

# Ep.2.36 - Jonathan Quarles

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## SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Jonathan Quarles

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- A** Announcer 00:01  
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29  
Hello, I'm your host today Ed Clemente. And we're fortunate to have a guest that I've been a friend with for a while, but also he's a very extraordinary person, he does a lot of different things and that's why he's on the show today. I think he's got an interesting story and welcome to the show, Jonathan, I might sneak in a JQ. But it's Jonathan Quarles, he's the CEO of the BTL Group and Founder as well and court source resources, right?
- J** Jonathan Quarles 00:56  
Quart Water Source
- E** Ed Clemente 01:00  
But go ahead, sorry about that. Welcome to the show, Jonathan.
- J** Jonathan Quarles 01:02  
Thank you so much. And, you know, when I hear Jonathan, usually I'm used to my parents, that's usually when I'm getting in trouble. So JQ was good. You can you can do JQ because I'm,

like, I'm getting in trouble when you call me by my my government.

**E** Ed Clemente 01:14

I know what your dad and I talked about you being in trouble so that's why I'm still calling you, Jonathan. So anyway, why don't you start out a little bit because you have two different organizations, you know, sort of under your belt, but why don't you sort of tell people what you do, because you're very unique guests for us because you're, you're sort of very entrepreneurish more than most of our guests. So why don't you explain what you do?

**J** Jonathan Quarles 01:40

Sure. So I consider myself I guess, a serial entrepreneur, angel investor, and an author. But what that all means, as I basically solve problems for companies. I have a international business consultant practice that actually works closely with the MEDC and helping bringing more companies, high growth companies into Michigan, either as a satellite office, or doing business with Michigan companies. And so I do that all over the world, specifically here in Michigan. But also, as you mentioned, Quartz Water Source, which was inspired by the Flint water crisis. Which, as a flint native, was a personal project that now is my life mission is making sure that we bring clean access to clean water all over the world. And so we're headquartered in Flint, Michigan, and we get a chance to do some amazing things with our donor advised fund that is actually in Flint, Michigan, in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, where we're writing grants for all cities and communities that are having challenges with water. And then the last thing is, we started a family foundation, which is the Quarles Foundation in the name of my father, who's still alive. And that was one of the things growing up in Flint, I remember telling my father, so I'm gonna grow up, I've always been an entrepreneur since I was eight, but I remember telling my father, I say, I'm gonna grow up, and I'm gonna get you in like a nice house, a nice car. And my dad said, I don't want any of that, I just want you to start a foundation in my name and give scholarships to those that are underserved, particularly in communities, black and brown communities, helping them to understand the importance of self determination through business ownership. And so that's what we're doing.

**E** Ed Clemente 03:17

And we might unpack that a little further and one of your questions, because I think that's pretty interesting what you're doing and both areas up in Flint. But let's get a little bit more to like you said, you were entrepreneur at eight. I know you said you had a newspaper route at some point as a kid, and your family had a small business, right? Or were you not in a small business, I forgot your background?

**J** Jonathan Quarles 03:40

Yeah, sure. Yeah. So at the age of eight, I started, my dad always knew that I was going to be the person that was going to not really work for anyone but be because I was always a problem solver in my community. So I had a paper route when when they used to have paper boys. And

so that expanded and was able to do that. And I would say maybe five or six other business ventures from T shirt companies to selling candy. I would go to Sam's Club and buy candy and sell it at school in between classes. This is all in elementary school. I had a printing company. I had a janitorial business. And then when I went to high school, I ended up, because my dad told me I had to go to college, I had to put all of that aside and focus strictly on getting scholarships, because we came from very humble beginnings. And I know there was no option I was going to college. My dad made that very clear. And so he said, Either you're going to work or you get you work your butt off to get the scholarships and to be able to go for free. And so fortunately, I was able to go to The Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee, Florida, on a full ride academic scholarship, and I have over \$100,000 of private scholarships that I spent my whole, from freshman year or ninth grade all the way to my senior year applying for scholarships and was able to do that and that was, to me one of the ways that a stepping stone from going from poverty to now being able to create wealth for generations.

