

Jon Bernstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Jon Bernstein, Regional President of PNC Bank in New England, alongside my co-host Carolyn Jones, Market President and publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Jon. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently. Our guest today is Tom O'Brien, managing partner and chief executive officer of HYM Investment Group. Tom, welcome. It's great to see you.

Tom O'Brien:

Thanks, Carolyn. Thanks, Jon. Thanks very much for having me.

Jon Bernstein:

Tom, welcome. It's great to have you here and we look forward to getting some great insights into your work and leadership. It'll be great to start with an overview of HYM, the business that you started and its core mission.

Tom O'Brien:

Sure. So the HYM Investment Group is a development company based here in Boston. We're now a group of about 45 employees, really wonderful team of people. We've worked very hard to build a company that reflects the diversity of Boston, so we work with a group of folks who really love the city and really care deeply about the work that we do. I have two partners, Doug Manz and Paul Crisalli, our folks who I've worked with since before HYM. The HYM operating history now is probably, I think we're in our year 14, if that sounds right, which is really wonderful and we enjoy the work that we do. I'm sure we'll talk more about this, but the key thing for us as a group is we do everything as a team with 45 or 44 employees. We work on a lot of different large projects, and the only way to do this work is to be kind to one another, to be good to one another, to be good about sharing information, to be good about how we think carefully in terms of the values that we bring to the projects that we work on.

So that's what we're all about, is all about team and leading with our values and our desire to put people first.

Carolyn Jones:

We will talk a bit more about some of the projects that you're working on, most particularly, the big project going on at Suffolk Downs, so maybe in a little bit you can share that. But perhaps let's talk a little bit about your career path, it's really been an interesting one. You have a law degree and you headed up the BPDA for seven years before moving to the private sector. So can you share a little bit about that journey and how that led to HYM and impacted the way you operate there?

Tom O'Brien:

I grew up here in Greater Boston and my mother and father were always very active. My father was a selectman, we grew up in Scituate, Massachusetts, and my dad was a selectman and my mother was very active in local politics and the like. And my mother actually earned a graduate degree eventually,

and she went back and she became the head of a public library in Lowell. She ran the public library in Lowell for 20 or 25 years. So my parents were always actively involved in government and civic affairs, and my brothers and I grew up in that household. So I think I always wanted to be involved in the intersection of business and government, I love doing that work. When I first came out of college, I wasn't really clear on what I wanted to do, probably not unusual for most young people graduated from college, and I went to work in New York.

Eventually, I quit my job to work for Mike Dukakis, he was running for president in 1988, and so I quit my job to go to work for him. We lost, people may remember, but I remember thinking that if I wanted to be involved in government and politics, to work out the transitions in there, I had it in my head that having a law degree would be important, you could always fall back on being an attorney. So I went to law school at night and along the way, I also worked for a place called the Massachusetts Industrial Finance Agency, which is now called MassDevelopment, and I met a guy named Tom Menino, who became mayor in 1993. He remembered me, I was 29 years old, I was still a young kid and went to work for him and he really was a great mentor for me.

I learned a tremendous amount working for him. I learned what it means to run a city, and I love the work that we did. And I honestly, it's defined what I've done with my life. I really love this work that I do, as I said, at the intersection of government and finance and business, and I get to use that work to do projects and improve the lives of people in the city that I love. So it's really honestly been a dream come true for me to be able to work on these sorts of things in Boston.

Carolyn Jones:

Wow. And just one more thing to add is, how do you see that partnership now between government and industry? Any tips for making that the most effective?

Tom O'Brien:

It's always important, I think, and I think we've historically have always had a great partnership between government and business. Certainly, there've been good days and bad days on either side of government or business, but I think in general, the city's done very, very well. When I look back on where we were in 1993, when I first started off with Tom Menino, we were coming out of a recession that for Boston, had really been a pretty terrible recession. There were a series of banks that had projects that had failed during that period of time, and Boston suffered pretty significantly during that time. We were trying to make projects work across the city, and quite frankly, it was a hard thing to do, to get new projects underway. And Boston had not had much in the way of new housing development at all in the previous decades.

