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## Conversations w/Tino

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Tino Magnatta: Hello and welcome to another episode of GT Radio. Boy, I have a great show for you tonight, and great guest who is so eclectic, full of amazing story. I think one of a kind. Please welcome Mark Birtha. How are you, Mark?

Mark Birtha: Thank you. I'm doing well. How are you tonight?

Tino Magnatta: Good, good, good. So you grew up in a working class family, a small farming town. What lesson did you learn from your parents, 'cause I know they were very hard workers.

Mark Birtha: They were. First and foremost if you don't mind, today is Veterans Day. I want to thank all of our veterans and active military and guard. Without them none of us would be able to do what we do each and every day. My father was actually a Vietnam veteran in the Navy, so big thank you out to him. That's kind of the preface right there.

My parents were blue collar, middle class people. My dad worked two jobs, was always willing to do what was needed, regardless of whether he wanted to or not. Hard work, work ethic, honesty and integrity.

My mom was actually more of like the softer side of the world. Having empathy and being fair and taking care of people, and at the same time, more of the creative. Taking the road less traveled, thinking differently, opening doors that you'd never think you'd wanna open, but making sure you care about people along the way.

Those principles have led into my values of who I am and what I believe in. It's funny, I live in Cleveland now, Northeast Ohio, LeBron said it. "Nothing is given, everything is learned." Of course he went to L. A. now, so we won't talk about that of course. It's all a combination of all those things. It made me who I am today.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, the foundation is so important. Now, you had a pretty interesting job as a teenager that placed you in a position to do pretty well in everything in hospitality. Tell us a little bit about that, 'cause that was a great story.

Mark Birtha: I love to work. Funny I guess. I started working when I was nine years old. I remember delivering newspapers, my own little business, working in bakeries. My first real job pretty much when I could really work was in high school. I worked the summers in a catering and event hall, and whether it was weddings or it was corporate outings, company picnics, whether I was washing dishes or parking cars or mowing lawns or whatever, had all these memories.

I remember dressing up in a lot of these events like weddings and bar mitzvahs and things like that in a tuxedo and serving hors d'oeuvres at 16 years old, thinking, "Wow, this is pretty cool." More importantly the food was really good,

so I got to eat all of it at the end. The real takeaway from me at that point that really resonated was this is a really cool industry.

You're part of these special events and they're really people's memories, they're life-changing occasions. They're fun, and you're a part of that and delivering that experience. That really kind of set the momentum of me falling in love with this business and looking to build a career in this space.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, when you have that kind of exposure and you see the effect it has on people, it really gives you an emotional sensation, right? It's almost like you're making every moment so special for them. Is that right?

Mark Birtha: It is, and that's what we do each and every day. At Hard Rock we deliver authentic experiences that rock. That's sort of our mission, but it's so much more than that. People in our business that come to our properties, that enjoy what we offer, it's about having a good time, of course, but it's more importantly, I mean people have lots of choices. It's about having the opportunity to do some memorable, to be with friends or family, and to really celebrate the fun and exciting and life-changing pleasures in the world.

The hospitality business allows you to do that no matter whether you're in food and beverage, or hotels, or casinos, any aspects of it. Around the world, it's a shared human quality, and to be able to be in an industry where you can deliver that and really raise the bar and be creative and diverse, it's a fantastic industry with so much opportunity in it. It's been fun.

Tino Magnatta: So you went to Cornell, and then there they had a speaker series every week, and there was one speaker in particular that really captured your attention and influenced you. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, so taking that knowledge and some of that experience as a teenager, I applied to Cornell. I went to the hotel school and it was really a great opportunity for me to sort of concentrate and focus and really see the world in a much bigger picture. While I was there, clearly wasn't really sure what, I came from a really small town in Connecticut, farm next to me literally, and was able to kind of start seeing the world.

We had this one speaker series where these really renowned executives would come in every Friday in the fall and they would basically talk about who they were, and their industry, and whatever. One of those classes was a gentleman named Steve Wynn. Although Mr. Wynn has clearly been a bit controversial of late, in the early 90s when I was there when he spoke, he was, for me mesmerizing. He would literally ... he was one of these people that could get up and speak and sell you any kind of Kool-Aid. It's really a rare breed.

More importantly, what he did was he told stories about the industry and his experiences and what he did to take care of guests as a hospitality leader. He

painted these amazing pictures of the types of properties and amenities and different things that he was offering. He really had a very unique way of delivering on and explaining to people what he did.

For me it was exhilarating, it was really something that opened my eyes wide, and at the time Las Vegas was on the cover of Time Magazine. The strip was booming. For me it was that kind of opening to, "Hey, the gaming industry. That's something I never thought of. It sounds exciting and sounds like something that's really booming. Maybe I need to find out more about it."

Tino Magnatta: Now you said when he spoke he painted pictures. What does that mean? How does he speak?

Mark Birtha: He clearly is a master. You look at his buildings that he created from a Bellagio to a Wynn to what he's done in Macau to the Mirage way back in the day. He is able to sort of bring you into a world, into an experience, where it's not just two-dimensional or black and white. He fills the space with color and volume. He takes you through the experience as if you are there seeing and feeling and touching and smelling and whatever what's going on in the building.

