

Talk CNY S1E16 Transcript

Andrew Fish 0:06

Welcome to CenterState CEO's semi monthly podcast, Talk CNY, presented by NBT Bank.

Kate Hammer 0:11

On Talk CNY you get an inside look at the people, projects and planning moving Central New York forward.

Andrew Fish 0:17

I'm Andrew Fish, Senior Vice President of Member and Business Experience at CenterState CEO, Central New York's leading business leadership and economic development organization.

Kate Hammer 0:25

And I'm Kate Hammer, business coach and member at CenterState CEO. We are your hosts for Talk CNY. Take a moment right now to subscribe in your listening app for new episodes every other Wednesday.

Shawni Davis 0:36

The future of Syracuse to me, looks like having Micron Technology here and having folks that come from my communities and look like me, involved in the growth that will come inevitably, from Micron being here.

Andrew Fish 0:54

On this episode of Talk CNY we'll talk to Shawni Davis, President and CEO of Luminary Electrical Contractors, first recipient of a Growth and Equity Fund Loan from CenterState CEO, about her company, its growth and how the investment has supported her growth in Central New York. Shawni, thank you so much for being here. Welcome.

Shawni Davis 1:11

Thank you for having me. Appreciate it.

Andrew Fish 1:13

Absolutely. So Shawni, you're a Syracuse native, you're a graduate of Henninger High School and a master electrician. Your company Luminary Electrical Contractors is a New York State certified Minority Women Owned Business, and you perform commercial and industrial electrical work. What got you interested in becoming an electrician and starting your own company?

Shawni Davis 1:30

I was well, first of all, thank you for having me.

Andrew Fish 1:32

Of course.

Shawni Davis 1:33

I was about 20 some odd years old. And I was just working like kind of dead in customer service kind of positions. And I went down to Florida to visit my dad thinking, maybe I'll just move to Florida. And I got there and he does heating, ventilation, air conditioning. And he was doing a little bit of electrical work on a on a project. He's like, come to work with me see how you like this. And I'm like, alright, and we did some electrical work. And I loved it. I was like, This is great. This is exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. I love it. I didn't know anything about power tools or hand tools or anything. But I know the little bit that I did, I really wanted to do. So he told me when you get back to New York, join the Electricians Union. And they'll train you to have an apprenticeship program, you know, that kind of thing. And that's exactly what I did. And that's how it started. And here we are now a master electrician going from not knowing anything about hand and power tools to now mastering my craft. It's been great.

Andrew Fish 2:36

It's amazing.

Shawni Davis 2:37

Yeah, it's been great.

Kate Hammer 2:38

That's the best feeling right? Like when you really find your thing. And you're like, oh, yeah, this is it.

Shawni Davis 2:42

Yeah, this is it. So I told Andy, who, Andy that works for CenterState that my first position or my first job as an electrician, I showed up on the on the project with just a hammer, the hammer. I had no tools I showed with a hammer, like whatever you need me to do with this thing is going down. And they looked at me like what are you going to do with that? That's what I had. Alright. Alright, well go pick up some material and take it upstairs. It's what you do.

Andrew Fish 3:11

An experience.

Shawni Davis 3:12

Fun, fun. So Andy, Andy, and I have a long relationship. I met with Andy, I think before I even started Luminary. So that's how long has been with me and Andy. And he would always say, Well, what do you need? What can I get to you? What can we how can we help? And every time my answer was Andy, I need money. No, you can't help me build these things. I need money. That's it. And he, I guess I was placed in a couple of the programs that CenterState was like, kind of building and so I might I might have been the, the first and a couple of these different programs, to be honest. But finally Andy goes, "Okay, Shawn, I know, I know, you're talking about money, and we may have an option for you, you know, hold tight." And then he brought the Growth and Equity Fund. And I'm like, this is the one right here, Andy. This is it. This is the one and I'm so grateful to be a part of this program. And with that assistance, like that's helped

me grow, I've, I've been able to, you know, buy tools and buy computers and things for office space and, you know, pay payroll and regular operating expenses. So, it's really, really been helpful. We've tried to, you know, have that monies in and see how well we can operate outside of that. So it's good to have that there. But like, how can we be self sustaining with having that little cushion there to and it's been, honestly it's been it's been great. It helps us out when we need it and I'm so just really, really grateful for the the Growth and Equity Fund and Andy. I love Andy and Eric. I love Eric and Andy gave me a nice little gift from when I was awarded the Growth and Equity Fund. He brought me a hammer Oh, a bundle of hammers with a with a bow.

