INTERVIEWS

Interview: F.K. Day on how bikes can catalyze economies

September 23rd, 2010 | Contributors: Margaret Eaton, Rachel Fischhoff

Before creating World Bicycle Relief, F.K. Day ran SRAM, one of the world's top manufacturers of bicycle parts. In 2005, struck by the images of people struggling to cope after the Tsunami, Day flew to Sri Lanka. He thought his bicycle and business know-how could help. Not everyone agreed. But within weeks, Day was working on delivering 24,000 sturdy, locally made bikes to people desperately in need of low-cost mobility. Here, Day shares with Dowser his thoughts on the power of bikes to propel global development.

Dowser: You founded World Bicycle Relief in response to the Tsunami. Your bike company was already highly successful, but you had no disaster relief experience when you got on that plane to Sri Lanka. What made you think you could make a difference?
Day: When I saw those devastating images of people walking in rubble, scrambling on their feet, I thought: these people need bikes. Bikes are what I know, they're what I do.

When you approached relief agencies with your idea how did they react?
Before flying over, we called all the big agencies in the U.S. and proposed a large-scale bicycle program. All of them turned us down. They all said, 'Just send money.'

Why didn't you just send money?
It was just so obvious to us that bikes could help people get around faster. Get water, food, and medical help faster. I thought if we could show people on the ground the power of bikes, they would get it.

So you went to ground zero.
We did. We met with field workers in Sri Lanka from the Red Cross, World Vision, Save the Children, and OxFam. They got it right away. One guy was like, 'Of course, bikes! Why didn't we think of that?'

How did SRAM and the relief agencies work together?
We went in totally naïve. I had this crazy notion that we'd collect used bikes and ship them over. But once we got to Sri Lanka, we could see that the infrastructure was totally broken. There was no way in hell you could get in container-loads of used bikes. Plus, American bikes just aren't designed to last in that brutal environment.

Did you have a Plan B?
No. But we're good on our feet. World Vision, an international relief organization, said they would go into the field to see if people would actually use bikes, so we kicked into gear.

We lined up a company in Sri Lanka that could bring in tubing and parts from India. They cut, weld, paint, and build the bikes right there. Then we waited to hear back from World Vision. No use building bikes if people wouldn't use them.

How long before you got the green light?
A few weeks later I got a 2 a.m. email. It said: 'OK, we're gonna need 24,400 bikes.' We were like, 'Wahoo!' And then we're like, 'Oh shit, now what do we do?'

That's a lot of bikes.
Before we could get started, we had to raise $1.5 million and teach a local company how to produce tens of thousands of bikes to our specifications.

Now World Bicycle Relief is getting bikes to AIDS workers in Zambia and school kids in Tanzania. How did you make the leap from disaster relief to health and education?
Once it was clear that the bikes were really helping people in Sri Lanka, a few of the relief workers said: 'You know, what you're doing here is really important. But the number of people that died in the tsunami, that's how many die every two weeks in Africa. You've got to take this program to Africa.'

Africa is a big place.
Huge. The primary mode of transportation in Africa is your feet. Productivity loss due to time spent walking is horrendous.

Africa needs tens of millions of bikes, not just a hundred thousand here and there. We quickly realized that we needed to teach local people to do it themselves if we wanted to turn the dial on global poverty.

Is that your focus now?
Yeah. We help others design and set up large scale programs. Everything from figuring out how many and what kind of bikes are needed to building the bikes and training people in bike repair.

Where there are bikes, there'll be bike shops.
They've sprung up all over. People are earning money building bikes and fixing them.

In business, you measure sales and profits. How do you measure the impact of bikes?
Bikes are tools. So, we measure how much better someone's life is with the tool than without: Did a family's income increase when they got a bike? Did kids with bikes go to school more often? Did they carry friends to school? Are people visiting clinics more often? Are health care workers with bikes getting deeper into the field?

What kind of answers are you getting?
Yes, yes, yes.

You jumped into poverty alleviation rather suddenly with an innovative approach. Did having a fresh set of eyes help?
A lot of the strategy to help the poor gets developed in academia or in the offices of the World Bank. At World Bicycle Relief we have a saying: All answers reside in the field. We say it at SRAM, too, because it's also true for business.

How so?
Before starting SRAM, my brother, Stan, and I toyed around with a few other business ideas but none took off.

Then one day Stan called me. He'd just returned from a bike trip in Nova Scotia. He told me how frustrating it was to have to take his hands off the handlebars to change gears in that cold, Canadian wind. Right then we decided to make gear shifts for handlebars.

Did you ever think your business would help show the world the importance of basic transportation at the bottom of the market?
Never. But it makes sense. About $2 trillion has been spent over the last 70 years on programs to address poverty. Most have failed. We'll never decrease poverty through philanthropy. Moving the dial on extreme poverty will take financial and business commitments. And I'm talking about for-profit approaches.

Any advice for entrepreneurs who want to put a dent in world poverty?
If someone wants to make a difference, my advice would be: start a business in Africa delivering really good bikes. The need is there, and there's no greater gift you can give to a community than a working business.