I think that is truly what has allowed someone like him, and there are others clearly in our industry to create these experiences. I've talked before in my past about you can be in the business of delivering a commodity and a product and a service, or you can be in the business of delivering experience. It's not a transaction. It's a personal interaction. It's a relationship-driven thing. It's something that blows people away.

That's what he did by telling these stories and painting these pictures that made you fall in love and made you want to go there. Want to see it. Want to experience it. It's an art. It really is. I mean, it's as much as science, but it's truly an art to create these things, to develop them, build them, open them and continue to operate them.

He was clearly a master and kind of brought me into that fold.

Tino Magnatta: So your first casino gig was out of Atlantic City. Tell us a little bit about those years and that experience.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, so actually it was brief. After he spoke, I was like, "Wow, I really need to get a taste of this gaming industry thing. It sounds really, really cool," so I think I was going into my junior year, I went to do an internship in Atlantic City at Resorts International, way back in the day it was Merv Griffin's property. This was my first time really out of Connecticut, my first time other than being in school. Taking a job there was a little bit one of these world less traveled, open the door and try something new.

Working in Atlantic City in the early 90s, it was booming, it was exciting. The boardwalk was invigorating. But working in the property, it just blew me away. Even restaurants and cafes in hotels are good size, but to walk into a casino where you have dozens of restaurants, and you've got thousands of people, and hundreds of hotel rooms. The size and the scale of what we do and what we were delivering was just absolutely mesmerizing.

I started off my career in food and beverage. That's kind of where I cut my teeth and what I was basically focused on at Cornell. To be in a building where you had a dozen restaurants, and one day you're working in a buffet doing 3,000 covers, tons of items on the line, and people coming and going, to the next week you're working in a fine dining restaurant and you're serving Bordeaux wines and expensive meals and high-end quality service and amenities and linens and everything, the whole package.

To go from A to Z across the spectrum and really see this wide spectrum of what could be provided in the space, particularly in the food and beverage space was just amazing to me. Then again, the hospitality, it was exciting. It wasn't a desk job, clearly, day-to-day, I really just started to fall in love with the energy, with the business. Taking that sort of experience, packaging it in with the Steve Wynn's of the world and what was going on in Las Vegas with the boom in the 90s, I just kind of new when I graduated that I absolutely had to be in Las Vegas working there in this industry.

Tino Magnatta: Tell us about Vegas. You had a great gig right out of the gate. Tell us all about that.

Mark Birtha: I literally, I think I interviewed for two places. One was a backup. I don't even remember what company it was, like a hotel company, and the other was Mirage Resorts. This was the mid-90s and I'm graduating. I literally was harassing the people recruiting me, 'cause I so desperately wanted to work there. I got recruited, went out there to see it, interviewed, Siegfried and Roy, and the volcano. It was like Nirvana. It was just something surreal, out of my mind. Coming from a really small town, I'm like, "Where am I?" It was literally the adult Disneyland.

For me it was dreaming big, and I got recruited into the Management Association Program, the MAP program there and started my career going through that and working food and beverage. But more importantly at that property you could see going back to what I was talking about with the Wynn sort of vision, you could see the attention to detail, and his level of interaction with every single detail.

You could tell that it was going to be something truly remarkable. So I started my career at the Mirage right out of college, and it basically started to escalate from there.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, tell us about the Bellagio, 'cause you went from the Mirage to the Bellagio, right?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, so I mean, again, it was the time Vegas was booming. There was so much development going on. I started off in food and beverage, I worked my way up to basically overseeing the whole beverage department at the Mirage at like 24. From there we were getting ready to start developing and building and opening the Bellagio.

The Bellagio interestingly enough just celebrated it's 20th anniversary back in '98. Shortly ... well after a few years of being at the Mirage, I made the decision. I was offered the opportunity to go to the Bellagio to be part of the opening team, and I went over there to oversee the beverage operations in that building. We're talking like 22 bar outlets, obviously 24-7, few hundred employees.

It was really a once in a lifetime experience for me, because we were doing something in that building that had really never been done before. Whether it was the design, it was the amenities, it was the services, it was all about raising the bar, but it was just such a unique opportunity at the time to be part of a team and a vision. Truly something that was unique that I believe changed, not only the city, but truly the industry, and began this whole spectrum of these entertainment destination resorts being more than just gaming, truly just gaming buildings. It was a lot of fun.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, the Bellagio redefines the high end of the casinos, no question. What a time to be involved. Just unbelievable. And then on top of all that, the next thing you find yourself in Macau in the swamp, working for the Venetian getting ready to develop their stuff inside the [inaudible 00:14:08]. Tell us about that. You go from one legend to another. Yeah, tell us a little about that.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, Bellagio was clearly an amazing opportunity and something that I really think was a milestone in my career. I made this sort of, I guess, intuitive decision that I wanted to be ... I love food and beverage, it was my passion. It was clearly what I cut my teeth on and the learning school I had really enjoyed doing, but after four, five, six years began to realize that the people who were taking on these much bigger roles, running these properties, kind of had the opportunity or were making the move to get a much more diverse and broader spectrum of experience.

I left the Bellagio in 2000 and went over to join the Venetian, and Las Vegas Sands at the time. It was just basically coming ... it has just opened, was totally a different experience. High end, clearly, the Venice theme, really unique amenities, services, design, all that, but it was really focused more on differentiating the marketplace. That was focused on the non-gaming, the conventions and meeting space, layering in the mid-week with strong business, different then the casino, than having the casino be the strength on the weekend. It was a relatively new paradigm in the industry.

