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ORAL HISTORY CONVERSATIONS WITH CHANGEMAKERS

By Students in PHILOSOPHY 332: Business Ethics | Spring 2017

TYLER NORRIS (SOULR INC.)

with Baisi Wu, Keegan McMillan, Morgan Lester, and William Han

Morgan: You grew up in Washington?

Tyler: Washington state. Whidbey island, Washington.

Morgan: did you live there your whole life?

Tyler: Yes, so I was born there and lived 0 to 18 there.

Morgan: and then you came here?

Tyler: Yes I came to San Diego. So Whidbey is the second longest island in the united states besides long island. and it's a uh small community. It's got a naval air station on the north end. It's a very cool, small community that you have to take a ferry to get there. Right in the middle of Puget Sound, kind of north of Seattle area.

Morgan: is it near Vashon island?

Tyler: Kind of Vashon

Morgan: so growing up in Washington. Do you think that had any influence over your ideas behind Soulr Inc.

Tyler: Yea absolutely. so Whidbey is interesting because it has its own bubble. there is a definite upbringing differential when you come from a island in Washington state. so, we got 4 stop lights, 1 fast food restaurant, we got my class size in high school was like 100, under 100. we got like 4-500 people in the high school. There's a real strong sense of community on Whidbey island and I think that's like a big part of who I became. Kind of caring my sense of connection and community, like a time piece on my wrist. That's like the fabric of community that is sown into my being in a sense coming from a small community in Washington.

Morgan: Yea I can see that. Do you think that the island has ... like being on Vashon island, people are like very energy conscience, there's a lot like clean energy and like being resourceful with everything. Do you think it's a lot like that?

Tyler: Absolutely. So a lot of people live off the grid. A lot people grow their own food. there's also tremendous amount of fishing, crabbing and clamming and berry picking. and I grew up in that kind of environment, being able to source things off the earth and being able to go out and catch dinner and come home and cook up a little barbeque. It's a beautiful place.

Morgan: cool. so, clearly you grew up in a environment of clean energy and stuff. were you thinking of Soulr Inc. before you came here, or an idea that's been growing for years?

Tyler: well yes, a part of it was growing up in a single-parent household, so my parents got divorced when I was like 2. so 0 to 18 I pretty much I had both my parents live on the island but they lived in separate places. so some weekends with my dad some weekends with my mom. but it was coming from a small community and having a mom with 3 kids and doing stuff on her own and doing her own entrepreneurial adventure. that kind of let me become independent. wanting to do something independent. not working for someone else. and also trying to bring that community to different places. so when I got to USD, or when I got to San Diego. It's different from a small island in Washington state. There's a lot more people, a lot more cars, a lot more dynamic to it. But USD itself is like a another own social bubble. where we have people don't want to talk to each other. you know it takes meeting someone at beach comber and having a few beers before you introduce yourself to someone you had the same class for 6 months with. That's a common thing. That's a part of it coming from a small community and relied on a small community and relied on people in the community and to help us out and raise myself and my family in a sense.

Morgan: cool. what was your mom's social venture that she did?

Tyler: So my parents were a trip for sure. so my mom she owned a consignment store. so she would go state sales, garage sales, all these different places and rummage. be able to go through peoples, some old lady's stuff and find cool antiques and different things and she would take their stuff. and I grew up in a consignment store for the most part and she did some real estate and then she owned a coffee shop. so she did a drive thru coffee store. so if you been to Seattle there's a lot of drive thru coffee shops. lot more than they have down here. and that put a definite influence on the business side of things. I had community on one end and I have this drive thru mobile food kiosk. that I'm like baristaing as a junior/senior in high school, but that was cool because I got to see how much of a pain in the ass it was for the payoff. Because if you're in food, it's a tough deal and she had a full on, she had a lot of stuff going on just in terms of you know she did biscuits and gravy, and hotdogs, and chili and all kinds of stuff because she had a boatyard across the street. But we had to keep inventory and you know the Costco runs and living on the island, stuffs more expensive because we had to get it shipped delivered weekly and if we run out of things. We're mobile food and solar in itself is making food industry simple. Everything is pre-packaged and it's solar-powered, it's off the grid, it's mobile. So that anyone could operate it. right? Thats how we did it on campus, so that any student could come on and they can sell things and not have to have a food handler's card and not have to worry about the inventory and not have to do those things. So, that played a part in it and then my dad is also kind of an entrepreneur in his own right. But he's mister buy, sell, trade. He would take me to boat auctions and airplane auctions and storage units and state sales and car auctions and all kinds of things. And we would go and bid on vehicles, and different stuff and he would buy and sell and runs his business doing that. So, but he sold anything from crab to firearms to airplanes. You name it. Taught me how to buy something for a buck and sell it for two. And if hes charging a buck off and charging him 50cents. So he'll come back at 75. The definite art of the wheel and deal.