This article was edited and condensed.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Bob Bates on how art gives kids lifelong problem-solving skills

October 21st, 2010 | Contributors: Connie Pham, Margaret Eaton

Urban arts programs often build confidence and agency among youth who are disheartened by, or disconnected from, public schools. Starting today, and over the next few weeks, we'll be presenting a series on Art and Urban Youth, featuring interviews with leaders in this field. At a time when education is being shaped by a rigid test-taking culture, these educators often succeed in eliciting a sense of inquiry and belonging among their students.

Twenty years ago, Bob Bates was a part-time volunteer with a vision: to create a space for inner-city kids to make art. He believes that giving children the opportunity and the time to conceive and produce their own designs equips them with skills that can carry them through academia and into the real world. Bates created Inner-City Arts not to train artists, but to engage kids in creative problem solving. His Los Angeles-based organization now serves

over 16,000 students and trains 1,800 teachers per year. Bates spoke with Dowser about his teaching method, the importance of artistic freedom, and how his endeavor to create Inner-City Arts took some creative problem solving of his own.

Dowser: Start at the beginning. How did Inner-City Arts come about?
Bates: I was 40 and still not sure what I was going to do with my life. I was living downtown and volunteering part-time as an art teacher at a youth center. The L.A. public schools had recently cut all their arts programs, which was incomprehensible to me. Anyway, one day I was meditating and I heard a man's voice say, 'Get an art space for kids.'

Pretty direct. What did you do?
I didn't know what to do. I looked around at spaces, even though I had no money. Then one day, a wealthy man from Beverly Hills, Irwin Jaeger, walked into the youth center where I was teaching. We got to talking and he said, 'Let's do something for these kids.' So he rented the space and I taught art classes.

So far, so good.
Then one day the fire department came to check out the sprinkler system. They smelled something and went next door. A clothing company was acid-washing blue jeans. One of the firefighters said, 'OK, after today, you can never have children in proximity to these chemicals again.' It was like: The End.

But it was just the beginning.
It was. An article ran in the *L.A. Times*, with the headline 'Fledgling Art Center Loses Its Space.' Someone called from the Mark Taper Foundation asking how they could help. They bought our first building for $750,000, which meant we could work with even more kids.

Inner-City Arts claims it's not training budding artists. What is it doing?
A whole lot of problem solving, to help the children realize they can do anything they set their minds to.

Making art requires thinking and decisions: what color will I use, how can I make this stand up, how can I make this stronger, quieter, brighter, more bendable. As they make art, and solve these problems, they begin to believe in themselves. That confidence helps them in everything they do.

UCLA documented this. They found that the academic performance of your students went up quite a bit. Now you train teachers, too. How did a few art classes evolve into this innovative teaching model?
Well, it took 20 years. And it's still a work in progress. We set out to learn about creativity, not just teach art. Having a study that measures the impact of creativity on our students' academic performance informs what we do here; but it also means more schools want to send us their kids.

Your new renovation is quite beautiful inside and out. You didn't skimp on aesthetics.
We've created an oasis in the middle of a dingy, tough, industrial part of town, on purpose. We are surrounded by the underside of life here: prostitution, drug dealers, crime. Our students live in this part of town, where there is little beauty, natural or otherwise. Beauty nurtures creativity. This is for them.

What's the difference between creativity and art?
Art is a tool, not an end in itself. Creativity is the ability to look at reality and make new connections; connections that have not been made before. It doesn't take rocket scientists to do art. Yet art develops the same capacity a rocket scientist needs: the ability to manipulate complex materials, data, information, and structures.

How does that play out in the classroom?
Creativity expert Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi found that all creative people, musicians and brain surgeons, experience what he calls 'the flow'— where time stops and you're only focused on what you're doing. It's a moment of great concentration of energy. We try to create that moment for the students. Because 'the flow' is the place of maximum human potential.

How does 'the flow' help the kids from low-income backgrounds in L.A.?
Kids here learn that they can throw away all the objects they make, because they can make more. Because the ideas and solutions and innovations come from within them. This is a transformative experience for a child who has nothing.

Who are your personal inspirations on a creative level?
Albert Einstein, Miles Davis, Jesus, the Buddha, Picasso, Cezanne, Matisse, Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca, Yo-Yo Ma, and an amazing musician on Paraguayan harp named Edmar Castaneda. Here at the school, I work with amazing people who inspire me every day.

Why don't more schools value that connection between creativity and academic achievement?
Many people in power have a misunderstanding of what the arts actually do. The intuitive and the rational parts of the brain, the right and left hemispheres, work simultaneously when a person is being creative. This expands what we can accomplish. Part of our mission is to make the truth be known: that art is vital to the development of human beings.

This interview was edited and condensed.

Learn More:

- Hopes from Big Sunday: Take a video tour of the Inner-City Arts campus.
- On flow: Learn more about the flow (and how to be happy at work!) from PBS blog This Emotional Life.
- GOOD LOOK: Art Class: Good magazine's video feature on Inner-City Arts.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Mary Ellen Iskenderian on why women + microfinance = less poverty

July 9th, 2010 | Contributors: Margaret Eaton, Shannon Nelson

Fresh out of business school, Mary Ellen Iskenderian went to work on Wall Street, where she learned the art of banking and made good money. But something was missing. "I thought, 'This is not what I'm here for,'" she says. She made a jump to the World Bank, where over 17 years she worked to stimulate the private sector in developing countries, in order to alleviate poverty. Now, as president and CEO of the New York-based Women's World Banking (WWB), she oversees the provision of training and support services to microfinance institutions that serve more than 20 million people, mostly women.