For me, I moved over into the conventions and catering side and at the time, the Venetian probably clearly still is, was really looking to redefine the industry. They were doing COMDEX, 200,000 people, events, corporate events, the dinners and programs of 5,000, 6,000, 8,000, 10,000 people. When you're doing these things they take over the entire property, and I was responsible for a lot of these large group, large city-wide conventions at the property.

What was really cool is that when you have 5,000, 6,000 people in your building, basically the entire building is there to cater to that group or that event.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, obviously.

Mark Birtha: And what it allowed me to do was basically start to interact with every single area in the building, whether it was hotel, food and beverage, meeting space, retail, everything in the building, gaming, they kind of were interacting with everything, so it gave me a real great purview into every area in the building.

What was happening, I was fortunate, I guess these meeting planners kept writing letters to the senior leadership and the team, and one day I was approached by some of the highest people in the organization, they kept saying, "You're getting these letters and people praising you. You're putting all your effort into it. Really appreciate it. What do you wanna do long term?"

My eyes just lit right up of course. It was like another new door opening up. I was actually the first person in the organization to go through the Executive Development Program there. The irony was it didn't exist, so I was literally sort of cast with creating the program, going through it, and learning at the same time. Basically having that sort of education on the job while I was working my 60 hours at my other job every week.

Tino Magnatta: Wow.

Mark Birtha: I think they were just testing me to see if I would actually do it. Lo and behold I did it and it opened up another door for me to get into corporate development. At the time, Macau, this was the early 2000s, we had just won a license there and I got into corporate development working for the COO of the company, and we were literally flying, you referenced the swamp, I remember the day in early 2002, standing in the swamp in Cotai, in between the areas of Macau when it was just water there and they were dredging it, and Sheldon Adelson being there, and saying, "I'm gonna build a Las Vegas strip right here in Macau on this future land," and once again a true visionary doing something that had never been done before. Making your hair stand on end. Just excitement and energy, and lo and behold, we open the Sands Macau and begin to develop the Cotai strip and think everybody in the industry, probably on this call kind of knows what happened after that.

It was just an exciting time to be part of it.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, no doubt. I mean some of those things that you were involved in were once in a lifetime experiences. Just to be involved with Adelson and Steve Wynn is a great thing.

After the Venetian, there was a couple of bumps, but you got to work with Marriott himself, right?

Mark Birtha: So yeah, bumps is an easy way to describe it for those of us that remember the late 2000s. So I had left the Venetian. Kind of had my big opportunity to go and develop a brand new hotel casino. I had actually joined the W Las Vegas as VP of Development and Operations.

As many of you probably know, the corner of Harmon and Koval in Law Vegas is still empty. That property's never went anywhere, unfortunately. Then I joined Marriott in 2007. We were gonna build the biggest Marriott Hotel in the world, right where Piero's is, across from the convention center in Las Vegas.

I was person on the ground, basically, overseeing the project, heading up all that \$3 billion development locally, working directly with Bill Marriott, who again, another visionary in our industry. It was an exciting time to be building a massive convention center, big casino, 2500 hotel rooms. This was the heyday.

Now fast forward a year later, and that wasn't the heyday. It was the beginning of lean and [inaudible 00:20:31] and the whole meltdown, and you know, we were scared to death. I literally got a phone call from Bill Marriott, I should have saved the voicemail, but basically telling me one morning that they were making the decision to put the project on hold. We were 90 days away from tearing down the hotels on the site, and he wanted to see where this sort of economic malaise was going. We put the project on hold and that was the end of it. It never really kind of surfaced from there.

Those were the rough years, and again, it created other opportunities to move on from there, which was exciting.

Tino Magnatta: Wynn, Marriott, and Adelson. What made them so great? Why did they have that vision? What was it about them that was different?

Mark Birtha: Oh, my gosh, where do you even begin? They have a larger than life personality, but more importantly they like to do the things that have never been done before. They like to raise the bar, but they have a pride. They have a focus on the craftsmanship, the essence of hospitality, the ability to build these buildings and create these experiences and do what no one's ever done before. Clearly it takes a lot of guts to do that kind of stuff. It's not for the faint of heart. They put everything into it.

I said earlier I've been fortunate in my career. I love what I do, and so it's not really a job, it's clearly hard work, but if you have a passion for this and you

really enjoy it, like they do, nothing is limited. Everything is possible. I think they just extrapolate that out to the highest magnitude possible. They drive themselves. They push themselves, but they create things that change the world.

Tino Magnatta: Talk a little bit about the Hard Rock. You've done so much there. You've won awards. You've been the number one gaming revenue in the state the last three years. You just got sold to MGM. What have you done there that's been exceptional and made you rise so quickly?

Mark BIRTHA: It's a great property. Our owner really designed and developed a building that was unique in the marketplace, brought in the Hard Rock brand which is so iconic. There's such a vibe and an energy in this brand, and the type of products and services, and the experiences that we deliver.

The property itself, we really focus on the people. As I've said many times, many people out there are building these buildings and filling them with great food and chandeliers and carpeting and all kinds of unique product [inaudible 00:23:15], but at the end of the day, it all comes down to the people.

