

Ep.2.45 - Jeff Thompson

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Jeff Thompson

- 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 Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show toda. We're fortunate to have Jeff Thompson with us. He's the Partner and Engineer for Shaggy's Skis and a lot of other titles in fact. Jeff, welcome to the show first.
- J** Jeff Thompson 00:41
Well, thanks for having me Ed. I'm excited to be here and tell you about our Michigan-made skis.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:46
And not only that your title actually, not your title, I know Partner and Engineer but also you're a Co-founder as well. And I think the other thing too, is you have a longer name, which ties into a little bit of your history of the organization too, right?
- J** Jeff Thompson 01:02
Absolutely. So everything's our full name is Shaggy's Copper Country Skis, it's an ode to our

family. My grandmother's great uncle Shaggy, used to carve skis by hand up in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula in Kearsarge, just past Calumet. And when my brother and I started building skis, we found these skis and my dad told us about the history that oh, those are your grandmother's skis that are Uncle Shaggy carved her. We thought, what is better than somebody, you know, 100 years before us in our family building, you know, that was making skis., we got to name this after him. So came from Shaggy's Copper Country Skis.

E

Ed Clemente 01:42

So hang on, Shaggy, a nickname, or is that his real name?

J

Jeff Thompson 01:46

Yeah. Yeah, Shaggy is definitely a nickname. His name was Sulo Lehto, and he was a jack of all trades up in the Copper Mining Country. And he did a lot of things, he was a blacksmith for a while, but carving skis was definitely a hobby and a fun thing that he did. And it was a way of life, you know, the big snow country. So we we're really proud to be able to honor on our family legacy.

E

Ed Clemente 02:16

And for listeners, if you go to the website, I think there's a picture of him with a sledgehammer or something in his hand. It's pretty cool photo. And we should also put a plug in because this, you know, obviously, this is the internet, you're gonna be able to download this around the world actually, to hear this podcast. But we also have a weird pocket up in northern Michigan that a lot of people don't know about, but are the Finnish people you said his name so quickly. But a lot of people don't understand there's a lot of Finnish people still up in the area up there.

J

Jeff Thompson 02:45

Yes, absolutely. They're all over, especially up in the Keweenaw Peninsula. And, you know, there's a tremendous amount of immigrants that came in for mining and liked being in the snow and cold weather, and it's pretty cool.

E

Ed Clemente 03:02

There's even a college up there. I think it's what Suomi College.

J

Jeff Thompson 03:05

Yeah. Oh, Finlandia University now.



E**Ed Clemente 03:07**

Finalandia, that's right, it changed its name, right. [Yeah.] And they teach Finnish I think still up there. [I believe they do.] Yeah. So let's get back to the ski work. You mentioned your brother, and I think he co-founded it with you. But now you're mainly the main person now or how's it work?

J**Jeff Thompson 03:25**

Yeah. So my brother and I in 2005, started building skis. And we kind of had grand plans, eventually, one day of, you know, turning it into a business. We came from a family of entrepreneurs. And so while we were just trying to build a ski, there was always a thought in the back of our head that we want to do something. Fast forward to 2008. My dad had got pretty heavily involved in the process as well. So my brother, my father, and I all founded Shaggy's, and we decided to make a run at it.

E**Ed Clemente 03:58**

And so, I mean, did you, were you did you grow up in northern Michigan or the UP?

J**Jeff Thompson 04:06**

So I actually grew up downstate. My family is from Kearsarge, and then I grew up downstate in South Lyon, just outside of Ann Arbor. And we were big ski racing family, so we were traveling across northern Michigan every weekend. We would four days a week we would train and then two days a week, you'd have ski races on the weekends. So essentially, six days we're on snow. And through our whole, like my whole childhood upbringing, that's what our life was we were on the snow all the time. And we wanted to make an all mountain ski that had the performance similar to, you know, race ski, but in a wide variety of conditions. So that was kind of the starting point of what we're looking to do. And, you know, here we are 17 almost 18 years later.

