Business Better (Episode 44): Economic Development Trends in Nevada with Robert Rippee, Executive Director of UNLV's Black Fire Innovation Hub

Speakers: Scott Marty and Robert Rippee

Scott Marty:

Welcome back to Business Better, the podcast designed to help businesses navigate the new norm. I'm your host, Scott Marty, a registered patent attorney and member of the Intellectual Property and Higher Education groups at Ballard Spahr. Ballard Spahr is a national law firm with clients across all industries and across the world. I spent the last 18 years working alongside higher education clients and watched higher education institutions continue to invent and develop new ways to grow economic development both on and off campus. This episode is part of an ongoing podcast series where we visit with different leaders trying to grow economic development in their areas or regions of interest. We will discussing new initiatives, new models, the interest and investment in technology parks, incubators, and accelerators, as well as other creative economic and development platforms being implemented throughout the country.

Scott Marty:

This episode features a discussion of some amazing new programs and initiatives being implemented in connection with the University of Nevada Las Vegas, as well as the surrounding Nevada/Las Vegas area. Again, my name is Scott Marty, and I'll be leading the discussion today. I'm honored today with my guest Robert Rippee. Robert is the executive director of Black Fire Innovation Hub at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and UNLV Incubator, powered by Hughes Center, as well as the... Robert also serves as the director of Hospitality Innovation Lab, and director of E-sports lab, so he's got a lot going on out there in Las Vegas. Before his tenure with UNLV, Robert was a senior vice president of marketing for the Venetian Resort in Las Vegas, and Las Vegas Sands Group. And before that, even more close to my heart, faculty at the University of Georgia. Go dogs. Welcome, Robert.

Robert Rippee:

Go dogs. Thank you, Scott.

Scott Marty:

Thanks for joining me today. I'm really excited to hear about some of the things that you've had going on. I know we've had the opportunity to spend some time together pre-pandemic, but it's been about almost a year and a half since we've really had a chance to sit down and chat so I'm excited about having this platform so that you can not only share it with me, but can share it with a broader group of listeners. So, as I rolled through some of your experiences, and you and I've talked about this a little bit in the past, you've run this gamut of different... from marketing, to faculty, to innovation, to running Blackfire now, all that experience, how far do you think we've come with economic development in just the last few years that you've seen things happening there on campus?

Robert Rippee:

It's a great question. I think it begins with the pandemic. We were probably moving along at a pretty good clip. We were developing new facilities. We were launching new programs. We were beginning to accelerate the efforts towards economic development and all of the things that support that in an academic environment. The pandemic, obviously, slowed everything and, in some cases, brought it to a screeching halt. There were several months where we mothballed the entire facility and everybody went remote, classes went remote students went back to their homes, et cetera. And that kind of stopped

everything. It really curtailed activity. It's very difficult to do active learning and run active labs when you can't have a lab. You can't do that on a video platform.

Robert Rippee:

And then the pandemic ended, or didn't end, but started to subside, and some normalcy returned, and that included opening up our facilities. Since the growth and the rate of vaccinations over the past few months, the activities have just, they've virtually grown exponentially. And part of that is due to the focus of some of the subject areas that we look at in innovation, hospitality, gaming, tourism, entertainment. Others, I think, it's just been a general awareness that maybe there's a better way to do things in no matter what industry you're in, and that's driven bigger questions that ultimately result in these activities to support that economic development.

Scott Marty:

So, with this pickup, and maybe we take one step back, I'm referring to Black Fire as if every listener knows what it is. Maybe you can share a little bit about what Blackfire is, where it came from, what the goals and how it manifests in a way to tie in to these economic development platforms that you just shared with us.

Robert Rippee:

Yeah, that's great. I'd love to. In a sense, the simplest way to think of Black Fire is a place, a place where innovative activities are supported, and those innovative activities may come from campus, from students and faculty, they may come from a corporate need in a particular area that they can't solve a problem and their vendor relationships doesn't solve the problem. Or it may be coming from an entrepreneur who's got an idea, that they've identified some kind of problem facing innovation and they don't know how to scale it. So, Blackfire was created as a place where those things could happen.