Mayor Menino was really good at, was he focused on how to get things done, particularly projects that really truly mattered in people's lives. So everything from making sure that there were plantings and flowers and pieces in all the different business districts across the city, wasn't just downtown Boston but there would be the same would be true in Roslindale Square, same would be true in West Roxbury, all across through Nubian Square, all across the city. And he would do that by also trying to make projects happen. And I learned a lot about what that means, to make these things go. So the only way to do that is to work in partnership with one another, both business and government, and to be, again, good partners with one another, be kind to one another and try and get things done together.

And I think as a city, the growth that we've had, the job growth that we've had, the number of housing units that have been built, the fact that we've been able to capture this life size business, which is such

an important and competitive business, as a city, we've really, really done well and it only works as a team, which is the underlying theme, I think.

Carolyn Jones:

Absolutely.

Jon Bernstein:

We're grateful for your commitment and your willingness to quit your job in New York and move to Boston and the success that has come from that one. But could you go back to that for a second? How did you get up the nerve to quit your job in New York and go work for a political campaign?

Tom O'Brien:

I had this desire, it's probably been in me since my mom and dad were kids. My brothers and I, even though we followed slightly different paths, I have two brothers, so there's three of us all together. My older brother, Jon, was a state senator. I actually, after the Dukakis campaign, I met a woman who is now my wife, the former Trisha Joyce, now Trisha Joyce O'Brien, and we were engaged to be married. My brother was running for state senate, so this was 1992. I was going to work for Tom Menino, I was finishing up law school at night, working full time, and I ran his campaign for state senate, which was really, really, really fun. For the two of us, we still have great memories of that and my brother was a state senator here for eight years. My younger brother, Bill, is a football coach, but he really, the three of us, when we talk about politics or governments and all the rest of it, it ends up being very passionate and we care deeply about our region and our nation.

And so we grew up with this same conversation, my mom and dad are both 90 and my dad still reads, I don't know, three newspapers a day, and you can talk to him about what's happening in Boston. And so I grew up with this, and I think when it came time when this presidential campaign was starting, I realized that I had a connection somehow, that I was a Massachusetts kid. My dad had met Governor Dukakis when my father was a selectman and so I basically volunteered at first. I quit my job for no money, and then I finally landed a job. And I think, honestly, I can't remember, Jon, what they paid us, but maybe they paid us a thousand bucks a month or something. I don't think they paid us much. So I finished in debt, I think I nearly lost my car because I don't think I made a car payment, but it was honestly one of the most satisfying years of my life.

I was in different parts of the country, got to work on this really interesting set of issues around the future of our country. I met some great people, I'm still friends with all the people. We were all 23, 24, 25 years old, we all worked together. I'm still friends with that group of people and even if we haven't seen each other in a few years, when we'd get back together, we're still close. And so it was a transformative experience for me in my life and I would encourage young people, honestly. There's a tendency, I think, among young people to discount government or government service or to think about it in a way that maybe is less than something else that you might pursue, but it's a wonderful way to learn about your community. It's a wonderful way to learn about who you are and what values drive you. It's an amazing way to build relationships with people and to feel like you've done something that's worthwhile. So I would encourage people to think about politics and government, particularly at an early stage of their career.

Carolyn Jones:

Wow, that's a great story. And Jon, thank you for taking us back and asking the next question.

Tom O'Brien:

I haven't talked about that, Jon, since probably 1990, I think. So thanks for asking me that.

Carolyn Jones:

That's awesome. Love Michael Dukakis too.

Tom O'Brien:

And that's one other thing to talk about, by the way. He is such an amazing, for all of us who care about civic commitment, and here's a man who I think turns 90 years old this year. I bet you, it's raining out here today but if the weather is right, I bet you he is outside in his neighborhood picking up scraps of trash and committed to whatever is going on in his day. He is a wonderful example for all of us to think about in terms of civic commitment.

Carolyn Jones:

Absolutely, totally agree. And that's a fabulous story. Would love to hear maybe about some of the other pivotal moments in your life and your career that helped to shape your leadership style and influenced your success?

Tom O'Brien:

Well, the most important thing for me was, I met this woman named, Trisha Joyce, who is now Trisha O'Brien, Trisha Joyce O'Brien and really, the gift that she brought to me was, I probably was always kind of an energetic, maybe some would say headstrong person. Maybe I was young man in a hurry, sort of a person and the gift that she's given me, and I'm still, believe me, Carolyn and Jon, I'm still a work in progress on this. The gift she's given me is to slow down, try to be a better listener, make sure you're being an empathetic person and so that's really, we've been partners in building a family, which I'd love to talk about if you're interested in that.

