

**Ride the Day with Renee Keener**  
***The Shred Coach Podcast Transcript***

**TOM**

Renee Keener, welcome to The Shred Coach Podcast. I am so glad you're here.

**RENEE**

Great to be here, Tom. Thank you so much for asking.

**TOM**

Yeah, it's really exciting. You have been in this industry such a long time. You and I go way, way, way, way, way back. I believe it was actually, it was in Alaska that you and I first officially connected in a more in-depth way. And I don't even remember what year that was.

**RENEE**

I think it was like, '07? '06? Something like that?

**TOM**

'07. Yeah. Somewhere around there. Yeah. It was at a conference there and you and I and Ev, shredder mom, actually got in a taxi together to get to the airport. And that was the beginning of what I believe has been a long and continues to be such a great friendship.

**RENEE**

Amen. Amen.

**TOM**

Yeah. So, recently you sold your business American Document Securities, and that was the end of last year, 2022, right at the end of the year. But to give context to the conversation we're going to have, give us a sense of the size, scope, you know, the business, what, where you are, where you're located. Tell me about where you were at the point of exiting the business.

**RENEE**

Wow. Well, I had, starting with employees, had the best, the best team in the world that a person could ever hope for as an employer. I had 22 employees. I had a, oh, couple thousand customers. We had several services. We had the storage and the shredding. We mainly stuck to offsite; when I needed onsite, I hired that done so that I didn't have any shred trucks. But I had eight or nine, you know, big box trucks, you know, had 30,000 square foot building, small comparatively speaking to some of my peers, but we were doing well. We were at the pinnacle. We were at the top of the game and we really were. At the ending there in 21, the pandemic kind of spurred us into more imaging. The scanning services really took off. And so that last... Well, let's see, 20... in 2020 and 2021 was our biggest years for the scanning. I ended up with six brand new

scanners, six or eight, you know, big scanners and tons of- and a whole scanning department. So, that's kind of where we were when we ended.

**TOM**

Okay. So, and you are located west of Atlanta.

**RENEE**

Correct. We're about 45 minutes due west out of Atlanta, almost to the Alabama border. We could service, you know, the entire Northern section of the state of Georgia ourselves.

**TOM**

Okay. But I'm assuming you were also deeply embedded in Atlanta too.

**RENEE**

Oh, deeply. Yeah.

**TOM**

Right. So, it's Atlanta, but did you service most of the state or was it just sort of Atlanta and Northern?

**RENEE**

Well, we did service the entire state with subcontractors.

**TOM**

Okay.

**RENEE**

But mostly from Macon, which is in the middle of the state of Georgia, to north Georgia, all of north Georgia. But we started getting a lot of law enforcement, you know, wanted us and we were deeply embedded with the GCIC, the Georgia Crime and Information Center, and the GBI. Story goes, short story, but we were told that we couldn't work for them because we didn't do onsite work for them. So, I reached out to the GBI and I said, "Look, what do we have to do to make that happen?" And he... they sent a guy down, a GBI officer down, and inspected my facility and approved us. And it turned out to be we were the first offsite facility in the state of Georgia to be able to work for the GBI, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

**TOM**

Wow.

**RENEE**

So, that went well. And we continued to do that.

**TOM**

That's cool. That's a really cool service that you provided obviously to a very interesting kind of client.

**RENEE**

Yeah, yeah.

**TOM**

Okay. So, let's... with that as the context, 22 employees, size your building, record storage, shredding, imaging. Take me back to the origin story. Take me back to the beginning. What causes you to get into this business in the first place? Tell me the story.

**RENEE**

Well, as you know, Tom, you know the story well, but I was in another business before this, as a matter of fact, this ADSS was my fourth business. We were closing it down because of a recession, back in '99 and 2000. And as the story goes, I was talking to one of my brokers that we were selling equipment. We had two businesses, two locations, one in Carrollton, Georgia, one in Fort Worth, Texas. And so, in winding all that down, we were selling equipment. And equipment broker said, I asked him, I said, "Look, you know, I'm looking for a new service to do". And he said, "Well, why don't you go in shredding business?" And, I said, "Really, do they make money doing that?" And he said, "Yes, they do".