Iskenderian told Dowser why she believes that private capital directed to poor women is the best strategy to end global poverty.

Dowser: What exactly does Women's World Banking do?
Iskenderian: We're a network of over 40 microfinance institutions, including some banks. Combined, our members have 23 million clients and a loan portfolio of over $4 billion. Our members provide very small business loans to poor people. About 70% go to women.

We help our members set up and improve their operations. Plus, because of our size, we can access capital markets for them that they couldn't otherwise tap.

WWB has a 'double bottom-line.' What does that mean?
Our mission is to increase poor women's access to capital, not consumerism. Our second bottom-line is reducing poverty. We don't want our clients to become over-indebted, or to go into debt to buy consumer goods they don't need.

You also want to help poor women save money.
We do. Given the chance, poor women are very good savers. If business is slow, or a child gets sick, a little savings can keep her business on track. This has tremendous potential to help women become economically stable. Providing savings programs for poor women is a trend that we hope becomes the norm.

Why focus on women, though?
When women have money they invest it more wisely then men. Women spend their money on nutritious food, schooling for their kids, health care, improving their homes. That has a positive ripple effect on the community, both economically and socially. And women pay their loans back at a higher rate than men.

How did you learn this?
Years ago, when I was working at the World Bank, the Ugandan government commissioned us to assess its gross domestic product, and to see how much it would increase if Uganda fully utilized women in its workforce. We crunched the numbers and there it was in black and white: women could be the game changers for this poor country.

Is that what attracted you to WWB?
I came to delve deeper into microfinance, but when I got here, I found the women's part of the microfinance story incredibly compelling. Women are the reason for the success of this business model.

How do you ensure good lending practices when you've got 23 million clients?
We rely on a consensus-oriented approach. All the microlenders in our network agree on a set of standards. WWB doesn't have a direct ownership or even governance role with its members, but we do have very close relationships.

You call WWB's microfinance model 'high-touch.' What does that mean?
There's a lot of interaction with the borrowers. Much more than with traditional loans. And clients can be spread across great distances, which can be expensive. So it's high-cost and high-touch.

At the outset, microfinance was practiced mostly by nonprofits. Why are banks and for-profits suddenly getting in the game?
Banks benefit from economic growth in the markets where they do business. If you leave the economic capacity of the majority of the people on the table—i.e., the poor—you're neglecting substantial untapped economic potential. Banks see that.

Are there any downsides to banks entering this market?
Commercialization has brought many positive things to microfinance. The downside is that

while the number of clients continues to grow, the percentage of clients who are women is falling quite dramatically. This is not good. If your mission is to alleviate poverty, you need women.

You gave up a career in high finance to help poor people earn more money. What happened?
When I graduated from Yale School of Management I went to Lehman Brothers—may they rest in peace—for four years. I learned superior banking skills, but I knew pretty early on that it wasn't for me. I just didn't believe in the work.

Do you remember the moment you decided to change your life?
I was on an assignment, hired by a large U.S. truck manufacturer that had a completely unionized labor force. Management wanted to move south to a non-union state to cut labor costs. I was estimating how many people they could fire in the northern state, and I'll never forget this moment: I thought, this is not what I'm here for. This is not why I went to college and graduate school.

You met a woman in Kenya who wanted to open a hardware store but no bank would loan her money. What was it like to see her business up and running?
Inspiring. Her neighbors were fixing up their houses but didn't have a place to buy good materials. Our affiliate, the Kenya Women's Finance Trust, loaned her $70 and provided her with some business training. She has since repaid five loans, each one bigger than the last. Now she employs 25 people, including her husband.

This interview was edited and condensed.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Patricia Walker on art, spirituality and international development

June 22nd, 2010 | Contributors: Kate Lillis, Margaret Eaton

After evaluating dozens of disappointing aid projects in places like Togo, Swaziland, and Senegal, Patricia Walker asked herself: Why don't more of these projects succeed? In response, Walker, a Buddhist and former professional dancer, got the idea to train people for international development work by linking their spiritual growth with field outcomes. Here she recounts the origins of her idea and a dinner conversation that changed her life – and led to the creation of CASID, The Center for Art, Spirituality, and International Development.

Dowser: Many people have heard of the United Nations and the World Bank but may not know precisely what international development is. Can you sum it up?

Walker: International development aims to raise the standard of living in poor countries. Projects can range from getting clean water and nutritional food to people who don't have it, to helping women earn more money. The goal is for the projects to be sustainable after the initial investment.

As an evaluator of international development projects, you have talked with people on both sides of the equation: development practitioners and local people. Did this perspective kindle an early spark for CASID?

Yes, a spark I couldn't seem to put out. The thing I kept coming back to was the fact that locals and development workers had such different explanations for what caused the often disappointing final results.

Was there a point when that spark ignited something bigger in you, when you said, 'I have to do something about this'?
There was. I was in Uganda in 1996 evaluating a 10-year agricultural credit project that could not have had more failures. I started to think, 'Okay, most of the projects I've researched have been adequately funded and most of the people doing the work have considerable experience. So why aren't there more successes?'