Carolyn Jones:

Absolutely.

Tom O'Brien:

And so as we've worked together to build a family, she's also the person who will look at me and say, be present in this particular moment, but think about being a better listener, being a more empathetic person. And so she's always either with me or on my mind as I think about everything that I'm doing in business and certainly everything we do together as a couple for our kids and our family. And she's very committed to our community as well and cares deeply about us and she asks me all of the hard questions. Part of the reason why I'm involved in different projects, we should talk about P3, for example, in Roxbury, she's the person in my life who will look at me and say, well, you care about these issues, what are you doing about those issues today? And so that to me was probably the pivotal moment in my life meeting her and we've now been married for over 30 years. We've known each other for 32 plus years, and it's really been a wonderful partnership. Although she would say she runs it and I follow, which is probably correct.

Carolyn Jones:

Like all great partnerships, right?

Tom O'Brien:

Yes.

Carolyn Jones:

I wonder if just quickly, if you could just share with us the story of your family, I think, is so interesting and I think really does speak to how you lead and how you run your life. So maybe you could just give us a quick little snippet into the scope of your family?

Tom O'Brien:

Sure. When we first got married, who knows what life has in store for you? So when we first got married, certainly, the two of us were determined to build a family. And so having a biological family was not in the cards for us and so really led by Tricia, we have built our family through the path of adoption. So we adopted five children, all our kids were born outside the US. So Lucas, our oldest guy, who's 27, turns 28 this summer, is from Bogota, Columbia. Nina is second. Nina is from Guatemala. Tomas is from Ecuador. We then had a fourth child, her name is Marisol. Marisol was born in 2000, she was also from Guatemala. Marital became ill with a very difficult disease called leukodystrophy, which affected her brain. It was undiagnosed and unknown to us when she came home. She was a healthy girl until almost the age of three, and the leukodystrophy really robbed her of her ability to walk and to talk and to live the full life that she had previously lived.

She was a very energetic, funny, beautiful little girl. She died in 2008 after a long time of caregiving, which my wife led. My wife was her lead caregiver, 24 hours a day. So Marisol died at the age of eight, in 2008. It then took us a little bit to get our legs back underneath us at that point and we went back, again, my wife's idea, and we adopted a fifth child from Ethiopia. Her name is Doretti. I kid her that she's literally the only person on the face of the earth named Doretti O'Brien. She's now 16 years old, she's about to be a sophomore in high school. Amazing, energetic, beautiful young woman. So those are our kids. And honestly, it's a path that seems very almost typical for us when we're all together and it's central to who we all are, and I couldn't be more proud of my kids and the path that they're on, each of them is on a really amazing path.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, that's great. Thank you for sharing that. I just think it gives a lot of insight into how you run your business and other parts of your life, so thank you.

Jon Bernstein:

Yeah. And Tom, it seems like your family building experiences have directly impacted your approach to building your business and how you engage your industry and your leadership style. Would you please tell us a little bit about how you process and stay positive and focused for your team in these situations?

Tom O'Brien:

Sure. I think the key thing is to be open to new ideas and to be willing to just keep asking questions, be a good listener and that's what we've tried to do. We do that in terms of how we build a team, so we're looking for people who have different life experiences and bring different perspective to come work with us. What we care mostly about is honestly what I said upfront, Jon and Carolyn, which is we want you to be a good team member, we want you to be a kindhearted person, that's the most important thing for us. Whatever skills you might need around real estate or design or whatever, we can largely

teach you those skills, but we can't teach you to be a good team member, you need to bring that to our organization. And I think because we're willing to look at people who have different life experiences, means that we've been able to build a diverse company that again, reflects the diversity of the city.

So we're now 50% women and 35% people of color and it was purposeful in some respects, but it also is strategic for us. It was a good thing to do to give us perspective, but it also is helpful for us in terms of making us competitive because we've got a group of people who will sit in a room and say, well, gee, have we thought about this? Or have we thought about that? And so being unafraid to ask different questions, consider different ideas, has led us to then take on some of these challenging projects which other people have shied away from. We kid ourselves that we say, we'll take on complicated projects that others won't. And I think that's been our ball market as a company, we like these things and they're challenging and sometimes I don't want to kid you, there are frustrating days sometimes when we're trying to get these things done.

