

Zander Isaacson 00:00:02 Cleantech industry has done great things to date, but there's a lot of companies that kind of shove it down your throat and it doesn't expand the blue ocean, meaning that the people that don't care about sustainability will never care about sustainability, but it's not a solution that's better for everybody. And all that does is oversaturate markets instead of expanding new ones. So we, we always looked at it as, you know, how can we bring things to market where it's not, oh, it's clean tech, it's just better technology.

Ryan Newman 00:00:33 This is Dare to Disrupt a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman, and on the show today is Xander Isaacson. Xander is the CEO and co-founder of Zeal, a technology first electric vehicle charging company, operating at the intersection of real estate mobility, clean energy, and the internet of things. Prior to starting Zeal in 2019, Xander worked in sales and trading as a summer analyst at City Global Markets, and then full-time in investment banking. Xander was the founder and president of Happy Valley vc, the first student run venture capital fund of Penn State. He graduated from Penn State's, Smeal College of Business. Xander, thanks so much for joining us. This is actually a first for Dare to Disrupt, as in you are the first Ev Cleantech company entrepreneur we're having the chance to connect with and looking forward to really getting to know you and getting to know all about that. Thank you so much for making time.

Zander Isaacson 00:01:45 Of course, Ryan. I'm excited to be here and talk more about how this got started and, and everything that Penn State has given to us to get here.

Ryan Newman 00:01:52 Awesome. Well, I, I always like to start at the beginning and so would you mind sharing with our listeners where you grew up and, um, what your early formative years were like prior to deciding to come to Penn State?

Zander Isaacson 00:02:05 Yeah, I actually never been asked that before. Um, so I grew up in South Florida. The main thing that was kind of the contributor towards entrepreneurship was I started wrestling in high school and I, I sort of built that indomitable spirit of, you know, me, verse me and, and defeating all odds. And really just growing that confidence in my own ability. Fast forward to going to Penn State. Um, I knew about the different programs there within finance, and just the possibility that can go to Penn State and get a job on Wall Street was pretty, pretty, like, that was never a possibility in my head. So for me, when I went to Penn State and I found out about the line fund, which is the student run hedge fund that has a hundred percent job placement on Wall Street, I was like, this is what I have to do. This is what I want to do, and I'm gonna push myself to exhaustion until I get there. Um, so I went for the new line fund, unfortunately, didn't get in my first time as a freshman, but I went for it again with that indomitable spirit. And sophomore year, year I got in and I, it was an amazing experience that kind of set everything else up after,

Ryan Newman 00:03:03 Well, we'll talk plenty about the nit lion fund, but, uh, you mentioned indomitable spirit, and I think we need to go back to you being a wrestler. So, uh, like any, any good sports enthusiast knows, you always want to ask a wrestler two questions, what their natural weight is and what weight class they forced themselves to, uh, work down to weight into, because that's one of those Sure tale signs of just how hard somebody had to work to actually get into the sport.

Zander Isaacson 00:03:27 Wow. So you're, you're gonna laugh at this one. So, when I started high school, I didn't hit my curled spurts very late. So freshman year I came in as 103 wrestler. I lost every single one of my matches. And then the pivotal point for me was the quote by Confucius, which is the person that says they can, and the person that says they can't are both usually right. So I came back my sophomore year, I, I gained about, I was like one 20 pounds then, and, uh, went out there. I was beating all the, all the newer kids. And through that I finally was ready for my first tournament, and the 185 pounder landed on my ankle, shattered my ankle, and I was out for the season. A domino spirit coming back my junior year, this is when I really hit my curl spur, um, --

-- I started working out lifting, and I got up to about 160 pounds by junior senior year, and I cut down to 145 every single week for the tournaments. So about 15 pounds every other week.

Ryan Newman 00:04:22 Amazing. Well, I heard, um, a motivational speaker recently say that if you think of three different, uh, periods in a wrestling match, the first period one by that wrestler with most skill, the second period by that with most endurance and the third period by that with most heart. Would you, uh, agree with that philosophy?

Zander Isaacson 00:04:39 I couldn't agree more with that.

Ryan Newman 00:04:40 Very cool. Well, I've, I've also not heard many wrestlers quote Confucius, um, in the opening lines of talking about wrestling. So talk us a little bit still about, in that high school phase, about sort of how you, um, came to sort of think about things in a, certainly an intellectual way, um, but also obviously, you know, the, the physical demands of being, just being a high school athlete. What, what was that like in terms of the makeup of your personality or how you spent your time?

Zander Isaacson 00:05:06 Yeah, so I think the, so the wrestling part was the first time in my life that I pushed myself beyond exhaustion, like passing out, coming back and, and just keep going until you win. And that kind of flipped the, the belief that, you know, the human mind can do anything. So coming into kind of like before my, my summer at Penn State, uh, I've read the book, the Alchemist by Paul Kolo, and it's a, it's a very light philosophy read, which a lot of people have read. And, um, it's about, you know, basically like going across your own destiny and just continuing the path and it's the journey, not the destination. So that kind of was the first book that got me into philosophy. And then from there I started reading like individualism, like the founded Head by Anne Rand and, and some books like that, which is all about just the human spirit and basically the, the real meaning of integrity, which is sticking to an idea that you believe in no matter how bad adversity is. And kind of that's been my, uh, my North Star with, you know, going through any adversity or tough challenge throughout college. And the journey has been philosophy.