**E** Ed Clemente 05:01

Yeah, I'm pretty familiar with Florida A&M, just because my family lives in Tallahassee and my uncle used to work for the Board of Regents. So he used to take me over there, when I was a kid to go visit him just to see the campus. Because it's a is it a historic college too?

**J** Jonathan Quarles 05:16

It's a historically black college.

**E** Ed Clemente 05:18

Yeah, yeah, it's pretty decent size too, a good amount of students

**J** Jonathan Quarles 05:23

We are the largest historically black college in the United States. Whave over 13,000 enrollee undergrad, and so yeah, we're the largest. We're actually we're the best at pretty much everything we do. So yeah.

**E** Ed Clemente 05:37

Yeah, I'm glad you're humble about it. The couple of so you did mention the serial entrepreneur, but I think also a little bit of your background. And I always just because I know you, but tell people what your goal is in life.

**J** Jonathan Quarles 05:51

Yeah. So my, it's not a goal, it's what I will be. I do believe in the power of words and what you think, and what you you speak into the universe will become. I will be the United a United

States Ambassador. And that's something that I am very clear of, and that's something that I'm working towards. So everything that I do today is focused around that kind of work of diplomacy, humanitarian philanthropy. And that's why for me, having double and triple bottom line businesses that I have now and even actually writing a book called 'Making Dollars While Making Change.' I mean, that's ultimately what diplomacy is about, is really making change in the world. And for me, I realized I can't make change without actually making profit also. So being making sure that it's not just about money, it's not just about what I can get, but how can I do better, so I can actually do more in the community.

E

Ed Clemente 06:44

So Adam Smith and Gandhi will both be happy with your choices. The that's good and, and also, I've got the book actually, in my house. And I know it's been doing pretty well, right?

J

Jonathan Quarles 06:56

Yeah. So we've been very, it's been interesting, because, you know, I had a, I had a third grade teacher to tell me, Ms. Verbal, Sobey Elementary. I love her dearly, she's still alive. But I always make it a point to talk about this, because I remember her telling me and I was a, I would say, a very active young person when I was younger. I used to get in a lot of trouble a lot. But she told me that you that I was either going to be dead or in jail, because the way that I was going, I was involved in gang activities and I just used to do things that just was not safe. But she told me that and one of the things I always had, I had always had a chip on my shoulder. But she told me that I mean, it had teachers that told me I wasn't a great writer. And to me, I've always had this chip on my shoulder. And I think that's a Flint thing. You talk to most people from Flint that are from Flint, the city of Flint, they'll tell you that we always felt like we had something to prove, because we were always counted out. And so I used that chip as motivation. And so I said, I'm going to write a book, because I have three daughters and I always tell them, don't ever let anyone tell you, you can't do anything. If I believe in you, that's all that matters. And you believe in yourself, you can do whatever you want to do. And so I wrote the book and in honor of my children, to really not only speak those things, but also to show them because I think children learn by what you do more than what you say. And so the book was part therapy for me during the 2020 pandemic, where it was just a lot of challenges like everyone else I was I was having a lot of anxiety, being stuck in a home, not knowing what was going on in the world. But the book was therapy for me. But it was all these tips and best practices that I learned along the way. But private sector, public sector, nonprofit, and then just lived experiences as as African American in the United States.

E

Ed Clemente 08:47

Just because your daughters might listen to this podcast, you should say all three of their names.

J

Jonathan Quarles 08:51

Oh, yeah. So my lovely Bella Ari Quarrels, J. Lauren quarrels, and Emerson Iea Quarrels.

E

Ed Clemente 09:00

I've met them all. And one other thing just to help you out, when I was in fourth grade, a nun wrote on my note to my mom and dad that they thought I was going to be in jail someday, too. Because, because I was pretty active myself.

J

Jonathan Quarles 09:16

So that's probably why we connect so much, we are like we're like brothers from another mother.

E

Ed Clemente 09:23

We definitely are in a path. So let's get let's also break down because I think it's pretty fascinating like, why don't you just plug a little bit about angel investing, too, because we've had a little bit on that before, but not much and with other guests.

