

Special millennial guest, Louis De Keyser (Louis DK), tells us how he started and sold a successful tiny house business.

Episode Transcript 7: Millennial Dream Works

Hi and welcome to Jenny in the Corner Office, episode number seven: Millennial Dream Works. I'll be hosting today's podcast and all the other ones. Who am I? I'm Jen Schell, an investment advisor with CIBC Wood Gundy.

So last time we broke down the net worth statement and to help you remember how to do that, I composed my very first single--your net worth it. Now to help inspire you to build your net worth, I will be showcasing a young entrepreneur who will show you that age is just a psychological barrier and that you can do anything you put your mind to. In fact, today, we're going to discuss the millennial dream of entrepreneurship. Can you guess what that is? I'm going to give you some clues. What's minimalistic, experienced based and all within budget. Ready? What can it be? Ladies and gentlemen, I bring you an episode about, (Da,da,da,da) That's my drum roll... tiny houses! Who doesn't love a tiny house? I figured that since everyone is so obsessed with real estate these days that we should finally discuss some real estate. Right? And you're welcome and to help us on our quest: I've invited an expert special guest. he's a millennial, he came to Canada to pursue the North American dream and he also started and sold a tiny house business in Belgium. Well now he's right here on an episode of Jenny and the corner office and let's give a very, very warm welcome to Louis De Kaiser also known as Louis Dk for the simplicity of this episode and for me being able to pronounce things properly.

Welcome Louis.

Thank you. Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Oh, you're welcome. It's a pleasure to have you here. Uh, so welcome. And we know that you had a tiny house business and we know you're from Belgium, but that's, that's all we really know about you at this point. And we all know that when you're starting a business,

that getting started is the hardest thing to do, right? So you have an incredible life story...Can you tell us what the first step is?

Great. So, um, I guess I'll answer this question with the experience I've had with the tiny houses, specifically, and it kind of started without knowing I was starting in business. So I got into woodworking when I was nine years old, my parents moved from the big city to a small town, so literally from a city with 250,000 people, which isn't huge, but in Belgium it's quite sizable to a town with 6,000 people. So it was quite the opposite from me and they were constructing a new house and I was fascinated by the process and especially woodworking and carpentry and anything like that. Um, so I started trying things out myself, trying to make things myself and I got a drill from my grandpa for \$50, you know, black and decker, I don't know if that's a thing here in America, but you have those too. Great. Yeah.

Um, so yeah, that's how it started and it, it stayed a hobby for the next four to five years, um, until I got a big opportunity to renovate an office and it was just a friend of a friend of a friend. It's kind of coincidental and this project was something I worked on weekends because I was still in school and it just kind of started my career in woodworking because it gave me the means to buy machinery and um, it was a pretty sizable projects where I could show it to other people and they were very impressed and so I started doing more and more of that and after two years of being in high school and in the meantime, doing all this woodworking stuff, uh, we decided to try homeschooling so that I have more time to work on my woodworking skills basically.

And that's kind of, you know, that kept going for awhile until 2016 or 2015 actually. And I went to California in 2015 with a friend of a friend of a friend's house. They were like, hey, you can stay with us if you want in exchange for building us a tiny house. And they have never heard of before, but I've done, you know, all the pieces that, you know, that go into it like building a kitchen and doing some construction work and all that kind of stuff. So I thought like if I put all that experience together, probably ended up being looking something like a house. So I, I tried it out and I got back home to Belgium after the trip and

people started asking me like, Hey, could you build a tiny house for us? And so that's Kinda how the tiny house business started.

And after a few weeks of doing that I had a Facebook page. People started hitting me up and like asking for interviews. It got national television in Belgium pretty quickly. And so yeah, it kind of happened without me realizing I was building a business. So that's how I got started.

Wow, that's amazing. Are there differences in tiny houses versus other houses when you're building them to scale?

So for me, when I talk about tiny houses, I talk about small wooden houses on wheels. So they're about 24 by eight feet and 14 feet high. So it's like seven and a half meters by two and a half meters by four meters high. And I'm like, that's a tiny house for me. And what's different is that they're very different stresses on the structure because you're driving on the road literally and you know, a regular house is not meant to drive on the road.

