

Transcription details:

Host: Bill Coppel, First Clearing Chief Client Growth Officer
Input sound file: Conor Delaney, founder of The Good Life companies

Transcription results:

Intro [music] Welcome to The Next Frontier where we examine what the world of the financial advisor will be in a world that's being disrupted by artificial intelligence and algorithms. Our mission is to spark new conversations that create stronger connections and build greater client confidence. Join us as we look at our industry and others through a new lens and explore the opportunities emerging at the intersection of high tech and high touch. It's time for a new conversation. Are you ready?

BILL COPPEL Hi. This is Bill Coppel. And welcome to another episode of The Next Frontier. Here at The Next Frontier, as you know, we're really exploring the direction of the financial services business because we believe that we've got to change the way we do things or we're going to be replaced by technology. And today we have a very, very special guest with us who I believe has, as we say here at The Next Frontier, made an effort to change the conversation and take things in a different direction. Today we have Conor Delaney with us. Conor is a financial advisor. But let me tell you a little bit about his background because I think this is very important relative to the conversation we're going to have with him today. He founded The Good Life companies, which is an RIA based in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, in 2012. He serves as the firm's CEO, but he's also directly involved with his clients and also the advisors that work for him. Conor was only 17 years old when his father passed away. And shortly after that as a sophomore in college, he began working in the financial services industry full-time, obtaining both securities registrations and insurance licenses while remaining a full-time student and an NCAA athlete. And we're going to talk a little bit about that because it's an important part of his background and I think a major influence on his success today. What I found interesting, why I asked Conor to be on the show is because his firm has constructed a 4,000 square foot fitness institute as part of his new headquarters in Wyomissing. And according to an article in FA magazine, The Good Life Fitness Institute has already opened but it's going to be used by not only employees but clients, and he's offering it to the general public. It also reported in this article that I read that he'll also include offices for his 35,000 advisors. There's obviously going to be a health and fitness center in there and an alternative food bar where you can get healthy snacks and juices. So a really interesting format for your traditional financial advisor. Conor, thanks so much for being with us today. It's great to have you on the show.

CONOR DELANEY Thank you for having me.

BILL COPPEL Let me start with your background and a little bit about this whole notion of health and fitness and where it got you. But I really want to start with you kind of telling your story about losing your dad at a fairly young age, the influence it had on you and how you got to the financial services business to begin with.

CONOR DELANEY Sure, so my father-- my parents were school teachers. And I grew up in a place called Red Bank, New Jersey. And so two school teachers in Red Bank, there wasn't a tremendous amount of money to go around. It's a very well-to-do community. And so we grew up in very humble beginnings. And my parents, they will start by-- I'll start because this will come back. They were not very healthy people, not because they

didn't want to be, but because they didn't know how to be. And they certainly didn't have the economics, the income to kind of make some of the sacrifices that they thought that they had to make. And so I was 17 years old, my father passed away after I graduated high school. So if you fast forward a couple months later, my aunt who basically raised us, she killed herself because she missed her little brother. And then shortly after that, my mom started having a stroke. So my journey into this industry was really as a result of having to take care of my family and make some things that at the time felt like sacrifices. But in all actuality, especially now looking back on the journey, it was a blessing that life happened the way that it did.

CONOR DELANEY

So I got in the business. I had a good opportunity of having a great mentor in college who was my college advisor helping me pick my classes and he said, "You know, this is an industry you should look at." Now growing up the way that I did, my parents were of the mindset that if you drove a nice car, and you had your initials in your suit, you've had to have taken advantage of somebody particularly outside of Wall Street. So I grew up not wanting anything to do with Wall Street because Wall Street equaled bad to me. And that said, I was on this journey and my professor says to me, "Conor, you should look at this business, you should look at this career." So I went into the business in between my freshman and sophomore year recognizing I didn't need a degree, I only needed to get my licenses. Got licensed and the journey began. So I went to school at night and was on the ice hockey team and our practice was at 10 o'clock at night, super convenient for the schedule. It allowed me to run the business during the day and sort of get the practice off the ground.