But it brings a tremendous amount of satisfaction to see these things come to fruition, particularly when you're surrounded by a group of team members who are just as proud as we are in terms of the work that we do. So it's fun, I love coming to work every day. It's really, really fun.

Carolyn Jones:

That's the way to be, that's awesome. So Tom, this podcast, as we've talked to so many great people over time and are thrilled with the opportunity to talk with you today, but it's been described by some as a masterclass in leadership. And so since this particular class features you as our teacher, what advice do you have for our listeners? Whether it's like for the up and coming leaders or the current C-suite, what are some key things you might share?

Tom O'Brien:

Honestly, I think, Carolyn, it comes back to the lessons that my wife is always trying to teach us. The other aspect of our upbringing for my brothers and I, was my parents really instilled in us a sense of our faith, what my wife and I would describe, we're progressive Catholics. So that faith is really about trying to put people first and to try and focus on where people are in their lives and what their needs are and what they bring to a given situation. And so I think one of the most important lessons that I've tried, and believe me, this is the lesson that needs to be learned every single day, relearn every single day. And that is to really try to put people first, to be a genuinely empathetic person, to think about what it means to put people first and to do that all the time in your life.

It's funny, our faith puts in front of us these responsibilities or these goals of trying to love everybody everywhere, no matter where they are, no matter what their background is. And quite frankly, no matter what your interaction might be with them, good or bad. So our faith calls us to be these people for others, that's really what we try to be as a company. I think that leads to our success, we couldn't do this work if we weren't good partners with other people outside of our company. So with community leaders who we've worked closely with or with contractors, architects, other professionals that we work with, I think it built a reputation of being good partners with people. And that hopefully is a reflection of these values that we as a team try to bring to each project, that to me is the most important thing.

Jon Bernstein:

As a leader in the Boston community, what are some of the key issues you see as critical to our future and how do they shape how you lead? And as part of that also, if you could share this, what are you optimistic about and what worries you?

Tom O'Brien:

I'd say for Boston in particular, the issues are really obvious. The first is, we need to build more housing generally and certainly more affordable housing, we just have to do it. And we have to find a way, particularly working with the mayor, the governor and lieutenant governor, we have to find a way to draw more communities, more surrounding communities into the construction of housing. It has been troubling to see communities think of ways to avoid building housing communities outside of Boston. Boston has pulled its way, quite frankly for a long time. There are many thousands of units of housing that have been built in Boston, and we can do more and we should do more. But quite frankly, the bigger issue for us as a region is, we've just simply not built enough units of housing in communities inside of 128 or in communities inside of 495.

We need to build more housing, that's number one. Number two, I would say for Boston is, we have to find a way once and for all to fix the Boston public school system for the kids who are in the Boston public school system right now. There's now about 48,000 kids in the Boston public school system. So just stop and reflect on that for a second. For a big city like Boston or a city that is in the weight class, let's say, of considered to be a big city, our public school system is only 48,000 kids. And when you look at that, this is something that given all of the resources that are in our city, from great universities, to great companies, to committed young people who may work in business or in private enterprise, but really want to have a sense of service in our city and really want to be committed, we need to fix the school system.

And I think the mayor wants to do it, she's focused on it. We have a new school superintendent, she's certainly focused on it. We have all these pieces, but just to give you a little sense of this right now. On any given day, my understanding from one of the city councilors here in Boston is, that there's about 20,000 absences of the 48,000 kids on any given day. Or just to pick another statistic, on any given day, there are some kids who are ready to go to school, have their material all set and ready to go, and they're out at the bus stop and the bus does not come to pick them up at that point. So there's 500 plus kids on any day and so these are issues that we need to work with the mayor, she's committed to this, we need to support her and support Mary Skipper, who's the new superintendent, to get these things done.