We hire people. They believe in what we're doing. We deliver those authentic experiences that rock. We have a culture of Love All, Serve All, and really taking care of people in the building, taking care of the guests, giving back to the community, really engaging the people that are in Northeast Ohio.

I think all of that combined with a really high quality product and service and experience allows us to be again, experiential and relationship driven, and not just a casino where you bang around on the slots, where it's a commodity or transaction. People wanna be there. They wanna enjoy the experience. I think it's favored us very well there. We've won all kinds of awards from Best Regional Gaming and Dining and Entertainment, Top 10 Pollster for entertainment venue.

But more importantly, one of the things I'm most proud of is three years in a row, Top Workplace for our employees. They're happy to be there. They enjoy their jobs. They stay. They grow in their careers. We take care of them. They take care of our guests. It's really a magical, simple formula that you take a building that costs a couple hundred million dollars and was recently to your point, was purchased by MGM International, or MGP and MGM is going to be operating it for a billion dollars, without table games, without a hotel.

It clearly has been a great opportunity to be there working with wonderful people in a really great culture and environment. Northeast Ohio's a really special place. Really great people up there. It's been a lot of fun to be there.

Tino Magnatta: A lot of people who are listening, they're wondering how can they achieve the success that you've experienced. What does it take, Mark? What do you gotta do?

Mark BIRTHA:

I thought you were gonna tell me. I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out myself. I think I've been fortunate. I really have been blessed. I have a family that supports me. I've had a lot of mentors in my career that I've engaged and they've really given back to me.

That's why for me it's so important to mentor the next generation of executives and leaders, to write articles, and educate people, and get more people engaged in our industry. I go back to Cornell and I speak there and I try to get the students involved and really show them how great of an industry it is.

For me it's been ... if the expectation is to get to 10, try to deliver a 12. Always deliver more. Become indispensable. If you're sitting at the table and you're invited there, don't just sit there and listen and be content that you're at the table. Participate. Raise your hand. Even if it's a crazy idea or something that might perceive as stupid, you've got to be part of the conversation. You've got to be somebody that when the job is tough, or when there's something that nobody wants to do, people look to you and you're that person that they have to have there to get the place running correctly, or to get things done correctly. Becoming indispensable is critical.

And then caring about your people. I love to be on the floor. I love to be with the guests. I have no problem rolling up my sleeves and whether it's picking up the trash, or parking the cars, or whatever it might be-

Tino Magnatta:

Sorry, you were saying being on the front lines ... actually you have a story about that, right? About bartending? Didn't you go on Saturday night ... tell us about that.

Mark BIRTHA:

I mean I go back to my Mirage days and being a kid out of college, people looking at you like ... I was running the bars and the beverage program and I'm literally 22 years old, 23 years old, and there are people working under me, I was the leader of the department. They've had more years of experience than I've had years of life. They're looking at me like, "How's this kid gonna tell me how to do my job?" Very quickly I realized that that's a very big challenge.

So for me, what I learned to do, and again, I liked doing it. I like the hard work. I don't mind it. On a Saturday night, the bar would be packed. Our guys and girls would be running around and taking care of the guests. I'd roll up my sleeves, in my suit, I would take the jacket off. I would get on the line. I'd be washing glasses for hours on end. And these people are looking at me like, "Why are you doing that? You're our director, our manager," whatever. "Why are you doing this?"

I had no problem doing it. You roll up your sleeves. You do the job, but you're not any better, you're not any worse, you're part of the team. I think that garnered me a lot of respect. I continue to try and do that throughout my career. It doesn't matter what my pile is or where I work. It's about taking care

of your people. When they need your help, you've gotta be in there. I've bused tables in the buffet in the Rocksino on a busy night and everybody's looking at me like I'm crazy, and you know what? They need the help. I have no problem.

I think that goes a long way with kind of bridging those gaps and really engaging your employees, and even the guests would come up and complement me. I think coming from that small town, blue collar, mid-class world, nothing should ever be too good for you, and something that I've learned as a life lesson that, from my parents I think again, like you asked, that I think it has just served me well in my career.

Tino Magnatta: Now, you know there's a lot of development going on everywhere. At last count I think it was 22 billion in Vegas alone. And everywhere, Southern California, Northern California, everywhere. Everywhere people are building, new casinos are popping up. What's gonna happen in five years when all this is built?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, I mean that's the multi-billion dollar question. We are in such a unique time period right now with economic growth and low unemployment rates and development everywhere. Clearly, the United States is slowing down a little bit. There are still new developments and things going on. Overseas there's tremendous opportunity for continued growth, whether it's Europe or Asia or Latin America, South America.

There's so much going on and our industry's still relatively new in a lot of those parts of the world. There's so much really exciting opportunity out there to expand. One of the most interesting things back here domestically is clearly the REIT, the Real Estate Investment Trust, whether it's [crosstalk 00:29:48] or Penn's Company, not Penn, but Penn's spinoff company, the MGP, which was the real estate owner from MGM. VICI, it's a whole new spectrum.

The hotel industry probably did it about 30 or more years ago, where they spun off the real estate. Marriott became a management company, and a licensing company, and our industry's now moving in that direction and it's a really exciting time. But, you know, capital is cheap still. There's still room for growth. There's room for mergers and acquisitions.