J

Jonathan Quarles 09:39

So interesting enough, I've been an angel an accredited angel investor for a few years now, but it was by accident. I had a friend in college who had a business that he was helping asking me for help. So I helped him with his business plan. And we got it we were getting ready to go take this product to market and he didn't have any money. So I just started loaning him money, essentially. And then I realized I was reading somewhere and it was like, you know about angel investors. I was like, what is that angel investor? That sounds like something kind of, you know, weird. And so I accidentally came upon it. And I made my very first investment was a failure. I mean, it was a six figure failure. I didn't do any due diligence. I just for me thought I was like, I know business. So I know how to read a P&L, I know how to read a ledger. You know, I know what I'm doing. But it's interesting enough, because I've been an angel investor and I've had one very successful exit a couple of years ago. But I am now going through an angel investment class right now through Tech Town in Detroit. And it's interesting, because, again, I've been an accredited investor for for several years now. And now I'm actually learning the technicalities of things. And it's been very helpful. And I'm grateful for the Tech Town, and I think there's a partnership with the state with with this particular fund also.

E

Ed Clemente 10:52

Yeah, why don't you mention again, that relationship you had with the MEDC. I thought that was kind of interesting.

J

Jonathan Quarles 10:57

Sure. Yes, I have. So with the BTL group, when we're bringing in clients or pursuing clients, we normally we utilize MEDC as well as the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, which I sit on the

Economic Development Board there. So yeah, so they've been very helpful, helpful with providing us with tax incentives, and any kind of things to help sell the State of Michigan.

A

Announcer 11:20

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E

Ed Clemente 11:37

Let's also talk a little bit about your international experience. I know both you and I have done a lot of work with Global Ties Detroit, but you're also on the National Board for that, and too, what is that?

J

Jonathan Quarles 11:47

Yep, Global Ties Detroit and Global Ties US, which is the national board, is help promote, it's an organization funded through the Department of State helping promote citizen diplomacy, I like to call it urban diplomacy here in Detroit. And we get a chance to really expose people to other cultures, from all industries and to be able for them to understand our culture and figure out how we can better communicate how we can better align not just for business, but for just basic humanity, for humanity purposes. And so yeah, and so one other thing that MEDC has played a huge part in is when I'm actually going to other countries to recruit, I use the STEP program, which pays for half of my flight and half of my my lodging. So a lot of the tools that our state has is something I'm really excited about, and it's really helped for my business to flourish. Now that we're in nine different countries doing work is because of the help of MEDC and all of these programs that they help offset some of our costs.

E

Ed Clemente 12:45

You've actually done a lot of work extensively, I think, with Israel, too, right?

J

Jonathan Quarles 12:49

Yup, that's actually one of my largest companies, I have five companies in Israel now. I work closely with Michigan Israeli Business Accelerator when they're bringing in, which is partially funded by the MEDC also, but I help them when they have customers and clients from Israel that are setting up shop here, I helpd them, they then kind of hand them over to me and I help to provide strategic business development here for Michigan companies, while they're here.

E

Ed Clemente 13:17

Yeah, and I know that you've traveled a lot on like reciprocal agreements too for

entrepreneurship right, around the world?

**J** Jonathan Quarles 13:25

Correct? Yeah. So this week, I was actually supposed to be in an outbound program in Armenia and Georgia, but it was postponed, is going to be postponed because they are now in Armenia is now currently in war. And so they obviously wanted to protect the US citizens, but I was like, send me, I said, I grew up in Flint, so I think I can handle myself.

**E** Ed Clemente 13:48

It's a weekend. Yeah. [Right.] So I think too that, is there any other this is more about beyond your specific projects, but one of my best questions I think I asked people is what do you think about the future? What opportunities are there going to be either in your industry or just like sort of a macro view of things because of your positions on a couple boards with DEGC? As well as Global Ties US?

**J** Jonathan Quarles 13:48

Yeah, I think the macro or for those that are really understand how to extrapolate and obtain data, that is going to be key. How do we, because again, a lot of predictive analytics, predictive behaviors is how most companies now that we can do a lot of stuff online with the pandemic taught us that is that how do you look at and be really smart about your customers and your clients in a way that you can do business all over the world? And then how do we expose the next generation the Gen Z, the whatever's after the Gen Z, how do we...