Andrew Fish 5:08

I love that. That's great.

Shawni Davis 5:10

Oh my gosh.

Andrew Fish 5:11

Certainly special.

Shawni Davis 5:11

Yeah.

Andrew Fish 5:12

You distributed those to your employees now, right?

Shawni Davis 5:14

No, just sits right there as a little bouquet of hammers sitting on the one of the desks in the office.

Kate Hammer 5:19

Take us back to what it was like for you when you first launched your business and you got those first few contracts.

Shawni Davis 5:26

Man, so I was in business for about, before, I even got one contract, I was in business for maybe six months or so. And I was just doing like, a couple of houses, here and there. And then I got a phone call. Well, once I got my my MWBE certification, I got a phone call from CNS Companies. And they're like, Hey, we have this project here out at man, it was a college for some fire alarms. And I'm like, yes, absolutely. But I need you guys to pay me weekly, because I have no money. And it's the only way I'm gonna be able to make it happen. And they were like, okay, like, all right, then let's go. So I was able, I worked there for a few weeks by myself, and I was able to hire someone else on because they were paying this weekly. And that's how I got my first employee, he still works for the company. And you know, it's been, it's been great.

Andrew Fish 6:20

So fast forward a little bit, you've got a good track record of contract performance, you got a bunch of quality contracts on the horizon, and you had existing relationships with a commercial bank, but you still found it challenging to get the capital that you needed in order to fund the growth in your company. Right. So what were the most significant challenges that that lack of capital created for you?

Shawni Davis 6:39

Yeah, for sure. I mean, anything that you're doing in in any kind of construction realm, it costs, the tools costs money, the equipment costs, money, the materials, cost, money, the labor costs, everything that I've just named, are essential to my business, and every single one of them costs money. And, you know, I was able to get the one contract to get paid weekly, but then after that, it's like, alright, you know, we'll pay you once a month. And it's like, alright, well, somehow, I have to float this payroll for a month, and I gotta get us tools to work with. And so those were the biggest challenges just trying to drum up enough money to even do even a small project, right? That was a very difficult time. And I tried to go to, you know, a bank and I was able to get get a little bit of money that just keep rolling a little bit. But it just cost so much. The more you grow, the more it costs, the more you know. So we're in a little bit of a better position. Now we've, you know, gotten some relationships with some banks and with CenterState and SBDC. And so we've been able to grow from that point, you know, I've gotten from I've gone from the one employee that I just told you guys about to now we have a staff of 11.

Kate Hammer 7:52

Whoa!

Shawni Davis 7:53

Yeah.

Kate Hammer 7:53

That's fast.

Shawni Davis 7:54

Yeah. We have a staff of 11. I have an administrator, estimator, project manager, myself, and then electricians. So-

Andrew Fish 8:02

It's fantastic.

Shawni Davis 8:03

Yeah.

Andrew Fish 8:03

Obviously, as you were struggling with those early years, and and the difficulty around the capital, you've been engaged with some of our team, you mentioned Andy Obernesser. He's helped quite a bit on the community investment team. And we saw the potential, right like,

here's this rockstar of of electrician that wants to grow. And so we had this program called Growth and Equity, it was very new. But it really was designed for entrepreneurs like yourself, individuals that the commercial banks aren't quite ready to take on the risk. But we see the opportunity and know that you're going to work hard, you're going to make that happen, and you're going to grow that business. So you now have the 11 people working for you. Yeah, that is amazing. Tell us a little bit about what that feels like. Right? What is what is today for a Luminary Electrical Contractors and you feel like versus a year ago?

