

**Kirt Jacobs:** Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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**Kirt Jacobs:** Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and legends and offer some keen insight into how they see themselves but most importantly just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where former interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, nationally renowned sports writers, heads of business concerns, community activists, and developers. Today our guest is Allan Cowen. He is the president and CEO of Funding for the Arts. Cowen previously worked in arts management positions in Akron and Columbus, Ohio and spent three years as associate director of the Arts Council Winston Salem, North Carolina before taking his present post. However he almost didn't end up in Louisville as he had already accepted a job in Canton, Ohio and was on his way there to find a house when members of the search committee seeking to fill the Louisville position persuade Cowen to stop in Louisville along the way. That twist of fate, or freeway exit if you so choose, the term prophetic as in Cowen's words quote "It only took a second to realize that Louisville was someplace special and the arts held a special place here. You got the sense the quality was very important. And so it goes in November 1976 Cowen joins the Fund for the Arts as executive director and in 1982 was named president and CEO.

Before Cowen arrived in '76 the Fund's annual campaign raised 536 thousand dollars from just a meager six thousand donors. Today some 30 years later it raises nearly eight million dollars from 26 thousand donors dispensing something well north of six million dollars in grants to Louisville area arts organizations and directing fundraising efforts totaling more than 110 million dollars for art groups and arts related education programs, building renovations,

and special projects. Combined Fund assets under his tenure have increased from less than half a million to nearly 20 million dollars. Wow. The Brown Theater renovation and the acquisition of the Fund for the Arts building on Main Street were both conceived of and directed by Cowen. And it was in 1992 that Cowen received the highest award given by the National Coalition of United Arts Funds, The Michael Newton Award for Excellence in United Arts Fundraising. Cowen has been quoted “It’s not that I have done the same job for 30 years and Louisville. I have done 30 different jobs for a year at a time.” I like that one.

Cowen finds himself now as the older statesman to the Louisville arts community and he has been stated or quoted “My biggest weakness is I care.” Cowen’s advice for Louisvillians is to avoid selling the city short. Quote “Louisville’s biggest challenge is we do not realize how great we are and sometimes compromise when it comes time to make that leap forward.” Just say an amen on that one. I agree. Allan Cowen is married to Gretchen Showalter Cowan of Louisville. He has a son named Jonathan who is an Army captain who is in who has served with the 101 Airborne in Iraq and a daughter named Emily who is a Ph D. candidate and instructor at the University of Kentucky. Got to mention this, he has a three-year-old daughter named Isabella. Thank you Allan for joining us on the Leadership Landscape. It’s a pretty impressive bio and background you know not many people get 30 years in one gig or post.

**Allan Cowen:** And live through it.

**Kirt Jacobs:** And live through it. Right, right. But the first question we want to ask you is what drives you I guess to stay for 30 years? Let alone what you’ve achieved in terms of donations.

**Allan Cowen:** Well I think it.... You know it’s easy to do any job for a short amount of time. And it’s easy to do any job for a short amount of time and succeed. I think that the charm, the journey is about taking the long view of life and really tackling the big problems, the big challenges or in Louisville’s case the big opportunities. And that continues to be exciting. I mean Louisville is one of

those unfolding stories. You don't know what the ends like. And we don't know what it is. But I think it's as great as we choose it to be. And I think that's kind of that way about any job. You know we have people all the time the coming and pass through the organizations that think that's all there is. And I think they're selling themselves and the cause short.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Whom do you credit most influential in your life? If you could name one person.

**Allan Cowen:** Well I don't know. I sort of think it's this way is I have been blessed to work with a lot of really wonderful, inspired people that are... Our board at the Fund for the Arts is most of the well known names you would think of in Louisville but but I as a young person got a chance to work with Wendell Cherry and David Jones and Steve Niles who was then chairman of the First National Bank and Dick Mayron who was head of KFC at the time. And you know you go all the way through and I'm lucky enough to have to work with people like Mike McAllister who's the current CEO of Humana, Jonathon Blume at YUM, Rick Anderson from Green Bum. You know it's really wonderful. I think the thing about you know there's all this conversation Louisville is you know well when there were ten old boys that sat in the small room in front Pendennis Club made all decisions it was easy. You know one it was and it wasn't ten it was probably five.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Good point

**Allan Cowen:** I think it's it's better. I mean we've got a lot of bright exciting people who have been or are newer to Louisville's Landscape, Leadership Landscape and and make a big difference. Last year Bud Chardyn from MSD. chaired our campaign and and you know here's a guy from MSD who's taking a big leadership role in the arts and I think that that's impressive. And next year Phil McHugh who's head of Fifth Third Bank is going to chair the campaign. I think they all realize we are all vested equally in the success and future of our community. It's up to each of us. If you sit on the bench and assume that someone else is going to do it. Or why aren't they doing it the way I think they should do? You know you're crazy.