Ryan Newman 00:06:09 Amazing. So you, you're now finding yourself at Penn State. You're a freshman. You've already kind of honed in on the whole Nittany Lion fund and that piece, but just take us through it. So you arrive at Penn State mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you are a freshman. You've got this a little bit of a philosophy background. You've got the, the scrappiness of a wrestler. Um, what, what are some of your first impressions of being on Penn State and how did you sort of work to initially get involved?

Zander Isaacson 00:06:33 So, being, having no friends at Penn State when I first got there, it's sort of like being a first time founder. It's like, you, you, you have to be resourceful. You have to get out there, you have to go to the, you know, the, the corny of, like, things that go on on campus. So I kind of just signed up for everything. And when I found out about the Wall Street Bootcamp run by Robin Stevens and, and the New Line Fund run by Dr. War, I'm like, I've never had the possibility of working my, you know, ass off towards something like that. So just the fact that it was like on a gold platter, like, all you have to do is work hard. I just took that. I was like, I'm gonna do whatever it takes. So that was like my freshman year, and when I didn't get into fund it, it was like, I didn't, it was no big deal. It was like, I'm just gonna go 10 times harder study all summer. So my initial impression was the, the opportunity is endless at Penn State. Um, you, you hear about the alumni network and the resources and the clubs, and you, you, it, it's what you make of it, but it couldn't be more true. And, and that's how I kind of went into it. And my entire career so far, I, I, I attribute to Penn State.

Ryan Newman 00:07:38 That's amazing. Well, certainly Robin Stevens and Dr. Wilks deserve, deserve a lot of credit for the tremendous, uh, way in which that program has been developed and cultivated and credit to somebody like yourself for really taking all of that opportunity. Um, but you didn't just stop there, you didn't just stop with, uh, being in the Nittany Line Fund. You actually, as I understand it, founded your own group at, at Penn State. --

-- So can you talk a little bit about that and what led to the inspiration to do that?

Zander Isaacson 00:08:03 So, truthfully, when I went to Penn State, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Um, when I found out with any line fund, it was more of the challenge and the excitement about the markets, and it's exciting, right? So I went through the sales and trading internship. It was great. It was an awesome experience. I gotta work with amazing mentors, another Penn State alumni, like, like Ryan Fleming. And, and I came back and, um, I got another offer for Boutique Investment Bank. So I accepted that because I wanted to get the investment banking background. And I came back to Penn State my senior year, and I'm like, what do I actually wanna do with my life? Um, now that I have the full-time offer, and I was thinking about investment banking, I was like, this will be good experience, regardless, I'm gonna go forward with at least my first year in the workforce, but what do I really wanna do?

Zander Isaacson 00:08:48 So I, I looked into venture capital, I've never heard of it before, and I was like, this is, this is it. This is like how I contribute my finance background with my entrepreneurial background, and that's what I want to do. So I started looking to, how do you break into venture capital? And I started looking at some students that started, uh, student run Venture Capital fund at uva, and they ended up in bc. So I looked around at Penn State, there was nothing going on there. Uh, went to talk to Origin, and I'm like, would you be open to helping me start the student and Venture capital fund? And he basically told me what the students did to start the new line fund. And my entire senior year was like my passion project of just starting this awesome group called Happy Valley vc, and really just bonus this ecosystem of really exciting students that maybe they don't have a start, maybe it's just an idea, or maybe they just wanna be around

like-minded individuals.

Zander Isaacson 00:09:36 So the paperwork, that was the easy part. The hard part was attracting amazing students that I'm not already friends with or in my network. So finance business, that was easy. That was my network. I had to go to the engineering school. I was knocking on classrooms, giving y'all flyers. I went to a blockchain event, a hackathon. I went to a TED Talk, that's where I met my co-founder. He was the keynote speaker. Um, when he usually asked me to join my club, he was not interested at all. I had, I had to get a few more people. Um, our product designer, Scott Luman, who's at another startup in San Francisco, he was our head of design for the club, our head of marketing that worked at Snapchat, Jake Shyman, he also helped us out in the early days of, of Zeal. So I had no idea that they were gonna help later on. It was just the idea, I love this stuff. So I built that club, that ecosystem, and the goal was to give students an opportunity to get into bc but also get real experience working with startups for the end result was that it gave me so much more than I think that the club made itself

Ryan Newman 00:10:31 Amazing. Well, you, so you come onto campus, you take the, the bull by the horns, no pun intended on the Nittany Lion Fund, sort of handle that rejection resoundingly well by bouncing back, go and do a, a Wall Street internship only to return and say maybe there's something more. And then found your own club. I mean, if that's not entrepreneurial, I don't know what is. Having said that, upon your graduation, I believe your first step wasn't actually entrepreneurial, it was more in the finance route. Can you talk about that?