BILL COPPEL

And that hockey also paid your way through college as I understand it.

CONOR DELANEY

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. And it definitely helped offset. College isn't cheap these days so it was a great deal of offset to help me keep that cost down and get through college.

BILL COPPEL

So basically out of necessity and guidance from your counselor, you chose to come into this business, a necessity to earn money to help support your family as well as yourself. Now, you're sort of taking this in an entirely different direction if you think about it. A lot of folks that came into the business it was an opportunity to make a nice living, but you have transitioned dramatically away from what we traditionally do. So I'd like to start with just getting a sense of-- the Good Life Fitness Institute is sort of your brand today. What prompted this transition from where you started in the industry to where you are today?

CONOR DELANEY

Health is such a critical part of operating at the level that I need to operate on individually. It's a big part of my life. I was the fattest kid in my high school before my journey started. And again, there was a correlation there. We were the poorest kids so we were also the fattest kids. So it means something personally to me. Losing my dad at 52 also influenced that because I saw what good health could have done to sort of help redirect his journey and sort of his health. But we started Good Life in 2012, after seven years of being in private practice, with the idea that-- I'll never forget, we were sitting there thinking about what we were going to name the enterprise and my partner had this great idea around the diamond and the different sizes of diamond and whatnot and she could build a marketing plan and each one of those would be a strong pillar, integrity and this and that. And I said, "It's just not going to resonate. It's not going to resonate. Maybe in the '80s that would resonate because our industry has changed and evolved so much." In the '80s it was define benefit. You needed to take care of the employer and make sure that the employer saw you as a thought leader and an access to product and all the other things that we needed to be as an advisor in the '80s.

CONOR DELANEY

But now as you get into the 2000s we shift from define benefit to define contribution. Guess what? You no longer need to look like somebody that appeals to the boss, you need to look like the person that's relatable and approachable to the rank and file, to my dad, to the school teachers, to the business owners, to the police officers, to that kind of people because, guess what, they're the ones that number one, need you the most, number two, they're the ones that our product offering as wealth managers and even as retirement plan advisors is going to drive us to needing to be relatable to them more so than the employer anymore. The employer has also changed, for the record. My doctors, my lawyers, my business owners are just as much looking for the person that is approachable and has it all together, the whole package, versus the guy that's access to product because the thing came out called the Internet. So that need to use an advisor to get the product is no longer important. But there birthed the Good Life where we wanted to give people a better life. That has evolved into something much bigger than that with our hundreds of advisors around the country and the thousands of the families that we serve in the dozens of communities. And it's a very proud thing for us because we feel like there's a lot behind that name, that energy, that feeling of having a good life.

BILL COPPEL

So tell us a little bit about when you saw this vacant-- I guess it was an old La-Z-Boy warehouse. What was the vision you saw and how did that bring to life the next sort of generation of Good Life?

CONOR DELANEY

When we made the decision to stay here in Berks County, we looked at on a micro level here in the county, what are some of the biggest issues? Well, Berks County is top 10 in crime, top 10 in obesity, top 10 in poverty almost every year. And so we said, "Why?" Lack of leadership, lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, lack of resources, lack of facilities. So we did this analysis. And we said, "If we're going to dig our heels in here as a firm that prides itself on sort of always being forward thinking and being at the front of the pack, what does that look like?" And we looked at the client base around the country as well as here and all those factors played into it. And we said, "Really, it's about four things." You had mentioned before we got on here a three-legged stool. I want to add a fourth leg to that. So for me, the four-legged stool that our advisors-- so we say B to A, our business to our advisors, B to C, business to the client, obviously, and B to E, what's our employee experience look like, four things that need to balance out. Number one, they need to be financially fit. Number two, the physical side of that, the physical fitness, the physical education. Number three, the nutritional piece of that, I always tell-- my wife and I are in this journey of doing the six major marathons around the world. And we always tell our three little ones at home that the Captain Crunch-- mom and dad can't run off that Captain Crunch. We can't run off that bacon cheeseburger. It's got to be-- everything's got to kind of be in sync. And then obviously the fourth one being spiritually and emotionally well as well.