I'm not willing to invest the future of my community and my family in someone else's hands. I'm going to be just too neurotic about wanting to make that change possible. Louisville as lots of great leaders. Lots of people in the game. I'm not much of a sports guy but I can tell you that that I think I do understand enough about sports that it takes a whole team to be successful. Think Louisville's a whole team.

**Kirt Jacobs:** What was the most defining moment of your life Allan?

**Allan Cowen:** Yeah well I think I've had a few. You know and I've been lucky enough to have a few. It's funny because when you said it I was thinking well the most defining moment in my life was stepping out of an airplane and landing unsuccessfully. That was defining only in the sense that it was one of those moments of faith where you simply have to decide whether you're going to do it or not. I was stupid enough to do it. I think the personal defining moments of my life have all been around my children, my family, and and the joy that comes with with each of those. And as you pointed out I have a three-year-old and I think you know every night when I put her to bed I... Not exactly a religious person but it has brought me to religion you know in the sense that you just got to thank somebody for making all that happen.

**Kirt Jacobs:** If there is one what is your biggest for professional regret? In other words if you could armchair quarterback your life, you know hindsight 20/20. Can you name one, what would it be.

**Allan Cowen:** Oh you know I'm one of those people that I'd love everybody to be thrilled with the work I do. I'd like every decision or every action I take for everyone to be happy about it and everybody to like me for doing it and you know and the inevitability is that ain't going to happen.

**Kirt Jacobs:** No.

**Allan Cowen:** And I think it. You know might happen if you making easy decisions. So I guess I get frustrated. I like to tell my three-

year-old it hurts my feelings when she yells at me but you know it's kind of ... You wish that people in this community more commonly had enough faith in themselves to collectively believe in our success and therefore I think that some of the criticism that that I've experienced wouldn't happen if people had faith in realizing you know what we could make that leap forward. There's nothing in a our way. What what structurally would get in the way of Louisville's success? The answer is kind of nothing. There's not economics. There's not imagination. There's not intellect. There's not capacity. So I think the only thing that gets in our way sometimes is is something that I used to hear a lot. Which was you don't you talk about every idea that would come forward and that the end of the sentence was always yeah but this is Louisville I guess we can't do it. Or you talk about some grand idea that. Oh yeah well this is Louisville. I think that's even interesting I remember at the beginning of the art center conversation a building to connect the Center for the Arts in Louisville was very much like the arena conversation. One is you know half the people thought we shouldn't do it and half thought we should. And the people who thought we should thought it we should redo the Palace and then another half thought it shouldn't be on the waterfront. Broadway or somewhere in between or floated down the river. and I think that we transcended that conversation. I think that the the arena conversation Louisville is gone through those, the same evolution. And I think that it's a confidence issue. I mean at least now we're just saying we're going to build it. And I hope the next conversation is about you know getting a great architect and and that ought to be the conversation. A landmark, a chance, a moment in history, a defining moment to talk about greatness. Those don't come... across community very often. The Art Center was one of those I think the arena is one. Humana building its tower was one. I mean these are all great terrific chances to talk about change.

**Kirt Jacobs:** What is your biggest professional triumph?

**Allan Cowen:** Oh I don't know. I don't you know waking up in the morning and probably. You know I don't I don't think about it that way? Don Ingerson said something to me he was head of the school board early on when I was here and he talked a lot about it

was like life was like eating, creating swiss cheese you just took one bite at a time and but time you're done you ate the whole piece. In my life it's been a little more. I went through a spell of climbing mountains. Now I was completely... had no fitness to climb mountains. And I climbed a lot of big ones. I finally learned you know that I could get up any mountain if I simply lifted one foot up and put it in front of the other one. You know. So what do I think is my greatest achievement -- putting one foot in front of the other one. I try to not get lost in the high grass of this the distractions which life puts in front of you probably every minute of the day.

**Kirt Jacobs:** You're 30 years of I think may be a testament to that psychology.

**Allan Cowen:** Well it's certainly you know I had I had a couple really some simple goals when I took this job in Louisville and one is I thought that our organization could be the best in the country. And indeed I think we are. And two was I wasn't going to get an ulcer. I have I believe I've achieved both of those.

**Kirt Jacobs:** What do you find exciting about all this? Like it said earlier in one of the quotes you know 30 years. You know each year's a different job 30 times was I think the basis of the quote so what do you find exciting about this year in year out?

