

- Jon Bernstein: Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Jon Bernstein, regional president of PNC Bank, 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 and sharing insights on their leadership journey and observations on the Boston business community.
- Jon Bernstein: Our guest today is Brooke Thomson, president of the Associated Industries of Massachusetts, known as AIM. Brooke, thank you so much for joining us today.
- Brooke Thomson: Thank you both for having me. This is so exciting.
- Jon Bernstein: Brooke, welcome. You spent a lot of time early in your career in government, and now you lead one of the largest professional organizations in our state. Could you tell us a bit about yourself and some of the experiences that have shaped your career trajectory?
- Brooke Thomson: Sure. Thank you, Jon, for that question. So some people know this, but some do not. I actually grew up in the Midwest. I grew up in Kansas, and honestly, if you had gone back and asked the high school graduate me what my trajectory would've been, it would be very different than where I am now. I always knew and had an interest in public policy and the law, but I really saw myself as staying in the Midwest, probably going to a large university. My mother was a single mother and we grew up and were very close, and she actually said, "Oh, well, when you're applying for colleges, you should look at some women's colleges up in New England." I said, "Women's colleges New England, what are you talking about?" But again, as a type A firstborn, people pleaser, I was like, "Okay, let's apply. Let's do what mom suggests."
- And I ended up at Mount Holyoke College out in South Hadley, and really that is a major turning point in my story. It's certainly how I ended up in Massachusetts and thank goodness I did. But it also really shaped me having that four year experience being with just amazing faculty and really, really smart and strong women leaders that I think set the course. I did end up then moving a little further east into Boston to go to Northeastern Law School. And again, I credit Northeastern. The co-op program really allowed me to figure out not just what I wanted to do, but what I didn't want to do when it came to the law. And I was fortunate that my last co-op was actually in the state house and I caught the public policy bug, as we say, and the rest is history, so to speak. And so for the last better part of 20 years, I've been involved in government affairs, public affairs, advocacy, and now I'm here at AIM leading an amazing organization.
- Carolyn Jones: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about AIM for a moment. There's an author and inspirational speaker, Simon Sinek, I don't know if you've heard of him. He talks about the importance of an organization identifying its why. Why does your

company exist? Why do you get out of bed every morning? So what is your why and also what is AIMs why?

Brooke Thomson: Thank you, Carolyn. That's a great question and it's interesting. I reflect on this often and I personally think all leaders should check in with themselves every so often and ask this, I'll start with AIM. AIM's been around 110 years, so not that long, in all joking, been around 110 years really started as an organization that was just representing manufacturers. Because if you go back in Massachusetts history, that was really at that time the industry that had a foothold and really helped build the economy that made Massachusetts successful. And so much like all of our businesses, AIM has evolved since that time. We are now the largest statewide business organization. We represent over 3,400 members, 150 different industries. So I would say AIMs why is really ensuring that when businesses succeed, we all succeed. And that's something that I know myself as the leader of the organization and the team take to heart every day.

We are here to do just that, to help businesses succeed. We know that when our businesses are strong, when our economy is strong, we can hire more people, we can pay great wages, people can have a good quality of life and do the things that they want to do, raising a family, building a life. And so that's really for AIM and for me what AIMs why is. My personal why is a little different, but it encapsulates many of the same themes. As a mother of two daughters myself, my why simply put is I want to have a role in shaping a commonwealth and a nation that is embodying the principles of equity and inclusion so that when they are at their point in their career where I am, that a lot of the issues we're working to try to overcome and try to eliminate some of the inequities that we have done. So hopefully by the point where they get here. And so I think my personal why and my professional why overlap a lot, and that's really what motivates me day to day to try to make a difference on the business side.

Jon Bernstein: I love your quote, "When businesses succeed, we all succeed." And you're a lawyer by training, but now you've worked at AIMs since 2019 and took over the leadership roles in 2023. Can you tell us how you brought your leadership style into the role and into AIM?