E**Ed Clemente 04:57**

Yeah, and you're talking to me because I'm intellectually curious, because I don't ski at all. I cross country skiing only but, but I mean, I'm always fascinated by the ski industry in Michigan in general. And that let's just put a little plug in too kind of for the MEDC, we, you know, we have a new division over here, but it's, it's new to MEDC, but we've had Brad Garmon on before, who heads up the Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office. And obviously, you're part of that because you're a manufacturer, right? And so, I mean, I'm sure you've been engaged with him too, in the past as well.

J**Jeff Thompson 05:33**

Yes, we have, we've talked about, you know, different opportunities that may, you know, start to present themselves as it's becoming more and more apparent that people that want to be outdoors, especially in the last couple of years, there, what are things that you can't stop

doing? Being outdoors is definitely one of them. So it's really important, you know, tourism, and outdoor recreation is such an economic driver, especially in northern Michigan where we we're located. And you know, to see everyone pushing, you know, towards being outside, being active, it's a, it's a really important thing, and we're excited to be part of it moving forward.

E

Ed Clemente 06:10

Yeah, I'm gonna put in an additional plug for two people, you know, Otie McKinley, who does, he's uses your equipment. He's got Shaggy Skis, and he's got a few of them, and also Kyle Gilmore, but they do a lot of the Pure Michigan video. I've been told by both of them that with the drone footage on Pure Michigan, which is some of the more beautiful film if you haven't seen any of it, but there you can see Shaggy Skis, because Otie's using them, and the drone follows them down the hills and their shot throughout different ski resorts throughout Michigan. So you get a good plug that way, but it's, it's so great you make these here. And can you talk a little bit more about the hard core part of the manufacturing side of it? Like, how do you make a ski I don't even know.

J

Jeff Thompson 06:54

Yeah, so making a ski is a pretty in depth process, it takes roughly eight man hours to produce a pair of skis. And with that, essentially, we take all of our raw materials from, like the heart of everything is going to be a hardwood core. And we use Northern Michigan, ash, poplar, and aspen. So we're bringing in rough lumber from a mill. And we're processing that down into a very stable state, we're actually flexing strips of lumber, matching the stiffness across seven strips of lumber that are laminated to make one ski core. And then we are going to take these different species of wood and machined them down to the actual thickness of a ski, so they're tapered at the tip and tail. And every ski model has a different profile designed uniquely for the conditions that it's going to be skied on and who's going to be skiing on it. And then from there we're going to have this ski core and we're going to start wrapping it with materials, different plastics around the edges, fiberglass on top and bottom carbon fiber underneath the core, your ski base, and edges. So all these things are gonna get laminated together in a press. And that's going to form the tip and tail shape of the skis and press all the materials together into one. And also in that process, we have the graphic that's applied. So the top sheet graphic, which a big thing that we do is custom artwork, we can add people's custom artwork to Huskies, or they can come to us and say, hey, what can I you know, I have this idea, can you come up with us? So we'll take a concept and turn it into a piece of art form and put it on the top of their skis. So that'll all get laminated in that pressing process.

E

Ed Clemente 08:38

So you could do that for individuals, right? You do it for like corporations?

J

Jeff Thompson 08:42

For individuals, we do a one-off ski.

E Ed Clemente 08:43

Oh wow, so it's like kind of a custom project too because they might even say what they're looking for, right?

J Jeff Thompson 08:50

Right. 100%. So that's actually this when we're in the season, it's a large portion of our business is building custom skis and the offseason we're building more of our stock products. But right now, we are working on making these custom skis for individuals. Whether we're actually customizing the construction of the skis, or just the graphics on the skis. It's definitely a, they get a totally unique product that's a one-off for them.

E Ed Clemente 09:20

So do you physically still make the skis yourself?

J Jeff Thompson 09:25

I don't, I'm not in the production process too often. I definitely I'm as an engineer, I'm, you know, in it all the time working to improve the processes, design new skis and as a small business owner, you're always in it in some aspect. But my day to day is more on running the business, helping customers you know I love talking about skis and helping customers find the exact right product for them. And then working on actually designing, designing new ski models.