Zander Isaacson 00:11:02 Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So finance, my whole background at Penn State, while it wasn't directly I know how to start a company now, or build a product or launching the App store, it was the work ethic, the professionalism, like nothing one in vain with the experience. So going into investment banking, it was, how can I learn as much as I can? How can I get real world experience working with different companies and within the mergers and acquisitions division? So working with tech companies and, and evaluating the space and being diligent. I saw it as I can still talk to entrepreneurs on the weekends and help them and talk to them and network with them, but in the meantime, I'm gonna stay focused and, you know, have a, have a job that's gonna really build my professional skills --

-- and, and, you know, be the, the bridge for later on.

Zander Isaacson 00:11:45 So went into, uh, tore Partners, which is a boutique investment bank in Manhattan. Um, started my career there and, um, as I'm working there, I'm, I'm exposed to different types of deals, and one of the deals ended up being, uh, something within the electric vehicle space. And I just started reading about it and, and I was like naturally excited about it. And I was looking about these cars, how they're computers on wheels and hovering over blue glowing lights in the road and getting a 50 miles per hour boost. And just the whole idea that it's not a car, it's, it's the next iPhone. It's a gadget, it's autonomous, it's connected. That's what I love. So I called my friend Nik from Nik Hill, broad wash from Penn State, the head of engineering of Happy Valley vc when I was a senior, and he was working at Schneider Electric in California, leading their electric mobility division.

Zander Isaacson 00:12:33 And I'm like, what is going on? Like, I see there's 500 new cars coming out. They don't look like the old electric vehicles. They're sleek, they're quick, they're faster, they can tow more with the F-150. And he is explained to me that all these cars are coming to market, but there's just not enough ev charging infrastructure. So I'll pause there. But that was when, uh, both of us kind of started talking about it. And I realized that while the IP route would've been great, and I love the experience I got, um, I really wanted to be an entrepreneur and build something from the ground up.

Ryan Newman 00:13:01 Amazing. And I'm glad you paused there because I understand that somewhere along the way you found yourself in Southeast Asia doing something very interesting. Can you tell us more about that and where that fit in, into this sequence of events?

Zander Isaacson 00:13:13 It's funny, I, I never pieced the things together, but it, it, it kind of does connect. Um, after college, before I was going into invest in banking, again, I, I, I like mindfulness and, and getting to know myself better. So it's, you know, you don't just go on autopilot, um, which is important to put your head down, but it's important to do it consciously. So I took a trip, my friends to Thailand right after senior graduation, um, went out there. We, we, we traveled a little bit around Southeast Asia, and then they wanted to go to Europe after, but I had the opportunity to do that when I was studying abroad, and I wanted to do something new. So I went on Trip Advisor, and I heard about these things called monk chats, where you can basically teach monks English and they'll teach you more about their culture. I went deep into the threads. There's like 37 replies deep, and one of it said, if you want an authentic experience, there's this one English speaking monk in Northern Thailand. You email him right here. I emailed him based off a 37 thread, and I ended up living with monks for a week in, uh, northern Thailand above Shk Mai.

Ryan Newman 00:14:10 Amazing. And what were some of your takeaways of that really interesting experience?

Zander Isaacson 00:14:15 I think everything in life can be manageable. Um, the whole point about meditation is not a ignorance, like, ignore everything going on in life. It's that, you know, as things approach you, it can just come straight through you and you can still grind and put your head down, and maybe not always like what you're doing, but that doesn't mean you can't produce great work. And so from that experience, it was all about, you know, I, I was explaining I was going into this investment banking route, and, and the monk was explaining how there's always gonna be discomfort. And, um, it's learning how to objectify the discomfort. And, uh, my, the biggest experience I remember was sitting down, we did eight hours of meditation a day. My first day was brutal. I was, I was sitting there, I can't even sit crisscrossed. And I'm sitting there and my leg fell asleep. And the monk is saying like, he's, the practice is like distraction, dis distraction, dis distraction. Like you're saying it in your head, discomfort, discomfort, discomfort. But the reality is it actually works. You start objectifying how you feel, and, and you could, you could apply that to any area of life.

Ryan Newman 00:15:15 Amazing. And as you think about your business, how, what are some of the major themes, not just going, preparing for your inves --

-- tment banking boutique experience mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but then subsequently starting your business. What were some of the takeaways from this experience that have sort of led all the way through to what you're doing now?

Zander Isaacson 00:15:31 I, I think the, the optimism is, is a big part. The resiliency. It, it doesn't just come with, you know, being tough. It's, it's the perspective you have on life and, and seeing things as like, this is a unique opportunity. Make myself distinct. Like, who else has had this adversity? So, you know, in the, in the early years, we, we struggled to raise money. We, you know, we were two students, an engineer, and an ex investment banker sounds like a perfect fit, but it's also, it's, there's plenty out there. So we really had to build a business from the ground up before we attracted any capital. And every single time we would just get turned down and be like, well, how many, like, it almost became comico. It was like, of course this happened to us, but we're gonna learn how to get through this, and that's gonna be adversity that's gonna make us distinct down the line.