CONOR DELANEY

So our wellness center, our multipurpose wellness center here at the headquarters, I think it's something that we are going to be able to replicate and bring to other markets around the country. But here, it's about making sure that our clients, our employees, and our advisors have access and have the knowledge base to make good, informed decisions on how they're going to run through every day. People think, "It's a diet, it's a fad. I got to catch up to my retirement, so I'm going to make an extra deposit every month for the next 10 months." Or, "I need to lose 10 pounds, so I'm going to cut this out for the next 10 months." What if we teach them about a lifestyle? What if we get people to change just moving the needle ever so slightly with how they approach life? Not as being one little window or pocket of time so that they can lose that 10 pounds or catch up on their savings, but if we can build new things that are going to change behaviors permanently. That's kind of what this is about with

the wellness center here. Now, are people still going to make bad decisions? Absolutely. But my goal, my desire, as a leader, is to say, "They're at least doing it from an informed state."

BILL COPPEL

I want to read to you a quote from an article that you were interviewed in, and it was an interesting comment. It kind of dovetails into sort of the motivation for why you created this new sort of profile for your business, backing up this balance between health and wealth. And I do like your four pillars, but let me read the quote and we'll come back to that. And you had said, "Two out of three kids my children's ages," and you have, at least at the time of this writing, a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and an eleven-month-old, "two out of three children the age of my kids will get type 2 diabetes in their lifetime." Tell me about what you're thinking with that statement and what you're trying to accomplish.

CONOR DELANEY

It almost brings tears to my eyes when you think about that. Our job as parents is to lead our kids towards good and steer them away from bad. And if we just moved the needle of knowledge for the parent just a little bit, then we might be able to change that. But that's terrifying, right? Type 1 diabetes, to the best of my knowledge and not being a doctor, is genetics, right? That's circumstance. Type 2, that's lifestyle. That means that we could have changed it. We could have done something different, and so that's what we're trying to accomplish here. One of the things that we're doing here, we have a big kitchen in the back, so I'm walking a company, a local company through here, and they take couples and they teach them how to cook. The couple brings a bottle of wine and they teach them how to cook. And they'll do three, four couples at once, or they'll do bachelorette parties, or whatever. And so I said to the lady-- I said, "That's an interesting business model." I said, "Instead of doing it at your house or in the basement of a church, the ambiance isn't always exactly what you want to create in those two circumstances. Why don't you do it here? Why don't you use my facility?" She goes, "How much do you want to charge us for rent? We're just a small business." I said, "I don't want anything from rent. Here's what I want you to do. I want you to go across to the City of Reading, highest crime in the country, and I want you to take a group of kids that have never had access to good food and have no idea how to cook it if it was staring them in the face, and I want you to take them in here twice a month and teach them."

CONOR DELANEY

So we can start there. We can start with the education. We can start with the-- if we can develop healthier kids, a healthier workforce, on a local level, I'm going to get better performance out of my organization because I can hold my people to a higher standard, but just look at the influence that we can have. One of the things that impressed me so much about my dad, and I didn't know this until he was gone-- my dad taught thousands of kids. In Keansburg, New Jersey, there are not a lot of kids that have mom and dad, so my dad served that parent figure for these kids, especially towards the end as the economics and the economy changed so much there in Keansburg. At his wake and his funeral, we had to move people out of the way just to get through the door, and so what dawned on me was that you could define success a number of different ways. Unfortunately, my dad did that by looking at other people that had more material stuff, but look what he did. He changed the community for the better. He left the world a better place than it was when he got there. He helped influence and put a smile on the face of these kids. That's success. And if we can do that and take that approach as leaders in society, then I think we're going to have nothing but up to go as a country, as a people. So that's definitely played heavily into what we're trying to do here in our offices around the country.