E Ed Clemente 09:56

Yeah, and this is a plug for you you didn't expect but a buddy of mine, I played rugby with down at U of M, he lives out in Portland, no, Seattle now and he still has your skis. And he said, you were the nicest guy because you helped them pick what he wanted. And I don't know when he bought him but he's been there before because his wife's from the Traverse City area. So he's got a few sets of skis, but he just told me to say thank you, it's a good company. So I'm sure you get a lot of testimonials anyway.

J Jeff Thompson 10:26

Well, that's good. We, you know, we want to, we want to, we say when you buy a pair of skis from us, you join in the Shaggy's family. And we really believe that that's what it's all about. Our customers are number one. And we want to be able to honestly, empathize with what they're, what they're skiing, and figure out what experience is going to be best. So we pride ourselves on that aspect.



A

Announcer 10:49

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E

Ed Clemente 11:06

And I did sort of cut you off a little bit at the tail end of what else you do for the skis and I would imagine it's like the bindings or those kind of things too, right?

J

Jeff Thompson 11:13

Yeah, so once the skis have been pressed, they actually go into our finishing area, where there's a lot of hand, left hand work that gets done. There's all sorts of flashing and excess excess fiberglass, and plastic that needs to get cut off the edges. So they'll really go from kind of like a block of ski materials that are a one, and then they're gonna get cut apart, actually back into a pair of skis and finished, they'll go through, we have a Wintersteiger automated grinding robot, that's going to put a really nice tune on the bottom of the skis and sharpen the edges with ceramic discs. So it's going to get a really nice finish that goes on the skis. And then they get waxed and hand finished and polished and sent out the door. We actually strictly do skis, we don't do ski bindings, or boots or poles. We stick to what we know. So the majority of our skis are sold to an end user, we are direct to consumer. So those skis they get finished, they get put in a box and shipped out to to a customer. So they can at that point, go to their ski local ski shop, bring their boots in, get their bindings mounted and set up.

E

Ed Clemente 12:18

Oh, that's interesting. I wouldn't even thought about that. And so, like I said, I'm not a skier, but your name is mainly on the bottom right? Or is it on the top too, usually?

J

Jeff Thompson 12:30

It's definitely on the bottom or big Shaggy's is branding, in bright blue letters is on the base of every ski unless you're doing something custom, and we're still putting Shaggy's on it, but you could choose your colors. On the top sheet. Yeah, there's still, it says Shaggy's, but not as big and bold. And if somebody wants to do a custom ski, they can do whatever they want. You know, if they want to leave our branding off, go for it. We, most of our customers say we want to have a big Shaggy's on there, though. So that's nice.

E

Ed Clemente 12:55

You don't have to say exactly who the customer was, but have you had any really interesting things you put on the skis?

J Jeff Thompson 13:02

Yeah, we I mean, we've had customers who have they've contacted different artists, you know, their favorite artist and tried to get a painting that we can digitize and turn into ski art. So that's, that's really cool. Yeah, certainly, you know, a number of those different things. I mean, every year there, there's more and more that come through. A couple of things that stand out, um, we actually had a customer who, whose I think they had a right or their brother passed away, unfortunately, but he was an artist. And they had like doodles and drawings in his in his sketchbook that they brought to us and we turned into a into a ski graphic, so and then he handed it off to his father, he bought skis for himself and his father. And he was able to, you know, memorialize his son on this pair of skis, and they all loved skiing together. So every time they go skiing, they've got his art on their skis. So that's, that was pretty special. But the things that people come up with, you know, it's from space cats to, you know, fighter jets, and, you know, people that want to put their, you know, maybe their callsign a lot of military guys want to have represent their branch of the military and, you know, put their callsign. And so that's pretty cool.