Ryan Newman 00:16:12 Uh, Xander, you mentioned that you were, you know, working at the boutique investment bank, and one of the projects you worked on was EV related. And, and that sort of led you down this path. Um, is it your sense that there, if it wasn't that idea, it could have been another idea that would've caught your fancy? In other words, did you find yourself sitting in that banking role, viewing it all along as a launchpad to become an entrepreneur? So was it, was it the, the, the internal entrepreneurial spirit looking for an idea? Or was it the idea that captured your entrepreneurial spirit?

Zander Isaacson 00:16:45 So I think it was, it was multiple things. My background, I've always been into entrepreneurship. Like in the high school, I, I would buy watches from Amazon and resell them to people that wanted them. I, I've always liked that. I did like a summer program when I was a high school student at a, at Syracuse entrepreneurship class. So I always had that just excitement about building things. But, but the journey was really just like an explosion of passion. It was like junior year, like, I loved finance, I loved them as a banking, the markets, like, I loved everything going on there, but in senior year, when I started the, the VC club, I'm like, most of my friends, they're, they're relaxing. They're not doing anything their senior year. And they're like, why are you doing this? Are you trying to get a job? And it's like, no.

Zander Isaacson 00:17:23 For me, it's like, I just wanna build a foundation. I want to like, build something that really lasts. So then I just started getting more excited about startups, and I was thrilled to start a ib. But then when I started working on the weekends, I would go to these like startup get togethers and these events on the weekends, and it's like, why am I doing this on the weekends? And it's because I love it. Like, it doesn't feel like work. So it was like a, just increasing alignment, what I want to do with my life. And I wasn't, I wasn't necessarily looking to, you know, leave IBN and started something like this. It was the fact that the person that I founded was someone I would blindly follow. Nikhil, he's a Indian immigrant, moved here when he was 18 years old from India with no friends or family with one life mission to stop climate change without bothering people.

Zander Isaacson 00:18:04 And that was his whole TED talk. And when I spoke to him and he, and he, and he's telling me about some of the ideas he wants and how he wants to leave his job as well. It was just like, uh, right time, right place, right person, founder of fit. And I quit my job. And, and what we do right now is nothing to what we did when we first started. It was a completely different product, business model and idea. So it, it was really the, the person, the time and, and the passion that really drove me to jump.

Ryan Newman 00:18:30 So if you could unpack this comment, uh, heal climate change without bothering people, that's is a lot of, um, uh, facetious just built into that, inferred by that statement. Can you sort of unpack that for us?

Zander Isaacson 00:18:44 Yeah. So I think Cleantech industry has done great things to date, but there's a lot of companies that kind of shove it down your throat and it doesn't expand the blue ocean, meaning tha --

-- t the people that don't care about sustainability will never care about sustainability, but it's not a solution that's better for everybody. And all that does is oversaturate markets instead of expanding new ones. So the example I always give is the, the paper straw, right? It's like the first wave of people that, uh, really don't like straws, has the paper straw, but it, we know that it, it disintegrates quicker. It's not a good experience. It gets all wet. It's not great. There's a better solution now. It's that there's ones that are made out bamboo and, and corn, and it might be a little more expensive, but it's a better solution that has the same experience. So that's how I kind of interpreted it, was that how can we solve things without making people realize they're, they're having a different, uh, fundamentals that make up the solution. So we, we always looked at it as, you know, how can we bring things to market where it's not, oh, it's clean tech, it's just better technology.

Ryan Newman 00:19:45 Fascinating. And so you find yourself running this business, uh, and talk to us about some of the earliest challenges. You mentioned it was very hard at first before you raised any money. You've obviously been very successful raising money. You just completed a series B transaction where you raised over 50 million. That's on the back of your series A where there was 11 million raised. But before we get ahead of ourselves and get to that mm-hmm.

<affirmative>, talk to us about some of those early challenges when you were really starting out the business, uh, with your co-founder

Zander Isaacson 00:20:14 Nikhil. So in the early days, the, the initial idea was a basic form reservation app for charting stations. There's not enough out there. So here's this Uber model. You reserve the charger and you charge when it's less expensive and it's better for the utility company, it's cleaner, it's better. That was, it. Brought that to market. And we had some part-time sales people seeing if we can sell it for us. First learning mistake is that you need to sell it yourself before you can hire people. Um, so I started selling it to different groups like workplaces and apartments, and everybody thought it was awesome. We were getting a bunch of pats on the back, but nobody was willing to pay for it because it was a feature, not a product. So when we started doing more customer discoveries and talking to different customers, we found out that they wanted apartment buildings, wanted a way to monetize electricity, make money off them like a bending machine.

Zander Isaacson 00:21:00 So through that we had to create an iot platform where there would be a driver app that can turn the charger on remotely, and then they would pay for their electricity that they consume, just like an Uber ride where you, it's based on how many meters or miles you go. And then the money that they would pay, like, let's call it \$10 a session, would float to the building manager's dashboard and they could collect the revenue share with us and also control who gets to use the chargers. So for example, Ryan, if you moved outta the apartment building, they can go on their laptop and revoke access. So now the phone can no longer turn the charger on. So we built, this took about a year. We, we brought it to market, um, still no investors at the time. We launched about 12 different markets, 12 different buildings, apartments, workplaces surfaced, lots above ground, underground, you name it.