We have to improve our school system. And then the third thing I would add, Jon, is another obvious one, which is we have to once and for all, set the MBTA up for success. The MBTA, when I was a kid, when I was younger, the MBTA was about students and lower income workers who would be going to work. The MBTA today is a part of our competitive advantage as our economy. So there's all measures of people who are taking the MBTA every single or would like to take the MBTA or should be taking the MBTA and we have a basic system that over time, was built so that we are fairly well-connected as a city through our system as compared to many other cities in the country.

We need to fix that. And I think, again, we have a governor and a lieutenant governor and a new general manager and a new secretary of transportation who actually are really aligned right now. We have a good moment in time where I think we can do this, and the mayor, I think as well, is committed to those. So those are the three things that I think we have to focus on and every single one of them, Jon, just to answer the last part of your question, worries me a little bit. Because the school system has just been an issue for all of my lifetime, and can we assemble the resources? Can we figure this out? There's kids in the school system right now who need us to solve these issues, and we need to come together as a city and try and help support the mayor and help figure that one out. Same is true with the MBTA, and same is true with the creation of housing. So those to me are the three biggest issues, and they're quite frankly, the issues that worry me the most.

Carolyn Jones:

Tom, it's interesting, those issues also really tie in a lot with the work that you do at HYM. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about some of the key ones, Suffolk Downs is one, you mentioned another. And just share a little bit about some of the current projects that you're working on because they do interact with the city, the state, all the work that we do.

Tom O'Brien:

Sure. So Suffolk Downs is a really interesting one for us. We had been looking around for a project that might be a large project for us to take on, we had an investor group that was interested in trying to pursue a large project with us. My partner, Doug Manz, who's really imaginative on these sorts of things and so Doug and I went to see the then ownership of the track, of the Suffolk Downs track, and they were interested in selling. And so we bought it without the permit. So basically, you would say, as is where in real estate perspective, which is a huge risk, obviously. There had been a great deal of environmental investigation that had done, so we knew the environmental portion of the equation, but the permitting part was a complete guess or a complete flyer. We then dove into that and both Doug and I looked at one another and said, this can be a community in which we can build thousands and thousands of units of house.

We were, for us in our careers and what we love to do and how we love to work on things, it was really a wonderful opportunity to do something very unique, almost unlike anything else that is possible in Boston. It's 161 acres and so we looked at it and said, gee, we think we can fit over 10,000 units of housing on the site, holy mackerel. So we said, yeah, we think we can do this and we can also make it a place where people will work. So another 5 million square feet of commercial spaces, could be life science, could be lab, could be office plus hotels, and we could do acres and acres of open space as well because there's just plenty of room here. And we could make it sustainable, we could build these buildings in a way that is ahead of the changes in the code, so that we can make this more sustainable because we control the whole site, we can make it resilient to potential flooding over time with climate change.

And we can be ahead of the game in terms of electrifying buildings, creating solar opportunities for buildings, using as much forward thinking as we could. So we convinced this investor group to join in with us, we engaged in a three-year planning process. A portion of the site is in the city of Revere and a portion is in East Boston. And the three-year planning process meant that Doug and I, pretty much together almost every night, we did over 450 different public meetings. So we do all this work ourselves, we love to be engaged with the community work. So we don't usually hire an outside consultant or somebody else to do this work, we do all this work, which we think matters in the communities in which we work. So we were able to complete the permitting, we worked in very close partnership with all the local elected officials in Revere, the local elected officials in Boston.

We've maintained really good relationships with people and it's really, really been fun. And now we're engaged in beginning the project, we're going vertical. We brought music actually there, just a few weeks ago, there was a series of great outdoor concerts. This is actually going to be really fun for us. So that's one aspect of it. And I would just add, Carolyn, I'm sorry, just if I could add one more that we're really proud of is we're redeveloping the Government Center Garage as well, which is really gives us a chance to do something a little different, but similar in that we're building a community, but we're really changing a part of downtown that has been burdened by this big, ugly garage that was built in the late 1960s. And as we change it and add these buildings, we're bringing probably five or 6,000 workers.

At the end of the day, there's probably going to be maybe 1500 or so people living in these buildings, when all is said and done. Can be a little bit more, maybe closer to 1800 people living in these buildings.

So it's really wonderful for us to be able to do this work, it's about putting people first. Where do people want to go to work? Where do people want to live? What else do they want? Do they want music? Do they want food, restaurants, shopping, that sort of thing? That's the fun of it for us, and we love working on these projects.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, those are exciting. Totally.