**Allan Cowen:** Well I think that a couple things first of all the subject matter is innately exciting. I mean the arts are about about imagination, about taking your own journey that you could never conceive of going in. So that in itself is pretty thrilling. And as somebody who was a pretty average artist growing up it's great it's wonderful be a part of great art. I think the biggest kind of turn on is is you know is the people I work with professionally. Our staff at the Fund for the Arts. The people who run the arts groups like Mark Masterson and then Jennifer Bealstone, who's new at Actor's Theatre or Brad Broker. I mean they're all thrilling Steven Klein at the Kentucky Center and then I've already talked about the volunteers in this community who enthusiastically step forward and give their precious time and just everybody remember when I walk in the office I'm not talking with just your time I'm talking about your

money. You know..

**Kirt Jacobs:** Yeah. That's a good point.

**Allan Cowen:** You know conversation is cheap money isn't.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Walk the talk.

**Allan Cowen:** I'm asking people to put their their skin in the game. And I don't find very many people that say no. I mean it's only a question of amount it's not a question..

**Kirt Jacobs:** Right

**Allan Cowen:** I don't believe it's a question yes or no it's a question of how much.

**Kirt Jacobs:** What is your favorite word in the great English lexicon? Do you have one word that is kind of your favorite or..

**Allan Cowen:** Oh I don't know I mean you know my fifteen cent response to that is I guess my favorite word is imagination. Just because you know it by itself is ill defining. I think that you know we're limited by that or we're not limited by that as we choose it. And again I sort of drift back to the artistic process in itself is it's about taking this blank canvas you think of that moment that an artist is presented with. When you have this this raw substance. And they are through intellect and creativity and maybe a little divine inspiration going to bring some elements together. And at the end of that you're going to have a great work of art. Now it's still just some paint. You know just stuff.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Yeah. They may not see it that way.

**Allan Cowen:** But the stuff gets assembled in a way that makes your head spin. And likewise I think that you know it's not an answer to your question but I think about my favorite moments of going to Actors Theater is you know you walk in and they make your head spin around three times. And you just hope it faces the

front when you're done and you know they challenge you intellectually. I want to be challenged intellectually. I think communities are challenged intellectually and I think I expect the same of the people that I get to work with.

**Kirt Jacobs:** On somewhat the flip side of that and that's the basis of our show can you define leadership in one word? It can be more than one word.

**Allan Cowen:** You know again you know I'm going to keep giving you the fifteen cent answer because maybe it's more honest guts. I mean you just you just gotta get over it. You know you just do what the right.. do the right thing. I mentioned you know my sky-diving episode which was unsuccessful mind you because I broke my leg but you know sometimes you just gotta step out of the plane. You just got to have the faith to just step forward and yeah you don't know what the heck's going to happen to you and I think that that you know that's sort of a nice way to use as a defining strategy for your leadership. You know you've got to step into the void. You've got to hope that more times you succeed than you break your leg. And sometimes you break your leg and guess what it heals.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Wow what you call guts I call insanity jumping out of a plane but I'll leave it at that. If you could change one thing, be it in life or in general, what would that be? Can be in your own life, it can be more of a macro kind a

**Allan Cowen:** You know I don't know and I know this is going to sound almost bizarre but I was thinking as you said that is I don't know I'd change a heck of a lot. You know. You know I'm like everyone else who you know you'd like to wish you could do some of the things you don't do well a little better. You know I wish I could speak French. You know I wish I could if you think that I can do very well and I guess I probably don't put the energy into it. I think I'm pretty blessed person. I mean I'm married to a wonderful person. I have three incredible kids that every minute of the day I think I'm blessed because through through their being a part of my life. I work with great people. I probably got the best job I could ever

ask for. You know I'm just some kid from Pittsburgh. You know it's kind of average and I think I've had a chance to do some great things

**Kirt Jacobs:** And just staying somewhere for 30 years is a testament in this generation.

**Allan Cowen:** You know you can stay places for a long time you know. The challenge is continuing to do good things.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Could you describe in detail a particular incidents or scenario you know maybe professionally or your personal life where you utilize the style or philosophy of leadership. You call it guts.

**Allan Cowen:** Oh I don't know I mean you know you know... I'll tell you I think it's you know the defining principles that use in your life are the same all the time. And I think you know it's focus, stay straight ahead. Probably keep your eyes focused not in front of you but you know pretty far down the road. And just have some faith that faith in yourself and faith and you're smart enough to figure out how to get to the finish line. I think you know so that's going to that's an answer to question I think that I think the only thing that's tough and it's got to be particularly difficult for for people that are coaches and things is that. Your success is only good as good as your last success. So if you have a winning season I mean next season is ten times harder. I think that than in that in a real way that this the same challenge present themselves and my work is that a lot that defines our success or chance for success or my chance for success it is out of my control. Yet you know you do all you can to corral the cats. To keep thing and move everything moving in the right direction. Most of the times you win a few the times don't. You know the answer is you know is getting up each day and just staying at it. I mean how thrilling could it be. I mean really this was a great time to live in society. To live in America and be able to do what we're doing. Think about that. We can change almost anything we choose to put our energy and our intellect and our resources behind in America. You know you can't do that very many places.