And so, he sent me up to Pennsylvania and I viewed a couple of locations and businesses up there and met Evelyn Jefferson and met the Wagner boys and dad, and decided to start. And by the time I got started, actually September. September 11th, you know, 9/11. We were sitting in my off- in my conference room and my sister called and said, "Well, no you're not, you need to get to a TV or something- that we've been attacked". And so, there- we were looking for... we'd already incorporated and already decided to get started and actually looking at equipment and so, it started at that time. So, history after that, I was the... I drove the trucks. I drove, sold the business. I did it all because I'm the farm girl. I'm the country girl that does all that. So, it was hard.

**TOM**

So, you sold the previous business and then you bought all the equipment and started the shredding business. But your entry point to was a broker who then put you in touch with Allegheny, and that Allegheny thing sort of prompted it to really move forward in a way that was logical for you. That made sense. There was some- but there was something in that. What was the thing in that early process, if you recall it, that really pushed you to go... you know, because early on when a broker tells you, you should get in shredding and you go meet and look at shredding equipment, it's like, mm, okay. This is a weird business. It really is. And then you go... but somewhere in there you went from uncertainty to certainty. And do you remember what caused you to go from uncertainty to certainty? What was the thing, if there was one?

**RENEE**

I don't think there was one. I think I was so young I didn't know that there was failure. I really didn't. You know, I didn't think about that. I went to visit Allegheny and met all the Pittmans, met John Wagner, who has since passed away. But it just melted my heart and I could see how it worked. We still had the building in Carrollton, Georgia, and it fit. We were in the paper, sort of in the paper business before this in a different way. So, we knew paper and we knew brokers and we knew all of that. And so, I went up to Allegheny. I ordered a shredder for a truck and they fitted it in a box truck.

**TOM**

Wow.

**RENEE**

And, long story short, I went up there, flew up there one way and audited the truck and the shredder. And next morning I got up and met Evelyn and John at the, they call the factory, which I think is wonderful. And the truck was there. And John, the story goes, John looked at me and he said, "Renee", he said, "where's your driver at?" I said, or he said, "Where is your gun?" And I said, "John, I flew up here. I couldn't bring a gun". He said, "You wait just a minute", shook his finger at me. And he ran back in the factory and he came back out and he had this steel rod, you know, about a foot and a half long. And I could barely hold it. It was so heavy. He said, "You use this on anybody that stops you, Renee." And I never forget it. 17 hours.

**TOM**

And back you drove.

**RENEE**

Yeah.

**TOM**

You took that truck and drove it back.

**RENEE**

I did.

**TOM**

But it wasn't unusual for you to drive a truck at this point. You've driven tractors and all kinds of equipment over. So, driving a truck with shredding equipment packed in the back was not unusual for you.

**RENEE**

No, I had... I have a farm and horses and baled hay and a couple of tractors. And I didn't think anything about it. I didn't think it was unusual. It to me, it was a, it was right- fit right in my little world, you know? And so, it is tends be clutching it, 17 hours later I was home. And so, it was a....

**TOM**

Wow, impressive.

**RENEE**

You know, when I look back at it, I think, oh my Lord.

**TOM**

What was I doing?

**RENEE**

What was I thinking?

**TOM**

So, we have the book ends, right? You start, you start, you have some history, you get into this business, you drive a truck. Now you've got shredding equipment and we see the end of the story which is 22 employees, 2000 customers. This really cool. So, what were the big, if you recall them, the big sort of moments through that span of time that you look back on as really critical to the evolution of the business, the growth of the business? What were those, what were those things or, what did, what were the interventions you made in order to make those things happen? I guess there's a... I'm coming at it with a bunch of weird questions and not fully articulated, but I want to just hand that off because I feel like there's, there is... it, you know, there's a lot of just slugging where you're just, you're just putting in time and then there's moments where something cool happened. So, do you remember what those were?