**E** Ed Clemente 14:50

I've heard Alphas and Betas but it's probably going to change again.

**J** Jonathan Quarles 14:55

Okay, well, yeah, exposing them to all of the aspects of technology and and using it for good that's gonna be very critical. You know, we have crypto, you have I mean, there's all kinds of wonderful things, Metaverse that to have a better understanding. Which my younger daughters, my ten year old, eight year old are currently learning how to code and learning about Metaverse and all those wonderful things, blockchain. That's going to be, and then one specific thing that I would always say to particular American youth, and even not just youth, but just the people in America is learning multiple languages. I think that, what I call culture economics, you know, that's going to be the game changer of how many languages can you speak? My daughters can speak now to languages outside of English, and hoping that they, they're learning Mandarin pretty soon, so that they can go anywhere in the world and can be able to communicate, and really understand the culture, not just by visiting, and being a part of it, but also communicating and showing appreciation to everyone's culture.

E

Ed Clemente 15:52

But can they speak Mandarin without you knowing what they're saying?

J

Jonathan Quarles 15:57

They're gonna have to because I'm trying.

E

Ed Clemente 15:59

No, I mean do they say stuff to each other that you don't even know what they're talking about.

J

Jonathan Quarles 16:03

Well not yet, they're still, they're just learning. So they're very, I mean, I know what they know now, but then at some point, they're probably going to.

E

Ed Clemente 16:13

You also dovetailed into the very next question, actually. And I think this is where you should maybe break down a little further, you're like, what advice would you give to high school students is what I usually ask, or what would you talk to your 17 year old self about? But you're doing it sort of with your foundations, and you have done a lot of interesting things. So why don't you kind of break down the foundation a little bit more.

J

Jonathan Quarles 16:37

So I'm gonna ask you a question Ed, did you, did you read the book yet, that I wrote? [I started.] You didn't. Because at the end of the book, end of the book, I write a note to my younger self, and I so I wrote about all the things that I learned knowing now to my 20 year old, my teen, my teenage self, and it was just really enlightening. But so what I would say is, there's a few things; One - I would tell high school student right now is always understand what your 'why' is because, as always start with your 'why' and end with your 'why' because that's what gets you up at night. And that's what keeps you up when you have to stay up. I am a big proponent and supporter of sleeping. So I'm not, I would never, tell anyone to lose sleep when you're like trying to work on a project or you're working on the business. Sleep is very critical. I write about that in the book, how important health and mental health is, and overall health and wellness. I'll say start with your 'why.' Two - Live for a cause. I have this thing, and I haven't made this up but I used to hear preachers talk about a gravestone where you have a date of birth a date of transition, and you have that dash in the middle. And I think that dash represents is more important because it represents a life that's live for a cause. And not just because so have a cause. And that gives you purpose, and be intentional about making sure you execute that before you, you transition to the afterlife. And then the last thing I would say is Dr. Gail Ganakas, who was my middle school principal at Whittier Middle School in Flint, she

always used to leave off in the PA announcement saying 'you can achieve what your mind can perceive.' I never, that's something that I can never get rid of because everything is meant to. I think what you think of every day and what you actually speak to will actually become your reality. That's what you will manifest. So you have to control your mental, you have to control what goes in your mind, you can achieve what your mind can perceive. And I want to give credit to Dr. Gail Ganakas acts for that.

E

Ed Clemente 18:34

Yeah, say I'm glad you remember all your good teachers, because those are all these pivotal points for people. And your foundation is doing what for entrepreneurs then?

J

Jonathan Quarles 18:43

So we're working with high school seniors, and what we do is we provide them with a stipend for the summer. Instead of a scholarship, we provide them with a stipend, where we give them an opportunity to work on their business plan, we then give them wraparound services that we will partner with organizations like the Ferris Wheel in Flint, Michigan and provide them with business technical assistance. We'll also mentor them will have outside mentors, and then we'll also provide them with a portion of their kind of scholarship, I would call it, will go towards investing on a long term. So teaching them about not just financial literacy, but also how to actually invest. So we're going to see their first investment, whether that's in crypto, or that's in mutual funds or stocks. But we're going to do that because we know that if we give, sometimes when you give a high school student, you know money, they may not put that in that cause but they're going to have to be responsible for keeping that in there for their long term trajectory. Because in a business, you got to make sure you have a retirement plan. You got to make sure you have a parachute. And so that's what we're doing is trying to create real life business owners and giving them real life situations so that they can be successful.