Zander Isaacson 00:21:47 We were so excited. And that's when all hell broke loose. Um, the app wouldn't connect to the charger, the charger wouldn't connect to the network. The, the app would just wouldn't get buggy because it didn't have connectivity and everything pointing back to a single point of failure model, which is how I OT works today, which is a phone connects to the cloud in another state, and then the cloud processes information and sends it back to the charger. So when we got hundreds of complaints from drivers, it wasn't, we didn't have an IT team that we could stitch these problems onto because we didn't have VC funding. So it was me and Nikhil, the customer success line, and we were getting hundreds of emails, I hope your company goes bankrupt. I hope your co dies. I couldn't drive my kids to school. I was late for my appointment.

Zander Isaacson 00:22:28 Like, it, it's not a dating app. Like it's a, you're controlling people's lives and it's, we fe --

-- It that, so we spoke to all of our competitors, right? We were asking like, what did they do? And all they did was like, they tried to ethernet, which is like hardwiring the building, but that doesn't solve anything cuz it still needs to go across the country to a server. We tried hotspot routers, which is like just amplifying the phones, connectivity still needs to go across the country. And then we tried every single solution that they thought of. And again, it was us facing the, the pain and we realized that this is just a broken status quo. So in 2019, uh, we made a very conscious decision, a light bulb went off and we decided that we're gonna build a new communication architecture, new internet that connects smart devices for authentication and payments and over their out updates without any central server dependence. It puts the intelligence back in the smartphone with, uh, digital tokens, which is a fancy way of saying it, just distributed computers where you don't need any external reliance. So we didn't know this was gonna be a big thing. We just building it to solve our own problems. And we launched that, uh, a year ago after two and a half years of development and we stopped selling the old products cuz we didn't wanna make any more drivers stranded. Well,

Ryan Newman 00:23:39 What's so fascinating about what you're describing is the applicability to basically in theory, any industry, right? So, and, and so talk to me about, uh, I mean, am I talking to the co-founder of an EV connectivity company or am I talking to the co-founder of a new digital platform for everything under the sun related to payments and, um, uh, identification and, and transmittal of information?

Zander Isaacson 00:24:03 You're talking to the co-founder with a mission to accelerate the future of smart cities. And the biggest pillar within smart cities is electric vehicles. First, it's gonna have the biggest impact on the climate cities and just the overall experience. So for us, it was, when we, when we filed the patent, it was about making it apply to all industries, right? This is a protocol that that is gonna make devices self-reliance. You don't have any lag, no latency, no IT infrastructure. But the thing is, when we built it, we were very conscious of how we're building it. And all other industries like smart locks or packaging lockers like Amazon Lockers or even, uh, bird scooters, right? To turn it on, it goes through the central network to the scooter. All of these things are the same architecture. So we built in a way where the platform, the protocol itself could eventually be used for other industries. But right now we're heads down focused on making this work for the EV industry. First,

AD 00:24:58The invent Penn State Summer Founders program provides the funding. Startups need to allow them to work full-time on their ventures over the summer. As part of the program founders receive the mentorship and resources. Early stage startups need to turn their business ideas into reality. Are you interested in supporting this program through a tax deductible donation? We'd love to have you involved. Please contact Heather Winfield at hbw eleven@psu.edu to learn more.

Ryan Newman 00:25:33 So, uh, once you redesigned this, this aspect of connectivity and iot, I should mention internet of things, you've referenced it, but just to kind of put those two, the, the acronym with the, the explanation, uh, you essentially now go back to market effectively consciously sort of take that pause and sort of pivot and you see that all of a sudden now you have this aha moment that it's working well, you mentioned a magic word there, which is patent. So you were wise enough, you and nickel to actually protect your technology, which gives you that benefit of additional first mover and attraction of capital, et cetera. And so now all of a sudden you have this infrastructure, you are using it. What was the, uh, decision to raise capital and what was the, the response from your consumers? And are you still getting those, uh, horrible messages on your message board or through your customer service communication system?

Zander Isaacson 00:26:27 Uh, for fortunately, no. Um, we, we don't get anything like that, but we we're still listening to make sure that we're always innovating on our side. Sorry. I think the big misconception a lot of entrepreneurs have is that you have an amazing idea in products and it sells right away, --

-- or some amazing product sells right away. This product, we had effectively communicated to individuals that may or may not understand technology and understand why it would not be good for drivers when they never drove electric before us. They, they can't empathize with it. So the sales and marketing force of, of how we marketed the technology and how we brought it to real estate groups that own all the buildings in the United States, that was the inflection point for us. It was who controls all the buildings who controls the future? And it's the ones that have all the parking spaces.

