

Fashioning Success with Betsy Wendell

[00:00:00] Welcome and Introduction

[00:00:45] **Linda Ostovitz:** Hello everyone and welcome to Real Talk, Real Growth. I am thrilled to have with me as our guest today Betsy Wendell, who is the owner operator of Octavia Boutique in Cross Keys in Baltimore. And I think I first became aware of Octavia many years ago when my grandmother needed to get a special dress for a family wedding.

And my aunts and my mom were taking her to Octavia because that was the place to get the special dress for the most special occasion. Now, I was a kid then, and now I'm a bigger kid and I've gotten to get to know Betsy personally in connection with her support of a Pretty in Pink event that happens at Turf Valley in Howard County every year.

And benefits an organization known as Blossoms of Hope. And through my interaction with that organization, I've come to really admire who she is and how she does it. This is a family run business. It is a small intimate shop she has but she is so supportive and so wonderful to deal with and has such incredible fashions that make me feel beautiful that I thought i'm going to talk to betsy today on a Real Talk, Real Growth. She's also faced some significant challenges in recent years with having to deal with Covid and reconstruction in the place where her shop is located.

So with that bit of background Betsy welcome and thank you so much for saying yes to come and talk with us today.

[00:02:33] **Betsy Wendell:** Thank you for having me. I'm very touched that you would think so much of me to have me on your Real Talk, Real Growth podcast.

[00:02:41] **Linda Ostovitz:** Well, it's my pleasure that you said yes

[00:02:44] **Betsy Wendell:** Oh, of course

[00:02:46] History of Octavia Boutique

[00:02:46] **Linda Ostovitz:** So Octavia started as a family business. Am I correct about that?

[00:02:50] **Betsy Wendell:** It did. Octavia Dugan started her store in 1965 and she had raised a family or was still raising it. Her husband was a surgeon. And she worked in little shops around Baltimore. And I think someone said to her, why don't you open your own shop? Actually Jim Rouse, who built, of course, Cross Keys, Columbia, the South Street Seaport and other things.

He was a visionary in community development, and so he built these beautiful condos and townhouses and then built this retail mall, which we didn't really know what a mall was in 1965. So he built this concept and asked her to become part of it. She was one of the first stores to open in the village of Cross Keys. So family run since 1965, I'm third generation her granddaughter in law, so that's how I ended up in the business.

[00:03:58] **Linda Ostovitz:** Wonderful

[00:03:59] **Betsy Wendell:** Mm hmm.

[00:03:59] **Linda Ostovitz:** It's interesting you mentioned Jim Rouse because I live in Howard County and practice in Howard County and my particular Offit Kurman offices in Howard County and my first job where I actually got a paper paycheck was at Herschel Cohn in Columbia Mall.

[00:04:17] **Betsy Wendell:** Oh, nice.

[00:04:18] **Linda Ostovitz:** But even before that, I remember my first trip to Columbia Mall as a teenage girl. I remember what I wore. It was a big deal to go to a mall as a 13 year old teenager. And times have certainly changed, but I understand the significance of being the first in a mall and yay to that first woman who did that it opened up.

[00:04:41] Shop Offerings and Unique Appeal

[00:04:41] **Linda Ostovitz:** So tell us all I know what your shop looks like tell us what you offer at your shop

[00:04:47] **Betsy Wendell:** Well, so the shop is, again, in the village of Cross Keys, and it's a beautiful quaint little setting, it's actually an outdoor mall. You can drive up to it and then you enter into these breezeways that take you inside of the mall. So they're beautiful trees and lighting and music. And our store is located in the center and we carry, let's say everything from almost like a sweatsuit to an evening gown. So we do mother of the bride and groom dresses. We do mother of the bar mitzvah suits and dresses cocktail for any occasion, and then a myriad of sportswear for the working women. Jackets is our big thing. Everybody who needs a jacket seems to come to Octavia.

It's really fun. And then we have a more athleisure wear section, which is everything from jeans to sweatsuits and everything tends to have a dressier flair to it. It's a little special. Everyone said they come to us for something really special, something unique and It's really fun. Some clients have said that they don't want to share it with their friends because they want to keep it all to themselves, which is awfully cute.

[00:06:08] **Linda Ostovitz:** I understand that because you deliver special and unique and I want to be the only one in the room wearing your clothes

[00:06:16] **Betsy Wendell:** Oh, how sweet.