Robert Rippee:

It originated in a conversation, actually, that I was having over a pizza lunch one day with a prominent CIO of one of the gaming companies who was CIO at the time. And we're friends, and we're just talking, and he mentioned the need for their company to have an R&D facility since they didn't have one. And it's very difficult in these large hospitality and gaming companies to do R&D because they're so busy. Their facilities, a typical hotel pre-pandemic on the Las Vegas strip would run an occupancy, annual occupancy, of over 90%. They're full all of the time. There's no opportunity. The opportunity cost of trying to do some innovative activity was prohibited. So, their idea was, "Let's build an R&D facility where we can take some of these problems that we know we face and apply innovative, new thinking to solving them."

Robert Rippee:

And at the same time, the gentleman who, at the time, was the director of the economic development for UNLV had told me of an idea to build a innovation lab facility at the Harry Reid Research and Technology Park, a big parcel of land that he owned in Southwestern Las Vegas. And I put those two together. I said, "Wait a minute. You're on parallel paths trying to achieve similar goals. I'm going to introduce the two of you and see if there's an opportunity for you to collaborate on this." And that's exactly what happened. So, big company met big university, and together they created something that neither one of which had and solved, potentially created the environment for solving problems for both.

Robert Rippee:

And so, Blackfire started as this idea where innovation would meet research and development, which would meet technology transfer and partners would come in. Some of those, this big company brought their suite of vendors which included big names in technology and brought them to the table where they would play either a sponsorship role or a direct role in providing technology or funding or expertise to help accelerate innovative ideas. University, on the other hand, has this portfolio of ideas, which can come from students who are working on projects in a design class or an engineering class or an architecture class, and they need those resources. Or it could come from faculty who are conducting research on a specific

type of technology and they discover that there's a marketable outcome of that, as well, and it needs a place within which. So, Blackfire became that place where all of those different activities could actually happen.

Scott Marty:

It's really an interesting environment, for someone coming from the Southeast out the Nevada/Las Vegas area, and learning about the Gaming Institute to learn about the Hospitality Innovation Lab, to learn about the e-sports, all those initiatives which, I guess in hindsight, seemed to make sense because you're in the middle of Sin City there with hotels and restaurants, and that innovation has to come from somewhere. And it sounds like, here, you had the right big partner looking for the same thing, like you said, that this big university tying those two things in. Once that was put together, and again understanding the pandemic brought it to that screeching halt, as you're seeing the trend now moving out of that, where are you seeing those innovators coming from? Are they still focusing in the hospitality, gaming, e-sports arena? Is that still where you're seeing? Or is it the quick tech app approach? What are you seeing coming through Blackfire?

Robert Rippee:

So, most of what's coming through is actually problem-facing innovation, which is the theory by which I base all of my coursework, is that begin with a problem, identify a problem. It doesn't matter the vertical industry you're talking about, but identify a significant problem that, if solved, could scale potentially beyond the original company. And so, much of the innovative thinking that I see coming through Blackfire in the projects that are being proposed and pitched are all beginning there, they're beginning with a problem solution, rather than simply saying, "Here's a new technology we've recreate, now go find a use for it." That was kind of the model pre-pandemic, and we did see a lot of that. It was like, "Oh, look at this new robot we built. Isn't this nice look? Help us figure out a way to take it to market." well, okay, we'll try.

Robert Rippee:

But again, one of the things that I think pandemic has forced upon us who think about this sort of thing, is to reverse that thinking and say, "Okay, what are the problems that are constraining growth, recovery, et cetera?" And we'll deal with hospitality, gaming, tourism for now because it just happens to be a big topic here, as you mentioned. Let's start there and let's take those major problems, find the solution. Now, that solution may include the integration of some emergent technology. And now we've connected those two, right? We've connected the problem with this emergent technology for an application, and that will take root very quickly because now you've got the interest of big company saying, "Hey, you're going to solve this problem for me. You've got my interest," rather than coming to them and saying, "Oh, we've got this interesting new technology we invented. Would you like invest in it?" Those are two very different paradigms.

Robert Rippee:

And that first one is one that's been heightened because of the pandemic recovery across the board. Nearly every day I'm either in a Zoom or I'm on a phone call with some entity that is in that space. Like it could be a big company. It was a small boutique hotel company this morning I was talking to. Yesterday it was a larger one. And the day before that, a learnage management company. So, it varies, but it all begins with these very significant strategic problems that they're facing, and now have the opportunity to change status quo with new thinking and new ideas.