Brooke Thomson: Sure. I will say even having been in this role as president and CEO since January of this year and leading teams throughout my career, these are some of the hardest questions saying you're a leader, what's your leadership theme, right? It's almost like, "Am I really?" I think we all have a little bit of a challenging time, imposter syndrome, if that's what you want to call it, but my leadership style is pretty simple. I don't expect anything of my team that I'm not willing to do myself. My leadership philosophy, if that's what it is really to provide the tools and support for my team so that we can all do the best we can every day. They know their roles better than I do, right? If they're on the membership side, they're a subject matter expert there if they're on the policy side again. So really I think it's about creating an environment where everyone's opinions are valued,

where there's an opportunity to share those opinions and then where support is there to make sure that everyone is successful.

Again, I go back to I'm the mom of two girls. My time apart from them while working, I want to be as valuable and meaningful and impactful as possible. And I recognize that for my team, same thing, whether they have kids or they have a spouse or they have a hobby or they have something else that drives them, I know their time away from that is valuable. And so I want their time at AIM to be rewarding, for their opinion to be valued. And again, I think that creates that environment where everyone wants to be at work and again, makes it more meaningful. I do have a couple of things that I try to remind myself. One, always be willing to say, you made a mistake if you made a mistake, right? We all make mistakes. Leaders make mistakes, and then always show gratitude for the team and recognize that again, people are stepping up and doing great work and that making sure we acknowledge that is really important.

Jon Bernstein: Brooke, you and AIM have been fantastic partners to the Early Childhood Business Coalition that we've been pushing and I've been working with. Could you also walk through some of the other milestones in your leadership or some of the key initiatives that you've launched?

Brooke Thomson: Sure. I've been fortunate that AIM has made tremendous progress over the last five years since I've been part of the organization, much of which was started by my predecessor Jon Regan. We, due to a tremendous effort, again to make AIMs board more representative of the diversity of people and businesses within the Commonwealth. Just this past May, we reached board parity on gender. In fact, we're a little bit over. We're about 52% female as far as board representation and 30% people of color. Again, huge strides, intentional strides that we have made again to be more representative. And through that, incorporating a lot of services and programs to help do the exact same thing.

So Jon, I know you mentioned childcare, certainly during the pandemic, again, as a mom of two kids, I became acutely aware that the downturn, the SHE session was having obviously a disproportionate impact on women and particularly women of color with less socioeconomic means. And so really the organization said, "What can we do to try to make a difference here?" And through that have come a variety of programs, one which PNC has been a fabulous sponsor of, best places for working parents. This is an organization that has operated in other states, but until PNC was able to come and work with AIM, we weren't able to bring it to Massachusetts.

Now we have, it's an opportunity for businesses to take a really quick assessment and become certified as a best place for working parents. Not only does it provide data and research and tools to help them be better employers for the caregivers in their workforce, it also helps distinguish them in a really competitive marketplace as, "Hey, this is a place where if you're a caregiver and we know the majority of our workforce are either caring for children or caring

for a family member or elderly parent, or both, that's really an opportunity to set them apart." And then through that, our Pink Slip initiative, again, raising awareness around equity issues and continuing to try to drive public policy to reach a more equitable commonwealth.

Carolyn Jones: That's great. I want to talk a little bit about some of the things you're doing to create a more diverse workforce and a culture that's inclusive and equitable. But I wonder, first, any other initiatives that AIM is doing to help businesses be more successful?

Brooke Thomson: Really, right now, and this, I think we're all acutely aware, the real issue is we're in a competitive environment. I know everybody says this, but it's more competitive than I've ever seen. I'm no economist, certainly, Jon, you are more astute about this than I am, but if we reach into the first quarter, two of 2025 and economists say, "Oh, this was a recession, I wouldn't be surprised." It's a really tough environment right now. And so what I'm focused on at AIM is how do we give our Massachusetts employers a leg up in a time when housing's more expensive here? Transportation's more expensive here. And so again, a lot of what we're talking about around childcare or even the work we're doing on our A, B, C, our AIM Business Connect, where we're trying to say, "Okay, we have a lot of really great diverse talent.