[00:06:17] Challenges and Renovations

[00:06:17] **Linda Ostovitz:** Let's just make it all about me you talked about the physical setup where you are, but you've just had to deal with a renovation recently a reconstruction. Which I assume had some impact on your business and you are a business woman. How did you navigate that and maintain your customer base?

[00:06:37] **Betsy Wendell:** We're still under construction right now, but the property built in 1965, of course, had some issues, structural and mechanical. So they worked on a lot of the systems that you don't see, like a boiler system that provides us heat and all that. And then they worked on the exterior and they did an amazing job.

It was Caves Valley Partners in Towson who did this for us. And Arsh Meerman is heading up the project. And he used to go to Cross Keys as a child. So he remembered how special it was when he was younger. So he has pumped in about \$25 million into the property. So we did have some hiccups in the resurfacing of the parking lot, the moving of some of the parking lots. And so parking became an issue. And I had clients call me and say how do I get in there? And I feel like some of them who didn't bother to call might have just stayed in the car and drove home. So it was a challenge. But people are really excited about what's happening there now. There are slated to be seven restaurants that will open. I think we have five now. CeCe's Roland Park, which is a Cordish Company Group restaurant who has the casino out near you. And they've built a beautiful fine dining location with a Michelin star chef. There's an easy, like Sunday all day breakfast place, which is dynamite.

It's packed. There's always a wait list. Zavino's pizza and wine store. needs, which is a pataracas group breakfast place and lunch and dinner as well as fresh breads and baked goods. So that just opened. And then we're got a Chinese restaurant and a Mexican restaurant coming next with the Atlas group.

So that's what we have so far. So it's really bringing people into the community, into Cross Keys. The parking is much easier now. People tend to love it. So it's been really nice. We just had a blue Mercury makeup store open, which has drawn in a really nice crowd of people into the location. They have really high end cosmetics.

They stand behind their cosmetics. If you have a problem, you just take it back. It's just, it's been a great thing for the neighborhood.

[00:09:07] **Linda Ostovitz:** My perception Betsy is that your clientele is a loyal clientele. And will come to you and will walk over concrete barriers if they have to that I assume presented themselves during this construction phase. Did you find that to be the case that people still came even though it was difficult and if so, how did you make that happen?

[00:09:33] **Betsy Wendell:** Yes they still came. I, they knew where they were going. So luckily we're a destination, even though we're in a mall, they are adding additional stores and restaurants. But during that phase, I really felt like it was just me out there. We sign up our customers into our email base.

You receive our emails, also text messages and we have a loyalty program now, so we encourage customers to come and shop. They earn points, and then they get discounts off of future items. And they are dedicated to it. They love it. And when they need something, they're gonna find us, and they have found us.

We lucked out with all that.

[00:10:13] **Linda Ostovitz:** How about this scenario instead? You're worth it for them to find you

[00:10:18] **Betsy Wendell:** Oh, thank you.

[00:10:19] Navigating COVID-19

[00:10:19] **Linda Ostovitz:** You also had to deal with Betsy as a business owner COVID and go through that experience and part of the reason you're sitting here right now is I look at you and I think, she's still here. She swung through all of it. She is still here.

So how are you still here after having to deal with COVID and the consequences of that on your business?

[00:10:43] **Betsy Wendell:** Right. That was a tough one. I originally like we knew it was coming and by I think it was like a Saturday, there were no customers in the store. So I think they watched the news more than I did. But I'm like, it's on. It's on its way. It's coming. Who knows when the shutdown will happen. So it did happen that weekend.

And in my mind, I said, this is probably going to be a two week kind of turnaround, I thought in my mind. And so my kids came home from college. It was nice. I took advantage of it being with my kids. And then as it progressed, it really surprised me. There was no sort of opening the store in the dark and letting someone in the customers were not going to be out and about.

We just waited it out and I actually enjoyed the time away from the store. I treated it like a sabbatical. I ended up driving across the country, which was interesting. And, really opened my eyes up to how beautiful our country is. There's so much to see just right here. People think of Europe and elsewhere, but there's so much to see and it was fun.

So a lot of things were closed of course, but I know that every store I went to, every hotel I stayed in, I tried to support the gift shops. Every store I went into, I made sure I walked out with something and let them know, there's light at the end of the tunnel when we get through this.

Eventually, as it started to come to a close the county stores opened, but the, we're actually in Baltimore city, close to the county line, but we were not allowed to open and I pleaded to the mayor as well as with other stores in this city, we were able to get some TV traction news and beg the mayor to let us open.