E

Ed Clemente 19:51

Now that you pointed out to I didn't read your book, we should mention the book again and where it's available, because I know it's, I think it's on Amazon, right?

J

Jonathan Quarles 20:00

It is. it's on Amazon, it's on everywhere books are. So Amazon, Barnes and Noble and I might if you know, if someone reached out to me on my website, I can probably get you some because I keep stocks in, in my warehouse. But yeah, so you can get 'Making Dollars While Making Change. It's on Amazon, Barnes and Noble and you can go to my website, [jonathanquarrels.com](http://jonathanquarrels.com) for all of the stuff that I'm working on from the foundation to my businesses, and the book and all that good stuff, and even speaking engagements.

E

Ed Clemente 20:28

Ed Clemente 20:18

And I know I've I think that, you know, there's probably a few things we might have missed because you've done so many things, but oh, I know what it was going to mention, where else you worked. I thought that was kind of interesting, because you did some work up at TACOM? I forgot.

J Jonathan Quarles 20:45

So I had a very interesting, had a very interesting journey and I'm grateful for it, but you know, I've always been a planner, but I realized that there was a, and I'm gonna paraphrase this, but Proverbs, I think 16-19 in a man's way God's God created his way, but wait, a man plans his way but God orders his steps. And so I always had plans what and how I was going to do I thought I was gonna be a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. I didn't have any of those things that my life never was really planned, but it's been a blessing. I started off working in a nonprofit, I worked for a guy named Tavis Smiley who is one of my good buddies.

E Ed Clemente 21:21

Radio show, I know who Tavis Smiley is yeah.

J Jonathan Quarles 21:23

Yeah. So I worked for him, raised money for his on the foundation side. And then I worked for one of the mayors of city of Detroit, Kwame Kilpatrick and had an opportunity to be his senior adviser to him, which was an amazing experience of learning how municipality work and how government works. And then I worked for two multibillion dollar companies. One was a defense company, which we actually did work with TACOM and things like that. And so then from there, I took another job, I was helped to put in, take another company public, a technology company. And then I went out on my own, full time, at least, because I've always been an entrepreneur on the side at least. But um, about maybe, probably 12 years ago, I said, you know what, I'm just gonna bet on myself. And I haven't looked back since. And it's been a blessing. Because now you know, my number one priority is being a father. My lifestyle is around being a father. And so that's why the business that I do has to be aligned with making sure I can pick my kids up from school, drop them off, go to the PTA meetings, and all that good stuff.

E Ed Clemente 22:21

And so that sort of ties into the last question. I've done a few adventures with you and your daughters but what, what's your favorite thing in Michigan? Like what do you like to either take them to or what do you like like either a destination or a festival or something like that.

J Jonathan Quarles 22:41

So I will say I do love the season changes. I probably one season I don't really love, it's the winter. I don't like snow. I don't like it when it's too cold. I do like the fall, the spring, the summer, and going up north is it's just amazing. And it's so beautiful, like natural resources

that we have, the fresh water and I just love, the people here are extremely, extremely humbly hardworking. I love all the dynamics and the color and the flavor that we have, particularly in Detroit, where it's just, it's never a dull moment. And so that's what I love about Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 23:19

Well, I want to also mention, too, that I think you're already a good ambassador for Flint and for Detroit and Michigan with all your jobs and everything. You do a great job and it's a pleasure being your friend. And once again, I want to thank JQ, Jonathan Quarles, who's the Founder and CEO of BTL Group and Quartz Water Source. I want to thank you again for taking time to do this today and keep on your path and we'll look forward to seeing you under some presidential regime someday.

J

Jonathan Quarles 23:46

Thank you. It's been my pleasure and it's always always good talking to you my friend.

A

Announcer 23:51

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