We have diverse suppliers here in the Commonwealth, but sometimes they don't have the same access or opportunity to get their name to some of these businesses that have some of these big contracts." So what AIM can do is we have 3,400 members, we can make sure that we are connecting these diverse suppliers to our businesses that have these contracts. Again, raising that opportunity, creating that opportunity, because we really do feel like opportunity is the word right now, right? If you're in a uncertain economy and a competitive environment, having those opportunities, creating access to opportunities for members is really what is key. And so that's what drives us at AIM every single day.

Carolyn Jones: Anything about your own particular workplace at AIM that you want to also weave into some of the things you might be doing to make sure that your own workforce right there is more diverse or to make it more inclusive?

Brooke Thomson: Absolutely. And we're fortunate enough that we exemplify the work we do on trying to create more diversity, equity, and inclusion at the board level. We replicate that at the staff level as well. So in addition to having board committees that are focused on this, we have staff level committees that work on this. It's driven by the staff. The staff participate voluntarily. We meet regularly not just to talk about is AIM moving in a path to be more equitable? Do we have representation amongst the employees, but also to share and to provide education, right?

To provide opportunities to talk about issues that are out in the public sphere. And this is such a kind of crazy time where there's a lot of emotions, right? It can be hard to talk about some of these issues in the workplace. We really thoughtfully sit down and say, "Well, how do we have some of these hard conversations?" Understanding that we have to talk about things, we have to provide education, we have to provide different perspectives so that we can continue to move forward. So I'm really proud that we do that work at the staff level and that the staff is involved in driving the priorities and the initiatives that AIM works on in this space.

Jon Bernstein: Brooke, we all learn from mentors and others in our lives. What are some of the best advice you've been given or picked up along the way, and what is your advice for the next generation of leaders?

Brooke Thomson: That is certainly a challenging one, again, because I am trying to get past this imposter syndrome, right, Jon? But it's funny, there's some advice that sticks out to me that I want to speak about, but I also prior to today, had a conversation with an amazingly successful female leader, and she gave me some great advice as well. So I'll start with something that has always stuck with me, which is trust your instincts. And I think it's really, really important because for anyone who leads a team or leads an organization, a lot of information is often thrown at you and you're being forced to make certain decisions that impact a lot of people, and it can be hard to sift through all of that information. And so again, I constantly go back to trusting my instincts. The other amazing advice that I was given as I mentioned right before we sat down, was particularly as a female leader.

Or I would say for any leaders who find themselves in rooms where maybe they're the only person at the table, they're the only one that looks like them or the only one who's had the experience as they've had is fight for that seat at that table, right? This has carried with me throughout my career, and I'm going to amend it a little bit because as we continue to fight for that seat at the table, the other piece that I add to that is you can't get to every table. So we need allies that are at the tables where we can't be making sure that they are saying our name, that they are bringing in the points of view that maybe aren't always represented. And I think that's just been really critical advice that I use and continue to again, seek for our future in Massachusetts that when we have all these perspectives represented at the table, I think we're going to be a better commonwealth.

Carolyn Jones: Absolutely. I want to go back to the Pink Slip initiative. Can you just share for those who might be listening who may not know what that is, can you talk a little bit about that?

Brooke Thomson: Sure. We launched Pink Slip in 2021, and again, this was in the wake of seeing the vast amount of women and people of color who were leaving the workforce during COVID. And again, it's sometimes referred to as the SHE session. A lot of

it we believe was driven in the data, reflects that it was driven by caregiving needs. And so it was really our entree into how does AIM take a thoughtful look at issues around caregiving and the impact on the workforce. And so we launched with a couple of op-eds just continuing to raise the issue. I say, Carolyn, that I go back to that moment that we all remember right when COVID started, where the kids were sitting behind us at the dining room table doing school. And we were on Zoom and Teams doing work, and it was front of mind for everyone that at our core, our personal life and our work life were intrinsically linked.