Shawni Davis 8:47

I'll tell you what, I did not expect to have 11 employees right now, I did not I didn't expect that. But it it feels great. Like you know, every time you play payroll, it may not feel that great, because there's a lot of money going out. But it does feel great because you know that there are families that are thriving, not just surviving, right, but thriving, because our electricians make great money, right. So they're there, their homes, their houses, their children, their vehicles, all of that they're there. They're thriving based on the work that they're putting out, and also the opportunities that Luminary is able to give them so it really feels good. I haven't really thought about it in that way. So thanks for even asking that question. I never even considered it. It's just like, as we go, we just move right. We're just moving. We're not really sitting and thinking, wow, what kind of impact are we having on just our employees? So thank you for asking that question. Because-

Andrew Fish 9:42

Absolutely.

Shawni Davis 9:43

It's definitely something to think about now.

Kate Hammer 9:48

Your story and the potential of other companies like yours to be a part of rebuilding the story of Syracuse inspired officials to select you to introduce President Joe Biden when he came to visit Syracuse last October for the historic announcement of Micron's investment in Central New York. What was it like?

Shawni Davis 10:09

First of all, I can't believe it's almost a year later. Wow, that went by quickly, just like flew by. But what an awesome experience, first of all, knowing that it was gonna happen and not being able to tell anyone. That was fun. That was when you try to keep your mouth shut about something like that. You just really want to tell it to the whole world. But what an awesome experience President Biden, Governor Hochul, everyone was just super nice, really cool, really laid back. What an experience afterwards, life has not been the same. Life has not been the same since.

Kate Hammer 10:45

Say more. What does that mean? Yes!

Shawni Davis 10:48

I mean, I'm definitely recognized pretty much everywhere I go now, which is not a part of my personality to be, you know, in the forefront and limelight. I'm just not that kind of person. But I try to still smile and say hi to everyone, and just being recognized everywhere is yesterday. Just a quick story. Yesterday, I had one of my employees that I sent out to Buffalo come here to meet me to grab some things. And we went to a local restaurant. And I probably stopped about four times before I got home. Because I saw people in there talking to me, he's like, Are you famous? Or something?

Andrew Fish 11:27

Yes, yes, I am.

Shawni Davis 11:31

Oh, my goodness. So that is something that has drastically changed. But for the most part in a very good way. We've gotten, you know, more contracts, we've gotten kind of recognition in a lot of different places. Some people don't really know that just in March of this year, there was an SBA event, right, that happened at the White House. And President Biden actually, like told my entire story in a speech, and was like floored, I didn't know about it. I didn't know what was gonna happen. I thought maybe they warn you about these things, but clearly not. Yeah. So I didn't find out about it until the very next day. So even having that like, life is not the same when the President is mentioning you on his own, just like yeah, yeah, I'm gonna just tell her story really quickly. I'm not gonna let her know. Like, how awesome is that?

Andrew Fish 12:21

That's amazing.

Shawni Davis 12:22

I don't even know how I feel about it. It's just the thing that every day, I'm thinking what is happening in my life right now, you know? So I'm thankful for the opportunity, though.

Kate Hammer 12:31

Well, now you're even because you had to keep the secret about him and then he had to keep the secret about you.

Shawni Davis 12:36

Yeah, apparently.

Andrew Fish 12:36

Yeah. There you go!

Shawni Davis 12:38

There it is!

Kate Hammer 12:39

So how have you or how will you leverage what happened?

Shawni Davis 12:43

Well, I've definitely been able to reach out to people who were who seemed to be a little more accessible. So I've been able to really leverage that with building more relationships, especially with customers. At this point there, folks that are reaching out to me as well. And so I'm just kind of just maintaining also those relationships with people. I'm a part of some great organizations that definitely give me a little more exposure to the things that are going on in the city, and not necessarily for work, but just just to know what's going on in the community and being a part of, you know, different organizations. And I'll just keep it at organizations because I don't know, I don't want to name drop too much, but different organizations. And so that part of it has been great. There are not a lot of people that are that I can't pick up the phone and call and say "hey, do you think..." and not get someone to say even if they don't have the answer, and they don't have the resource, they're they're able to connect me with other people. And so it's been pretty cool. It's great.

Andrew Fish 13:46

And networks really expanded.

Shawni Davis 13:47

Yes, it has like crazy.

Kate Hammer 13:49

That's awesome.