Scott Marty:

That's interesting because a question I've asked a lot of my guests through here is do they see a current emphasis from the investment community? Because I think they're the latter of the two platforms, which is we have an interesting tech, where can we seek investment? And with the program that you're identifying, it's like... Is it a mischaracterization to say the investor is the one who's investing in... providing you with a problem to solve? Because would they then in turn fund the project or get involved in the project that way to where some of the resources are actually coming from the entity providing you with a problem to solve?

Robert Rippee:

Well, yeah. That's one path, and that's co-creation. Right? So, co-creation, definitively, is the end user or the client is the one investing in the solution because it's their problem. Right? They just don't know how to solve it. If you find and identify those entrepreneurs or that technology that will help them solve it and deliver that to them, they're standing there with a purchase order. Right? So, that is a great... That's what I'm referring to in saying with the emergence from the pandemic, that type of activity has accelerated. The other model where you have a group of investors, be they VC, Angel, whatever, that are just sitting here looking for interesting ideas that they think can scale into a vertical and they want to invest it, that's still there. I'm just saying the prior one now has become much more prominent because these problems have emerged in saying, "We need help. We don't know how to figure this out. And if you can come up with a solution, we'll buy it. We'll invest in it." So, I think that that has emerged to a much greater degree than it existed pre-pandemic.

Scott Marty:

So, I know when we started the conversation as far as the impetus for Blackfire, at least in large part, because of that main driver, co-partner that you have being in that gaming and hospitality and tourism realm was where, at least in the early years of Blackfire, that's where we saw a lot of the innovation taking place with some fun... I mean, there were some fun e-sports and gaming going on there in the stadium that you have there at Blackfire, which I encourage if you're ever out there, you should take a look at it. It's really something to see. But you mentioned just a few moments ago, robotics. And so, this trend of coming out of the pandemic and, granted, the examples that you've given so far have still been in that hospitality/tourism, but you mentioned robotics, what do you see on that platform now?

Robert Rippee:

So, on the one hand, you see the effect of the pandemic on the technology startups that were in the robotics space. They were falling like flies. Right? They couldn't sustain themselves when they're developing an advanced technology for which the applications and the customer base was still vague. On the other hand, you have pretty significant demands now from an industry, and let's take hospitality for example, where you can go on any news site right now and see that they are facing critical labor shortages. And so, they're facing this growth in demand and not being able to fulfill it because they've got labor shortages, labor shortages, in many cases, that can be ameliorated or partially solved through technology like robotics. So, now, you suddenly have a need for a technology that three years ago people would look at and go, "Oh, that's nice. That's interesting technology. I'm doing perfectly well with what I've got. Why do I need that?"

Robert Rippee:

Today it's like, "I got a massive labor shortage. I need something that will enhance labor efficiency. What can you deliver?" And maybe that labor efficiency can be affected by something that affects redundancy or precision in a task. Well, that's definition for what robots do really well: redundant, precise tasks. And so, now, you see there's this conversation about, "Wow. Now suddenly that's a topic that has traction." And if you're in that field and you survive the pandemic, you may just find that there are customers now who say, "Look, if you deliver your technology that can do this, I'm buying, because I'm at a critical point right now. I don't know what else to do. I'm running out of resource that I used before: people. And I need help."

Robert Rippee:

And labor is a critical one. The discussion is not about replacing humans with robots. The discussion is, "I can't find enough humans. I need something or I've got to curtail my supply. I've got to restrain what I can actually sell because I can't do this. I just don't have no people. Can't hire them, can't find them, whatever." So, I think that's the driver that has changed the environment around this discussion specifically around robotics, but that also applies to other areas of tech as well.

Scott Marty:

So, when someone brings an idea like that to you that says, "We have a lack of manpower, we need to automate something," putting the Skynet of the Terminator, fears aside for a moment, where's that expertise coming from? So, where are the people who innovate on that robotics side? Where do you find them? Where do they come from? How do they find Blackfire?

Robert Rippee:

Okay. Let's deal with the academic piece first since that's what I'm closest to. A, the simplest aspect is I teach an innovation lab at UNLV, so my students are multidisciplinary. I have engineering students, I have sciences, I have social sciences, and I bring them all together in my lab and I present them with problems. And they, in turn, come up with innovative solutions. That's one path. Another path is to actually go to the colleges and you go to the College of Engineering, say...

