Secretary Eric Friedlander:
But the rewards, right? The rewards, and like you say, what happens to your heart, right?

Daniel J. Owens:
Oh, yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And what happens to you, right? We get back more than we're given when we do that, right? And that helps us be a better person, helps us be a better employee. It gives us perspective, right?

Daniel J. Owens:
Oh, for sure. So it allows me to step out of my paradigm and see the world in other people's paradigm.

Julianne Hatton:
Hello and welcome to CHFS Community. A podcast about health and wellbeing for CHFS employees across the Commonwealth. Hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, broadcasting from Frankfort, Kentucky.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Hello. Welcome to another podcast. This is Eric Friedlander, your secretary of Cabinet for Health and Family Services, and today I have with me, Daniel Owens. Hi Daniel.

Daniel J. Owens:
Good afternoon. Hello.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
How are you doing today?

Daniel J. Owens:
I'm doing well. I'm doing well. If I'm being honest, I'm a bit nervous. My palms is a bit sweaty as this is outside of what I normally do, but I'm very thankful for the opportunity and I'm doing well today. How about yourself?
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I'm doing all right. We're recording this during one of our heat waves. So, it's about trying to stay cool too, right?

Daniel J. Owens:
Right. Yeah. I may blame my sweaty palms on that heat wave because it has been very uncomfortable, to say the least the last few days.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, no doubt about it. No doubt about it. And I got this whole solar collector going on top of my head. How about you?

Daniel J. Owens:
I'm almost there. Mine's the opposite. I have gray hairs, so that's kind of salt and pepper. I went and got a haircut on lunch to hide a few of them, but yeah, mine's more grays.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It's all right. Where did you start out?

Daniel J. Owens:
So I'm born and raised a resident here in Frankfort. Never left, not even to get my secondary education. I went to the public schools here in Frankfort. Was raised by just my mother. And so, I got to see a unique side of life growing up, although you would've never known it, but we were on the lower income side. But my mom was great at never letting me feel that we were there. And so, I went to Second Street, the public school, which it doesn't look the same nowadays. Although they're doing great stuff downtown. Mr. Barber, they're going to be leaving this year. They're doing wonderful things, but I went to Second Street, and early on, what I really loved about the public school system was the diversity, not only in my classmates, but in the janitor staff, the kitchen staff, the teaching staff. So after finishing early education, I went to the local schools, and then I did not graduate high school with about nine weeks left. I got that senioritis, but an extreme case. One that I wish, it was a good experience. I'm glad I did go down that road, even though at that time, it wasn't. But I obtained my GED before my class graduated, which I looked at it, it was a goal I wanted to set. So I got my GED at the local Thorn Hill. Very thankful for that pillar in the community, which is still there.

Daniel J. Owens:
So after I got my GED, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I thought that I could just hang out and bills will pay theirselves, and that's how life goes. Unfortunately, I quickly learned that, although these jobs are important, fast food and manufacturing wasn't ideally what I wanted to do the rest of my life. And so, I made a decision that I was going to go to Kentucky State University. I always kind of excelled academically growing up. It was just I was a talkative kid.
And so, I might have been in the principal's office more than I should have been. Not to deliver mail, but you know.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, Kentucky State in my first year, I received the president's award for the highest GPA among freshmen. And so, that was a big accolade to me personally, like to show that although I did get my GED, I had a kind of a slip. I just got back right where I should have been. And so, I majored in criminal justice with a minor in social work, and I graduated in 2012. Thoroughbred through and through. So I'm watching closely as I think yesterday I read they had four candidates right now that the board's looking at for their next president. And so, just very thankful that we have a university locally that I never had to leave the city I grew up in.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, that's really cool. And Kentucky State has really been, several friends that went there and then for state government, a lot of folks like go and do continuing education there. So it's an interesting program for us. And then it's caddy-corner, it's like right across the street. So, we need to be involved. We need to be involved.

Daniel J. Owens:
Right. It's interesting, during that time, my mother, she still works for the Department of Corrections, but at that time she was in the CHR building. Going up through the public systems, it allowed me to see a bunch of different backgrounds and kind of become accustomed to those. Being biracial myself, I was kind of in an identity crisis, I would say at times. Do I identify with this group? Do I identify with this group? And so, growing up in that public school environment, it really allowed me to lessen that confusion and just be me, and be accepted as I was no matter if I was hanging out with this group or this group. And then I found my way into sports at a young age, specifically football starting out, and that was something that really helped as well.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Now that had a big influence on your life, right? The sports?