Good question. How did CASID become your answer?
I wanted to expand the boundaries of thinking in my field. I started to look at the development practitioner, the person, because I felt that the light had not been shined on the individuals *doing* the work before.

One thing kept coming back to me: Where's the creativity? Where does imagination come into play? These were not part of any formal training for international development.

You've got a master's in Economics and a Ph.D. in International Development, yet it was Nichiren Buddhism that inspired your model. What's the story?
Buddhism tells us to look inside ourselves for answers. I looked inside and saw a creative person. I danced professionally and I'm a painter. I see myself as an artist. So I asked myself, 'How can I use creativity to help make foreign assistance more effective and to stimulate dialogue among the general population about the effectiveness of our foreign assistance programs?'

So Buddhism led you to creativity. What came next?
Many people in the big development agencies – the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, United Nations Program for Development – have backgrounds in economics. There's a tendency for linear thinking. I thought, 'If we tap into the creative aspect of our brains, how might that reveal different solutions and possibilities?' My idea wasn't to remove linear thinking, just to bring creativity into the mix.

How does CASID do that?
When I was an evaluator, I saw over and over how a development worker and a local person had experienced the same thing in two very different ways. This gap in perception and explanation can contribute, sometimes significantly, to the failure of a project. To minimize this, we use theatrical role-play exercises that highlight the complexity of what is going on when people interact in the context of international development. That's just one example.

Does it work?
Yes. We've done this with people all over the world, including incoming staff for the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program. Each time, we see people make the connection between what they believe and how they perceive others. Once they acknowledge this connection, they can try to prevent it from getting in the way of achieving their goals on the ground.

That's a big undertaking, and we haven't even talked about spirituality.
Well, at CASID spirituality is not so much about morality or ethics but about an approach to oneself. Ironically, the problems we're trying to fix are so big and urgent that it's hard to make time for personal reflection. Yet for development to work, relationships must work, and that requires some inner reflection.

And they don't offer that in graduate school, do they?
Not yet. Although I think we should. I mean, why not try to bring all of yourself to your work?

How did you first sell your idea that personal transformation could get better results?
It's one of those 'be careful what you wish for' stories. I was in Boston visiting a Harvard Business School professor with whom I had coauthored a paper; he invited some friends and colleagues to join us for dinner. I spoke passionately about bringing a new perspective into international development: art, creativity, and a spiritual dimension. Then I ate my salad and went to bed.

The next morning, one of the dinner guests contacted me and said, 'I'm with the Kellogg Foundation. If you're still pursuing your idea a year from now, I will give you a grant.' Just like that! A year later I started CASID.

More dinner parties should end like that. Do you remember the first steps you took down this path?
As a kid I remember telling my mom I was going to work at the United Nations. I didn't even know what it was; I just thought it sounded interesting.

I think my first actual step was studying in Rome for a semester during college. I was studying history and our class went to Egypt and Greece to tour the Acropolis and the Pyramids. Seeing these places and being with students from countries so different than mine, I think that was the beginning.

Any advice for others who would like to use their creativity for social change?
Know your strength. Name it, own it, and contribute it. Believe in yourself. Even in the moment there is no funding, even in the moment of great challenge, keep believing.

This interview was edited and condensed.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Eric Schwarz on how to transform education with 'citizen teachers'

June 14th, 2010 | Contributors: Julie Furbush, Margaret Eaton

Eric Schwarz wants Americans to re-imagine how and when learning happens. In 1995, he founded Citizen Schools, a network of afterschool programs that enlists adult volunteers to provide hands-on apprenticeships to middle school students from disadvantaged communities. Citizen Schools currently works with 37 schools in seven states. Schwarz explains how professionals like engineers, jewelers, gardeners or even morticians help low-income students discover new possibilities and vistas for their lives.

Dowser: What's the basic idea behind Citizen Schools?
Schwarz: On graduation day, wealthy kids are far more prepared to achieve than low-income kids. This gap has a lot more to do with what kids learn outside of school than inside. So we're making the learning that takes place outside of school better.

How?
For most low-income kids, school just isn't working—many of the older kids are bored to tears in the classroom. Middle-schoolers learn quickly and deeply from real-world, hands-on projects. So I thought, why not create an afterschool program centered on learning by doing, through apprenticeships? I thought this could keep kids engaged long enough to hook them for life.

So you're saying, 'Hey, let's look outside the classroom.'
Right. Kids need more knowledge and more skills than ever before to earn a middle-class income, but it just isn't possible to cram more learning into the school day. Kids are only in school 20% of the time they're awake—why not fill some of the other 80% with creative learning?

How does your model work?
We develop a second shift of educators, citizen teachers. We invite local entrepreneurs, professionals, specialists, to teach a few hours a week, for 10 weeks. At the end of each session, the kids present what they've learned or created.

Can you share some examples?
Our kids are learning from chefs, jewelers, gardeners, architects, clothing designers. We've had mock trials with real judges; kids have built video games and robots with help from Google engineers; one group of kids conducted research on experiences that shaped the success of 200 CEOs, then presented the findings at a conference at Harvard University.

I heard that you've even had kids work with a mortician.
We were skeptical at first, but this funeral director was very persistent. He said, 'We're not so good at dealing with teenagers when they lose a family member. We'd like to work with kids to help us figure this out.' I said, 'Perfect.'