Every day in the newspaper or online, wherever, you're seeing these deals being announced, this growth being announced. It's an interesting time. We've had six, seven, eight years of continued market improvement from the recession. There's gonna be headwinds in the future, but again I think if you build a high quality product and service and bring on great people and treat them well and teach them to take care of their guests, you'll withstand the growth and the storms and the headwinds, and you'll always be a destination people will want to frequent as a place they'll wanna go when they're not at home or not at work.

It's gonna be a very interesting next five to 10 years to watch the growth, to watch these acquisitions and mergers, to kind of figure out how do we raise the bar? How do we attract millennials? How do we refresh and evolve the experience that we deliver to our guests? Because the industry is not just gonna ... it's not you build it and they come anymore. It really just isn't that way. Via competition and just freshness of what we do out there, we have to constantly and continue to evolve and push ourselves to do better. It's not gonna change just by standing still.

Tino Magnatta: Yup, and work hard as you can.

Mark Birtha: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tino Magnatta: For sure.

Mark Birtha: Every day.

Tino Magnatta: Okay, this has been great. Let's take some calls.

Hello, this is Tino Magnatta, GT Radio, do you have a question for Mark?

Speaker 3: Hey guys, great conversation. Pretty worthwhile. Mark, question for you. You, obviously you have the Hard Rock brand. I'm not sure what the agreement is out there with Hard Rock Incorporated, but could you talk a little bit about some of the synergies you've seen with some of the other Hard Rock Hotels and Casinos out there?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, that's a great question. I appreciate it. Hard Rock is an international company. We're about 40, 47 years old plus. We're in as many countries around the world as Starbucks is. Over 200 locations between our cafes, hotels, and casinos.

We've just opened a newer one in Atlantic City and we're building one in Northern California, and looking at Japan and Spain, Barcelona. There's so much opportunity in the hotel and casino side, so that integration is absolutely critical, and part of what our leader, Jim Allen, who's another visionary, truly a dynamic individual who is so smart and so talent, and really just redefining our organization and our industry.

We're looking to bring the company to the next level of evolution. We recently purchased the rights to the brand and the name, West of the Mississippi, and so we're in the process of evolving as an organization, bringing these three different platforms together, integrating Players Clubs and rewards programs, and IT synergies, and guest services programs, and everything under the sun, synergizing the brand and all of the different things we do, so that the experience, the value, proposition, everything that we offer as part of the Hard

Rock experience is similar and sort of integrated and synergized at all of our different properties.

That's a big undertaking. It's an evolution and something that we're absolutely focused on. It's an exciting time within the country. We have great projects and great people. We have new development. We've got over \$2 billion worth of expansion development going on in Florida right now, in Tampa and Hollywood. New projects coming out of the ground in Sacramento.

So it's a really, really unique time to be part of the company with so much upside, so it's a great company. Thank you for the call. [crosstalk 00:34:22].

Speaker 3: Certainly a fantastic brand. When you talk about the synergies, does that include ... how far are you, months off, years off from being able to share the databases between Hard Rock and target each other's customers?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, that's the evolution that we're clearly going in. With a history of having properties that are in some frame or fashioned that are licensed or managed or owned. We're in the process now of looking to integrate all of those components now, because you've got different people that are involved in the company doing different things, and so that is absolutely one of our focuses is to bring that data, bring that Players Rewards Programs, all the different amenities, the interconnectivity of the company together.

So it's on our immediate horizon. It's clearly a focus that we're evaluating and something that will only make the brand and the experience stronger in years to come.

Speaker 3: Sure. Fantastic. One more question for you before I get off here. Could you just talk to us a little about sports book environment in the Midwest. You know, what do you guys plan on doing, and what do you see as a horizon and do you think obviously with your Vegas roots, do you think that will have any ... as sports markets expand, do you think that will have any effect on the Vegas market?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, I mean that's a fantastic question. Clearly that's the topic of the day with the recent activity, legally. It's something that every market's gonna evaluate differently. I really don't think federally they're gonna come out with a program for the entire country, but it'll be a state by state decision. Every state right now is evaluating.

Now, the elections are over, clearly we kind of know who's in these political positions, so every state's gonna evaluate whether they want it, which most do of course, because it's a new tax revenue source, and then how to facilitate it. Is it through the existing gaming properties? Is it not? Is it mobile online? Is it bricks and mortar? How many can you have?

All that's gonna happen ... in the Midwest, a little bit more conservative. The markets are a little bit different, literally state by state. We've seen it already roll out in a few states. To this point it's had a good start, and there will be more critical mass to come.

I think the Vegas experience will not necessarily be impacted in a material way. I think the March Madness in Vegas, and clearly you can have that in the future in other market, but there's such a unique experience going there for these big, big events, and the betting, whether it's the Kentucky Derby or Superbowl or March Madness, whatever. That's truly unique experience, so I don't think it will hurt the Vegas market directly.

It will be a great new opportunity again to engage a different customer, to bring the experience more locally around the country as the markets evolve. Of course, the add a new revenue stream, a new amenity for properties, a new tax basis for these regions. And continue to evolve what we basically already offer, just in a limited fashion. I think there'll be a lot more to watch coming into 2019, and I think it will be an exciting time to be able to offer that amenity across the country.

Speaker 3: That's great. Hey guys, I certainly appreciate it. Thanks for the time, Mark.