Daniel J. Owens:
It was the coaches, in football specifically, early on that not only were they a father figure for a fatherless child like me, but more importantly, they didn't let me cut a corner. They didn't let me do things that maybe a teacher who has 22 kids in class, I just don't have time today. It was the structure that they put in place and the discipline. The work hard every day, complain less. You will complain, it's a human nature, but do it less. Don't look for excuses.

Daniel J. Owens:
And it was early on, the coaches also instilled into me, what's something that I learned older in life, but the understanding of proactive and reactive. And although I didn't master it nowhere
near at that age, or even growing up in my adolescent years, it was early on that I learned reactive situations and proactive situations that kind of instilled that chess player mentality instead of a checker player. I want to think seven or eight moves down the road instead of, I don't know. If I do this, I need to think of the consequences here.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, it was early on that they influenced me, the coaches. But my mother, and most importantly, I would really be doing my Papaw a disservice, but my grandfather was probably one of the, if not the most influential person growing up in my life. Still is. He's from Hazard, a little holler called Pigeon Roost. And so, growing up, I'd hear the stories. He walked seven miles one way to school and seven miles back. And he would receive a dime and he would put logs in the fireplace. Stuff that I couldn't even conceive at six years old in the early nineties. And so, although this isn't life anymore, it was my Mamaw was the, what stayed at home, she took care of the kids. She made sure that dinner was there. But my Papaw was the one that really was the rock that made sure that everybody was in line, that they raised great children to go out and just try to teach them right from wrong.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, if I'm in a situation or if I have a decision I have to make, kind of like those bracelets people used to wear, the WWJD. I say to myself, what would Papaw say? What would Papaw do? And so, right now he's been fighting cancer, a stage four cancer, but he's still around, and still a huge influence to making me the person I am today.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, that's beautiful. We talk about how important it is to have somebody in our lives or a young person's life that really loves and cares for them. And how that makes all the difference for them. And you talked about your coaches, you talked about your grandfather, you talked about your mother. Having folks like that in your life, who you can turn to, and support just makes all the difference.

Daniel J. Owens:
It really does. It really does.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Because that lifts you up. And none of us are perfect. And when we all slipped to have somebody behind us to lift us up, to get us to think about, well, hey, maybe this isn't the right thing for me. When I left college, I came back and started working painting cornices and stuff. And it was like, yeah, I need to do something else. But that kind of support that you have behind you can say, yeah, not only shouldn't I be doing something else, but I can, right?
Daniel J. Owens:
Right. It was the belief in me. I would often not believe in myself, but it was, I mean, if I ever said it and my Papaw said it, if you put your mind to it, you'll do it. My mother did too. But like you said, having those people believe in you when you're really young and vulnerable, and sometimes in situations where you can be pulled either way, in a negative way or a positive way, very thankful for those that influenced me. And like you said, it's just, you can't replace that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And it's tough, single mother, right? Not in the greatest financial circumstances, you probably shared your face of adversity growing up, right?

Daniel J. Owens:
Yes. So there were times where our house, our four room apartment at that time, the only way we could warm it up is the oven door be open. And so, those type of things. I have three sons. And so, I try to explain those things, but my wife quickly tells me, you can explain it all you want, you really can't grasp that. I try to tell my kids, you got to be thankful. You don't have it like I had it. But it put me through things, but I also was embarrassed a lot. I found kids might have wanted to come over to my house and I'd find reasons, well, it's not going to work today. And so, my mom would, and my Papaw both would always remind me, never be embarrassed, always accept whatever's coming your way. And just, if you can't change your surroundings at that time, just embrace it. And so, as I got older and more mature, I started to embrace that, but it was hard early on. And so, I really just took those lessons. And coming from what we came from really allowed me to have the backbone and just the strength that I have today.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I hope that even as they exist today, that some of the cabinet programs, like SNAP, food stamps, whatever, were hopefully helpful to your family growing up.

Daniel J. Owens:
So, yeah, very interestingly, my mom got my Papaw's stubbornness, which I have too. I would be lying if I said I didn't, but my mother worked two jobs. And then at one point, she was working at the funeral home, at the regional jail as a correctional officer, and then the Farmer's Kitchen. The Farmer's Kitchen used to be a wonderful-

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah, I remember that.

Daniel J. Owens:
Yeah. And so, it's not that she refused to go, to seek that, but it was just not something that if she was capable and able, she did what she had to do. Now, fast forward, my first child came, I was young. I was 23, and I'll never forget it was around Thanksgiving time. And my landlord was
letting me pay half of the rent on the 15th, the other half on the 30th, kind of the draw the picture of how life was. And Thanksgiving was coming up and there was no way I was going to be able.