So the structure looks a little different but there are a lot of comparisons. Um, and one thing I love about tiny houses is that you really have to think about design because in a regular house there is enough space to do pretty much anything you want, right? Like if you build a kitchen you can use standard units because you don't have to worry about it. But in a tiny house everything is custom made. So we started asking uh, or we started with asking the client like, what are your priorities? Like what, what do you need the most? An architect will need a big table and a cook will need a big kitchen, but you can't have both. So it's like what, what do you want most? And then we designed around that. So that's a big difference between a tiny house and, you know, a regular house.

This might be a silly question, but how do bathrooms, bathrooms work in a tiny house?

Yeah. So it's, that's the first question that everyone has. It's funny. Yeah, it's definitely not silly. There are a few options. So one is what a lot of people did is actually hooking up to an existing house, um, because that's also an legal way to park a tiny house. Like every house can have a tiny house on her property and you can just connect the utilities to the existing house, which is just the easiest and the cheapest way. Uh, but then there are also chemical

toilets and composting toilets and all that kind of stuff, but that's a little harder to live in of course. But that was definitely used as well.

Interesting. So is it the same with kitchens? It's the same. So there's this thing called gray water and black water and black water would be your toilet and the gray water would be your sink and your shower and stuff like that because it's not fully contaminated.

Right. Um, and so like few people or most people actually had a tank outside that would catch the gray water and then you could filter it or you could just bring it up. So how do you get rid of it? Yeah. So, um, it depends on the situation, but there are most people you can use it in their garden if you're using, um, you know, safe products are environmentally friendly products and, and others had, I'm not sure what it's called, like a, it's a big pond and you put certain plants in it and it filters the water in general to. Oh, okay. I'll try. It sounds very environmentally friendly, right? Yeah, we're pro sustainability and being environmentally friendly here, Jenny and the corner office.

Also like you have to remember this house is really small, right? So your usage is also way lower.

Like you're not living in a house in a tiny house with six or seven people. Right? Like I'm mostly like one or two people and it's actually not that much, you know, there's not that much waste.

Is it insulated? Like. Yeah.

Give us an overview of what the structure absolutely needs and the structure of a tiny house.

Right. So you got to think about it as an RV, but it's meant for living. So like the walls are around 14 centimeters thick, which is quite a lot and it's just full of installation and your utilities go in there and all that kind of stuff. So it's basically a sustainable RV is how you need to look at it. Yeah, like a windows are regular windows. We've seen a normal house. The roof is even more. It's even Thicker at 24 centimeters. So there's a lot of insulation in there. And you're also insulating the floor because you're on a trailer, right? So there is a draft below to trailer. It's very similar to a regular house. Just size down a little bit.

We're probably all wondering how much does it cost to build a tiny house.

Right. So they actually started, after I sold the business, they started rolling out standard models which brought down the price, but most people want to get a custom house for them because you know, it's a very small space and you want to make sure that they can actually live in it. Right. So prices would start at about 50,000 if it's a fully furnished house. It was started about 50,000 euros. So that's, you know, times one point four for Canadian dollars.

Thank you for that clarification.

And then other people, um, a lot of people want to do stuff through it house themselves and so we would build the shell of the house and that was started at like 23, 27,000 euros and then did just finish it themselves.

So I guess the rules are a little bit different in Belgium than they would be in Canada.

You were saying that you need a house already on the existing properties so that you can have an addition, which your addition would be a tiny house. Can you explain that?

Well, it's interesting because there's definitely a difference between Belgium and Canada, but then we were in Europe, right? I did Europe as one market and every municipality in Europe has different regulations. So in Belgium we had 530 different municipalities that had different regulations, so it's probably very different in Canada too. And it's very hard to answer that question. But you have to look at it with your municipality and there are certain rules, like for example, in Belgium, certain municipalities allow you to live in a tiny house for two to three years before you start construction, just so you can live on the job site. So to say. .

Wow. So how did you get the plans for the tiny house, like architectural drawings.

Right. So what's cool about tiny houses is that there isn't really a building code because technically one thing the government or a government is only going to consider building a building if it's--if it's connected to the ground in a sustainable way, so meaning there's a foundation and all that kind of stuff. And because the tiny houses are on wheels, it's

technically not a building. So there is no building code. So that also means that you don't need an architect and you don't need an are an engineer, which is still something we should suggest to look into, but you don't need it.