Talk about community involvement! But how are they doing academically?
An independent study documented that our kids perform better than their peers on six of the seven top indicators of success including math and English grades, attendance and graduation rates, and the level of high school course work they take on.

Do you remember when you knew your idea had real social change potential?
I had just finished City Year here in Boston, where you volunteer as a mentor to help kids stay in school. I knew I wanted to teach, but not full-time. I have a journalism background and I thought I'd like to teach kids how to put together a newspaper. I pitched the idea to a principal in Dorchester. She said, 'OK, try it.' When that came together I knew I was on to something.

So that was like a test run.
It was. I took 10 kids and we published an eight-page tabloid newspaper. Every kid sold ads, every kid wrote articles. That last week we piled into a van and drove to Manhattan to see their newspaper fly off this web-based printing press. They were totally hooked. They were published journalists, with bylines.

Citizen Schools is active in 37 schools in seven states. Over 4,000 citizens have taught classes. How intentional were you about growing beyond Boston?
Pretty intentional. We set out to create a model that could influence the field. Once we had evidence that it worked, more schools wanted to partner with us. Now policymakers are investing in extended day learning. The late Senator Kennedy introduced legislation for a half-billion-dollar national pilot program.

Best advice you ever got?
Don't be satisfied with something that gets on the front page of the *Boston Globe* or smiles on the faces of 100 kids. Do something that really moves the numbers big in education.

Can you recommend a good book for someone who wants to make a living making change?
Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns, by Clayton Christensen. It's not just about education, it's about the value of disrupting the old way things are done, to make way for the new.

Learn More:

- Students apprentice in program after school: A local feature on Citizen Schools in action, from the Charlotte Observer
- Citizen Schools: Volunteer Tutoring Program Calls on Capitol Hill: Citizen Schools lobbies for the Time for Innovation Matters in Education Act
- The Lasting Impact of Teachers: U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's 2010 commencement speech at Lesley University, where 29 Citizen Schools Teaching Fellows received their Master's in Education with a Specialization in Out-of-School Time

This interview was edited and condensed.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: Deb Delman on how The Pangaea Project creates global citizens

October 26th, 2010 | Contributors: Katie DeRogatis, Lauren Tucker, Margaret Eaton

The Pangaea Project arranges overseas learning experiences for low-income high school students from Portland, Oregon. In the eight-month-long program, students meet social entrepreneurs and activists working on issues related to justice, equality and sustainability. They visit sustainable copper mining projects in Ecuador and learn from villagers about the effects of chemically-intensive farming in Thailand. To date 53 students have graduated. Here, Deb Delman, who founded the project and directed it for several years, reflects on what makes a global citizen and explains how she turned an idea that was sparked in a conversation over coffee into a full blown reality.

Dowser: The Pangaea Project gives young Americans a rare inside look at social entrepreneurship in poor countries. Why just include low-income kids?
Delman: Because these kids have very little access to the idea of social entrepreneurship, let alone opportunities to see it in action. They've got even fewer chances to travel outside America. Most of our students have never been on a plane before.

Aren't there social entrepreneurs in Oregon?
Leaving the U.S. is central to what we're about. We want students to learn about global disparity. What causes it, and what local people are doing about it. The best way to learn this is to experience it. To experience how completely different life can be, just based on where you're born.

How do you prepare American teens for that kind of experience?
The curriculum has three phases. We start with a three-month course, 150 hours of classroom learning on wealth disparity. They learn about colonialism, neo-colonialism,

worker rights, and human rights. They also get basic language and cultural sensitivity training.

Then they spend one month abroad. What happens when they get there?
First they spend two weeks traveling, seeing what happens when powerful outside interests operate without considering the life of indigenous people or the natural environment. It's a real eye-opener.

What do they see?
In Ecuador, students hike and canoe through the Amazon rainforest, past huge contaminated oil pits and miles of clear cut forests. In Thailand they visit vast slums, where small children work the streets. They drive for hours through farmland controlled by transglobal corporations.

This is powerful stuff for teenagers who've never been on a plane before. Do they get overwhelmed?
They are meeting with community organizers, so they can see that it's possible to make change, even in extremely challenging situations. For example, they meet with youth leaders in Sarayaku, a community of indigenous people who have kept the oil companies out. Sarayaku's leader is 23 years old.

In Bangkok they meet with Four Regions Slum Network, an organization of slum dwellers working to stop eviction from the only place they have ever lived. The students see real social change strategies at work.

Pangaea Project students spend their second two weeks abroad living with host families in Thailand and Ecuador. How do they like that part?
It's a highlight of the trip for most of them. The host families are incredibly gracious and welcoming. The students get a day-to-day, intimate experience of how another culture lives. Our students are urban youth, and they're working on the land, milking cows. And they do service work. They have a lot of fun, too, but it's not a trip to Disneyland. It is very real. We travel very far off the beaten path. We really want them to see the real life of people out there.

OK, they get back to Portland, now what?
Now they have ideas, informed ideas. Each initiates a social action campaign, and the final part of their project is to spend four months campaigning. They speak to hundreds of high school students. They speak on the radio to thousands of listeners. They speak to the mayor and city council. We give them a chance to develop their public speaking skills, to find their voice, and to realize that there are people all over this community who really care about what they have to say.