Daniel J. Owens:
So I lived in walking distance of our local food stamp office and gosh, they were very, first of all, I went in there nervous. I went in there with the stereotype, this isn't for the males. I went in there like, I'm not a mom, what am I doing here? And so, I was welcomed with open arms. There was great staff. And so, not only did they help me immediately that day, but what I call a crutch, because that's what it was. I had that crutch for about two and a half years. The programs that the cabinet offers, the insurance for my children and myself and food stamps. And so, eventually of course, like all crutches, you want to eventually let that go. You don't want to be a walker. And so, I'm very thankful and blessed. And I kind of look at where I am now, because I came from the administrative office of the courts, and now I sit with the cabinet, and it's interesting because if not for some of the things the cabinet did, programs did for me before I was a state worker, who knows if I ever would've even became a state worker.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh that's good to hear and good to know. And thank you for talking about the experience that you had in the office, because you get nervous going in, right? And we keep on trying to make it a better experience. And so, I'm so glad to hear that when you needed it, we were there for you and you said it correction, I think about it like it's support. So you can get to the point where you don't need it anymore, and that's exactly what happened. So that's fantastic to hear that. And yeah, I remember the Farmer's Kitchen and all of that indeed. So you've been involved in community as well, right? I mean, you've done a lot of work in the community to kind of lift up the whole, I mean, it's what we say, right? It's how we impact our community, and you've done a lot of that.

Daniel J. Owens:
Yes. So earlier I spoke about influences can pull you negatively, or they can pull you positively. And so, in my late teens, early 20 adolescent years, I kind of leaned to the negative influences. And one thing that was always, and I'm thankful, I don't know if the trait came from my mother or my father or who it came from, is I'm very observant all the time. Even when I'm in the moment I'm looking. I could tell you who drives what car and what time these people do this. And it's just a trait that I truly enjoy having. But I noticed quickly that there wasn't as many of the coaches when I was a child that there was at that certain time. And it was kind of, we use a term daddy ball, and I'm thankful for those dads that do volunteer, but sometimes you may have a special interest at that time on a team.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, about 2012, I went to the local, YMCA and I asked if they needed any volunteers. And I didn't know what the outcome would be once they said, yeah, if you'll do it, and because it wasn't about the money for me. And it was about the long-lasting impact. I still remember
coach Bay-Bay, that was my coach as a child. And when I'm thinking about doing something, I think about what he tells me. And if I'm 15 minutes early, I'm on time. But if I'm on time, I'm late. And so, those type of things stuck with me. And so, the first season came by and day one, I had a couple of kids hiding behind their mom's leg, and a couple of kids and I had a couple what I would call the Tasmanian devils, the whirlwinds. And so, I didn't know what to expect. And so, I always, kind of in life, I would come with an agenda and I would have a plan.

Daniel J. Owens:
Now, with the younger group, you could just rip the agenda up when you walked in, but I kind of kept it structured still. And so, by the end of that first season, those kids that was behind their mom's leg and those tornadoes that was all over the gym they were squeezing my leg. And it was it's the last day and I don't want it to end. And it literally, it melted my heart in a way, but it kind of, for the first time my time in my life, I learned a passion. Like, I'm passionate. Like this truly moves me. Up until that point, the only thing, and unfortunately I say it a lot, was money makes the world go around. And that was the only focus I had. I didn't really worry about the long-lasting impacts, the relationships I could build. And so, once that first season ended, I was hooked, like a fish.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, continuing to this day, I still do that. I've coached locally. I stopped counting at about 200 individual kids in our small community. And that number continues to grow. I'll be at Kroger or Walmart and I'll see a kid that I had when he was six and now he's 12 and I hear, "Hey coach." And it's just, again, it melts my heart, but more importantly, I want to ask the first thing that they hear from me. How's school going? How's life? How's every, because for me, even when I'm coaching and I am an X and O's guy, I'm very competitive. But as a coach, for me, I'm going to teach you life through the game of basketball.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, the discipline and the structure, and when I see you before practice and you think I want to talk to you about your bad game, all we're going to talk about is how was your day? How's everything at home. How's everything in school. There's no other fulfillment like it to me. I have never found any other passion like it. And so, I've done it for a long time and I've came across every type of socioeconomic status that there is. And at times, because I could never have been a social worker, and now, not because of what they do is hard, and what they do is amazing their angels on earth. But it's because I'd have to take every kid home with me. And that's to take my heart out that I wear my heart on my sleeve a lot. And so, I've had those kids that I know something at home isn't right and just while you're here with me for this little time, or maybe we're going to take a trip to the movies, or we're going to do something that I know you don't do at home. And those are the type of things that really get my motor going.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, I've also coached summer AAU basketball, and then I recently got into grade school basketball. And summer AAU ball, you get your best athletes, you get them together and you
go against amazing competition. But for me, it was, you're not in school right now. And so, I really looked at that summary AAU as that time to really hammer home you have a lot of time on your hands, use it wisely. And we talk about the 24 hours in a day and 60 seconds in a minute type stuff. But again, if not for the influences I had as a child, I wouldn't have probably went down that route.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
No, no, I heard the echoes in what we talked about, right? You were talking to your kids about the oven door being open for heat. And I was hearing your grandfather say, it was seven miles back and forth to school uphill, both ways. I was hearing that where, and we're all like that. We're all a product of what we've learned as kids and to our families and things like that. So I think it's beautiful that you're giving back and you won the YMCA volunteer of the year, right?