Mark Birtha: Thank you.

Speaker 3: Thanks so much.

Tino Magnatta: All right. Bye bye. Okay new caller, new question. Hello this is Tino Magnatta, GT Radio, do you have a question for Mark?

Vance: Hi. Can you guys hear me?

Tino Magnatta: Yes, hello.

Vance: Mark, I enjoy listening to you talk. I think the affordable experience that you had with ...

Mark Birtha: Did we lose him?

Tino Magnatta: Did we lose him? Are you there? Hello? I think we lost him.

Mark Birtha: Uh oh.

Tino Magnatta: Hello. You can still hear me. Right, Mark?

Mark Birtha: I can hear you.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, okay. Let's go to another caller and then if he pops back on, we can put him back in. Hang on one sec.

Mark Birtha: Perfect.

Tino Magnatta: Hello. This is Tino Magnatta with GT Radio. Do you have a question for Mark?

Heather: Hi Tino. Hi Mark. This is Heather Lee with Atria, and my question was, so Mark you had mentioned Steve Wynn, Sheldon Adelson, that you've worked for and also how you value mentorship. Were those your mentors or was there one specific mentor that you could mention specifically and what you learned from them?

Mark Birtha: Oh, I've been fortunate, had a number of them. By the way we love your product, so great kiosk there.

Heather: Thank you.

Mark Birtha: You know, I've been fortunate. One of my earliest mentors was a gentleman named Brad Stone who took me under his wing. Sometimes he tortured me with knowledge, but more importantly he pushed me, and I learned tremendously. He opened up doors for me. The whole Venetian enterprise between him and Bill Widener and Rob Goldstein were fantastic to me.

Even today, John Lucas, who's our Chief Operating Officer in our organization and a mentor to me. I've learned so much from him in so many different ways. You know, I think you have to look for one. You have to have the mentality that it's important to learn.

I was telling Tino earlier that when we stop learning, not only do we stop evolving, but a lot of the fun of what we do disappears, and so you have to find the right people to align yourself with. And yes, it's a way to hopefully open up future doors and grow in what you do and everything, but more importantly it's just an opportunity to learn and see new things.

That being said, once you have had that experience, you know if that's important to you, it is absolutely critical to then give back. I've had a number of people that I've worked with that have the motivation, the ambition, the knowledge, the passion, and do the job. It's important to do the job, not just show up at the door and knock on it, but do the job, prove yourself, earn the respect and the opportunity, and then give it back.

You have to pay it forward. You've got to give back. It's important to make that a part of your own personal culture and vision. That's something that I've found that has helped me be successful, whether I've been growing in my career, or helping future people grow in their career. It's been a really good time.

Heather: That's great. Thank you for sharing that.

Tino Magnatta: Thanks so much, Heather. You have a good night.

Heather: You as well.

Tino Magnatta: All right, let's see if we can get the last guy who fell off. See if we can get him back. Hello this is GT Radio. Do you have a question for Mark? Hello? Can you hear us?

Michael: Hi Tino and Mark, Michael Blasé here, how are you?

Mark Birtha: Hey good. How are you?

Tino Magnatta: Hey good. How are you?

Michael: Good, good. Glad to hear it. Great stories, Mark. Hey quick question I got for you is what ... if you could pick one, either in your current role or across your career, what moment or project you're most proud of ... something that sticks out.

Mark Birtha: Oh, my God. That's a hard one. I mean, again, I've been pretty lucky that I've been part of experiences that, whether it was opening the Bellagio, which truly will always resonate with me, being on the ground in Macau when we broke on the Sands Macau and changing the whole industry there in that part of the world was extraordinary.

Working in tribal gaming ... I worked for a few years in Tucson as you might know. We were able to build a great hotel expansion, all non-gaming amenities, and the culture and the nuances, unique perspective of having a property that we had hired a lot of the tribal members to work in there, and they had a pride and a glow and a beaming energy that that hotel and that expansion was their own, and they were welcoming guests. That will stick with me forever. It was truly a tremendous experience.

Working with Hard Rock now, clearly winning awards is not what we're in the business for, but having our team tell us that they appreciate working there, and the things that we do, whether it's for Veterans Day or team member growth, or raising the bar of the experience, it's just been another great experience, and then culminating in that billion dollar transaction for a regional gaming sold property.

I've been fortunate like I said. I've had a number of great experiences, great people that I've worked with. They've helped me to have the achievements and the success that I've had. It's a team effort. It's not me. It's not I. It's a whole bunch of people. But when you put your energy and passion, no matter where you are or what you're doing, you can find those truly iconic experiences and life

changing takeaways. It's been a great ride. I've enjoyed it and I look forward to more of those in the future.

Michael: Very cool. Great experiences. Hey, I got one more for you. You know, I shift at Dell, I work at the agency side about a year and a half ago, closer to operations, marketing. What do you think as far as agencies go, everybody's got their opinion whether they're bringing marketing service in house, to have agencies. What do you think the rule of agencies in the gaming industry going forward in the next 10 years?

Mark Birtha: I mean, it's clearly an interesting question. I think where we are in the industry right now, we are so challenged with finding people at every level, from hourly levels to management to upper executive management. There's such a demand for people. In my time, I've levered and number of agencies in all different fashions, because there's great intellect, there's great experience, there's great creativity.