Robert Rippee:

At UNLV for example, we've got a fantastic of College of Engineering, one of the best in the country. And as part of the curriculum there, if you're an undergraduate student in engineering, you complete a senior design project as the capstone of your academic curriculum, and that project is some kind of technology that you come up with with either yourself or a team, most often it's a team, and you spend a period of time researching it and a period of time actually building it to prove it. So, that is one area where you can take these problems and say, "Hey, here's a real world problem. Work on it. Come up with a solution." And you might come up with a new career path for yourself. You may define your own destiny post-graduation. So that's the academic side.

Robert Rippee:

The community side is more industry-driven, and that's where the individual companies would say, "Hey, we've got this problem, we're working on it, we need some help. We don't have expertise in data science. Can you connect us with expertise in data science from campus that will work with us on our project?" And that can happen at a place like Blackfire.

Robert Rippee:

And then, the third, of course, as I mentioned very early on, is the entrepreneur. It's the startup that has been out there with some smart people who came up with a good idea, and now they're trying to attract some investments so they can scale and enter a marketplace or grow in a marketplace. And they may find an opportunity with us, it's a little more challenging because they have to have some kind of relationship with us first, so we have to figure that out. How do we have a relationship? We're not just a public library that you can come in and start using our facilities. It's like, we'd have to have some kind of formal relationship. It'd be either as part of a program or as part of an alliance for some of the services we offer. So, those are the three primary means by which those ideas can take root, become companies and go to the marketplace.

Scott Marty:

That's interesting. I think, overall, it sounds like it's a pretty interesting ecosystem that's out there. Right? And one that folks like yourself are connecting the dots. Right? Is just kind of...

Robert Rippee:

Ecosystem is a very good word because it is what you're building. You're building a series of connected but separate components that define the entire machine that takes inputs and produces outcomes, those outcomes being commercially viable products or services. And there are different parts. There are academic parts, there are corporate parts, there are research parts, there are technology company components. There's a capital part. You need money to do all of these activities. And so, you take all of those and say... You have to build all of that first, and that's, as an entity at UNLV, that's what we've been doing, is building all of the resources and the facilities in order to do those things.

Scott Marty:

So, with all these balls that you're constantly juggling, between your responsibilities at the university, your responsibilities to students, your responsibilities at Blackfire, you get an opportunity to... Again, to use the word once more, is the ecosystem. In the ecosystem you have now, what do you think out there in Nevada or in Las Vegas that you think you have? And then where do you think that there's still a need for what you're doing? Is it the funding side? Is it the tech side? Is it the development side? Where is it that you have it? And then where is it that you need it?

Robert Rippee:

So, what we have are certain resources that are very difficult to replicate anywhere else in the world. So, at surface level, when you say Las Vegas to someone, people think, "Okay, gambling and entertainment." Right? "I go there for a weekend." They don't realize that nearly every industry has their biggest trade show in Las Vegas, so every industry comes to Vegas for business purposes. And it doesn't matter what it is: data science, automotive, manufacturing, technology, they come here to showcase products and make sales and meet. So, A, you have a confluence of industries that are going to be here. That's a very powerful incentive to also be here innovating, because you could have potentially access to them.

Robert Rippee:

Second thing is that we think of these large companies that are based in Las Vegas that are on the strip as these gambling companies. Right? Or hotel operators. Yet, they are much, much more than that. These are data science companies, these are leading edge technology companies, these are entertainment companies on a scale most people can't even begin to imagine, and then they are also hospitality and gaming companies. So, that definition of what they are is very broad.

Robert Rippee:

That being said, it gives the opportunity to innovate in multiple areas, data science for example. Who can you think of that have loyalty programs with hundreds of millions of members? Gaming companies. Who can you think of who deal with gaming? Gameplay, not just gambling, but gameplay on a daily basis. Gaming companies. Who deals with cyber security on the scale of that is unimaginable, except in governmental agencies? Gaming companies. Who deals with payment systems? Gaming company. So, my point is that they are much bigger than simply the stereotypes we place on them. And because they are mostly headquartered right here, being here puts you in proximity to them for development, for co-creation, for resources, for investment, and for clients, for potential customers, for whatever it is.