**RENEE**

Well, one of the biggest ones that changed the trajectory of my business was stepping out, stepping out into an unknown. Meaning that in 2016 the state of Georgia, our governor, had created an initiative for small business. And in 2016 the department of administrative services put out a contract for records management and included storage and shredding, which was right up my alley. And my sweet friend, Angie Singer Keating was up giving a speech up north somewhere. And the woman that was the contractor for the department of administrative services was there. And Angie said, she came up to her and said, "We're looking for, to do this in the state of Georgia. We're looking to do the records management in state of Georgia." And Angie recommended that she talked to me. Of course, that was open to everyone in the state that was there. And a lot of my, you know, friends bid on this contract as well. It took a year and that was 2016. 2017 I won the contract, which meant it was like trying to, as we say in the south, trying to

swat a gnat with a sledge hammer. And you know, I was the gnat, you know, because we had 159 counties in the state of Georgia and that was thousands of state entities. Not only was it like law enforcement, but it was DFACS offices, Department of Family and Children's Services. It was all of those entwined in the state. And then not only that it included your schools, any of your, you know, schools could join in on this contract. So, it was a major step major. It was a major step and it was a little more, I bit off a little more than I could chew.

**TOM**

So, was it really that, because of that major process forced you to go from sort of small, like I'm just going to do this and I'm going to do this, to now having to manage this massive project and massive... Obviously, routing, scheduling, all of that becomes just a drama- Like it's amped up your game so much that you're going from, you're going from one to a hundred, like really quickly.

**RENEE**

Yes. In a second, you know, like that. And it was... we were inundated with new business and trying to find subcontractors that we could work with, you know, down where we couldn't service and simply getting that together. And then learning the lingo of the state of Georgia was another kind of a wall that we had to learn because they have different language; they call things differently and you had to learn each one and then you would put... and you would go to downtown Atlanta, which is the majority of where all these were. I mean, you'd put in, you would install 70 containers in a 15-story building and, you know, they wanted weekly service. And I didn't have staff.

**TOM**

Yeah.

**RENEE**

And so, I added on almost 10 employees for to do this contract.

**TOM**

Amazing. Yeah. So, that was a real lever in terms of growth. It just forced you to drama- like it was dramatic...

**RENEE**

It was the rocket. Yes. That launched me into a different realm, so to speak. So, this person that I was telling you about, Alicia was her name, that did the contract, she said, "Renee, you need the help". She said, "You're going to need some help to help you administer this", because not only was I handling, you know, I had employees under me, I had to have, you know, customer service employees. They had all kinds of forms that they were making from scratch because this was new to them. So, we were not only that, we were learning their, the way they wanted us to do this and what forms that each entity had to submit to us to be able to do this for the state of Georgia. So, literally carved out this contract from zero with the state.

**RENEE (cont.)**

So, I ended up... I had a friend of mine to call me and he wanted me to pass out his resume because he wanted to come closer to home. I said, "I sure wish I could hire you". He said, "You just wait a minute". And so, seven or eight months later, I hired him as my COO. And, because I couldn't, Tom, I just couldn't handle it. It was so much to deal with. And he made all the difference in the world in handling things for me, because I couldn't handle how many, how many tires do we need on this truck today, as opposed to, okay, meeting with the attorneys for the state of Georgia tomorrow, you know? It was pulling me in five different directions. So...

**TOM**

So, what did it... like, there's the hiring aspect of that, but there's the internal stuff too. What did you have to do or learn to be the CEO in that environment? Like what did that massive shift, that new contract, change for you as the CEO? What lessons did you have to learn personally?

**RENEE**

I had to learn how to manage my time incredibly, manage my time. Time management was major because we weren't doing a whole lot of zoom calls at the time. And so I was, you know, going back and forth to Atlanta a lot and would visit, you know, locations to see what they had and how we could help them. Because not only were we doing the shredding for these companies, we were doing their storage as well. So, you know, we had to coordinate all of this for them. So, time management, I would say would be the biggest thing that I learned more than anything. And I learned how to say, "I can meet at this time or this time", you know, and save myself for in between. So...

**TOM**

Was that hard? Was that hard to make that internal decision to, instead of just accepting what was offered, to become the person who said, this is what I offer?

**RENEE**

Yes, it was not easy. I learned how to say, what I taught my employees, that we all learned together was there's this little bitty word in the English language. It's two letters. No, N-O. there were some things that we just could not do. And we weren't going to try to flip over backwards to do it, even though we wanted to. And some of the time, some of those times I had to say no. I had to say, "Okay, I can't do it here, but I can do it here". And it taught me that lesson, even though I was in sales and had been in sales for 30, you know, 20, 30 years already with my other company, I knew I had to draw some lines somewhere.

**TOM**

Yeah, no, that's such an important distinction that happens and yes, you taught it to your team. But sometimes you having to learn that one is the hardest lesson of all.