Jon Bernstein:

Yeah, incredibly creative and fun to see that dream come to fruition over time.

Tom O'Brien:

It is fun, Jon. As I said, I love coming to work every day, especially I get to work with this great group of people who really understand the dream and share the dream, and it's fun. When we're done with Suffolk Downs, there'll be 15,000 people living there and probably 25,000 people going to work there every day. So it's like a mid-sized Massachusetts town, when all was said and done. So it's pretty funny.

Carolyn Jones:

Tom, you mentioned the project you're working on, P3, earlier in the conversation. Tell us a little bit about that.

Tom O'Brien:

So P3 is the designation, so it's just a letter P and the number three. It's a designation that comes from the fact that this has been a publicly owned parcel, it was taken by eminent domain or a series of homes and businesses that existed there, were taken by eminent domain in the sixties as part of the effort to build an extension of I95 through the city. The community rose up and stopped the construction of that highway and so this parcel has sat empty in the community of Roxbury since the late 1960s. And it's really been a place that has been a place of broken promises and broken dreams for a lot of people. When I was first at the BRA in 1993 and first really working with Tom Menino and understanding how he led the city, that's when I first really familiarized myself with the history of P3 and where it is and what happened.

I left the BPDA before the project really could get shaped up and move forward, but it was designated for another group for a long time, and unfortunately, that group was not able to perform. So it became clear that the project was going to become available again publicly and I had met and gotten to know Reverend Jeffrey Brown, who's just this really wonderful person. He's formed a company called My City of Peace, which is focused on creating home ownership and economic opportunity for black and brown families in Boston and in other cities around the country. And so he and I have formed now a five year, almost six year, I think, friendship and partnership to pursue and redevelop P3. The community selected our team, we organized a really great team of people, broad-based team of people, a series of black-owned businesses that are based here in Boston that are part of our team.

And our objective is to make this a place that can be a place for life science jobs. So this business of life science is really an important economic engine for us as a city and this site is located very close by the Longwood hospitals. And so while it has not yet been the case that the life science business has expanded to Roxbury, it is certainly the case that that business has expanded to places like Somerville and Watertown, and we hope and reverse. So why not Roxbury, is our point. And so then as we do that,

our objective will be to use that life science business to create the economic engine necessary to create affordable home ownership for those families in Roxbury. And so Reverend Brown and ourselves, together with this team are doing that. We'll also create a permanent home for Embrace Boston, which is the organization that was founded to Mark and celebrate and create a more permanent and lasting thought process around the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King, who came here to earn his doctorate at BU in the fifties and met and fell in love with and courted Coretta Scott King.

Boston was really where that mission and that ministry started, so marking that and creating a permanent space for Embrace Boston with the other piece that we'll be working on together with retail, open space, all those things. So we're really, really excited about it, we're just about to make our first filing later this year and get going. We've been working on some of the terms with the city for some time, and the city has been terrific on this, and we just need to all work together to get this thing in the ground as quickly as possible. Very excited about it.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, I look forward to more to come on that for sure. Thank you.

Jon Bernstein:

You're creating a community, but I'd also love, Tom, for you to talk about the work that you do in the community, the causes that you care about and your perspectives with the role in business and advancing social impact?

Tom O'Brien:

I would say part of it is, our team here, we're all together on some of this work, but also for my wife and I, a lot of it is driven by that. So there's a number of things that I'm involved in. There's probably a couple that I would just pick off if I could, Jon. One is, I've been active with the Anti-Defamation League for a number of years and really believe deeply in the work that the ADL does, particularly today. The ADL, for people who may or may not know, is an organization that was founded to defend the Jewish people, but also to defend people who may be discriminated against or treated unfairly no matter what their religious background or what their race is or whatever.

So we stand up for people whenever civil rights are threatened anywhere. And it's a really proud thing to do, this particularly in a world today where there has been a huge uptick in hate crimes in particular, unkind things done and said to people who are immigrants, to people who have backgrounds where they're new to our country and new to our city or new to the workforce and so being part of that organization has really made me very proud. I became part of it in part because my wife and I share that value, but also because of who our family is and who our kids are, but also working with, I could just mention a friend of mine, Mike Sheets, who's been a long time part of that and really recruited me to be part of it, it's been great. I love that work. In addition to that though too, if I just tick off a few others, the East Boston Social Center is a terrific young guy, Justin Pascarella, who runs it, who's just this really wonderful person who he should be a candidate, honestly, for one of your podcasts.