Daniel J. Owens:
Yeah. So, it was a shocking thing. In 2017, like I couldn't get enough, but I loved every level. And so, the YMCA would do three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and 11 through 13. All those were age groups. And first I checked with the boss, my wife, and I said, do you mind if I coach all the age groups? And my son was on one of the teams. And so, I got the green light from the boss. And so, that year I coached all the teams, didn't skip a beat. I was at all the practices. I'd go from one game to another, I'd be in the gym from nine to five. And I didn't seek any recognition or anything from that. At the end of the year, I hugged all the kids. I hope to see you next year and I hope your summer's safe.

Daniel J. Owens:
And I got a letter in the mail from their central office that I was recognized as the YMCA volunteer of the year for Central Kentucky. And I really, I was kind of just speechless. Doing something that I love and to be recognized for it, it was kind of just, again, just a speechless moment. I go back to the president's award that I received at K-State my freshman year. And I think about weighing the two and they're both exceptional, but having that volunteer of the year title, I think goes farther for me. Because again, in a lot of people's mindset and even my own, the earth rotated on the access powered by money. And so, having that volunteer title, it kind of lets people know, like I was during the summer, I was looking for volunteer coaches and I had that V letter in the front, and gas is going up and everything's going up. And if you truly aren't passionate about something, you're not really going to volunteer. And I see that, but yeah, I was very proud of that award for sure.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
But the rewards, right, the rewards, and like you say, what happens to your heart? Right. And what happens to you, right? We get back more than we're given when we do that, right? And that helps us be a better person, helps us be a better employee. It gives us perspective, right?
Daniel J. Owens:
Oh, for sure. So it allows me to step out of my paradigm and see the world in other people's paradigm. I call it a medication. So there's three things that I do. I run, I started running about five years ago and I cycle, but I had a bad cycling wreck two years ago. So haven't jumped back on yet. And coach. And those three things, I call my natural medications. Like they really do the things that medications do to other people. And so, I'm thankful that I have the opportunity to do those things, but more importantly, like you said, it's like, it just overflows my heart.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, I had a lot of animosity and anger growing up with my father being absent. And we live in the same town of 27,000 people, but it just was what it was. And so, we talked about how doing these types of things can change a person. And that's exactly what it did to me. It allowed me to release years of anger and animosity, and why this and why that, and just live in the moment and learn that you're creating a legacy now that when these kids are 18, 19, 20, they're going to see you out with their kids. They're going to say, that's the coach right there that taught me that if you're 15 minutes early, you're on time. That's the coach right there that made me run because I talked back to my teacher, and it's that lifelong legacy that my intent is when I coach for sure.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, I don't mean to get too deep on it, but that love and support that didn't happen then, you are creating that space for you and others now. Right? So, you're getting that all back. What may have been missing early, but you know, you got six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve-year-olds showing the love, feeling the love for you that you've created.

Daniel J. Owens:
At times, it's emotional even to think about, but it goes both ways. To my older ones, I always tell them, you'll never understand how much you're helping me more than you think I'm helping you. And they look at me and they scratch their head and "Coach, you just taught me how to do between the legs, behind the back." You'll never know how much the impact of your sacrifice, your dedication. You look at me in the eyes when I'm speaking, and it goes back to what you said. I think it's just, it all became full circle, and now it's just an overflow of love that at times I don't even know how to digest.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah, we can fill that tank back up. It doesn't cost us. It doesn't matter what the prices are. We can always fill that tank back up.

Daniel J. Owens:
Yeah. Inflation doesn't have an impact on that for sure.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. Right. Just making our hearts bigger. Right?