**Kirt Jacobs:** You know that's a great comment. Really is for the show. no one's ever really talked about that aspect of how fortunate we are to be in America. This question I love to ask you because you've got this 30-year span and you've seen leaders from all kinds of different generations. From when you started till now. Do you think there's a difference today in our leaders and there was in past generations? There's no right or wrong answer obviously

**Allan Cowen:** You know I don't. I don't I don't think so. I've been lucky enough to work with people in leadership capacity probably around the world and you know the common denominator is keeping your vision focused squarely down the road. And you know I'm a big fan of reading presidential biographies and and all the great people made those decisions very early on their life and they kind of stuck to them. And regardless of what you think of any of these people their political affiliation and whether you like they were in a conflagration or not with all these great leaders had is that sense of destiny. You know and I guess if I could own a little piece of some destiny. You know I'd be just thrilled with that. I'd be thrilled with that. I've read a quote somewhere where Thomas Jefferson said you're measured by the footprints you leave behind. And that may not be an exact paraphrase of it but but I do think that is kind of what's great. I mean wouldn't be great if you could to visit a community that you've been a part of in some future life you know and you get to take this. You fly over the town and you look down you go huh that's still here. And I made that possible it's kind of like you know going back to your childhood home and visiting a tree you planted. You know I love to go. I've lived in lots of houses in Louisville and I've always been fond of planting trees and I like to you know there's a tree I like the best because I remember planning it when my my son was born and I just I go back and I go. All right still there.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I hope the answer is next question is not skydiving but we'll see. I love to ask this question of our guest. If you were granted two weeks right today no obligation. No commitments. No Blackberry no cell phone no e-mail. How would you spend that

two weeks? Mini vacation from life.

**Allan Cowen:** Oh well I don't think I'm all that interested in a mini vacation from life that if I was you know if I had my chance tomorrow I'd pick up with my wife and I know this is going to sound arrogant I'm just going to say it but you know that I'd go to Paris. I'd sit in the Tuileries by the Louvre. Which is a park in front of it and I just sit there for two weeks and watch people. I think there's something about observing the rhythm of life and that's really fascinating. Just kind of intrigues me and I mention that not because you know I'm going to Paris but I mention it because there are a few places in life that the physical presence of those places peels back enough of the reality to give you that moment. I think you have those moments of peace and in observing the rhythm of life in lots of different places that we all have those dynamic intersections that take us to that, And for some people it's fishing. And for some people it might be watching sports events. I just I just happen to have that moment when I got married where we went and it was you know I just remember clearly because it was November and it was cold and I was eating an ice cream cone and I was sitting there on this bench doing nothing particularly fancy but just watching the rhythm. I'm fond in meeting of asking people you know you put your hands on the table. Just try to feel the rhythm what's going on. And this was a place that made me feel that and I'm sure there's a glance grand and more glorious way of answering a question but that's an honest one

**Kirt Jacobs:** No it's a very humane answer. I like that. You know some people want to fly off here and do this so I think that on. This is a question we ask of all our guest in the it's a little bit dark it's a question we end on with all of them. If it all ended today, how do you want to be remembered when the great day comes? God forbid you walk out of here. something terrible happens.

**Allan Cowen:** You know there's you know there's two simple questions you know most parents legacy is always their children. I mean I think there's you know any parent says that and and I think that I am a very very blessed person because my children and I think second would be the you know the professional one and I

think that it's kind of fun to drive around Louisville and I look at projects that that I feel like I was a part of at some a critical moment in history. A defining moment where maybe it happened because you know I had a finger in it. Or a hand or elbow or whatever it was. So I guess I would say is that. I feel I've got lots of those moments already and probably lots more in me and I think that God you know what more could you ask for a life.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Another 30 years at Fund for the Arts.

**Allan Cowen:** Well you know I got a three year old I'm going to have a lot more years at Fund for the Arts. You know I'm going to be 70 when she graduates high school.

**Kirt Jacobs:** You'll have this video to show her. I really want to thank you for being here today on Leadership Landscape. Allan truly a pleasure. Your footprint will last many years I think long after you're gone on this community and I just personally want to thank you for what you've done for the arts.

**Allan Cowen:** Thanks thanks for having me.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Thanks for being on Leadership Landscape.

**Allan Cowen:** Sure

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**Kirt Jacobs:** Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at [kirt@moxietalk.com](mailto:kirt@moxietalk.com) or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at [www.moxietalk.com](http://www.moxietalk.com)