You were working at a refugee center when you decided to start The Pangaea Project, what made you change course?
It was an amazing organization, people from 46 countries came in and out every day. But it was still an office job. I wanted to do more. I had traveled to dozens of countries and while abroad I had my own evolution from backpacker, to volunteer, to becoming a social activist.

It changed my view of the world. I had this idea that if more people could have that experience, the world might be a more just place.

That's a pretty big idea. Where did you find your early partners?
I was having coffee with a friend, Stephanie Tolk, Pangaea's other co-founder. She had been in the Peace Corps in Mali. She told me she wanted to start a program to bring low-income students to other countries to do service work. I said, 'That's exactly what I've been thinking!'

What came next?
I took a course in nonprofit management and Stephanie took a grant-writing course.

We put up a post for volunteers on a local website and 35 people showed up. It was crazy! That was eight years ago.

And now the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funds The Pangaea Project. Can you share something you've learned about fundraising?
We started by writing to everybody we ever knew. Literally everyone. My dentist from third grade, my fifth grade science teacher, my third cousin. After the first letter went out, I didn't sleep for a week.

Something you learn quickly is that people want to help; they want to be a part of something. They just need to be asked. Now I am much more comfortable with asking.

What is the best advice that you can give someone who is interested in pursuing a career in social activism?
Balance and take care of yourself throughout the process. Have boundaries with it. For several years, we had very few boundaries and worked seven days a week. When you're obsessed with an idea, it consumes you. You think about it at 3:00 in the morning and you're working on it Sunday afternoon. That's OK if that's what it takes for a little while, but try to also have fun. Go out with your friends, get a break.

And make yourself replaceable if you are really on to a big idea. This is a hard one. I feel so invested and attached to this whole thing, but at some point, you want it to be bigger than you. You want to be able to pass it on.

This interview was edited and condensed.

INTERVIEWS

Interview: How Hannah Taylor launched the Ladybug Foundation (in first grade) and turned empathy and creativity into $2 million to help the homeless

June 21st, 2010 | Contributors: Margaret Eaton, Sean Grimes

Hannah Taylor (R) and formerly-homeless Rick Adams work together on Ladybug's National Red Scarf Campaign.

When Hannah Taylor was 5, she saw a man eating out of a trash can. For the next year, Taylor interrogated her mother with questions about homelessness. One day, her mother challenged her to do something about it. So Taylor organized a bake sale and clothing drive in her first grade classroom to raise money to help. Out of that effort grew the Ladybug Foundation, an organization dedicated to ending homelessness that has since raised over $2 million. Taylor, now 14, travels widely across her native Canada, delivering a call to action.

Dowser: Seeing that man living on the street changed you. Can you describe that moment?

Taylor: It was around Christmas, me and mom just had manicures. I was looking at how sparkly my nails were when I saw him. He was eating from a dumpster. He looked right at me.

I asked my mom why he was eating garbage. She said he was homeless and had no food. I couldn't believe there were people with no homes, who had no food. I worried about him that night, and almost every night for the next year. My heart was sad that whole time.

I kept worrying and asking my mom questions about homelessness. One day she said, 'Hannah, maybe if you do something about it your heart won't feel so bad.'

What did you do?
I asked my grade one teacher if I could speak to my class about homelessness. We had a bake sale and collected clothes, food, and coffee for a mission in Winnipeg.

How did you decide which shelter to help?
My dad took me to see a few. I picked Siloam Mission because the homeless people got food and a place to sleep. I was so happy I could help, I cried. But this time happy tears.

And that was just the beginning.
It snowballed pretty fast. So many people wanted to help that we had to start an organization, the Ladybug Foundation.

Your baby sister helped, too.
She was eating a lot of baby food then, so we painted the jars to look like ladybugs. We put them in stores so people could put money in them.

The Ladybug Foundation has helped 48 shelters. Why do you only give to shelters that also provide food?
It's too hard to try to find food and a place to sleep in the same day.

Gordon Sinclair of the *Winnipeg Free Press* said you see homeless people as people, and most of the rest of us don't. Why do you think that is?
It matters how you act, not how you look or smell. I think if more people knew someone who was homeless, they wouldn't care so much about how a homeless person looks or smells.

To spread your message you often tell stories about the homeless people you meet. Can you share one?
Sure. Once, when I was 8, I stopped to fill a homeless man's asking cup with all the change in my purse. Then I hugged him and left. His name is Carey. Twenty minutes later, he came up behind me and handed me my ladybug charm. It fell into his cup by accident. He said he thought it might be important to me. We've been friends ever since.

You have friends in high places, too.
I do. I started taking big bosses [wealthy donors] to lunch to talk to them about homelessness. After a few lunches, I thought, this would be so much easier if I could talk to lots of big bosses at once. That's when we started 'Big Boss Lunches.'

How do you inspire the big bosses to write big checks?
I tell them why we should all care all the time. Then I ask them if they will help. For my first Big Boss Lunch, I drew 50 pictures to sell. Most were of ladybugs. One of the big bosses asked how much they cost. I said, ‘Let your heart decide.’ He said, 'I'll take one for $10,000.'

Not bad. You also got a meeting with the Prime Minister. How did you do that?
When I first heard about him, I wasn't sure what the Prime Minister was. My mom explained that it was the head girl or boy of Canada. I said, ‘I have to talk to him.’ My mom said, 'Hannah, I don't think you'll be able to talk to Mr. Martin.'