So what was happening was customers were dying to get out there and do some shopping. So they were going to the county stores, which was a little bit scary. I decided just to open like I asked him. I wrote him a letter. I pleaded to him on TV and then I just opened a soft opening and I notified my customers and they came out in droves.

It was like a homecoming. It was so beautiful. The really interesting thing about that was I did do a promotion on my email and I asked people to buy gift certificates to the store. So some very kind, friendly friends, customers purchase these gift certificates. So when they came to the store after the store open, I would remind them, I'm like, you have a gift certificate.

Some of them were 500, which is so touching. And I, the customers said I know that, but I'm not spending that money yet. And some refuse to spend it at all, which just tells you how dedicated and beautiful our customers are.

[00:13:41] **Linda Ostovitz:** Gave me chills. I just got chills when you said that. I thought that's where you were going. It's that people thought so much of you and how you take care of them that they just wanted to help you.

[00:13:54] **Betsy Wendell:** yeah, it's true. And I was like you have a gift certificate and some would say later, let's get the wheels of business turning again. So that, that's just so touching. I feel like I'm in this business because I want to help people. I feel like God put us on this earth to help one another.

And in the. business of clothing, fashion, we have everyone, we have every fine experience that any family could ever experience and we get to experience it right along with them, all the joys, all the bride zillas who come in, no mom, that color doesn't look good on you. Oh, this, that, the other thing.

It's hilarious. But even, their send off clothes for the end of life, like they come in and they want to buy something from Octavia because mom or grandmom would have wanted to be in that for her send off. It's so touching. So I really feel like, I'm doing my part.

[00:14:49] **Linda Ostovitz:** So how long were you actually closed?

[00:14:52] **Betsy Wendell:** I think it was three months. So March, April, May, June, yeah, March, three months.

[00:14:58] **Linda Ostovitz:** And when you reopened, you described people came back in droves and they were so anxious to get back to you. To what do you attribute that desire. Okay. I'm getting out of the house for the first time in months, which most of us were and guess where I'm going to go. I'm going to go see Betsy at Octavia.

How do you explain that? That loyalty?

[00:15:21] **Betsy Wendell:** That's a beautiful thing. I'm sure that, we provide all the fun in life and they came out, girlfriends came together and they came out shopping together. It was like a party. It was such a beautiful thing. I should have served champagne. I normally serve a little Prosecco in the store when appropriate, but I should have done it on that day.

Yeah. But I mean it's hard to say, just, I think just letting them know that we were open and this is what we were going to do, and I think they just wanted to support and who wouldn't want to go to a beautiful place like ours instead of going to the grocery store or something,

[00:15:55] **Linda Ostovitz:** okay, so let me say it because you sound like you don't even know this. The reason they came in droves is because Betsy's there. Her people are there. We know who they are. They know who we are. They greet us when we come in. It's like you're part of the family. It's like you're dealing, shopping with friends.

And

[00:16:19] **Betsy Wendell:** feel like that too. We feel like that too. One of our customers mom's turning 100 in a few weeks and so we all have our she wants cards for her birthday, so we want to make her make sure she gets to 100. So we have all these birthday cards for everyone to sign to send to Norma Jean on her 100th birthday.

But we feel part of it. We feel it's a family too.

[00:16:44] **Linda Ostovitz:** well, and you certainly make that people feel that way when they come in

[00:16:49] **Betsy Wendell:** we're a little like, therapists, too. They bring us their problems, their woes, their issues, and we all work through them together. It's like therapy, free therapy.

[00:17:00] **Linda Ostovitz:** that's good. Retail therapy is a

[00:17:02] **Betsy Wendell:** Retail therapy, right?

[00:17:03] **Linda Ostovitz:** It is a real thing.

[00:17:05] **Betsy Wendell:** Yeah.

[00:17:06] **Community Engagement and Events**

[00:17:06] **Linda Ostovitz:** So when a Preakness comes around, we normally see Betsy on television being interviewed by the news stations because Betsy and Octavia often dress Preakness attendees in their finest. How did you come to do that?

[00:17:24] **Betsy Wendell:** That's you know what? I've always had a love of horses and horse racing, even though there's some, harsh realities with horse racing, but it's Baltimore. in the international spotlight. So it's a big event for us. And I think if you're a local, you almost don't really think about how special that event is.