Sometimes when you're in an organization and everyone's kind of drinking their own Kool-Aid, which is not a bad thing, but you may not get perspective. You may not get diversity. You may not get creativity. I've found that agencies, oftentimes that I've brought on, have challenged me and we've worked twice as hard to create something truly unique, whether it's a tagline or an advertising platform, content-wise and branding-wise, to creating new experiences on the property, or to freshening up your guest services program.

I think agencies in every different aspect of the business, whether we're talking about marketing or anything else, add a lot of value. It's gotta be the right fit for you, and it's gotta be the right need for you, but I welcome it and I think it's an opportunity to challenge yourself and get outside input, fresh eyes on what you do, and hopefully continue to evolve what it is that we offer each and every day.

Michael: Thank you. That's a great perspective. I appreciate the feedback.

Mark Birtha: Thank you.

Tino Magnatta: Thank you so much. Great questions. Hello this is Tino Magnatta. Do you have a question for Mark?

Vance: Hi, this is Vance. I think you can hear me now.

Tino Magnatta: Now we can, yes. You dropped out there for a minute.

Vance: I know what the problem was. I'm really enjoying the conversation. Thank you very much, Mark.

Mark Birtha: Thank you.

Vance: Just a question. How long have you been in Cleveland, and is there any unique features to the market that you've had to accommodate anything in particular about the specific location? Just curious.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, I mean, Cleveland's been a tremendous market. I've been there for a little over four years now. I came in pretty much after ... seven or eight months after we opened the property. It's unique. Gaming has only been there for five or six years now, so it's a relatively new market, and so the challenges have been guests understanding that we do there, employees realizing that when they join the company, or the industry, they may be working on a holiday or 3:00 in the morning. We never close our doors, so that's been some really unique things in that marketplace.

It's competitive. Clearly, it's still evolving. What's interesting is literally in the same region you have racinos and casinos, so the amenities are different. My property, we don't even have table games right now, and yet we still lead the state in gaming revenue, competing against properties that have table games, slots, video poker, poker, everything. It's a very different animal and it's a very unique space.

But at the same token, the people there are amazing. The Midwestern values, I think Hard Rock has resonated well there. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is 25 minutes away. People love their music. They love their entertainment. They love to get out and have fun. They love to watch the Browns. They won yesterday, I think-

Tino Magnatta: Yay.

Mark Birtha: It's a comeback.

Tino Magnatta: All right, they're winning some games. They're winning some games.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, so it's a good place.

Vance: Why do you think you're leading the market? Is it the brand or ...

Mark Birtha: I think it's a combination of things. I mean the brand clearly resonates with people there. People love music. They love entertainment. The Hard Rock I think is a unique brand offering that I think people really identify and it resonates with people.

Our owner was a visionary in artistry as well. He could have easily put VLTs which were slot machines there, video lottery terminals, he could have put them into the racetrack and opened the doors quickly, and probably made really good money, but instead we built a brand new property from the ground up. We filled it with high quality amenities, and FFE, and finishes, and truly created an experience that if you walk in there ... our tagline there is Vegas Experience,

Ohio Address, and it literally came from ... I used to stand in a lobby on a Saturday night every weekend, and I would hear people walk in and it was their first time there and they'd be like, "Wow, I feel like I'm in Vegas."

The funny thing was that we were literally creating a destination experience in a locals market. It's been done before. We're not the first to do that clearly. But again, engaging our team members to really go above and beyond and know their customers to deliver these great experiences, and focus on ensuring that we have high quality products and services, I think has led us to be the market leader there.

I mean I think it's a combination of all these different things, and we've really driven our business very, very hard to ensure that we continue to stay fresh. We expand the properties. We add new amenities. In five years ... one of the things that I'm very proud of there is we've made over three and a half million dollars in charitable donations to the local Northeast Charitable and Philanthropic organizations over the last four and a half years in order to take care of the people in our neighborhoods.

Whether it's Susan G. Komen or American Heart Association or our veterans, VFWs, on and on and on, we make an impact on the community and I think that goes a long way to ensuring that you're not just an economic enterprise that's reinvesting, you're also a local citizen.

I think our guests really, truly appreciate that, and I think it's again, it's a great question. I don't think there's one solitary answer. I think it's a combination of things that have allowed us to really be successful in that marketplace.

Vance: Are there any games specifically that perhaps a Clevelander is more apt to play than in other markets that you've worked? I've been in certain markets where the Cleopatra game was the hottest game in the whole city, all the casinos, it's all they had. I'm just wondering, is there anything unique like that that you're seeing in terms of preferences?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, I mean that's a great question. I think market by market, there is always going to be some nuances. At the end of the day, I spent time at the Vegas strip, and I've spent time in the Vegas locals market working, and I've spend time regionally, and I've found that a large portion of the games that we offer there, we don't have video poker or ETGs. We only have video real and traditional games. A lot of the performance metrics that we see in other markets are very similar.

A lot of the guests that are in Cleveland are making trips to Vegas or to other marketplaces, so in the Vegas locals market, video poker is huge, and that's not necessarily the same thing in other marketplaces.