BILL COPPEL

That's very reassuring and it's very optimistic and I couldn't agree with you more. And I think for those who are listening to the podcast, you have to understand that the

parts of New Jersey that Conor is talking about are not affluent areas. And I think coming from that background and learning what it takes to recognize where the opportunities are and the amount of knowledge and skill required to lift yourself out of that is remarkable. And we applaud, obviously, the dedication of your dad and your mom and your efforts to make a difference in those communities, which leads me to my next thought. My guess is that the conversation you're having with your clients is very different than what a lot of advisors are having with your clients. Talk to us a bit about how you were able to broach this subject of health and lifestyle which are critically important particularly as it relates to the prospect of and fear that many, many folks facing retirement-- that prospect about living their money. Tell us a little bit about how that conversation goes these days.

CONOR DELANEY

I think the first thing is kind of establishing the culture that we have here just to sort of set the table so that you see what the client experience looks like here. And that's really sorts of the conversations we were having with our advisors, first. So I still have dozens of clients, and they're clients from everything from doctors and lawyers and business owners down to one of the best people that we've ever worked with. He's the janitor at Kutztown University, he's a great guy. And the conversation, there's so many similarities even though these folks are on different ends of the economic spectrum. But the conversation we're having with our advisors, which is always in advance of the conversations that they're having with their clients, or we're having with ours as we build this thing around the country is, we're telling the advisors, "Look, guys. The day of being the guy in the three-piece suit with the hair slicked back driving the Jaguar because that's who you think your clients want you to be, they're over man. They're over." So our advisors look more like the guys that are pitching to the kids' Tee-ball team or the kids' little softball team than the guy that is pulling up to the country club. Doesn't mean that he's the old rich man next door kind of philosophy. Our advisors are doing very, very well. They're some of the best-compensated folks in the industry. They just don't need to let the whole world know about it. And when you do that, you start to change-- that shift the mindset of the client who's no longer intimidated by us, the advisor, they see us as a part of their life.

CONOR DELANEY

As I look at the other side of that as it relates to health-- it's funny, I was saying to my wife a few weeks ago-- I had a week that had gone by where on a particular Friday I had about 46 meetings that I had throughout the course of a day. And I said to my wife I'm like, "Honey, 35 of these 46 meetings had nothing to do with financial services. Nothing. Literally, we didn't even talk about money." And I would say half of those were talking exclusively about health and about what these different people needed, how they were feeling, literally how they were feeling. And so I would say today I have about 30 people that I write on the back of a napkin what their workout plan is for the week until we formed the gym, and now they're all transitioning to working with personal trainers in our gym, and the results are amazing. These people have lost weight, these people are-- a lot of these folks come in and when you're talking about their money, their retirement, guess what? We already have an intimate relationship. In other words, we're very deep into these people's lives, it makes it a lot easier to talk about some of the other stuff, the health and the wellness component. And I hope that what they see on the other side of the desk is somebody that they would aspire to be, somebody that is disciplined, that does make that investment in their health and such. And the only reason I can do that is because I was once on the other end of the spectrum. And so if you can help folks and inspire them along their journey, then I think there's something to be said about that.

CONOR DELANEY

But again, it has nothing to do the fact-- clients don't come to Conor and say, "Hey, we're with you because we think you're the best guy at picking out stocks." No, no, no, that's a commodity, right. The access to product, all the stuff that we said we

were 10 years ago is no more. Now it's what are we doing to-- what's the rest of that ecosystem look like? And so the idea is that things that we're innovating, cultivating here, it's around the lifestyle stuff. It's around giving the clients access to things that makes their lives better, and in the process turning our advisors into little incubators of commerce in their respective communities, by forming partnerships with the local restaurant and breweries and the different guys that are the retail customers and the doctors and the lawyers. But doing it in the sense of being that center of influence and that center of connectivity, rather than doing it with the goal and desire of just grabbing the-- everybody fighting over the million-dollar accounts. We have to be able to provide an ecosystem for our advisors to provide to their clients. That's what gives us relativity.