So I've always been a fan of it. I've always liked to go. It's always been a nice little party. I remember way back when being invited to the corporate tent area in the infield. So you walk across in your high heels, but sometimes sink into the mud and get over into these beautiful tents with the crab cakes and it's all the who's who in Baltimore and beyond now superstars are going to the event.

So it's a really big deal, but I've always had a real love of that event. And now with the Black Eyed Susan event, which happens the day before, which is a cancer fundraiser to it's ladies day at the racing, but that's becoming almost as big as the Oaks in Kentucky. So being a huge fan of wearing hats as well as The Preakness.

I've always had a fondness for dressing the ladies for The Preakness, and we've always been known as the destination of where to come, what to wear, et cetera, et cetera. We always recommend that you come and buy your hat first and we like to remind you that it's a big venue, so we suggest a very big hat.

And then you dress the rest of yourself from there. So find the most spectacular hat you can and have it fit your personality, et cetera, and then go from there. We're fortunate enough to dress some first ladies. Their hats became very important and also as this media turned toward fashion and covering it people started covering the first ladies and their hats and we got a lot of publicity from them and having them look great on the national stage.

So it's a lot of fun.

[00:19:28] **Linda Ostovitz:** You always look great. I'm not surprised that you love it because you look just like you belong there.

[00:19:34] **Betsy Wendell:** Oh, thank

[00:19:35] **Linda Ostovitz:** But dress with the hat first. Okay, that's interesting. I would have thought hat comes last, but what do I know? Fortunately, we have you as an expert.

[00:19:44] **Betsy Wendell:** I'd start with the hat, always start with the hat and then the venue determines the brim. So if you're out in the, 90 degree weather, it's nice to have a big brim to cover yourself from the heat and sunlight.

[00:19:56] **Linda Ostovitz:** Very good. Very good. Betsy, you are a success as a businesswoman.

[00:20:02] Marketing and Future Plans

[00:20:02] **Linda Ostovitz:** Do you do marketing on a regular and consistent basis that has contributed to your success?

[00:20:09] **Betsy Wendell:** We do a lot of internal marketing. So our emails are text messages, people. Almost get a text message and show up within 10 minutes of receiving it. It's pretty uncanny. Then we are marketing in the community is actually part of it is how I met you originally. We like to do events outside of the store to capture new client bases who might not know about us or might have forgotten that Cross Keys is in the Village of Cross Keys.

They just, you just forget you get in your routine, but partnering with Claudia Mare Cancer Research Fund and Pretty in Pink Fashion Show with Turf Valley Resorts was just a beautiful thing. I think this is our 12th or 13th year we just signed up for. They do a beautiful event.

They ask cancer survivors to participate in the fashion show so they become the models and we get to dress them and it's like a nice opportunity for them to feel good about themselves through a difficult time. Then we do a little boutique there and the ladies are invited for champagne and shopping all throughout the morning and then the show in the luncheon in the afternoon. So we do lots of events like that. In the community sororities, many sororities have us to their events. We just did a crab feast at Martin's West, which was absolutely fabulous. And fun. We had a good time doing that.

So just getting out and reminding people that we're still here. That's part of our marketing campaign.

[00:21:52] **Linda Ostovitz:** Do you have any plans to open other shops or other locations at this point?

[00:21:59] **Betsy Wendell:** My plans now are probably somewhere in Florida, like another location down there. And still maintain the Baltimore location and all of that. A lot of clients have moved to Florida or they winter in anyway. So that's something in the, on the horizon that I'm looking to do.

[00:22:21] Conclusion and Appreciation

[00:22:21] **Linda Ostovitz:** I so appreciate you spending the time with me and sharing your success story and really giving my listeners an opportunity to get to know Octavia and the experience that it is to be there and to deal with you and to deal with your folks. So

thank you so much being with us. I will look forward to seeing you in April on the 25th at Turf Valley

at the Pretty in Pink event that you described.

My best friend Betty and I always beat feed it to you first. We go through the door and don't say hello until we get to you.

[00:23:00] **Betsy Wendell:** Have some champagne on your way, but that's a beautiful event. And I ask all your listeners, anyone to come into the store, mention you, and we'd love to take care of you.

[00:23:10] **Linda Ostovitz:** that'd be great. Thank you so much. I look forward to seeing you soon. And again, I very much appreciate you being here and I can't recommend Octavia Boutique enough. If it wasn't already clear not only for the lovely fashions, but for the people who run it. So thank you, Betsy.

[00:23:26] **Betsy Wendell:** You're a doll. Thanks, Linda.