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QUDWA 2017

Inspirational Stories

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Speaker

Adam Braun, CEO and founder of Mission U and Pencils of Promise, UAE

Moderated/Facilitated by

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Summary Paragraph/Key Points

Adam Braun started Pencils of Promise (PoP) with \$25, the minimum amount needed to open a bank account. When he typed up his original mission statement in 2008, his goal was start one school in a developing country. For his 24th birthday, Braun threw himself a party in which he asked for \$20 for his organization in lieu of gifts; 400 people showed up. He and his friends organized more low-cost events and within a year he was building that first school in Laos. PoP now runs 420 schools with over 70,000 students worldwide.

“I learned recently that it only takes 29 dominoes, stacked progressively larger, to knock over the Empire State building,” Mr. Braun said. “This is how large-scale movements occur. Many believe it starts on a big, shiny stage, but that doesn't happen.”

Braun's success, however, did not come without his share of mistakes. When PoP started out, the New York City-born social entrepreneur tried to do everything himself. He discovered that by recruiting like-minded talent and training and mentoring them, they ended up running with an idea and achieving much more than he envisioned. He also believed that there would be a big moment when he achieved everything. In truth, the process was much messier and required a lot of patience. “It was hard to grapple with,” he said. “It's tens of thousands of micro wins leading to medium and large wins. You want it to be easy, but it's not.”

Five years after launching PoP, Braun wrote the book, *The Promise of a Pencil*, which became a national bestseller and was distributed on many college campuses. He visited these campuses as part of the promotion for the book and discovered students had something surprising to say to him.





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“What you’re doing is good, but what about doing something in your home country?” The average American student was graduating \$50,000 in debt with dim prospects in the job market; in one survey 74% believed that university has failed to prepare them for the work world. Mission U, a one-year, debt-free alternative to college will launch next year. In return for free tuition, the “school” gets a small share of a graduate’s income for three years provided their salary is over \$50,000. The first trimester will teach skills such as project management and giving and receiving feedback that will make for effective employees in many workplaces (Braun has partnered with many companies to find out the skills they value). The next four months are spent studying a major, while the final third is spent in embedded internship in a company. Mission U will use a blended-learning model in which 80% of the learning is online. “We’ve developed a 21st-century curriculum,” Braun says. “You can create the exoskeleton of superior learning by leveraging technology, but we also want people to create authentic relationships by coming together in person.”

Before he started PoP, Braun backpacked across many poorer countries. One of the most interesting takeaways from Braun’s experiences around the world is that the developed world has much to learn from the developing. Chief among these is the importance of physical expression and play. “I saw kids swim a river or climb a mountain, then go back to class,” he said. “The brain is far more activated after physical activity. Our ability to learn is enhanced.”

Braun spent 2015 working on a global education initiative with Gordon Brown, the former British prime minister, and his wife, Sarah. The goal of the program was to spread technology across the developing world, but Braun discovered that it wasn’t so simple. “The challenge is content,” he said. “Reading about a woman going to college in Paris is not engaging to someone in Laos.” The biggest advance the initiative made was through local publications. They launched writing programs to enable locals to be the creators of their own content. This human element will be crucial, Braun thinks, as the millennial generation gives way to Generation Z, the first generation to which technology is native.

Takeaway: It requires patience to build large-scale movements. Success doesn’t come from one big moment but from many smaller wins.





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