And then as reopening happened and people went back into an office and kids went back to school, I feel like some of the awareness around the fact that these two things are intrinsically linked just happened to fade, right? Because we weren't seeing it every day, but Pink Slip was really born because even though we weren't seeing it, it was present all the time. And it had been present before COVID, right? And so we kept moving Pink Slip forward as a way to say, "What policy issues do we need to discuss to remind employers and to remind employees that the issues about how they navigate caregiving and staying and being successful in the workplace are critical. And it's how we're going to make our Massachusetts employers strong."

And I would say it's more important now in 2024 where again, you've seen it, whether it's a positive or a negative, the fact that remote work was really in full force during COVID has demonstrated for a lot of employers, "Okay, I don't have to have employees in the office all the time." What that has also done is made employees more mobile. And so if you're coming out of college like I was when I moved here, and you're 25 to 34 and you're somewhat new to Massachusetts and you're trying to decide where you're going to start your career and raise a family, you might be looking or be drawn to some of these lower cost states. And so I think what we've done with Pink Slip has said, "Let's make caregiving And the fact that Massachusetts can be a leader, a real advantage and can keep talent here or draw talent here, because Massachusetts is going to be the epicenter of ensuring that our caregivers have a place in the workforce and are succeeding."

Carolyn Jones: Yeah, that's really helpful. Thank you for clarifying that.

Jon Bernstein: Brooke, could you expand upon that from your point of view? Why is Massachusetts a great place to work, live and lead a business? What troubles you or what do you think needs work and attention?

Brooke Thomson: This is a great question because coming from a different state, I think I bring a unique perspective. I have said that it continues to amaze me that... and I think it's the self-deprecating nature of Bostonians and folks from Massachusetts in general to focus on the negatives, right? Coming from Kansas, I get constantly ridiculed that I'm like the Chamber of commerce for Kansas, right? I brag about our sports teams. I brag about barbecue. And it's interesting coming from a

place where I feel like people do that, no matter where you're from, you can be from the middle of nowhere and, "Oh, I love where I came from. Let me tell you all the great things about it." You come to Boston and it's kind of like, "Well, we harp on the things that aren't working." And I keep saying one of the biggest advantages, lowest hanging fruit we've got is let's start turning that narrative around.

Let's talk about all the advantages and the opportunities of Massachusetts. And again, I think I have a unique perspective here. There is no safer urban city that is walkable, that has amazing businesses, that has world leading institutions, that has innovation and research, that has arts. And I really think sometimes Boston is its own worst enemy in the sense that not highlighting all the advantages can sometimes make it hard, particularly for those folks that we're trying to attract to see the beauty and the value. Yeah, there's a lot of change that's happening and change does need to happen, right? There are things about Boston that we could work on. We do need a more equitable city. We need more opportunities. But I do think focusing on the positives can really be an advantage, not just for our businesses, but for overall quality of life.

Jon Bernstein: What are the issues that your constituents are most focused on and concerned about, and how do you feel about the economy and key issues we face to the state?

Brooke Thomson: So the economy and workforce is the number one issue that we hear from A members all the time. We survey members regularly, and this has been a consistent message throughout COVID. Pre COVID, if I had been asked this question, the issues that would pop up would be, it would be phrased as sort of cost of doing business, right? Taxation, energy costs, healthcare costs, and while those all still register amongst businesses as issues that they care about, the top of the list going on almost four years now is workforce and talent, right? And what that really manifests as for members for businesses is not being able to access the qualified talent that they need to fill all open positions. And this is something that transcends all areas of commonwealth, all industries. It can be manufacturing, it can be finance. And so what we've done is really break down well, "What does that mean?"

