, we're still going to hang out together and continue the party.

Ashleigh: Well, we did not have social chairs. But we also didn't have the queen of social chairs that you and I both know was the one to really push that along. But we do get together. I'm very close to my Leaders on Loan group, but, okay -- you guys may have slightly one-upped us on that.

Jason: Oh wait, we actually two-upped you because we are going to be the first class that has a class yearbook.

Ashleigh: Oh gosh. <laughs>

Jason: Sorry. Best class ever over here. So if all you leadership Frederick 2022 folks are listening -- that's right. Best class ever.

Ashleigh: <laughs> . That's what they think. That's what they think. I am going to your graduation next week though just so I can really judge if this is truly the best class ever. Okay. But, we'll see. We'll see.

Jason: I don't know that another year's class person should be allowed to judge our class, but whatever.

Ashleigh: <laughs> We were the pre-almost-right-before-pandemic class. And you guys were the, right-after-a-full-pandemic-for-the-first-time class.

Jason: Actually on our education day, we actually had to go back to virtual just because that month, we were seeing a spike in cases. So for safety purposes we went back, but that was our only virtual class. Everything else was back in person.

Ashleigh: Okay. So outside of everybody telling you how great it was, what to you personally was important for you to want to participate?

Jason: Well I love the Leaders on Loan Project. I thought that it was really cool to take some of the things that we can bring to the table as leaders in the community and actually work on a project. I loved History Day. History Day was really cool. Economic Development day. All the days were great, but all of that stuff is for us. And so I thought it was really nice to be able to do a project that benefited someone else in the community. So I did Justice Jobs. And, I thought that was particularly relevant, given the fact that I'm in law enforcement, to work with Bob at Justice Jobs, where we're actually helping him to help people that have been incarcerated get back on their feet. That's something we see a lot in law enforcement -- we see the same people over and over and over again. And I say, yes, sometimes people need to be arrested. But there's usually an underlying issue. And, one of those things is poverty, unemployment. So someone like Bob who's helping people get back on track if we can be a part of that. And then, we don't have to arrest people because they now have jobs and you know, it's a cycle. And so it was really cool to be able to do a little something to give back.

Ashleigh: Yeah. I mean, you wake up with an actual purpose and routine and get that all established. That's really cool. I actually did not know anything about that nonprofit [Justice Jobs]. Are they new?

Jason: I don't think they're new. And since I'm probably the newest person here, I don't know how much longer Justice Jobs has been around than I have. I can't recall exactly when they were established, but [Bob can tell you]. He's extremely passionate about his work. And I want to say they've been able to place 190 individuals that were incarcerated and find them jobs, which is huge.

Ashleigh: Wow.

Jason: I just think back to my whole career, how many times I've encountered somebody that when you actually get to sit down and talk with them, whether you're doing an interview with them or after the case is over and you're talking to someone you arrested and they tell you their life story, there's usually so much behind what causes someone to turn to crime. And it's just cool that Bob has dedicated his life's work to addressing those underlying issues.

Sponsorship Message

Sophie: Hi, I'm Sophie from Platinum PR—Places Reimagined and we're the creators and producers of the Frederick Factor. We're also the sponsors of Season 2. For over two decades, the Platinum PR team has helped economic development and tourism organizations discover their potential, attract new investment and tell their community story. Would you like our team of talented professionals to help you reimagine your place? We'd love to hear from you. Find us at www.platinumpr.com or click the link in the Show Notes. We're also looking for sponsors of future episodes of the Frederick Factor. If you're interested in sponsoring future episodes, so

your business organization can be featured in a message like this, email us at info@frederickfactor.com to find out more. Happy listening.

Ashleigh: So now that you've had at least a year, what are some of your goals for the community for the next few years?

Jason: So I think in year one and in the first few months, [I] was really just doing a lot of listening to the officers, to the civilian staff, to the community, and just trying to figure out what are we doing really well currently? And then what and where could we improve? The one thing I wanted to be cognizant of was not coming from Pittsburgh and saying, well, this, this is what we did in Pittsburgh, so let's just do it here because it's a very different city. So you don't want to do that. And one of the things we noticed here was that we are lucky to -- I say lucky, that's probably the wrong word. There's a lot of work that goes into it, but we have a very low violent crime rate here, which is great.