Morgan: I definitely did not grow up with helpful things like that.

Tyler: It's a different upbringing, it definitely created an environment that allows you to be on the hustle. Because going back to it and growing up in a single parent household you know it wasn't all ... it was a cool upbringing but at the same time we struggled. We didn't have everything. We were not well off. We had a lot of years where we struggled and so. It taught me to be independent and to appreciate your family first and foremost and people around you and the environment and the earth and different things you relied upon to survive.

Keegan: So speaking of your parents, are there like major values that you pulled away from them? Especially, since they're both entrepreneurs in their own right.

Tyler: Absolutely. I would say from my dad a lot just in seeing value in things that maybe aren't seen by others. Like the way I got the money to start my venture. Was through selling vintage trailers. So, I would go out to El Cajon, or Encinitas, or North Park, I bought one in OB, and I'd go find these 1950s, 60s, 70s, shasta aristocrat low liners. and some old guy Bill would have it in his backyard and say "Oh I don't know ot been sitting there for 10 years and Its got a little something here and it's got a flat tire and everything." But he would have it on craigslist or whatever. I read the ad, actually saying "hey I would buy your old vintage trailer" and he would have it on craigslist for like a \$1000 bucks and I'd go and offer him you know 400. and maybe come back at me like 600. and we'll settle it at 5. So I would get for 500 bucks and rented a storage facility, rented a uhaul truck and I'd go pick up the trailer and take it to my storage facility. I'd buy a quart or 2 quarts of white paint and a little pint of blue paint. And I'd paint the whole thing white and I'd do a blue stripe and I'll clean out the inside and I'd throw it on craigslist two weeks later and I'll sell it for 2800 bucks or 3 grand. And I did about 6 trailers in a span of 3 months. So, I made like 22000 dollars in the course of 3 months. Selling these vintage trailers. Swear to god. And so I used that money to build a buy cart and do my food and county stuff and everything else but it was back to being on the hustle and say I don't have a lot of money right now, I don't have any resources, but if you can see the value in something you know and you can put it in the time and make it work. You can turn anything and make it worth something to someone else.

Morgan: Why trailers?

Tyler: Because if I went and bought a car and I went to go sell the car. Who knows if the transmission is shot, who knows if the brakes are crap, who knows if the fuel filter needs to be replaced, who knows if I need to do the spark plugs. A trailer has 2 wheels on the inside, it's got a little bed, a little fridge, a little something. So I can deck that out and know that it's road safe and I didn't have to do any maintenance for it. I didn't have to have a mechanic look at it. I didn't have to sink any money into it. Total I'll buy it for 500 bucks and maybe I had a 120 and for towing into it maybe 200 bucks into it. So, it was like the perfect thing to buy sell trade because theres little to no maintenance and you know what exactly your getting up front. So, that will come on my dad's side. and then my mom's side, you know shes kind of the frantic entrepreneur. Which was kind of just going week to week and a little unorganized so I think on that end, she taught me that I need to be organized and manage my time wisely. Now she had 3 kids and was doing it on her own so, she had a little bit of an excuse, but for the most part you know I think from your parents in general you should analyze what qualities are good and qualities are bad. Because whether you know it or not typically you will have both the good qualities and the bad. I think thats one of the most important thing to do, to analyze what qualities are best suited for you.

Morgan: So you picked up a lot from your parents, do you think that there's any other person that stands out that you think you got a lot out of them?

Tyler: Absolutely. I have 6 sisters as well. So I have 2 step, 2 half, 2 real. I have 2 older sisters from both my parents, then my dad got remarried with a woman with 2 girls, and then had 2 girls. So my 2 older sisters Els and Liz, they are 9 and 6 years older than me. And they always, raised me in a sense as well. Because my mom is doing her thing and when they're 18, I'm 9. So, it was a good age to have a mentorship but they instilled the work ethic and lead by example and they're very creative, very witty, outside of the box type thinkers. They put a spin, or a flare and a touch of ph-jazz on to anything they touch. So, I think that's where they came in as two older women who were able to kind of teach me, about women as well in the workplace, just in being able to how to have a relationship with women and how to treat them right. They lead too, they're both leaders, really good leaders and it lead into, like in 8th grade when I was the ASB president of my 8th grade and my middle school. Then when I went to high school, I was the freshmen class president, then I was the sophomore class president, and then my junior year I ran for executive ASB president for my school against 5 senior girls and I won in a landslide. My senior I dressed up as an Avatar because the movie was popular then and I won again my senior year. So I was ASB president my 8th grade to my senior year in high school. And my sisters were huge in that because I always had the best speech, I had the creative phjazz that people would go "what in the hell" but also "that's pretty cool," just thinking outside the box. You could think back right now writing the ASB speech, you can just go up and say well I want to do this and this and that blah blah blah or you can go up and dress up as an avatar and lead your tribe into the next generation. So, that was the differential factor to where your starting a business, think a little bit outside the box and put a little creative phzazz on it.