Andrew Fish 13:50

Great. Well, we're gonna take a short break. And when we come back, we'll continue the conversation with Shawni. Talk more about how companies like hers are creating new growth and opportunities in Central New York. But first, a note from our presenting sponsor of Talk CNY, NBT Bank.

NBT Bank Sponsor 14:05

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Kate Hammer 14:41

This is Talk CNY and we are continuing our conversation with Shawni Davis, President and CEO of Luminary Electrical. Shawni, do you have any words of wisdom for the youth in our community who might be interested in pursuing entrepreneurship or going into the trades?

Shawni Davis 14:54

Absolutely. So one of the things that that I make sure that that we do As a company, is when we make sure we go to schools, we make sure we go to events that involve the youth, just to first of all be visible. Because I think just having that just seeing what Luminary is and where, where I started and where we've we've come, I think, is super inspiring. I think if I had someone that was a Luminary Electrical, when I was younger, it probably would have inspired me to, you know, get into the trades a little sooner. So that is something that we already do. But I would say that I'm a project kid, I grew up on the south and east sides of Syracuse in the in the housing projects. And there is literally not one thing that you cannot do just because of where you came from, you know, you can be in your environment, but you don't have to necessarily be a product of your environment. You can, you can take whatever it is that you do. And take it all the way to the next level is wherever the next level is right, take it, you get to one level and you continue to level up. And that's I'm still in the level up phase, you know, myself. So yeah, I'm hoping to just be an inspiration just just purely from existing in the city.

Andrew Fish 16:13

Yeah.

Shawni Davis 16:13

I think that that alone is inspiration.

Andrew Fish 16:18

Correct me if I'm wrong, but are you not the first African American woman to be a master electrician?

Shawni Davis 16:23

Yes.

Andrew Fish 16:24

In this community?

Shawni Davis 16:25

In this community. And we're still doing research, but I'm believing the state of New York.

Kate Hammer 16:29

Ooo!

Andrew Fish 16:30

That would be-

Kate Hammer 16:31

That's cool.

Andrew Fish 16:32

A) that would be amazing. And also about time, and you know, more of them. Right? Let's let's let's be the first of many.

Shawni Davis 16:39

That is one of the things that I always say. I'm just like, it says a couple of things, right? There's like, wow, this is such a great accomplishment. But we are so far behind. I am fortunate enough to be in contact with and know the first black woman in the United States to own an electrical company.

Kate Hammer 16:58

That's so cool.

Shawni Davis 17:00

I looked her up on LinkedIn, right?

Kate Hammer 17:02

Yes!

Andrew Fish 17:02

Great tool.

Shawni Davis 17:03

Man, I love LinkedIn. And I just reached out to her like your story sounds so much like mine, just the way you went about it. And she's like, "Yeah, let's, let's talk". And I have her phone number. I'm gonna go down. She lives in Atlanta going on to Atlanta and have a conversation with her and kind of hang out with her. I've talked to her a few times. It's just what an honor to have that person. Right. And so she started 20 years ago. Well, 23 years ago.

Andrew Fish 17:30

Okay.

Shawni Davis 17:31

So I mean, we are way behind.

Andrew Fish 17:34

Yeah, yeah. I think that that's the first right. And yeah, And now and now only the first year, you know, there's a lot of work to be done. And you're you're doing it you're leveling up as you said, it's going from you and one person to now 11 people, a lot of stuff going on right now anything you want to share about what Luminary is working on or any of your projects right now?

Shawni Davis 17:54

One of the biggest projects is we are working on the new Buffalo Bills Stadium, which is-

Kate Hammer 18:00

Whoa!

Shawni Davis 18:01
Really cool.

Andrew Fish 18:03
Yeah.

Shawni Davis 18:03
Really awesome.

Kate Hammer 18:06
I'm just floored right now.

Andrew Fish 18:07
I made sure not to tell Kate. I wanted to see her reaction.

Kate Hammer 18:11
That's awesome. And all of our listeners who are Bills fans are probably freaking out now.

Andrew Fish 18:17
Bills Mafia is freaking out right now.

Shawni Davis 18:19
Yes. It's just cool to just be a part of that project.

Andrew Fish 18:22
Right.

Shawni Davis 18:22
It's cool to say that Luminary's on it. We're currently working on the Corning Glass Museum project, which is really cool.