**RENEE**

Yeah.

**TOM**

Right, because it's just, there's sometimes an embedded sense that you... and especially when we've grown up in business and that it's like, yes, because "yes" gets you growth, right? "Yes" gets you opportunity. And then you get to a certain level of opportunity and growth where "no" becomes the thing that helps grow. Right? And it's like, you have to change the whole... I forget who said it, but the thing that got you to here, won't get you to there. And somewhere along the line, you've got to make that distinction. And often it's at those points of massive growth where a CEO's role has to change, fundamentally change, and change the way you work with your team. But also, I think most of the issues are our own. We have to figure these out ourselves. So, yeah, that's powerful.

So, as you think about that, you know, that growth over the years to get to the point of exiting, what would you say were some of your biggest personal secrets of success in terms of growing this company? Like what were the interventions, the things that you did, that really ultimately you feel like looking back made a difference? What did you do as the CEO, as the entrepreneur to really, you know, to make this thing successful? What were your things?

**RENEE**

I learned that I could not do it all. And I am a type A, complete capital A that I think I can do it all. And I had been doing it up to this point. So, in order to be able to run the company, I had to pay someone else to do something for me, which was unusual. And of course, I hired you and Janelle and that helped with the advertisement and... one of the things that I learned is that I wasn't, I didn't know what I didn't know about your world, meaning your world in the advertisement industry and advertising my- getting my name out there, letting people see me where I was and coming up, as we all say in the first, you know, at the top of the Google list, so to speak. And I learned that I could not do that. I did not understand that. And that was just one of the things that I did not know. So, I learned that it was okay to do that. It was okay for me to not know everything about everything, because I had come up from driving the truck, running the shredder, knowing everything so nobody could pull the wool over my eyes at the business.

**TOM**

Yeah.

**RENEE**

And so that would be my number one. The second would be pay attention to the details. The devil's in the details, as they say. And that was, you know, and that could, we could go on for two more hours with that, but that was the biggest learning factor of paying attention to the details.

**TOM**

So, what, give us an example of a detail that you paid attention to that, up until a certain point, you didn't. Like, there's a detail, like there's certain details that are minutia and there's certain details that are power. Right? And so, which details did you get kind of hung up on in a good way?

**RENEE**

There's tons of them. But the thing that I remember the most is when I first started, there was a college up in north Georgia that called and said, "Hey, we've got several hundred boxes that we need you to come get". Oh my gosh, I was so happy. You know, and I sent two drivers up there to get it. What I didn't ask was that all of these boxes were in an attic, in a building. That was in the middle of July, when it was a hundred degrees outside, much less in the attic. And so, I didn't ask those questions and it's a simple example, but it's those things that I had to learn on my own because I didn't have anybody. I didn't have a coach to tell me I didn't have... I didn't know this business as well. And all of those little things, you know, the contract details, you pay attention to those. You pay attention to the language and you learn to explain it to your customers in the way that makes them feel comfortable with a contract.

**TOM**

Yeah.

**RENEE**

So, those- that's just one little example.

**TOM**

Yeah. Yeah. So, it's really understanding that hidden behind the details is the real essence of the business.

**RENEE**

That's right.

**TOM**

Right. So, because walking your employees into an attic in the middle of July, when it's 130 degrees in the attic, both impacts the cost factor, it impacts your employees, it impacts... it impacts a lot of things. Contract details impact a whole lot of stuff. And while it seems like as a growth entrepreneur, you go, "Oh, it's just details and we got to just get the client". It becomes everything when you really understand that the devil is there. It's pay attention to those details. Yeah, that's really good.

**RENEE**

Yeah. You know, and those little things, like, is there an elevator, you know, is it only stairs? Do you have a dock? Can I, you know, what is the dichotomy of your parking lot? What... those are the questions that I had to actually put into a database for my sales people to ask before we went.

**TOM**

Yeah. Yeah. that's so good. So, ultimately you decide to sell. And I guess the... it's not so much about why did you sell, but what lessons did you learn in the actual process of exiting your business? What did you learn about your business that you didn't know before you sold it, or before you went through the process of trying to sell it? Was there things that you went, "Hmm. I never realized that that's what was going on in my business"?