But there is a significant issue here with mental health, mental illness. So one of the things we were able to do in the first year was to create a program that has come to be known as the Crisis Car. And that is a Frederick City police officer, an EMT or paramedic from Frederick County Fire Rescue, and a clinician from Sheppard Pratt. And it started as a 4-hour pilot Monday through Friday. We recently expanded to eight hours a day. So the car runs 40 hours a week right now, from 1:00 PM to 9:00 PM, and they go out in the community and they deal with calls involving people in mental health crisis. And so if I had to say, was there one thing I was most excited about or most proud of? That would be it, because it helps everybody.

It helps the individuals that are in crisis. It lessens the likelihood that we'll have to use force on them or take them to jail because you have in real time, a clinician out there, a medic out there. And it really helps our keep our officers safer as well. When you have someone in a crisis situation and an officer shows up, I believe they are well-intended, but they're probably not always the best person to deal with that type of issue. And sometimes, as you see across the country, sometimes those mental health crises result in an ugly use of force situation. So it [supports] our officers -- their own health and wellness -- as well as the people that we are serving. So having that program up and running, I thought is really cool.

Right now, we're in the middle of doing a three-week leadership and professional development training for our department. So, as we're sitting here talking, we have an instructor who came. We brought him in from Washington State, and he's spending three weeks with about 50 police officers and firefighters. We were able to open up some spots to our partner agencies and they're doing a professional development thing. We have to offer top notch training if we want a top notch police department. So this year coming up, we have a couple other things in the works and we're getting ready to do a public announcement on them so I don't want to say them here. But we have a couple things that are really going to go towards building better relationships between the police and the community, which I have to say in Frederick, we already have a pretty awesome relationship, but it'll just go to further.

Ashleigh: That's awesome. I'm the incoming chair for the Mental Health Association for the Board of Directors. And, one of the reasons I actually got on the board to begin with is because I come from a family with a long [history] of mental health issues. My brother was bipolar growing up. And so having to deal when he would get into those encounters, and having to unfortunately call the police. He's 6'7" now, so even when he was younger, he was a tall black man and in Prince William County, Virginia. So, [I witnessed police] not knowing how to handle those situations and their first reaction is to restrain him, violence, things like that, when really it just needed to be: how can we assess it, calm it down, things like that.

So when that program started, I felt so personally happy to see that because of having that background. [I'm grateful] to not have people go through all of the things that he went through because eventually it does take its toll and it's traumatizing on them too as well. It doesn't help the mental state. It actually ends up deteriorating it and hurting it. And then they have a fear of police and all of that and think that they're always out to get them and that they never want to call [the police] when they're in need of help.

So, like you said, I think having a mental health professional also helps the officers. Now they've got someone who knows how to handle this situation and when they really need to step in. So grateful for you to have that. I truly, truly appreciate that. So you kind of touched on this already, and I don't know if you can really answer this, but, how can we continue to promote those connections, obviously between the police and the city and even underrepresented groups and minority groups?

Jason: So actually, so there is another program that is already out there, so it's okay -- it's no secret. It's not something coming up. It's something we started last year. So we started what's called a multicultural liaison unit. We've identified five communities across Frederick. Now, my disclaimer is: we realized there's far more than five communities, but we really wanted to pick the five most prevalent communities in Frederick where we thought could benefit from a liaison officer. And so we identified our African American community, our Hispanic or Latino community, Asian American, LGBT community, and our deaf and hard of hearing community. And we have seven liaison officers assigned to those five communities. And, it's in addition to their regular patrol duties. They make regular connections and make regular check-ins with businesses, community, organizations in their specific community. So when issues arise, we realize sometimes there is still fear. People have a fear of calling 911 for whatever reason. And so they now have a liaison officer that shows up at their community center. They know that they can connect with that person. So we always want someone to call 911 in an emergency, but we realize if there is a fear of calling 911, we at least want them to know that there is an officer that directly works with your community. So thankfully, we've had nothing too crazy. But we've had issues arise. We were able to use that liaison officer to finesse that situation and get the information we needed and help the person. So I think it's pretty cool to be able to have officers that are kind of representatives of specific communities and there's that trust-building factor.