He's really very thoughtful, kind-hearted person who run this 100 year old organization called East Boston Social Centers, and they have activities and care for both young children as well as seniors. And Justin, I'll let him speak for it, but he really measures their success based upon how much joy they bring to the community of East Boston. He's a really wonderful guy. There's so many people who do this work. We were in the lead in, we talked about Project 351, which I'm involved in, and Project 351 people hopefully should know about, which is an organization that takes eighth graders who are committed and

kind-hearted with their fellow eighth graders and offers them a year of service to others in service, training and leadership. And so that each year is launched on Martin Luther King's birthdays weekend, so we launch late January with these kids and it's amazing and inspirational. If you're feeling worried about our future, if you're sad about where we are as a community or maybe sad about how people speak about one another in our country, just come to a Project 3 51 event.

You get these eighth graders who talk about what it means to serve others, and it's so amazingly inspirational, run by our friend Carolyn Casey. It's amazing organization. So I think I just mentioned Jon three, those are the ones that just come top of mind as you ask me that question. But there's so much work that people can do, I would just invite people. You can pick whatever, if you care about kids, there's a dozen kids organizations that you can be involved in. If you care about Boston Public School Kids, there's a program called Big Cheese Reads. So if you want to make a difference in the Boston Public School system, the largest volunteer organization in the Boston Public School system is a group of business people. There's literally, I forget the number, but it might be like a thousand people a day, go into a public school classroom and read a book to a classroom filled with kids, and just to show these kids at the time you read the book and then the kids want to ask you questions about where'd you grow up and yeah, right. So Jon, you do that.

Jon Bernstein:

I've done it. It's a great program.

Carolyn Jones:

I've done it too.

Tom O'Brien:

It's really good.

Carolyn Jones:

Me too. Love it.=, It's great.

Tom O'Brien:

So I encourage people to do that. You can do that work or just coach a sport or something. There's so much work that people can do, it's really, and it's fun.

Jon Bernstein:

We know the East Boston Public Centers very well, we've been able to fund them through our group, great initiative. Impressive.

Tom O'Brien:

Yeah, that's great. It's a great group. And by the way, there's so many faith-based organizations as well. As they sit here on this podcast, and I think about my friend, Father Jon Uni, who people should know, whatever your faith is, if you're interested in finding a person who is a faith leader, who has a really important message for you, just attend a mass. Everybody's welcome. Everybody's welcome. Attend a mass at St. Cecilia Church in the Fenway, and just listen to Jon Uni. He's wonderful, inspirational, and most importantly, a fun, really fun guy.

Jon Bernstein:

Yeah, he is. He's great. We'd like to close with some rapid fire questions. So off the top of your head. You ready?

Tom O'Brien:

I'm ready. I'm ready.

Jon Bernstein:

What did you think you wanted to be when you grew up?

Tom O'Brien:

So can I tell you a funny story on this one? So you're going to love this story. So my son, Tomaz, who is now a college graduate, 24 years old, just graduated from Wesleyan when he was 11 or 10 years old, his teacher gave him an assignment to go home and ask your parents, did they grow up to be what they wanted to be when they were your age? So he came home and he looked at me at the age of 10, and he said, "Hey, dad, did you grow up to be what you wanted to be when you were my age?" And I looked at him in a moment of clarity, and I said, "Yes, Tomas. When I was 10, I wanted to grow up and be a commercial real estate developer." He looked at me, he goes, "Oh, really?" I said, no, you kidding me.

I wanted to play for the Bruins or play for the Red Sox or something. So that's really, when I was a kid, although I would say I was a globe paper boy, and this is what I would say, I was a Boston Globe paper boy, and as a globe paper boy, that's where I really learned to love reading the newspaper, which is the example that my parents also gave us as well. And when I would read the newspaper and read about the mayor or the governor or other people, I really did want to be actively involved in civic affairs and at this intersection of government and business. And so I think I've grown up to be basically the person I wanted to be, which is to be involved in the city that we love. So that's probably the answer, Jon, I think. Sorry if I took long.