E Ed Clemente 14:22

Yeah, it's fast, I would have never have known that. And I should also mention, you won't see him in the audience, but he's wearing a Stormy Kromer hat. And we always appreciate it another Yupper company, so you're keeping your Yupper roots with your head keeping warm too. And let's, a couple other things too. So once again, I don't know that much about downhill but is there different skis for like, Michigan, say versus out west or Switzerland or so how does that work? Like how do you decide which is which or do they ask you?

J Jeff Thompson 14:58

Right? So there are so many different types of skis for different conditions, different amounts of you know how much vertical drop you are you going to have. And that's really a conversation with the customer. I mean, we make powder skis, we make carving skis. Our specialty is all mountain ski. So for taking on a wide variety of conditions through most, you know, places you'd find both on and off trail. So in Michigan, you know, typically you're going to maybe look for a slightly narrower ski than you would find out west or if somebody skiing in, in Vermont, a lot of times they encounter a lot of ice, way more ice than we do, so they want, they put a higher priority on a ski that has more edge grip over flotation or the ability to kind of punch through crud and chopped up snow. Where we ski in a lot of variable conditions here in Michigan. So having something like that is is very important.

E Ed Clemente 15:47

And just you maybe you kind of touched on it right now, but last few questions is like, what do you see for your future? Is there new tech? I remember for a while there was those hyperbole ski, [parabolic skis, yeah.] parabolic skis, I don't know if those are still popular, but I don't see him as much now I don't know if they're still popular, or what like is that technology still evolving for ski?

J Jeff Thompson 16:15

It absolutely is. So you know, parabolic like technology, we're using a using an arc to generate the turn shape of a ski that's that's very important in that is actually it defines basically, the tighter the turning radius on the ski, the faster you're gonna be able to make a turn, and the sharper it's going to be. So that's definitely still extremely relevant. And it's definitely every ski has various amounts of you know, they're changed to various degrees of what the ski is going to be used for. I think the future for us is looking at materials. And we are, we started looking at ways that we can reduce waste in our manufacturing process. And in conjunction with that, so try to reduce waste using different materials and being able to take certain things out that are required. So we're looking at a couple of different manufacturers to work with urethane, where it's a product that can be poured and formed rather than taking the place of some of the plastics in the skis that have to get machined out of big block. So rather than having a big, giant pile of shavings at the end of the day, we just we're able to use the exact amount. So trying to do that become more sustainable with the materials that go into the skis. That's a big thing for us to in that in hand, hand in hand, that's will improve the processing speed of u. Being able to offer more mass customization and being able to do that faster. That's where our benefit is. Because we're not trying to be the biggest factory in the world, we don't want to be. You know, we are we're certainly you know, we're in Michigan, we're in the in the state that builds things and we want to be really good at what we build and be able to make skis that are customized at a you know, so you don't have to pay three times the price to get a custom pair of skis. You definitely have to pay a premium, but we want to be able to do that quickly, effectively, and just make it seamless in our process. So the mass customization, I think is a big part of our future also.

E Ed Clemente 18:26

Yeah, I was actually interested too when you said all the different types of trees you use for the core too and you know, Michigan based and we have all those. I would imagine the ash is harder to find nowadays, but yeah, but I know that ash was big for like baseball bats like Louisville Sluggers, right? And they had to change the way that they started using too I remember when that was like the emerald ash borer was running around. But by the way, you did mention your Boyne City. I forgot where you're located.

J Jeff Thompson 18:55

Yeah, we're located in Boyne City,

E Ed Clemente 18:56

And your factories there too, as well as your storefront. Are they combined?

J Jeff Thompson 19:01

Yes, everything's all in one building here. We have like we produce all the skis I walk out the door and I'm in our on our factory floor where we are producing our skis. We're a small shop,

you know, we have there's about nine of us that do everything here producing skis, selling, helping customers and we're a small business and we're proud to be that size. And we you know, we try to punch above our weight.

E Ed Clemente 19:24

Yeah, I think you probably sell some merchandise too as well like clothes or anything too?

J Jeff Thompson 19:30

Absolutely yeah, we've got our line of swag the stuff we all get. Your T-shirts, hoodies, hats, the all the branded apparel so you can rep Shaggy's when you're when you're not skiing.