CONOR DELANEY

If you look at Jeff Bezos in 1994, they're like, "Look, this guy's crazy. He's selling books online. What is that, renting books? You can mail the book back when you're done kind of thing. Where's the strategy here?" Well, now, obviously you can't un-Amazon. I mean, Amazon has taken over the world. We have the same opportunity in financial services. And so I think that we started two, three years ago as the guys that were selling books online, and people were trying to figure out what the heck these guys are doing. But just watch. Watch, and you can put an entire ecosystem around the client experience so that their life is that good that if they unplugged from that, the same way that if you or I canceled our Amazon Prime account, our life wouldn't be as fulfilled or satisfied. Except we're not doing it by being a fulfillment center, we're doing it by being a active, influential person in our clients' lives.

BILL COPPEL

So you talk about this ecosystem, and as we mentioned a little bit earlier in our conversation, I had this notion of these three components, and your translation is a fourth component. But let's break that down for our listeners so they understand what we're talking about. Your ecosystem that you refer to here is really this holistic approach that goes far beyond helping people manage their financial affairs but actually helping to manage their life, or how I say it, achieving well-being. And we look at it from three perspectives here at Next Frontier. One is your financial resource profile, and then there is your wellness profile, and then we have the third which is the network profile, and I like the way you've positioned that as well. When we talk about the network profile, we talk about how we connect with the community, how we connect with each other, because as you pointed out, it's very different today than it used to be. Amazon has changed the way we think. It has changed clients' sentiments and expectations. We are behaving differently as a result of it. It's not bad. It's just different. And if we don't react and respond accordingly, as you put it, financial service and wealth management is quickly becoming commoditized. So what I want to really focus on for a moment is something you had mentioned in the context of your four components of your ecosystem which is one of the things you focus on is your advisors, right? So my guess is that, well, Conor Delaney got it intuitively, has the vision. Now you were challenged with getting your advisors to embrace that. Talk to us about that process, that sort of the pay-it-forward process of getting them healthy, getting them focused, getting them to recognize the scope of the ecosystem that we really want to focus on in managing families' well-being.

CONOR DELANEY

The advisors are the most treasured asset that we have here because they're the gateway to us being able to make those changes around the United States in these little communities that we serve, which by the way are submarkets of the big names, right? Instead of it being deliberately Charlotte, it's Greenville. We know, the average advisor is one quarter away, one financial quarter away, from being financially destitute, okay-- maybe not destitute, but for being on the verge of bankruptcy, one financial quarter. That was a stat that I read the other day. It blew my mind, right? How are you going-- that's like going to the gym and hiring the guy to help you

workout that's 50 pounds overweight. It makes no sense. And it's not because the advisor is irresponsible, it's because A, the advisor thinks he needs to be somebody that he isn't actually have to be anymore, but two, we have to fix [inaudible]-- I had a guy come in my office. Shows up out of the blue. About a year and a half ago, he comes in. Somebody calls, said, "Conor, your appointment's here." I said, "I don't have an appointment. What's going on?" And they said, "This guy's here. He's--" I said, "All right. Bring him back." He comes in, sits in front of me, I'll never forget. He starts crying his eyes out. I said, "Oh, this got really awkward quickly." And he goes, "Conor, I need you to fix me." He goes, "I'm doing a half-- my name is Scott. I'm doing a half a million dollars in revenue, and I need you to fix me because I'm about to lose it all." I said, "Okay." He goes, "I'm 150 pounds overweight. I'm broken. My relationships are falling apart. I--" this, that, and the other, and I had a big smile on my face the whole time. He goes, "Conor, what's so funny?" I said, "I know I can fix you, man. I know I can fix you. I know that we have a chassis here that can help you, and it's--" for this particular guy, we said to him-- we said, "Hey, man, let's get you onto a program. Let's get you right. Let's get you back into balance, back into alignment."