Ashleigh: Yeah, absolutely. Now with the communities where other languages are spoken, can those officers either understand or speak their language?

Jason: Our two officers that serve as our liaisons to our Hispanic and Latino communities both speak Spanish and our officer assigned to the Asian American community speaks fluent Mandarin. And so it was pretty cool. So when Officer Nick Elward met Elizabeth Chung from the Asian American Center, within a few seconds they were speaking Mandarin to each other. And I was like, "Well, I guess, I guess you don't need me here." <laughs> But it was just cool to see them instantly make that connection. And, I know that, uh, Elizabeth raves about Nick and all the organizations that have that liaison appreciate the fact that they have someone directly connected them. Corporal Geysler's connected to the Frederick Center, and they know that when there's a special event or a security issue in the community, they can reach out directly to Corporal Geysler. And so I think that those individuals appreciate that they know a face.

Ashleigh: Absolutely. Just a uniform. Well, I never realized how large of an Asian community we had here in Frederick until I met Elizabeth [Chung]. And, she will not let you forget it. And that's what I love about her. And so I know she was probably thrilled to not only have an officer, but to have someone who was fluent in Mandarin who could communicate with those in the community.

Jason: She has so much energy. It's kind of funny. We were going to the food distributions last summer and she's just so much energy -- it was great to see.

Ashleigh: I believe she actually was a Season One guest on the Frederick Factor too as well. She and I were in a Minority Leadership Program together last year. So, that's our special plug for Elizabeth Chung because she's awesome. So, wrapping it up, we ask this to all of our guests: what is your Frederick Factor? What makes Frederick Frederick for you?

Jason: So I would say it's tough to put your finger on it, but there is just this sense of community here that I've really never seen anywhere else. Like I said, born and raised in Pittsburgh -- I love Pittsburgh. My whole family's still there. I enjoy going back to visit. But here, it's like everybody's interconnected. Just this morning, I was asked to attend an awards presentation at the Carroll Creek Rotary and I walked in the room. Now I've only been here 14 months. I walked in the room at 7:00 AM, absolutely packed with people. And I knew, I would say, 50% of the people in my short time here because everyone's so engaged and everyone's so connected and everyone supports each other. A good amount of my Leadership Frederick class was in there. And just a number of community organizations and everybody just wants to support the good work that everyone else does. And I would say that's the secret sauce: that everyone's so engaged.

Ashleigh: Yeah. I call it the huggy town. Yeah. Frederick is the huggy town. It's the place where, if you've met someone twice, you will hug them constantly. Wait 'til holiday season when you go to holiday parties and you see all the same people back to back to back. You hug 'em like you haven't seen them in forever. It's the huggy town.

Jason: I'll just end with this. Yesterday I put a kind of a funny Mother's Day post [on Facebook]. I always give my mom a hard time because she's still trying to mother me at 45 years old.

<laughs> And she was in town this past weekend. And so I put a funny post up and I literally walked out of my house and I'm walking down the street and the neighbor sticks their head out at their door and they're like, "Oh, hey, I loved your Facebook post." <laughs> And I said, where, where else does that happen? So, it was pretty. That really made me think about how tight-knit Frederick is.

Ashleigh: Well, I want to thank you so much, Chief Lando, for being a guest on here, for allowing me to talk you into it while you probably had a mouthful of food at dinner and for agreeing to do this. I truly appreciate it and I'm very excited for the work that you have already done in the work you continue to do in Frederick. So please know that we are all very grateful to have you.

Jason: Thank you so much for having me.

Ashleigh: Yeah. Awesome. This is Ashleigh Kiggins, wrapping up on Frederick Factor.

You've been listening to the Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community that makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at www.frederickfactor.com. 'Til next time.