Zander Isaacson 00:27:10 So it's the real estate groups that we need to work with to really accelerate things. So we focused on going after the top 50 real estate groups that own 80% of the buildings in the US and we partnered with groups like Lincoln Property Company and, and Toll Brothers and, and big groups that, that manage all these different assets across the country. And we started working with them and explaining to 'em the technology and how they could be a first mover and how they could be the leader. That that accelerates the whole flywheel for EB adoption. And it was an amazing kind of flywheel effect where these groups, they wanted to be champions. They wanted to lead the future and lead first. And so we started partnering with these groups, and now it's a realization that if we're really going to change the world, if we're gonna accelerate the future, we need to bring in as many real estate champions as possible that wanted to accelerate EV charger deployment. And that was a decision to go after the series A last year where, um, we wanted capital to bring in the right real estate groups, expand our partner program, and put chargers in all places that are needed, not just the places that are more mature, right? If you don't put chargers in a region that doesn't have EV drivers, you'll never have EV drivers. It's the chicken of the egg. And

Ryan Newman 00:28:16 So, just to be clear, so you raised, you raised a series A, are you actually, uh, using some of that series A to install chargers on location?

Zander Isaacson 00:28:24 So we we're a technology first company. Everything is software, but we're hardware agnostic. So think of it like they android it for any type of charging station company. So we don't manufacture it ourselves, but we have custom solutions with big manufacturers that have our own protocol inside of it. It's a custom brand. And then we, we use that charging station. We, we give the full turnkey solution of real estate groups. So we oversee the installation, install the Chargers, software management, and the on the 24 7 supported and five year warranty. That said, from like a technology perspective, it's the software that's the real value. I I always like to say it's like, um, like when the Peloton first came out, you know, you're not selling an optimization software for the Peloton. You need to sell the full unit before they can value it until the market matures.

Ryan Newman 00:29:12 Um, and so as you sit here, uh, when you went, when you went to market and you were looking to raise capital from, from investors, how, what was the level of receptivity and how did your message evolve over time as you sort of talked to more investors and realized what you needed to hone to be able to be successful in raising capital?

Zander Isaacson 00:29:30 So that th this is just my experience, and this doesn't mean this is the right opinion, but, um, every single time we went to raise capital to raise capital, we fail miserably. It was only when we started focusing on the business and just building. And then naturally investors started reaching out to us and they heard about our growth and, and our customers being happy. Who, who might have been investors in the venture capital fund, some of these real estate groups. So it was really just focusing on the business and, and making sure we, we provide the best customer experience to drivers and, and real estate owners. And through that, it, it just became kind of, everything else followed after that. So when we started focus on the business, that's when it got a lot easier. And then groups were excited to, to work with us and, and that's when we kind of kicked off the process for the series A

Ryan Newman 00:30:14 And Zander, what led you to go from a series A to a series B? Uh, as I mentioned, it's just been announced that you raised a series B at 50 m --

-- illion. What was the, um, thought process for going to that series B? And what were the lessons learned from the series A to the series B that carried over?

Zander Isaacson 00:30:31 Yes. So series A is, uh, <laugh>, it's a different beast, right? It's you, you see all like the show of Silicon Valley and, and zero to one and books like that. And you think, you know, it's a really good idea. You can raise off certain, certain things. Series A, it's like a real financing, right? It's the, it's the valuation. You have a 409 a valuation, it's, it, it, it's legit. So the point is it's much harder and the diligence is much deeper. So that experience made us a lot more professional and realize what we don't have and what we need to have. And we were really fortunate to have amazing vdc funds that helped us kind of grow at that next level. And then after the series A, again, we just focused back on the business. The plan was not to raise around anytime soon, but we just started growing like crazy.

Zander Isaacson 00:31:13 And, and the team, like we were building new products. We were, we, we screwed sales over 85x since there were Series A, we went from 12 partners to nearly a hundred real estate partners. We went from a, a, you know, a few regions across the US to 40 plus markets. And it became a realization that, again, how do we hone in on our mission of accelerating and enabling EV adoption? And we do that by, by expanding our core resources. So timing was right. We, we, we've been seeking to a BSC fund for the partner there was our advisor of the for, for the last three years. And, um, we had a really good relationship. He's been watching our growth for the, for, for the all four years. Never thought he would be an investor, just mentor and then a friend. And then he ended up deciding that, that this was the right place, right time, and we felt like it was just opportunistic. So we decided to close the 40 million equity and 10 million credit line to, uh, accelerate our goals and then expand the team going into the new year.

Ryan Newman 00:32:06 Amazing. And, um, when you look out to the future, what is it that you hope that, um, Z will be able to do in the, in the years, quarters and years ahead?

Zander Isaacson 00:32:17 So Ryan, I mentioned how the, there's a fundamental problem with the current system of Internet of things, and there's no way to guarantee reliability when you're depending on something else, right? It would be like saying, uh, I can get to the, the ice cream store in under 10 minutes, but you have no idea when the Uber's coming, right? You're depending on something to work for you to get there. So for us, you know, step one is rebuilding the status quo. It, it's getting in the door with all these groups. So the new status quo is ready for the next wave of EB drivers who are not gonna be as patient and eco-friendly. Again, they just want better technology. The next wave is how do we enable the rest of the industry? And that's where we see our protocol that that has a hundred percent uptime, um, apply to other chargers that are already in the ground.