In other properties in Vegas the buffalo games have been tremendously successful and more of a regional market. Ours are very successful. They're probably not as successful. Our penny games perform very, very well. It's a unique product, 'cause I think you've got the local regional marketplace, but again, because the gaming is still relatively new, we do as well with some of our traditional games and some of the more local-friendly-ish games like buffalo, as we do with our penny games that people out there just wanna have a fun time and probably realize they may not win as much or as often, but they love the content, they love the inner-activity, they love the boxes. They just really enjoy the experience.

I don't think there's been all that much different. I think we may be a little bit of a hybrid, only because we are relatively newer marketplace and we continue to grow as a state in gaming revenue. There hasn't been like a category killer that's come out and just blown me away that I have never seen in another marketplace.

Vance: Did you say that you do not offer video poker?

Mark Birtha: At my property, we are a racino property, so at this time we do not offer video poker at the Hard Rock Rocksino, or electronic table games.

Vance: I didn't realize that was a part of the requirement or restriction.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, there's two different models. There's a casino model, which is full-blown gaming, everything from tables to every slot product to a racino, which is tied to the racetracks obviously. There's seven of those, and there's four casinos, makes up the 11 gaming properties in the state. These seven racinos, right now they're limited to only offering video lottery terminal games, which again are your traditional real products and your video slot machine-type product. No games of skill, basically.

Vance: I should know that, but I didn't realize that's part of that. That's interesting. At least your holds gonna be positively impacted without them.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, clearly you know the business, and that probably helps. We have customers that walk in all the time that really would like to enjoy the experience they have. They love our quick hits games, so they enjoy that. The video poker, yeah, the reinvestment laws are typically higher and they don't always tend to be as profitable, so they do impact your hold.

A lot of people don't realize that. When you're looking at casino gaming properties in the state and one has a really high hold and one has a really low hold, but at the end of the day, one offers video poker and ETGs, and one doesn't offer them at all, and so there's gonna be some different hold percentages and paybacks. I think our goal is to educate the people out there to better understand a lot of that, because many times they don't.

Vance: So your closest competitor is the downtown casino?

Mark Birtha: In our region, there's three other casinos. We have Jack Thistledown. We have the downtown Cleveland property, and then we have the Hollywood Youngstown property, which is obviously a Penn property in Youngstown, Ohio. It's about 45 minutes away from us.

Vance: So the only one that would have the video poker then is the one that's in downtown?

Mark Birtha: Correct. In our region.

Vance: I'm curious what percent ... how popular they are down there. I'd be curious to [crosstalk 00:55:42] that.

Mark Birtha: I'm sure I can call some of our friends down there and probably ask them. I know they have a decent representation of those games on their floor, but probably not anywhere what you would see in a Vegas locals market property.

I think they do well, but again, they're a more challenging game to be profitable with. And again, I don't think maybe the sophistication or that sort of experience isn't as wanted there in the Ohio or Northeast Ohio marketplace. That's a good question. We can ask them.

Vance: Yeah, it's interesting. Well, I sure appreciated ... I really liked your comments about the Wynn organization. I'm actually doing some work with them right now and although he's not physically present at this time, his legacy is tremendous, and a very positive thing. Like you said, his attention to detail and I think most importantly customer service is unmatched in our industry still.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah.

Mark Birtha: Yup, that's exactly right. It's a great organization.

Vance: Well thank you very much.

Tino Magnatta: Thanks for calling in.

Vance: Enjoy the winter.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, thank you. I'm not ready. Brr.

Tino Magnatta: Yeah, it's coming up, right?

Mark Birtha: Yeah, it's been snowing already. It's been like 30, ... 25, 35 degrees. Yup. Welcome to winter.

Tino Magnatta: I was in Cleveland recently and I was really impressed by all the development that was going on, especially down where all the clinics are, the cleaning clinics. It's pretty incredible, the expansions.

Mark Birtha: Yeah, I think LeBron coming back clearly helped. It kind of energized the city. The Indians going to the World Series a couple years ago. There's so much goodwill. The people there are just salt of the earth, great, Midwestern value people. It's nice to see the city's re-surg-ing.

We had the Republican Convention there a couple years ago. There's a whole new appetite for growth there, whether it's the Cleveland Clinic, which is arguably the best hospital organization in the country, medical program. All kinds of other restaurant growth and retail growth and housing, et cetera.

It's been a really, really great time to be in that marketplace. Again, it's the people that make it very special.

Tino Magnatta: And Little Italy's great. They got good pastries and great pizza.

Mark Birtha: There you go. You got your vote in. There you go.

Tino Magnatta: Mark, this has been fantastic. Thanks for being on the show. I wanna get you back on next year, so let's stay in touch. Thanks so much for coming on.

Mark Birtha: I wanna thank you and Golly for the opportunity to participate. You guys are doing great work out there. We in the industry appreciate it. This has been a lot of fun. I appreciate everybody's questions. Probably have some new news coming soon. I'll be able to tease you with that, about me and where we're going, what's going on.

But I'd love to come back, so thank you for the opportunity and thank everybody for being on tonight.

Tino Magnatta: Thanks, Mark. We really appreciate it.

Mark Birtha: Take care.

Tino Magnatta: Have a good night.

Well that was great. Mark definitely has a lot of experience. He's been around a long time. Wednesday, Aaron Moss, GM of Black Oak Casino. Don't miss it. It's gonna be great. Remember, everyone's got a story to tell. You just have to have time to listen to it.

Have a good night.

END