**RENEE**

Well, I was, to say the least, very humbled when a major company wanted to purchase mine and they started asking questions. Now, again, type A me, the devil's in the details, it, that is one of, I call it one of my pitfalls. But I have to, I worry about those things. Those things cause me anxiety. So, the biggest lesson I learned in selling was keeping records of everything,

**TOM**

Yeah.

**RENEE**

Everything. Everyone- I used to have, you know, people would come to see me and learn the business. And I would say that, you know, you got to keep records. So, just to give you an example, we would weigh all the paper that came in when it came in in the containers, or however it is. I had two scales, one on one side of the building, one on the other, and then we weighed everything going out. Because we baled everything, baled all the paper and we sorted so that we could keep up with that. Well, those details saved us so many times. Well, keeping up with, okay, how many customers are, you know, purge customers as opposed to regular, you know, customers? How many customers are your imaging scanning customers? What's the revenue between the two? You know, what, how many customers here, there, and now? Thankfully, I had incorporated a bookkeeper and a CPA, and we had software out the wazoo that kept up with all this, you know, detail. But that was the biggest thing is keeping records of everything so that you can prove what you had to sell.

And then, then the second thing I learned, I hired a wonderful broker that knew the business. Not just somebody from out of space. This person knew the business well, and again, me being the person that does it all myself thinking I could do this myself. Oh no. Oh no, no, no.

**TOM**

Yeah, it's one thing if you're running a small one-person operation. It's a quite a different thing if you're running a, you know, 20 plus person with awkward and interesting contracts and 2000

clients. I mean, it's just, it's a different game. You can't play it the same way and you need that external person to manage the complexity of the interaction with the buyer.

**RENEE**

Yes. And there is no doubt, again, as I told you before, I learned early on, if I didn't know something about something, hire someone to help you with it.

**TOM**

Yes. Yeah, so, I mean, you you've, made this long and interesting journey. You took up a business, you started it up, you grew it, you sold it. So, looking back now, if somebody were coming to you and saying, "Renee, I want get into the business you were in and I want to kind of follow your lead. And I want to gain the same degree of success you've had". What would be one or two critical lessons you'd tell them that they have to do? What would be secrets, maybe the insider secrets?

**RENEE**

Wow. There's a lot of them. The first thing is I would say don't sell yourself short.

**TOM**

What do you mean by that?

**RENEE**

Meaning that if you think your service is worth \$10, but the industry says it's worth \$30, then don't say, "Oh, I feel bad about charging \$30 for this service when I don't think it's worth it". And I experienced that from a couple of, sales people that I hired, they were selling a short on the services and, you know, not that I overcharged on anything. But you've got to have confidence in yourself and your company and know that you are, you have been through every test and everything that's happened. But, you know, *to* you for a reason. And you can't sell yourself short, you've got to sell yourself first before you do anything else, because what's going to happen is that customer is buying you, not your service. They're going to either like you or not, and you know, it does not matter. You need to answer the phone, you know, the second it rings.

Short story. You know, the center for disease control is down in Atlanta. You're familiar with them. And I hate to bring out their name, but they're a big customer. She calls and she says, "I need help". I said, "Okay". I just happen to answer the phone in the second ring. She said, "You're the first vendor that I've called that has answered the phone, given me an answer. And within 10 minutes, given me a bid on what to do". So, if anybody is starting in this business, I would say make sure that you, you know, you do your job, sell yourself and don't work for anything, don't work for nothing. Don't, you know, go out and just sell yourself for 10 bucks when it is worth 30 bucks. Raise your prices regularly. Raise your prices regularly.

And the last but not least I would say is hire good people. And I know that's critical right now, in this world we're living in, but the other thing is pay them well.

**TOM**

Mm.

**RENEE**

Pay them well. There was, you know, times when it was hard for us and I would not take a salary just to pay my people. And they didn't know that, but you know, I did it anyway.

**TOM**

Such great advice. Don't sell yourself short, don't work for nothing, raise prices reliably-

**RENEE**

Regularly.

**TOM**

Regularly. And then hire good people and pay them well. It's such a good set of advice for anyone, even if you've been in this thing a long time. It's really important.

**RENEE**

Yes.