Zander Isaacson 00:33:00 And that's kind of what, where we, we start specializing in being that layer that that creates a reliable experience for drivers. And then far into the future, um, again, staying focused on ev charging, we start enabling that protocol as a software development kit or S D K where other industries can apply it to achieve a hundred percent uptime, a more secure and faster way to communicate. And again, it infrastructure free by leveraging the fact that everybody has a smartphone in their pocket. And that layer is kind of the, the vision for, we don't know how big it can be, but we wanna be the platform that dreamers and builders can build off of it and, and build whatever they want.

Ryan Newman 00:33:36 Incredible. Well, sounds like it's an incredible vision and you're really only just getting started. Um, Xander, I'd now like to turn things over to a current Penn State student. Uh, Dylan Benson, Dylan is a third year student studying finance and Chinese language at Penn State. He's the director of education in the Nittany Lion Fund and an executive board member at Happy Valley Venture Capital. And so it sounds like he's very much walking in your footsteps, Dylan, and I'll hand the interview over to you.

Dylan Benson 00:34:06 Thanks Ryan. And, uh, pleasure to be speaking with you, uh, both today. And so Zande --

-- r, um, looking at our backgrounds, I mean, coming to Penn State, I immediately joined the Nittany Lion Fund, happy Valley Capital. Sort of following in your footsteps, I guess to an extent, um, what, ultimately, what advice would you give to someone in my shoes who's looking at that Wall Street path, but also looking in terms of startups, entrepreneurship, and looking at all of those different options?

Zander Isaacson 00:34:33 One, it's, it is a pleasure to speak to you, Dylan. I I appreciate you making time and I I, I remember speaking to you and when I started advising Happy Valley Venture Capital, um, my advice to all students is that you're never gonna know the person you're gonna be a year, five years from now, 10 years from now. And you just have to accept that and build as much genuine as many genuine relationships as possible with the understanding that they may not lead to anything. And when you kind of have that mindset, that's when you start meeting with people that might be an engineer or a designer or something outside, that your plan of what you plan to do is the best place to be when you've realized what you wanna do is to have optionality and have a network that you've built over the years and a genuine network that really wants to help you.

Dylan Benson 00:35:17 Understood. And thanks for that advice. And overall, when you were starting out in investment banking, you mentioned how on the weekends you would get involved with startup communities, reaching out to founders. And so could you just talk a little bit more about that experience and how in tandem with working your full-time job, you were able to sort of still get that kind of exposure?

Zander Isaacson 00:35:36 So I, I think you brought up a really good point that, um, a lot of these events and, and things that I got exposed to it, it started at Penn State. It was, uh, I wanted to start a startup organization and I couldn't find access to the people that I needed in it. So I learned through the people, I brought on some of these different resources. It was like Scott Lutman, um, taught me, he was a designer. He taught me, you know, these different groups in New York City that I can go to. I, I met other entrepreneurs within the organization that, that explained to me different engineering events I can go to. And it sort of just becomes this like snowball effect that surround yourself by different perspectives. Cause you're, if you're around just finance students, you're gonna get access to all the events, but you're not gonna find out this weird cool niche thing that you would've never stepped into. So it's network, different types of perspectives and, uh, diverse experience all around you.

Dylan Benson 00:36:27 Definitely. And, uh, in terms of your vision in creating Happy Valley vc, you sort of wanted to help connect students with those opportunities in venture capital, but also there's a degree of helping advance that startup environment for Penn State. And now, I know recently Penn State was ranked, I think 34th by startup founders in the US for, uh, colleges and entrepreneurship studies. How would you advise now current Happy Valley VC's leadership to sort of help facilitate that advancement of that startup environment and the support for startup founders?

Zander Isaacson 00:36:59 That's a good, great question. I think it always comes down to hands-on experience. I, I think it's, as a founder, like the o the one thing that's most important is growing your business. It's sales and marketing and building products that actually customers want. And I think taking less of a focus on the planning and, um, making pitch decks and, and things that aren't not gonna help them in the early stages and getting just your hands dirty, putting out flyers around the campus, meeting with different customers, helping sell the product, right? I think that's the hard thing about hard things. And, um, getting as much real world experience where you are basically their free employees. And, and that's what you kind of need at a startup is like, you don't have the capital to bring on full-time people. So that's kind of how I, how I see it is, is work with startups in a way that's going to best advance them, not in a way that you think that's gonna mostly advance them.

Dylan Benson 00:37:47 Got it. And at what point was it where you sort of realized, I guess, getting comfortable with those uncomfortable sort of situations where you would just be --

-- able to go out there, go do sales in a random building, hand out flyers, and sort of go get out of your comfort zone in that way?