Because workforce and talent is pretty big and can encapsulate a lot of things. And it's really these three main issues. It's housing and the affordability of housing, the recognition of the business community, of the importance of being able to be a state where people can access affordable and market rate housing has shot to the top of the list in a way I wouldn't have been able to predict. The second, which is I think intrinsically linked with it is transportation. So if you cannot find affordable housing near where you work, then you have to use some form of transportation to get to where you work. And I think we all know because we make the top of some of the lists, we don't want to be at the top of, that this continues to be a challenge. And then the third issue again, and why AIM is so focused on it is caregiving.

And if I can't find a place to live or I can't afford a place to live and I can't get to my job and I can't take care of the people in my family I need to take care of, then I can't work. I can't enter the workforce, I can't move up. So again, this goes into conversations about why don't we have more representation in the C-suite or on boards of women, people of color? Well, again, if I have to make choices in my career in order to fill one of these other buckets, then I'm not going to have the same trajectory as maybe some of my counterparts. And so those are the issues that our members have said right now are impacting their ability to be successful, to grow. And so those are the ones we're most focused on. Luckily, it's the ones that our policymakers are also most focused on.

And I think we're at a unique time right now, again, AIM does the business confidence index analysis every month where we ask businesses, "Are you confident? Are you investing? What's your feeling?" And it's been a roller coaster. Anything over 50 is optimistic, but we've been hovering around 51, 52, we hit 53 in May, means cautious optimism, but we're not out here screaming from the rooftops, "Everything's great." And so I think, again, we're in this really uncertain time where luckily we have policymakers that are focused on the issues that need attention, and we have the business committee at the table weighing in on it. So I can't see a better recipe for success. We just have to stay the course.

Carolyn Jones: I want to ask you something that I've heard you say a couple of times in this conversation. Well, you've mentioned the imposter syndrome and also as a woman and many others, but I think for many women that's a very common thing. I just was at something else the other day where again, some amazing woman said the same thing. You're on stage in front of hundreds of people, you're at the State House talking to the governor and other leaders about public policy, and you're in front of so many powerful people all the time, not to mention this group of constituents that you have these 3,400 members. Tell us a little bit about why you feel that way. What do you do about it? And maybe give advice to other folks about how to lean into it or how to lean out of it. Talk about that a little bit.

Brooke Thomson: You're right, and that's what it is. I think I talk about it because I try to be as real in the moment with sort of how I'm feeling and what I'm thinking. Again, because I don't presume to have all the answers, and I take it very seriously that for me to get to this place, I had a lot of amazing role models, male and female. And I think there's a mystification that we have around that, or at least I did when I was a 20 something, and I was, "How do I get to that point?" Right? And so for lack of a better term, Carolyn, I try to keep it real in the sense that I feel like if we can just be open and have these honest dialogues and say, "Listen, at this moment, is it hard for me to step back and say, 'I'm a leader, so I'm going to give you advice.' It is." But nevertheless, I'm going to give you what works for me and let's be authentic and talk about it.

And so I think you're right. You just have to lean into it, right? I think it's okay to have those feelings. It's okay to have this sort of talk track that goes on in our minds. I think the problem arises when we let it block us, to your point, Carolyn, but I think it's going to be there. And then if we get to a point where it's not there, great, then you've done the work. But I think the reason I try to talk about it again is I don't want other women or future leaders who maybe are having some of the same thoughts to think that somehow then they can't be a leader or move forward or even just be honest about some of the things that we all struggle with. And again, I think that's why on the childcare side of things and the caregiving side, I say it's about having open and honest dialogue because I think that's the only way we really find the right solutions and open up the conversation to everyone.

Carolyn Jones: I think that's great. And I do think that all does connect, as you mentioned that feeling, the childcare, so many other topics, what it does, it just makes you authentic and vulnerable and allows for, I think, better conversations and also to navigate difficult conversations. So thank you for sharing that. Appreciate it.