**TOM**

So, I know that, and you've mentioned it already, you're a farm kid. You grew up on the farm. You can drive, you know, trucks for 17 hours across the country full of... well, as long as you're carrying a pipe with you. And not a smoking pipe, a pipe for hitting anyone who tries to mess with you. But I also know that based on that, you're a horse whisper and a dog whisper. Somehow, I'm aware of that. I've never seen you work with a horse or a dog, but I know just based on my intuition, that you have both those skills. How does that knowledge of working with a horse, working with dogs, training them, working with them, how did that impact what you did in the business over the years? How did that capability, that skill, that intuition, how did that translate over into the business?

**RENEE**

It gave me a sense of reading the room well. Meaning, understanding what a employee was thinking. I can read a horse's mind just about. And I don't mean it literally. I just mean I can see what's coming and I can see what's coming with my dogs. My, they're just, they're- they mean a lot to me. And learning how to train them is very much like teaching children. Their first steps, their, you know, what does "no" mean? What does "yes" mean? What does "thank you"? All those things. But also, the farm work is what gave me the knowledge of trucks and tires and hard work and all that to help, you know, know what to do with that, because I could talk trucks any day with anybody. You know, what diesels do, what d- I can close my eyes and a truck passed by and I can tell you if it's a Dodge or a Ford or Chevy. That's just how stupid it got. But, you know, yes, the horses and the dogs gave me that sense.

**TOM**

So, is it intuition that you... is- because you said you can read the room. So, I sense by, you know, having seen and observe people who work with horses, and I haven't seen you do that up close and personal, but is that like- a horse... Not just, you just don't read the horse, the horse reads you. Right? And there's something about something happening in you that changes the horse.

**RENEE**

Yes. That's why you have to really learn how your employee is working that day. We used to call it "ride the day" when we were showing horses. I rode dressage. And so, if you were, you know, if the wind was blowing or if something was into the day, then you couldn't, you couldn't ride very well. So, if an employee comes in and they're crying or, you know, or they're upset about something, you have to be able to diffuse it in a way that makes that employee understand that you really do get it, that you understand it and that their day will get better. It will. And so, you have to learn people and how they work. And when you can get to know these people and you know the employees... I had 20-year veteran employees, 15 years, 10 years, that stuck with me and I'm hoping, I haven't asked them, but I'm hoping that means that they had confidence in me, you know, that of what I was doing and how I treated them.

**TOM**

Yeah. So, it wasn't just what you, what the employees did and how you observed it, it's how they observed you and what you did. And it's the interplay between that energy, relationship, connection, intuition that makes the difference, it sounds like.

**RENEE**

And yeah. And, you know, I took my dogs to work with me and my employees loved it. It's kind of eased their minds when the puppies would come up and say hi, and they would get to pet them. And, you know, we all got to got to talk about the day and what we did, and you just become human to them as well. Because some people look at their boss as this person that, you know, is different and you're not, you're human.

**TOM**

Yeah. Oh, so good. Well, Renee, thank you. This has been delightful. But I want to say thank you for more than that, because over the years I've observed, watching you in this industry, from being involved in the board, significant amount of board work that you did specifically in the NAID context. Although you're deeply involved in PRISM too, the two original. So, thank you for that. You just touched on it briefly and we didn't explore it, but you trained and helped so many people in this industry start their own businesses because not only did you grow a really cool business, you had this cool little consulting practice on the side where people came and watched you work and you taught them and you gave them, you gave them forms and you taught them how you operated so they could repeat it. So, there was that part of it. There's all of the work you did just as a mentor, advisor, guide, even outside the context of being the consultant

who people paid you to come in and learn your system. So, I just know that you have made a dramatic impact on people in this industry. And I need you to know how much, on behalf of this industry that you have touched, helped, supported and everything as you've exited it now officially, I know you have deep friendships and all that kind of stuff, but thank you for the work you've done. Thank you for the connection, the imprint, the impact, and giving of yourself for so many years to so many people to make their lives and their businesses better. So, thank you.

**RENEE**

Thank you, Tom. I appreciate that. I really do. And yes, I do have a lot of very good, long, lifelong friendships. You being one of those in this industry. There's no doubt. I will miss that and hopefully I can get back to the conferences and just, just to come in and feel the love again.

**TOM**

Right, feel the love. Well, Renee, it's been delightful. Thank you for sharing your story, your insights, your lessons. And I really appreciate you being with us today.

**RENEE**

Thanks, Tom. Me too.