Zander Isaacson 00:38:04 So, so you <laugh> the truth is you never get comfortable. It's a, it's kind of a, it evolves, but it, it's sort of like a pain tolerance, right? It's the, the more dis discomfort you, you go for, then it's like, that's 10 x more uncomfortable, so the next time you have a challenge that's 10 x more uncomfortable, it's not a hundred x more, it's, it's the fact that you already grew to that kind of discomfort. So for me, it's, I was always around finance individuals and I got really comfortable there. So for me to go to like a hackathon, I asked some of my friends, nobody wanted to go with me, so I had had to go there alone. And I'm like tapping on someone's shoulder who's like, zoned in with their headphones that was discomfort. And by, but then from there, you know, then I'm, I'm, I'm presenting at our first board meeting, sorry, we have a board meeting next week, our first, uh, happy Valley BC meeting, and there's students in the audience that are not financing. There's like, well, I only know how to inspire an a, make inspiring and make finance individuals excited. So now I'm really nervous, like, how do I inspire someone about product and I don't know anything about products, but that discomfort. And, and, and you get, you get comfortable with discomfort, and as you do that, you have more confidence in your own ability. So it's crucial just to throw yourself in as much discomfort as possible, especially when there's less risk and that's when you're a student. Got

Dylan Benson 00:39:13 It. Um, and then I guess more to that extent, in terms of that discomfort, when you, so you went from an internship in s and t to working full-time in investment banking, then while you're working full-time, you eventually leave your, I'm sure a great job and start your own business. At what point were you ready to make that change or ready to start your own, uh, venture?

Zander Isaacson 00:39:35 So, so I mentioned the expanding your network and being open-minded, but one thing that I, I, I actually do recommend as students is that when you're in something, you're all in, and even if you think it might not be what you wanna do long term, it's, it's what you learn in the process by being all in, in something. And if you always have one foot outside the door, you never really gain as much exposure as you can. So for me, I was all in with ib. Um, I, I, the transition for s and t i, I got the full-time offer, but when I started learning about venture capital was IB seemed like a more exp experience that ties better. But when I was there, i, I was all in, I had no plans to leave anytime soon. Again, it was just the timing, the place, the inspiration and, and the founder that was ready to go. And, and that kind of led to the whole movement. Got

Dylan Benson 00:40:21 It. Um, and then overall, I guess it's something that we stress in the Nittany Lion fund then is perpetuated in investment banking, but there's always like a big learning curve. When I was first got into the Nittany Lion Fund, just as you, there's a ton of onboarding or ton of work, you have to get used to a lot of stuff you gotta learn in a short time. Um, then moving into investment banking, that was very similar then I guess starting Zeal, how did that sort of learning environment, uh, continue?

Zander Isaacson 00:40:48 It's a hundred percent transferable. Um, learning how to get a company incorporated, learning how to put together a sales presentation, how to close a deal, how to set up QuickBooks, right? How do I work with engineers, how to work with product designers.

Everything you're doing, it's just, it's, you just make it a process and every single step you obsess about until you, you get it perfect and then you, and you have the next challenge, right? Like I always say, um, like we're at series B company now, but, but the weight is even heavier now. Like, we have to, you know, move to the next level. And again, it's just, it's reinventing yourself and how you go about things in the way, but at the same time, it's, you've done this before kind of thing.

Dylan Benson 00:41:25 Got it. And along with all those challenges you're coming across, how do you, I guess, look back, reflect and assess how you en like, overcame those challenges and reflect on your past success and then utilize that in terms --

-- of moving forward with your business?

Zander Isaacson 00:41:40 I think you gotta have a good support network. Um, that's one thing I've, I've always been very fortunate for. Um, when, when we failed the first time of raising capital, we really needed a capital. I had a, a humble experience. I, I went back to my mentors on Wall Street, the ones that were like three years older than me in the fund. And I said, we're raising a hundred thousand dollars, can you help us out? And my mentor that got me my internship at Citi was our, the first check, Louis Rosenberg. And, uh, he actually is our head of finance now, believe it or not. But, uh, he was the first check and helped us raise money. And, and you kind of, that's like the first time you realized things don't go as planned, but if you stay focused on the north story, you just keep your head up and you have resiliency as you move to new challenges. Um, so I'd say resiliency and, and just a positive attitude as you approach new things.

Dylan Benson 00:42:26 Awesome. Well, thank you. And so I'm sure I have plenty of more questions to ask you, but in terms of just one last question here, um, any last pieces of advice for someone in my shoes at Penn State looking into Wall Street, again, looking into startups, entrepreneurship, uh, what would you say best will help us start off our career and lead to continued success in the future?

Zander Isaacson 00:42:48 I'd say be open-minded and, and cast as wide of a network as possible. And I mean, a genuine network, like people that you want to hang out with and be friends with and, and introduce your family to, right? Like that, that's what a genuine network means. And then when you're in a row, keep your head down and work as hard as possible, especially in the early side of your career. And then by doing so, you're gonna learn much more and, and just be more exposed to different things. Um, so for me, this is actually a, this is the first podcast I've, I've done since starting ze. And it's not because I, I don't wanna help and pay forward. It was just more of a, I wanna keep my head down and focus on the business and not talk so much. But at the end of the day, you know, Penn State gave me everything and I had to say yes to this one.

Dylan Benson 00:43:29 I appreciate that, uh, advice. So thank you very much. Uh, Xander, thank you for taking the time for me to interview me today.

Zander Isaacson 00:43:36 Of course. Thanks, Dylan.

Ryan Newman 00:43:39 That was Xander Isaacson, co-founder and CEO of Zeal. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe today or to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts. And look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.

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