Robert Rippee:

So, I think what Southern Nevada and Blackfire and everything that's happening here in our ecosystem offers is access to all of that in one place. It's pretty hard to find a place where all the major banks in the world are located. Yeah, there's a lot of them in New York with different divisions, but all of the gaming companies are here in Vegas. They're all big in entertainment. They're all being in retail. They're all big in data science, they're all big in loyalty. They're all big and payment-less casino projects. So, you've got all of those different verticals all co-located here. Plus, guess what? As I said, all those verticals come here for their trade shows, so all of the players in there are going to come here at some point during the year.

Scott Marty:

So, what are you missing, then?

Robert Rippee:

Capital. You're always short on capital. You're always chasing it. And that's one of the immaturities of this ecosystem, is it has not developed the level of investment capital that other... Take Silicon Valley, take Austin, take Atlanta, the Research Triangle Park, whatever it is, you look at those, they have very mature investment infrastructure. Right? The money is there because they know that the ideas are there. We're building the ecosystems, or have built the ecosystem for the ideas; the investment

ecosystem is not yet here. It needs to catch up. And it will when we begin to produce these products and we begin to produce the outcomes that attracts their attention.

Robert Rippee:

I mean, we've had, at Blackfire, we had a PE company move in a few months ago that were looking at Las Vegas. So, it's beginning to work, but it's not at the level we need yet. It's still hard for a scaling up startup to find capital here in this area. They can find it somewhere else, but they're in all likelihood going to say, "Well, why are you in San Francisco? Why are you in Las Vegas?" And it's like, "Well, lots of reasons but..." I think that's the piece that we need a lot more attention on. And there is a lot of effort. Don't get me wrong. It's not like we're just standing by and waiting for it to happen. There's a lot of people who are putting concerted effort in developing the resource of investment capital as well.

Scott Marty:

I think young companies and young techs are always chasing the dollar. Right? And so, I think even when you're in the Silicon Valley or you're in the Boston or Atlanta or Austin, or the Silicon slopes up in Utah, that you're still, even if it's there, you're still chasing it. But I think it's an interesting thing to think about because the Austins weren't always the Austins. Right? Something had to have that trigger, and perhaps Blackfire is the fuse that needed to be lit to really shine a light on everything that you've shared. You have the technology and areas that are unparalleled to anywhere else in the world, to have that confluence of players and opportunities and access to, I can only imagine, millions of people who roll through Las Vegas for something other than a vacation. But I've had the opportunity to be at CES and I've seen things where it just takes over three or four hotels and it's just technology everywhere. It's-

Robert Rippee:

Three or four? It takes over all of them, Scott. There's 250,000 people come into the city for that show. It takes over all the hotels. Everyone here practically is here for CES. Most people just don't have the optics to just how big and how much of that happens in this city. But there's very few places where you find that confluence of all these vertical industries having their major annual trade shows in one location. They're right here, and for good reason. This is a good place to have it. We have the logistical capacity to handle them.

Scott Marty:

And the airport, you got this super easy international airport there. So, if we can switch gears for a moment, and we've talked a little bit about students, maybe you can share some of your experiences. And if I understood correctly from another conversation that I had, that you're involved with the Student Innovation Center as well, did I hear that right?

Robert Rippee:

Yeah. Yeah. I'm actually sitting in it right now. We are in the process of finishing it. It's not quite done. We're still waiting for some of the equipment to come in. It's all been delayed because of the post-pandemic supply chain issues that everyone is facing, so we're waiting on some classroom tables, things like that. But yeah, this is a facility that we've called the UNLV Incubator powered by Hughes Center. And the powered by Hughes Center is interesting because this is a collaboration with Blackstone, who has, through their subsidiary company Hughes, which is a big office park very close to campus in Las Vegas, has made an arrangement with UNLV for use of this facility for an incubator. And the specifics on it are that we would design this incubator that would take that technology that's coming from student teams on campus and give them a first step. Right?

Robert Rippee:

Best if I just give you an example. So, let's say there's a student team in the College of Engineering who do a really great project in senior design that gets validated by external experts that says, "That's a really good idea. You should do something with that idea," in the past, most of that type of activity, they would be like, "Well, thank you very much, but I don't know what to do, so I'm graduating and I'm going to go get a job. And my project goes on the shelf and I get an A in the course,

and okay, project dies." So, what the incubator facility is, is to create a space where you can take those teams and say, "Come on over here. Now, I'm not going to talk about your project, but I'm going to talk about how do you commercialize a project? And how do you either take it to the point where it can be a licensing deal, or how do you do a startup? What does that mean?"