I kept asking and finally she called his office. I left a message. Forty-five minutes later someone called back and invited me to join him at a luncheon. He spoke and I spoke.

What was it like sharing the stage with the Prime Minister?
It was fun. It was at a Chinese restaurant. Mr. Martin and I held hands and walked in behind a dancing dragon puppet, the kind with people underneath. He's a very great man. He taught me that it’s Canadian to care.

You do a lot of speaking. Do you get nervous up there?
No, because no one knows if I make a mistake or not. Because I’m the only one who can see my notes. My nana taught me that.

You’re 14. You founded an organization, wrote a book, raised over $2 million, and you’re on an international human rights jury. What’s been the most difficult part of your journey?

When two of my friends died from being homeless. They found my one friend, Patches, on the riverbank; he drowned. I had exams and couldn't go to the funeral. My other friend froze to death because she couldn't find a place to sleep. These are the saddest and hardest things.

What will Canada be like when the Ladybug Foundation reaches its ultimate goal?
People will care about each other like family. The homeless will have homes and won't have to eat out of garbage cans.

This interview was edited and condensed.

Learn More:

Seven Solutions to Homelessness: Facts + solutions for homelessness in Canada, from B.C. news source *The Tyee*.
“Make Change”: A documentary on Taylor and the Ladybug Foundation
World's Children’s Prize: Learn about more kids around the world making positive impact. (Taylor is on the jury.)

INTERVIEWS

Back-to-school Interview: Aleta Margolis on why a dynamic classroom leads to greater learning

September 8th, 2010 | Contributors: Julie Furbush, Margaret Eaton

Aleta Margolis, founder and executive director of the Center for Inspired Teaching, believes all kids have an innate desire to learn. She also believes our schools are beating it out of them. As a teacher, Margolis rejected the idea of trying to motivate kids with rewards – like stickers and gold stars. Students should be motivated by the work itself, she reasoned. So Margolis developed a teaching model that emphasizes engagement over compliance, and now she focuses on spreading it. Teachers who have been trained by her center regularly see test scores rise and drop out rates fall. Here, Margolis explains why classrooms that are messier and louder can be more fulfilling for everyone.

Dowser: Inspired Teaching wants to reform public education in America. How can one organization impact something so big?
Margolis: By putting a teaching model out there that makes school the opposite of boring. The top reason kids drop out is boredom. Most are getting C's when the leave school. They're not failing; they're bored.

What does the opposite of boring look like?
If you see a classroom on TV or in a movie, you see half-awake kids at desks and a teacher at the board. That's the least effective way to engage kids in learning. Yet it's the norm. Schools could

look different. They could look like a NASA lab, with people experimenting, solving problems, working together. That's our ultimate goal.

Where do you begin?
With the teacher. It's not the subject matter, it's not even the testing. It's the teaching.

Aren't we already asking a lot from our teachers?
We ask teachers to deliver a curriculum as efficiently as possible to a passive audience: the kids. It's called the transmission model. Inspired Teaching is trying to change the teacher's role from transmitter of information to instigator of thought.

How?
By helping teachers bring the student into the work. We show them how to start lessons by giving the student a question to answer, then a hands-on project to discover the answer on their own. It's actually that simple.

Doesn't that take longer?
It takes about 20 minutes to turn a kid on. You give any child, from any background, work that is interesting, work that is important, and the child will want to do it. Once they want to do it, you're off and running. They will work harder and understand it better.

Are you measuring academic results?
We track grades and test scores, which go up quite a bit when teachers adopt our model. More important, the nature of learning changes, which means kids are hating school less. They're less bored.

For example?
A recent study showed that when teachers use our model, participation more than doubles, and the number of interactions that involve critical thinking and analytical reasoning increases. Another huge bonus is that time spent on discipline drops significantly.

What's the catch?
It's messier, it's louder, and it's hard work. But every teacher using our model reports deeper job fulfillment. To them, it's worth it.

Do you remember that moment as a teacher when you realized the power of engaging kids in this way?
I do. When Bill Clinton first ran for president, we held a school election. Our kids polled everyone in the school, graphed the results, then supervised voting in the lunchroom. One teacher was upset because it wasn't part of the curriculum. She didn't let her kids vote. Some risked punishment and voted anyway.

Later, when we talked about countries where some people aren't allowed to vote, the kids were furious. They understood on a deep level the power and importance of the vote in a democracy.

What made you decide to leave the classroom and start an organization?
I love teaching but I was overwhelmed by the general acceptance among my colleagues that kids hate school. It turned out that starting an organization was the best vehicle to change that dynamic on a bigger scale than my own classroom.

Did you hate school when you were a kid?
I loved learning, reading and getting A's. But I do remember one time, getting my enthusiasm kicked out of me. I was in first or second grade and discovered, on my own, that if you add two odd numbers, you always get an even. I was so excited, I told my teacher. She said, 'Everyone knows that. It's right here in the book. Besides, we're not on that yet.'

What did you take away from that experience?
Everyone has a story or two like that. I've been reading quite a bit about changemakers, people who have done great things to make our society better. Just about all of them were taught, by their school experiences, that their ideas didn't fit in. If society valued divergent thinkers, we'd not only have more problem solvers, we'd have more problem preventers.