E Ed Clemente 19:43

Yeah, no, I imagine just You just punch in Shaggy's on a Google search and they'll find you?

J Jeff Thompson 19:49

Absolutely look up Shaggy's skis, go to skishaggys.com, most of those places will get you there.

E Ed Clemente 19:56

Yeah, no, no, it's great gifts for people too throughout the year, just to have some apparell too. The last couple of questions are pretty quick. But because you've sort of became a self, you're actually repeating your grandpa's legacy somewhat. But like, any advice you'd give yourself, before at like 17, you would probably tell him to do something different, or tell yourself to do the same or what?

J Jeff Thompson 20:22

You know, I probably started a little bit differently, I, I would not give up anything for the path of entrepreneurship. It's it's struggle, you know, there's a giant struggle, there's trying times when the times are good, they're good. I would say when we first started, we tried to present ourselves as a bigger business than we were. And that's was probably to gain, you know, trying to get more legitimacy for a small business, but now with the fact that everything's online, you can see things so quickly, and, and, you know, virtually touch them online. Be proud of being small? [Yeah] That's what I would, that's what I would tell myself.

E Ed Clemente 21:07

And one last little teeny story, I think you should mention is you pivoted somewhat during COVID. Why don't you tell them a story what you made?

J Jeff Thompson 21:17

Sure. So back in March 2020, we were, we knew that in early March, we knew that man, something, you know, drastic is going to be happening in our country is definitely gonna be changing. So we put up a post on our Facebook page, saying, here's the type of things that we can do. Here's the type of things that we can make. We have no idea what's going to need to be made, but if we can help with something, give us you know, just let us know. A couple days later, we got a call from the president of McLaren Northern Michigan, asking if we could make face shields. We didn't even know what a face shield was at that point. It's funny, I was actually, my wife was giving birth and at that point, I was actually at the hospital. And they had someone come and drop off samples to our room. And we looked at them.

E Ed Clemente 22:11

Wait, you were at the hospital where the president was approaching you? [Yes] During the birthing process?

J Jeff Thompson 22:18

Yeah, well, luckily, it was it was a little bit after, we would have told them, hey, you're gonna have to come back. But it was probably eight hours after my daughter was born, they dropped off samples. We looked at them. I said, I think we can make this as long as we can source the materials. And from there on, it was a race. We retooled our whole shop, worked together with my brother's new business. And we made hundreds of thousands of face shields for hospitals all over the state. [Wow.] And that kind of kept us running, we never shut down. We had one day where we shut down at the beginning of the lock downs. And after that point, we we raced on through and made as many as we could.

E Ed Clemente 23:00

Well, your last question is pretty simple. But you don't have to give if you have a secret spot. But what do you like best about like, what thing do you like or place or event in Michigan?

J Jeff Thompson 23:11

That is a really good question. And that's a loaded question on what my favorite places in Michigan, but definitely in the Copper Country. I love skiing at Mount Bohemia. It's a get kind of like a rugged western feel. But you're overlooking the Great Lakes, a tremendous amount of snow and it's all within Michigan. So I mean, I love it all. But being able to see the water and have really rugged terrain. That's kind of the best of both worlds.

E Ed Clemente 23:41

It's a perfect answer. There's usually no wrong answer, by the way. But anyway, I want to thank you again, I know you're busy. And you take time when you're small entrepreneur. I know what that's like. So again, our guest was Jeff Thompson. He's a Partner, Engineer and a Co-founder for Shaggy's and I appreciate, Shaggy's Skis, and Copper Country. I know I'd probably didn't get the whole title but, but thanks again, Jeff, you did a great job today and keep up the good work. You do good justice for Michigan. We appreciate everything you guys do.

J Jeff Thompson 24:12

Well, thanks again for having me Ed.

E Ed Clemente 24:14

Thanks for doing it. Join us next week where I guest is going to be Sean Pomaville-Size, she's Executive Director for Motor City's National Heritage Area.

A Announcer 24:24

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