Robert Rippee:

It is really dangerous to assume that our engineering student example here knows what a startup is or knows how you form one. And the highway is littered with the remanence of people who tried to do them without adequately knowing what they were doing. Most fail. Why? They fail because of business models. Well, what's a business model? I know, to you and I, we're like, "Really? That's a pretty simple question." But if you spent the last five years studying mechanical engineering, you didn't get a course in how to build business models. You took courses in forces and structure and materials. You didn't take courses in business models. And so, what the incubator is, to say, "Let's give them a next step, a place where we will fill in the rest of that and help them understand that. And from that point, yeah, now you can go launch a startup, or you can take your technology and find a co-creation opportunity and license it out to big company." Whatever it is, but at least you're going to have some knowledge that's going to get you a running start.

Robert Rippee:

And that's what the incubator is designed to do, is to be a next step for students. It's a beautiful facility. Fantastic. It's very inspiring to be in here. It's pretty close to campus so they can get you're on their long board without any trouble. And we got to Starbucks. I'm not giving an endorsement to Starbucks, but they're just down the street. So, you've got everything they need, right? So, this is an excellent addition. This kind of completes our physical infrastructure or ecosystem. And we expect to run it with cohorts, so we'll take groups of students at a time and take them through a syllabus that I've designed, it's a 12 week syllabus. And at the end of that, they're ready to either go back and accelerate their product design and take it to a prototype, or they're ready to form a startup and enter the market.

Scott Marty:

So, you have courses for students, and now you've got this opportunity to take their coursework forward. I'm curious, and this is a bit off topic, but just, I think you're the perfect person to ask this question, have you seen a trend in the younger generation, in the students, in what their interests are, that they're more willing to innovate so they don't have to work for someone, they can work for themselves? Have you seen a trend in that direction, or is it status quo, yes and no?

Robert Rippee:

Oh, it is a huge trend. I've been a faculty member here for seven years now, and it struck me the first semester I was here. And it's only reinforced every year that I deal with more and more students. It's the entrepreneurial spirit within them. They're independent thinkers. They want to do their own thing. They want to change the world. They want to follow... I don't like to use the cliche follow their dream, but they're following their passion. This is what they like to do, so this is what they want to do for a career. Well, how can I do that? Does a company employing me to do this? Not too sure I like that structure. I like being more freewheeling about it. And of course, they know what entrepreneurism indicates, or at least the perception of it.

Robert Rippee:

So, yes, very, very strong emphasis in the generation of students that are moving through our higher education system now towards entrepreneurial thinking, and I see it across campus, whether it's in the sciences, in engineering, in liberal arts, in fine arts. It's just, "I want to do. I want to at least give it a try." Right? That's the answer. "I may have to go work for a big company or work for school at some point, but I want to try this now because I have passion for it and it's in my mind."

Scott Marty:

Again, being around higher ed for almost, scary to say, almost 20 years now, the impetus for this podcast really was an observation that I made from the beginning, which was I've seen the rise and fall of incubators and accelerators, I've seen the traditional licensing approach, "Let's just file a patent and then try and license it out. Let's not develop it ourselves." Moving into the MIT, Stanford, University of Utah model of, "Let's innovate. Let's build our own company. Let's create our own startup around it. Let's do internal funding or federal funding, SBIR grants, et cetera. Let's get it to that next step. Then let's try and find angels and moving it that direction."

Scott Marty:

But one thing that really struck me in the last, let's say, five years, and for whatever reason more so in the last two years, I think, is programs like yours, is programs like the Lassonde Center out at the University of Utah, is the investment in students, is finding platforms for young 20s, sometimes teens, building a company, having that passion, and enabling them to drive their technology forward. And not necessarily the traditional incubator accelerator, but in large part, it is an incubator and accelerator. It's an incubator of ideas, it's providing them the tools and the means and the education, as you mentioned, to learn how to run a company. Right? Because it's one thing to say, "I'm passionate about making X," or, "I'm passionate about doing something," but rarely do you have the opportunity to do that alone. So, people don't think about like, "I have to hire an employee. What does that employment contract look like? What's the labor and employment? What's taxes?" All of these sides.