CONOR DELANEY

So today, the guy comes in a year later. He's lost 100-and-something pounds. He has a smile on his face that I couldn't hit him with a shovel and knock the smile off his face because he's so excited about his life now, and he's got the rest of his life to look forward to. So the mindset has changed, but that becomes a big piece of it, right? The third part is-- so if you fix the financial piece, and you fix the physical piece for the advisor, the third component of that is the emotional, and it's kind of the spiritual piece of it. And this guy's relationships have gotten better. The relationship with his spouse has gotten better because he's back into alignment and stuff again, and it's all because we tried to give him all the things that were outside of the idea that we can open up accounts for you, and we have this separately managed account that you can work with if you want to outsource investment management. And all that stuff is great, but that's all commoditized. We have to provide that or else we're not in business. It's giving Scott the ability to also incorporate getting well when he leaves. I always say when I was on the basketball court, I was one person. When I was off the basketball court, I had to make sure that that balance is the same. Scott comes in the office. Yes, he's got the guardrails around him, and the protection, and the boundaries, and everything that he needs around him to see him successfully service his client base, but have we participated in making his life better when he gets into the parking lot and goes home to his family? That's the intangibles. Those are the things that you can't quantify. He's on a virtual training program. He's on a nutritional program. These are all the things that we provide our advisors because it's what they need, more so than the stuff that's generally commoditized.

BILL COPPEL

So basically what you're telling me is you took a guy who came in to you who was already successful, defined as a good producer, maybe a half a million dollars a year in revenue, overweight, stressed out, unhappy, and you took the same formula that you use in changing the lives of your clients to actually change the life of the advisor. And in so doing, they're able to become an evangelist for this notion of what you're trying to accomplish. Now that he's healthy, he's aligned, he's balanced, his relationships are better, he'll become a better advisor to a family. Have I got that right?

CONOR DELANEY

You do, and then guess what? His clients are asking him, "Hey, Scott. What happened, man? You're a different person than you were a year ago." So now we get to take-- now Scott gets to be-- to your point, he gets to become an evangelist or an apostle of the cause here, and he's now able to push that message through, so the advisor

becomes the leader for the client relationship. [crosstalk] And not because he picks the best stocks and mutual funds--

BILL COPPEL But that--

CONOR DELANEY --but because he's somebody that's worth following.

BILL COPPEL Yes, exactly. That's a great story. And that again, I want to emphasize the fact that by changing the conversation, you have changed the direction of this industry. You've gone on this mission. You've recognized that the financial service industry, the way it was currently positioned, is not sustainable. It's not meaningful. It's not having a large enough impact, not only on the super wealthy but just on the mass affluent or the regular person who is just dealing with the same kinds of stress and pressures as everyone else is. You've taken this opportunity to create a model that addresses the whole family from not only their financial resource profile but their wellness profile, both their physical and mental outlook, and have been able to help create better relationships among those family members and essentially create "people that are happier" than before and that's quite an accomplishment. So with that as a backdrop, in the interest of our listeners, what's the one thing you'd like them to take away relative to challenging themselves to rethink how they might be doing business today?

CONOR DELANEY That's a good question. I think the thing-- it doesn't matter if I'm an advisor or a client. I think the one thing that we can do is just strive to get a little bit better. If I'm looking at that from the advisor standpoint, it's not-- in the 1980s, can I make five more dials? It's can I have one more meaningful conversation? It's two different things. One is volume, one is quality. And if I'm a client, I'm thinking about what I do every day and the family that looks up to me. I would say to my wife and kids-- if I can say that I'm the man that my daughter wants to bring home one day and the man that my son wants to be when he grows up, then I'm checking those boxes and doing something right. And so whether the listener is the client or the advisor, I think that that's a really easy high-level thing to think about. Be that person that you want your kids to look up to and if you can do that, then the rest of the boxes will start checking themselves.

BILL COPPEL Well, that's perfect. Thank you very much. Conor, thanks so much for sharing your insights, giving me and our listeners an awful lot to think about. If you'd like to learn more about what Conor's doing, visit his website, which is goodlifefa.com. And Conor, I hope that you'll come back and join us for another episode on The Next Frontier.

CONOR DELANEY Absolutely.

BILL COPPEL Thanks again, my friend.

CONOR DELANEY Thank you. [music]

Outro
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