Kate Hammer 18:30
Equally cool. Glass. Love.

Shawni Davis 18:32
Yeah, the classrooms? Yes. Equally cool. Have some some local projects coming up Community Hospital, man, there's about six or seven others that right now my mind is drawing a blank, but we have some, quite a few projects coming in.

Andrew Fish 18:47
I assume in order to execute against all those, you're going to have to continue to grow.

Shawni Davis 18:47

And that's gonna have to happen.

Andrew Fish 18:53

Love that.

Shawni Davis 18:55

So and we're still building. I mean, I'm an electrician by trade, not necessarily a business owner, I just have an entrepreneurial spirit. And so there's still so many parts and pieces that we're still bringing together as a young company. But I'm looking forward to, to where we go from here, which I think probably leads into what you're-

Andrew Fish 19:17

Absolutely. And also I can't wait for us to, you know, a year or two from now do a check in and see how much that exponential growth has continued for you and Luminary.

Shawni Davis 19:27

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it. I'm, I'm a little nervous about it. Right, because we're moving into a different kind of territory, especially working on a stadium now like, you know, where do you go right, or you go from this mean?

Kate Hammer 19:41

I mean, there's a lot of different types of industries. Right. So you're making your way around the industries. We like it. When you think about the future of this community, what do you envision?

Shawni Davis 19:53

The future of this community? Well, I mean, the first thing you think about when you think about the future of this community is obviously, you know, the big huge 17 football field or whatever elephant in the room, which is Micron, right? Is it 70? 14? I don't know.

Kate Hammer 20:10

It's a lot.

Shawni Davis 20:12

So, so obviously-

Andrew Fish 20:15

40.

Kate Hammer 20:15

40? It's 40.

Shawni Davis 20:17

So, I see a community that is literally totally different from what we have right now, I can't even really fathom where we're going to go. What I'm looking forward to is, what's going to happen with the current youth, and how they're going to change this, you know, this community for whatever they're gonna change it to, I know that, you know, they're growing up in a in a society that has the internet that has everything at their fingertips. And so they can literally do whatever. It doesn't have to be trade school doesn't have to be college, it was a really two choices for us for, well, mostly college for us. But they can, they literally can, like create a career. I mean, it is just, the future is so unknown, but I am looking forward to you know, what these kids come up with because they are sharp, they're smart. I love working with youth. Recently, I did want to say it was maybe 21. Or one of the programs. And myself and an apprentice, we went and did a demonstration, there were 25 kids, we split them up into groups of five, and they wired up a light switch with a light. And then we plugged it in, and they got to turn their light on to see oh my god, that kind of hands on and the eye to see their faces just light up with something like that. Some of them were like, "eh is fine, but I'd rather be on the phone doing something". But there were others that were just like, is this what happens? It's like,

Andrew Fish 21:52

It was like that experience for you in Florida with your dad. Right?

Shawni Davis 21:54

Exactly. This is great. And they were just they were all into it. But I said that to say, what else can we put in front of them that they're just gonna be like, just soak it all in, and then create something totally different out of that. So I'm looking forward to that. I think the future is like, so bright here in Syracuse, and it's totally going to change, I hope that we can get more people that look like me, or from my community to get into not only the skilled trades, but just to be a part of what's happening in this community. I think we lack we lack some of that. It's this just like that side of town. And then there's downtown. We're so separated and divided and siloed here. So I'm hoping that maybe having this big, huge elephant in the room will kind of bring us all together.

Andrew Fish 22:43

Shawni, thank you so much for the time today. Outstanding and keep up the great work. Luminary is fantastic. Love watching the growth. Keep sending out the LinkedIn videos about the progress of the Bills stadium.

Shawni Davis 22:55

Yeah.

Andrew Fish 22:55

Thank you so much for your leadership, and you're being such a great role model in this community.

Shawni Davis 23:00

Thank you. Thank you for having me. Thank you very much.

Kate Hammer 23:02

Yeah, thanks.

Kate Hammer 23:03

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Andrew Fish 23:13

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Kate Hammer 23:19

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Andrew Fish 23:24

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Kate Hammer 23:30

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Andrew Fish 23:36

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