Scott Marty:

So, it's encouraging to see you and UNLV investing in those students as well. And I'm hopeful and excited to come visit once once the travel handcuffs are off a little bit more and once the facility's done. So, I know I'll be out there in early August over at Blackfire, but maybe I'll catch you the next round and come visit the new facility.

Robert Rippee:

Yeah. And I agree with what you just said. I think that that's kind of an indication of a... like a realignment or a change in the role of higher education. Right? You define some new ones. And those are great examples of universities who've been doing it now for a decade, that they realize that they have a bigger role to play in society and the economy than the next generation of managers or researchers, that we can actually solve problems, we can create companies, we can move technology, develop technologies that have commercial application. What it takes is an emphasis by the university that it's important.

Robert Rippee:

We're fortunate here that we've had a... We actually have a new president at UNLV who is an extremely strong advocate of this line of thinking, that this has become a strategic objective of President Whitfield, is the development of this entrepreneurial innovation focus for students. He's like, "Let's put resources behind it. Let's make it happen." I mean, obviously, we've had other prior presidents to do that because we have facilities now. But I mean, he's totally on board. And when the leadership of the Institutes of Higher Education get on board with it, then it happens, and then all of a sudden the university or the whatever it is, the college, takes on a different flavor. It's not just, as I said, about the next generation of managers or researchers, that it has another purpose too, and it's do what you just said, is to create these solutions and put them into the marketplace for them to be potentially successful and economic entities and, in that region, perhaps drive economic growth.

Scott Marty:

So, I always have an aside here, and this is a little bit of levity, I think, as we come to a close here, is before I ask you, how do people get involved and how do people get in contact with you, I always like to ask the question of, if we're coming out to visit, where are we going to eat when we visit?

Robert Rippee:

Everybody asks me that, and I tell them, "What do you like? Tell me what you like. And I'll tell you to go where to go. Do you want on strip, or you went off strip? You want like locals, like the hidden secrets, or do you want the best of what Vegas offers?" So, my answer is always qualified. What do you like?

Scott Marty:

Well, let's qualify it, then. Where would you go if you were choosing what you wanted?

Robert Rippee:

So, I like steak. One of my very favorite restaurants in Las Vegas is a restaurant on Sahara, just a couple blocks off the strip, called The Golden Steer Steak House. It's an old institution. You feel like you're sitting in these round banquettes that are red leather, like Elvis is going to be sitting at the table next door. because he probably did. It's that old. It's been there forever. It's an institution. They have fantastic food. Food quality is off the grid. Really good. But traditional things, right? Nothing too French, fancy. It's a steakhouse. But this is where Sinatra ate and Elvis probably ate there. Because it's been around that long. I always recommend like family when my family comes in and they want to try something that's really good and is off the grid, I say, "We got to go there." That's given. Then it's like, okay, now go see what the strip has. Go see some of that, because then it's the whole experience of going into the major entertainment, Mecca and seeing thousands of people, and then having an extraordinary event-filled meal as well.

Scott Marty:

That's awesome. Well, I know where I'm going next time I come out now. I want to go live like Sinatra and Elvis.

Robert Rippee:

His ghost is going to be sitting at the table next to you.

Scott Marty:

That's great. Well, we're here at the end of our time, and I want to be respectful of all the responsibilities you have, but could you leave the listeners with a little bit of information on how they get involved with you in these different initiatives, how they get in contact with you?

Robert Rippee:

Yeah. I'm pretty easy to find. You can find me on LinkedIn. Every day I'm on LinkedIn and people are trying to connect with me to find out about Blackfire or UNLV. And if I see there's an opportunity there and it works for everyone, we'll go to offline and we'll connect that way. I'm doing that two or three times a day, it seems. That's probably the fastest way for the general listener. Otherwise, you could find me at UNLV's directory. I'm a pretty easy find there. And Blackfire is a pretty easy find as well. Blackfire Innovation at Las Vegas, Google and you'll find us. So, those are the easiest ways.

Scott Marty:

Wonderful. Well, I'd like to thank you again for making time for me, so thanks, Robert Rippee. Really appreciate it. Can't wait to get out there and see some of these things with my own eyes. Again, it's been a long time since I've been out to the desert. Looks like it's going to be in the middle of the summer, but maybe I'll catch it in the fall.

Robert Rippee:

Yeah. Definitely. All right. Thank you, guys. It's been a pleasure being on with you.

Scott Marty:

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