Mind blown.

This will spell opportunity for a lot of people in Toronto. So I don't know if you've noticed, but people are crazy about real estate in Toronto. Yeah, it's become insane. Um, I think it's calmed down a little since then, but not by much. So this notion of tiny houses really appeals to a lot of Torontonians or people living in big cities or even Vancouver? A lot of things you were mentioning as well that you're really mindful about finances and you're a millennial and maybe you can kind of share what your views are on financial aspects. So let's start with... how do you feel about debt?

Okay. That's actually the main reason I liked the tiny house concept. So when these people in California and asked me to build one, I looked at it from a construction perspective. Right. And it didn't really think about anything else that, that would entail living in a tiny house. It's actually after this trip that I started looking into it and I noticed in my own life I have a lot of older friends that are 25, 27, like around 30 ish.

Those are some old friends. Yeah, they're old.

But what was interesting in their life phase where normally, you know, they got the stable job and they get, um, they got like two and a half kids I think because that's the average in Belgium. And they buy a house so they get a mortgage and then two years after they're like, Hey, I hate my job and now I have this mortgage and I have to pay for another 28 years and you know, I can't change anything about my job. And so that, that's the biggest reason I love this tiny house thing, which is also the reason I started building my for myself is that housing doesn't need to cost that much. Like you just, I'm just trying to show that there are other options and especially for younger people that are between 20 and 25 and don't want commit to a mortgage. So you're not even 30 yet, so you don't know how long that is even. Right.

Just to kind of get your view on how you see things. What's your view on real estate or investments in the stock market?

I would say just, I'm not experienced in either. So I don't own real estate and I don't have investment in stock market. Right. But I do believe in investing in people that are doing something you believe in. I think that's kind of the essence of investing in where it came from in the first place, but I see a lot of people not doing it, including my grandfather, like I love your Grandpa, but he invests in companies that are on the other side of the planet because on paper they're doing well or whatever and I'm like, you know, there are people right here that you know, that are doing very innovative things and you could spend your money on them and probably be way safer and so that's kind of my point on investing. It's more locally focused, not necessarily locally, but just like try to find something that you actually believe in as a person and that you think will succeed.

A lot of people are losing that touch, so to invest in something that you actually believe in that aligns with your values, your core values. Yes. Yeah, that's a, that's a very smart perspective.

Now you're no longer in the tiny house business, right? You sold the tiny house business and now you're onto something else. Can you explain that transition and also tell us what you're going to do next?

Sure. So the tiny house business started, or just me knowing about tiny houses started because of the United States, right. Like I wanted to go to the United States and then I found these people in California and then I found out about tiny houses, blah, blah, blah blah. And as I said before, like it wasn't, it wasn't my intention to start building a business and being in Belgium because I have known for a very long time that eventually I wanted to move to the United States, but this opportunity was there and I wanted to pursue it and see where I could take it.

And it's been my biggest achievement in life so far... So I'm glad that I did it. But after a year of running the business, I noticed that it was growing very fast and it was doing really well, which I was of course happy with. But I also realized that that wasn't my dream and that,

you know, I was fascinated by New York and spend a lot of time there. Um, it was still calling me and it's actually because of a trip, like a two week trip I took just to get away from it all and you know, because things were getting very busy with the business and I needed some space for myself and went back to New York and I fell in love with it again. And I was like, okay, like what am I going to do?

Because it was really at a point where I had to make investments and get a bigger space to work at and hire other people and stuff like that. It's like, am I going to do this or am I actually going to pursue what my actual dream is? And so I decided to get out in the end of 2016. So I sold at the end of 2016 and then I started pursuing my dream of New York City, moving to New York City, um, and last year I spent nine months in the city and I got into sales and marketing and real estate and all that kind of stuff, like everything I've done before in a way, but I wanted to know more about it and uh, right now I'm here in Canada because I'm starting a business in New York, but it takes long time to set that up so I'm still working on that. And in the meantime I'm here in Canada for a year. I have a work permit here and working with some amazing startups here. And uh, yeah. And in the meantime, I'm working on my New York business. I'm actually going next week again to see if I can set something up or not.

Wow. Incredible. So you're financing your major dream with a bunch of little dreams.

Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

That's so much fun. And I guess on your pursuit of greatness and your pursuit for your original goal, uh, what are the biggest obstacles that you faced?

For me, I think the biggest one is credibility because I remember dropping out when I was 14, I was looking for a carpenter to learn from because you know, you can learn things from YouTube but it's not everything. Right. And so I started looking for people that could teach me that and it was just a big hassle to convince people that I could do it and that's, that's been constant in my life, but at this, at this point I'm pursuing that because then, you know, I feel like I have something to prove and it actually motivates me. Like if someone tells me that, you know, I'm too young to do something or I'm not qualified to do something, then

I'm like, okay, thank you. And then I'll go do it. Right. Um, so it has been my biggest thing and I'd say like the way I overcome that is by knowing there are a lot of people out there with good intentions and sometimes you just need one person to believe in you. And I've been very fortunate to have like two or three people over the last six years that have done that for me and that that has really helped me forward.

Yeah. Establishing credibility and having people believe in you and your future is great too. Would you say that if you have haters, it's a good sign that you're doing something fantastic?

Yes. Yeah. I have this one quote and it says like, I know I'm on the right path because things stop being easy.

Well, I would agree to that as well. So Louis, given that you had so much success in this business of tiny houses, what made you transition into other areas?

I actually got to know about tiny houses because of the American dream. I realized that that dream was still there and it's actually a trip I took to back to New York, which is the city I love that made me realize that again. And the business was at a point where I had to make investments. I had to hire people to really make something out of it and I didn't want to do that because I knew that my, my aspirations and my dreams were on the other side of the ocean, so I made the decision to leave my business behind and sell it and use the money to figure out what I wanted to do in New York and how it could get there and what I wanted to do in my life in general. And I figured that that was the right time to do it.

So what would you say is next?

I spend a good amount of time on that because I think that whatever you do kind of make sure that you like doing it. And that's something I noticed with the tiny house stuff too. I got into it really fast and it grew, it grew really fast and it wasn't what I loved. Like I'm very, I'm very big fan of the concept and I hope it does well, but it's not what I want to be known for. And you know, there's this big thing about labeling and stuff like that, but it's a whole different topic that people started calling me the tiny house guy and then, you know, you're nothing else, literally like, oh, you're the tiny house guy. I'm like, yeah, but I also do this and

this thing. And that was just kind of reminding me of that, that there is a lot of, a lot more stuff that I want to do in my life and I want to pursue or at least look into what that could be.

And so yeah, for me, that was New York at first, but you know, that's very broad, right? Because it's just a city, like what are you going to do there? How are you going to live there? And Yeah, yeah, that's, that's tough to figure out. And it took me nine months to do that. Um, and I didn't, I didn't put a deadline on that. It's just, you know, it took me nine months to get there and I'm here in Canada still figuring that out. And so I want to do my own thing and I want to build out my own thing and I'm combining all the experience I've had for this, which is something I'm pretty good at it by now in my life and is just whatever you've done before, involve it in what you're doing next because that helps me with that credibility thing as well. And now I want to make a maker space in New York City, which is like a space for creatives to try out woodworking or to take their kids and learn something and just to bring back that creative to our cities. But it's a concept. So I'll talk about it later.

Okay. So for now, will you be offended if we associate you with the tiny house guy?

You know, at this point, it's just funny. So I roll with it. Right.

Well, I'd like to thank you for coming onto Jenny in the Corner Office. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you here. And your story is incredible and you've inspired me to look into a tiny house situation.

Oh, thank you for having me.

It's great and I think that you're an inspiration for not just millennials but for the other generations as well who may have thought about doing something but were too afraid to. And we appreciate you for showing us how to do that. Thank you.

So if you would like to view Louis' work and all the projects that he's done in the past, please visit www.louisdk.com for pictures of his tiny homes and projects and much, much more. And you can follow his pursuit to achieve the Big New York City dream.

Everybody out there in the public. I love hearing from you. So please reach out anytime by sending me an email to Jennifer.Schell@cibc.com Or follow me on facebook at Jennifer SchellWG so that you never have to miss an episode of Jenny in the Corner Office. Once again, thanks for joining me and now I will read that corporate disclaimer, see you next time.

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