Jon Bernstein:

That's awesome. No, that's a great one. Who's a favorite sports figure that you admire?

Tom O'Brien:

I got to say Dwight Evans, and that's probably going to date me, right? So for people, so for the uninitiated Red Sox fan, Dwight Evans, Dewey Evans played right field for the Red Sox in the seventies and into their early eighties. What I loved about him, he was a great baseball player, he's in the Red Sox Hall of Fame. I think it's a little controversial, he's not in the Baseball Hall of Fame, but I loved about him though was, he was a steady player. He made some great plays in the 1975 World Series. Again, I'm dating myself, but he was a steady, great player, but he was also, as a young kid, when you watched him when he was interviewed, he was always a very kind-hearted, steady, never out of place on things.

And I am also aware, I don't know the details on this, but his wife and he had a child or maybe two children who were adversely affected, I think by a brain disorder. And so just the way he's managed his life, managed who he is, he's a great baseball player. To me, honestly, he's one of my favorites. Still love him.

Jon Bernstein:

Who's a Boston leader or an organization that we should watch.

Tom O'Brien:

So I mentioned Father Uni, who I love, and Justin, who I love. I would say, I'd also mention Reverend Jeffrey Brown, who's my partner on our P3 project. He's the associate pastor at the 12th Baptist Church in Roxbury. Of course, the pastor of the 12th Baptist Church is Reverend Willie Roderick, who's also a wonderful person. The two of them together are great leaders of that church. And honestly, I think they're two people to watch, that's probably what I would say. I spend a lot of time with Reverend Brown just because he and I are partners on the P3 transaction. I think the two of them together are people to watch in our community as we focus on creating more home ownership opportunities for black and brown families in Boston, creating more job opportunities for black and brown families in Boston. These are two of the really most wonderful, steady. They've been leaders for a long time, so they're not new, but they're really wonderful people that a key part of the fabric of our city.

Jon Bernstein:

Great leaders. What's a favorite spot you have in our city?

Tom O'Brien:

This one's pretty easy. So the public garden is our spot. So I actually asked my wife to marry me in the public garden, my kids know the story. I picked a bench and decided I was going to be on that bench, and somebody else was sitting on the bench and so I had to move. And I'm a person who likes to plan things out, so my kids know that I get a little flustered, but I still was able to achieve it and get it done. So I love, honestly, if I'm somewhere in the city and walking someplace else and I can make an excuse to walk through the public garden, I love to walk through the public garden. So I love it, especially these days in the summer. It's packed with people, it's awesome. Really, really great.

Jon Bernstein:

And what makes you laugh?

Tom O'Brien:

My kids. The kids were all home and when we're all together at dinner and somebody's telling a story about what happened that day or reminding us of some crazy thing that happened years ago, that's what really makes us laugh. I think my wife and I get the most joy in our life when all the kids, when everybody's all together. That's really, really fun.

Jon Bernstein:

And finally, what's the wish you have for Boston?

Tom O'Brien:

I probably go back to the Boston Public school kids, I probably go back to those BPS kids. I think for all of us to think of generations of kids for whom the public school system has failed them. I went to public schools and I had amazing teachers who really changed my life and coaches who really changed my life. And I did not go to Boston Public Schools and I feel really fortunate in that regard. And so I wish I would have for the city is to put ourselves in position where these kids can achieve in the Boston public schools. And can I just add, Jon, this doesn't have to be just something that's the right thing to do or an

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important thing to do, it is. But if you think about what this does for our city, if we make our school system a really high performing urban school system, think about what that does for us as a city.

Just in terms of this will be a destination where people want to live, a place where people will want to work even more than it is today, all those things will happen. So I think working carefully with the mayor and the superintendent to make the Boston Public School system work well, that's really what my wish would be for the city.

Jon Bernstein:

Great wish. Long-lasting, powerful impact as well. And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Tom, and for sharing your insights.

Tom O'Brien:

Thank you, Jon and Carolyn. This has been really fun, thank you.

Jon Bernstein:

I'm Jon Bernstein.

Carolyn Jones:

And I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. Our guest today was Tom O'Brien, managing partner and chief executive officer of HYM Investment Group.

Jon Bernstein:

You can find, C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston or on any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.