Daniel J. Owens:
It really is. It really is. And it's just, I could have a kind of rough day at the office, as we all do, or I could, I have three sons, so it's easy to have a rough day, you know? And if I'm scheduled for a practice, I know that my medication's going to be coming at that time. That's the way I view it. And currently right now I'm doing a four through six-year-old T-ball local parks and rec. And I never played baseball growing up, but at that age, it's not about that. It's about the basics, but it's about teaching these kids that this is about fun, because when you get older, it's going to be competition. I have everybody screaming at you, telling you what to do, how to do it. Talking to you on the way home. You did this right, you did this wrong. And so, it's a great opportunity, but it's very rewarding. Coaching is very rewarding to say the least.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Those are two, I mean, within what we're talking about, two major pieces that I like to talk about on these podcasts, right? One is as a coach, and I think as a cabinet employee, you get to wake up every day and you might, particularly on the frontline, have a chance to change somebody's life and understanding that then we should alter our approach a little bit when we do that. And that's part of what we're trying to talk about in the cabinet all the time, because we have to do that with ourselves and we have to do that with the folks we serve.

Daniel J. Owens:
Yes. I used to take it really strong to the heart when I'd follow a kid and then they'd turn 18, and then I see him on the JailTracker website. I just, but then I quickly learned that you'll lead the horse to water, but you can't pour that water down that horse's throat. And so, I tell the kids that even at a young age, I use it at a G level, right, a G level. But I keep that message going, because I can only take you so far. And then the real world happens. And unfortunately for me, I didn't know that detentions and suspensions turned into misdemeanors and felonies. I learned the hard way. And so, having that knowledge and being able to share that with these youth that are growing up is just a great insight and to kind of touch on what you said about what I do in my day to day, and how I relate that to coaching and being in the human resource office specifically in the region I cover right now, I've had many different areas, but right now I'm covering a service region for DCBS. Obviously kids share a very, very close spot in my heart.

Daniel J. Owens:
And I don't know if it's unfortunate or not, but I watch a little too much news. And so, sometimes I know this is going on, or that's going on, but seeing the both sides, but seeing the appointments, it always warms my heart. I'll never know that, I'll never see that person probably. I'll never probably meet them face to face, but now we've added a social service worker to a region that I just seen on the news that needed it. And so, if I could just take a second and say that your leadership since you came onto the cabinet and the support that you saw, and I'm not meaning to single out the social workers, the environmental health inspectors
are just as important, and our investigative officers we have up here. But that support that your office has shown and I feel like is very important.

Daniel J. Owens:
I'm new, per se, to state government. I'm getting a little drier behind the ears now, but that support and seeing it when the announcements was coming out, my supervisor had us watching it. The excitement that was coming from the social workers. I'm thankful that I'm in a role where we can help the process. Now I don't do the hiring. I'm not the appointing authority, but I can move that paperwork. I'm not sitting on paperwork. I'm not twiddling my thumbs, but I'm helping the cabinet fill these positions. And like I said, now I'm with the service region, but prior I was overseeing public health when they were in the Zika was going on, and hepatitis was going on, and they were doing crazy hiring.

Daniel J. Owens:
And right now, I said I'm not the appointing authority and I'm technically not, but I have been designated the appointing authority for the DCBS interim pilot program.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh yeah.

Daniel J. Owens:
And so, that is specifically me. It comes to me and fingers crossed, we have not had any hiccups yet. We've had over 160 come aboard. Now, maybe some have separated since, and of that 160 interims, many are becoming full time merit. And so, being a part of that is very fulfilling and just makes me find value in what I do. I don't just say, “I went to work today, I went home.” Now I'm part of this program that the governor and the secretary are talking to me, and now I get to brag about it to my wife, which she don't know, but she cares.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
No, it's true, right? You lead from where you are. You're making sure stuff happens and everybody's got that role. And the more we can connect to that, right, the more we can connect with the fact that we're making a difference. You're making a difference is coaching. Right? But you're also making a difference at your job. I just think it's a beautiful thing when we can acknowledge that and support each other in it.

Daniel J. Owens:
I do too. I do as well.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today. I know you were a little nervous at the start, but you did great.
Daniel J. Owens:
Oh, thank you.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Thank you very much. And I hope folks enjoy this podcast, and we'll listen to others as we have more in the future. Thank you. It was really a pleasure and an honor to speak with you.

Daniel J. Owens:
Thank you for the opportunity. It was an honor to speak with you as well.

Julianne Hatton:
Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, produced by Julianne Hatton. Our assistant producer is Beth Fisher. Our technical director and graphic artist is Lisa Wallace. Watch for the podcast preview in your email so you'll never miss an episode. While you're at it, tell your coworkers about the show. Until next time, stay healthy Kentucky.