Can you recommend a good read for someone thinking about starting a social change organization?
Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High Impact Nonprofits, by Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant. It's phenomenal.

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career as a social entrepreneur?
Find work that fascinates you and that also makes a difference in the world. I don't do this work because it helps people. I do it because it is the most intellectually stimulating job I can think of to do.

This interview was edited and condensed.

INTERVIEWS

Arts and Urban Youth: Interview with Phyllis Novak on why homeless youths need art studios, not just shelter

October 4th, 2010 | Contributors: Alison Herr, Margaret Eaton

Urban arts programs often build confidence and agency among youth who are disheartened by -- or disconnected from -- public schools. Over the next few weeks we'll be featuring a series on Art and Urban Youth, featuring interviews with leaders in this field. At a time when education is being shaped by a rigid test taking culture, these educators often succeed in eliciting a sense of inquiry and belonging among their students.

Not far from Toronto's downtown theatre district lies Sketch, a busy art studio filled with paintings, photographs, and sculptures created by homeless youth. Founder Phyllis Novak, a former actor, created Sketch because she believed that providing young disconnected people with an opportunity to join Toronto's cultural conversation addresses a need beyond food or shelter, the goal of traditional outreach. Her vision is that, as more displaced young people participate in the community through the arts, not only will society's perception of them change, but they will come to see themselves differently as well.

Dowser: Sketch is a vibrant, stimulating place; but wouldn't these young people rather have a dependable place to crash than a spot to paint?
Novak: There are all kinds of initiatives to eliminate homelessness. We have a different mission. I created Sketch because I'm not sure it will be possible to end homelessness as

long as we define the problem as the lack of a bed. Living homeless isn't necessarily the problem.

Fair enough. What problem are you trying to solve?
We want to raise the quality of the personal and spiritual health of young people who live on the streets. If we can, they'll have a better shot at thriving and becoming invested in the community.

How did you come up with that approach?
When I started to work with homeless people, years ago, I was coming from a very needs-based perspective. I saw a need—people were homeless—and I bought into a social norm that it was my responsibility to fix it. I quickly realized, however, that that work was more about serving my own needs and those of a larger corporate agenda.

So you found that work condescending?
Yeah, and patronizing. I wanted to work *amongst* people not *for* people. I recognized that people become incredibly creative when they go through really tough situations, and that's what catalyzes them to make changes.

How does making art lift a person's quality of life?
Poverty and living on the street can alienate people. Especially young people. Working in the arts strengthens resilience, and invigorates a desire to learn more. When you make art, you tell a story. Once you put your story out there, in song or on canvas, it elicits a response, and right there, that reduces isolation.

Why a studio? Why not offer art classes at drop-in centers and shelters?
Homeless people need relief from the pressures of the street. Yet they are disenchanted with the systems and structures we've set up. Sketch is different. It's a place where youth can express opinions and ideas, process experiences, and even regain a little privacy. A studio environment is fairly easy to step into. Plus it doesn't scream, 'You are broken and need to be fixed.'

But something's broken, isn't it?
What's broken, or flawed, is how society looks at street-involved people. We want to change that because the way we view people on the margins affects our approach to bringing the margins in. Do we want to get kids off the street? Or do we want all of Toronto's youth to be healthy, safe, and positively engaged in the community? Different questions get different answers.

How is Sketch reframing those questions?
When homeless youth are visible contributors to the city's culture, they are less likely to be viewed solely as objects of charity or problems to be solved. Art is central to humanity. It's one of the things that make us different from other species. We can connect through it regardless of where or how we live. When you feel a connection to another human being, you're less likely to try to sweep them under the rug.

Aren't there a lot of people who want to help the homeless?
Unfortunately many of those people tend to be overly sympathetic to the point of feeling sorry for homeless people. When you pity someone, you don't see them as a whole person.

If you've never spent any time with homeless people or street youth, you may jump to some false assumptions. You may think they are always depressed and forlorn. Street youth aren't sad and miserable every minute of the day. They're also joyful, happy and excited.

You were an actor; did that shape your ideas about art and social change?
It did. In the theater you learn how drama uses tension and conflict to move the plot forward. It's not something you try to get rid of, you need it.

After working at a drop-in center for homeless youth for five years, I started thinking, why are we trying to get homeless youth off the street? Let's invite them into the community instead. It might create some tension, but maybe that will generate some new solutions.

Did you think a lot of people would show up?
No, but I'm so glad they did. The fact that hundreds of young people participate every year tells me there is still a void out there. We still haven't made enough room in our community for these fellow citizens.

Was there a moment when you saw the community start to make room?
There was. It was in the middle of a big feast at Sketch. A somewhat concerned volunteer took me aside. In a low voice she told me that the homeless people weren't getting very much of the food. She said, 'Everyone is just digging in.' And I said, 'I know, isn't it great!' There we were, all together in this art-filled space, eating and talking. And except for a few us, no one knew who was homeless and who wasn't.

I see—rather than feeding the homeless, you were tearing down alienating social stigmas. That's not a typical approach. Do funders want you to do things more traditionally?
It's a challenge. Many funders look for quick results. It just doesn't work that way. It takes time. We have wonderful funding partners and we encourage them to be as open to learning from Sketch as we are.

This article was edited and condensed.