Jon Bernstein: And Brooke, I've seen you on stage in front of hundreds of people. You do fantastic work when you're up there. It's amazing.

Brooke Thomson: Well, thank you. We had a pretty good panel last year. Listen, Jon, we take the show on the road. That's what I always say.

Jon Bernstein: That'd be fun. Absolutely. Yes. Brooke, we'd like to close with some rapid fire questions.

Brooke Thomson: Love it.

Jon Bernstein: So off the top of your head, are you ready?

Brooke Thomson: I'm ready.

Jon Bernstein: What was your high school career trajectory?

Brooke Thomson: A great question. I thought I was going to go be a prosecutor, much like many other kind of dorky little high school kids, I love to watch Law and Order thought for sure. I was going to go be a prosecutor. I actually did an internship at the Suffolk DA's office in the homicide unit. Loved it. But again, I caught the political bug, otherwise I'd be in a courtroom right now. Whether that's a good or a bad thing, I don't know, Jon, but that's what I thought was going to happen.

Jon Bernstein: What is something that people don't know about you?

Brooke Thomson: Most people don't know that in my personal life, I am an avid, I guess, workout-aholic, if that's what you want to call it. So I used to do triathlons much more than I do now. Again, I will say that is because I was probably in much better

shape before I had my two girls, but I also lift weights and I can deadlift 250 pounds. So I don't know if that's impressive or scary, but it is what it is.

Carolyn Jones: Both.

Jon Bernstein: Impressive. Impressive. What are you currently reading or watching?

Brooke Thomson: Well, going back to the question about where I thought I'd see myself when I was in high school, I love crime documentaries. I'm fascinated. You can talk to any of my friends, name an unsolved crime, and I probably have a theory behind it. So I'm currently watching the Girl in the Picture on Netflix, and usually if you're asking me what I'm doing to try to relax, I've got some sort of murder mystery on TV and somehow that calms me. I don't know.

Jon Bernstein: Who's a Boston leader or organization that we should watch?

Brooke Thomson: Well, Jon, you and Carolyn, obviously in that list, I would say keep your eyes on Secretary Lauren Jones, Labor and Workforce Development. I think she's fabulous. She's young. She's doing remarkable things again around making sure that caregiving is incorporated into everything workforce driven at the state level, which I think is going to be really, really important moving forward. Sam Gebru, if you know of him, he is literally transforming what it means to be an advocate for business organizations in Boston and brings a unique perspective as an immigrant himself about what it means to represent our businesses and nonprofits. And then I'm going to do a little shameless plug here. Keep your eyes peeled on AIM because we've got a lot more ahead.

Carolyn Jones: I was hoping you'd say that.

Jon Bernstein: You guys do. And finally, what's a wish you have for Boston?

Brooke Thomson: This will go back to sort of, I will say Boston's imposter syndrome, right? My wish for Boston is that we can get to a point where there's a recognition that Boston truly is the best city to live, to work, to raise a family. That we can embrace that the business community is part of that equation, and that we are all working in a like-minded fashion to just make Boston the best place it can be. I think we can get there. Again, I love self-deprecation. I say I wasn't born here, but I really do think truly my personality fits here. But again, it's that we can all stand up and shout about how amazing Boston is and truly believe it, because I think that is going to be what makes the real difference going forward.

Jon Bernstein: And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Brooke, and for sharing your insights.

Brooke Thomson: Thank you, Jon and Carolyn for having me here today and for having forms like this where we can talk about these issues and again, hopefully share

information and best practices because I certainly know I can use all the advice I can get.

Carolyn Jones: Brooke, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your insights. We truly appreciate it, it was a lot of fun.

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 Brooke Thomson, president and CEO of AIM, Associated Industries of Massachusetts.

Jon Bernstein: You can find PNC C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston or in any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.