Morgan: So you were busy in high school too. So, I know you were talking before and mentioned that you went to other schools before you came to USD.

Tyler: Yea

Morgan: Where did you go? and why did you move around so much?

Tyler: So, I got recruited for football at University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. So, I went and played 1 year of college football at UPS. And it was an interesting experience, because it was close to home, and I was dating my high school girlfriend who went to Pacific Lutheran University at the time and I was playing football. So, I was like 40-50 pounds heavier than I am now. I was like 225. I was playing defensive end. I was good at football my senior year and junior year in high school and I went to play a semester. I got to play as a freshman which was great, coming out of high school, but we went 0-10. So, we lost every game that we ever played in. So, talk about a life lesson, come out of a high school, we didn't have losing seasons but we weren't the best in high school. But coming out I really got smacked in the face and really learned a lesson about staying true to your team and your people and community and family in that regards. So, here comes around January, December after my first semester. I've felt stagnant and I'm in Tacoma and my team just went 0-10. This is ridiculous. Why, what am I doing with my life. And I felt a yearning, I felt a sense of change that needed to come about. Because I just wasn't into it and like USD it was incredibly expensive it was 4-50000 dollars a year and so I went home and thought about it and told my parents in a course about a week and said "I'm moving to San Diego." I think I had about 500 bucks and I packed my jeep and drove to San

Diego on a whim. and my aunt stays down here so, I stayed her place for a bit. And about 2 weeks I moved into a apartment down in mission beach. I got a job as a valet and I enrolled in Mesa College. So, I was figuring well shit and spend 20 grand going to UPS or I could live at the beach in San Diego and go get my education, my undergrad for free at mesa. So I save about 130 something thousand dollars just in 2 years living at the beach and partying it up and hanging out and everything else. It was cool because it was the first time, well not the first time but one of the major times where I said "ok I know that if I take a big jump right now, and a even bigger net is going to catch me" and ill be ok. and it ended up working out ok. So, I go to mesa college, and I'm from an island in washington state. I go to a small school in Tacoma and now I end up in San Diego Mesa College. One of the most diverse, largest community colleges in the United States. I think theres like 136 different nationalities at Mesa College. So a total major different transplant.

So, I think the first day I was practically in tears calling my mom " right look I don't know what I just did, but" because it's big, parkings a nightmare, didn't have any friends, it was just one of those shock moments. But it turned out to be a great experience because I became friends with a mid-40s vet who was in a wheelchair who was a really cool dude in my spanish class, and another 26 year surfer dude Curtis who was from OB and then. So, I had these interesting this older, older woman who was in the class as well and in her 60s, 70s. So, totally transplanted a new environment with everything else. But got a lot out of it and I got to be a part of a big diverse community. But it was a shell shock but it definitely was a cool transition. So then I spent a year and a half there on the side I'm working as a valet, then I worked in rubicon deli, and then I went to the Apple Store. So, I was working at the Apple Store. And then I transferred to USD. Then I was at the Apple store and finished with USD.

So, I kind of moved up the ladder in a sense and USD was its own shell shock. Because here I go from this large community college that's got all these diverse groups and a bunch of people all over the world and now im in this school that is up on a hill, catholic institution and lot of privileged students and predominantly white students and people are a little more closed off. You come in as a junior and people are already in their sororities, people are in their sports group, people are in their business fraternities or their whatever. And I'm like ok this is a little more interesting because now I'm on the oust of a social dynamic and dealing with social silos and I've never done that in high school, I would know everyone, I was very well connected and when I got into my freshman year doing college football, I had a built in community or charitable movements within the community and on campus across the border. You know going to the juvenile detention center how do we bridge this so that these silos are working together and talking to each other. So I got involved with changemaker shortly after through another student and started a program called Revibe. The Revibe Tribe. And the Revibe Tribe was to just literally just throw a party up on Maher lawn and I brought in food, sponsored food organizations to provide free food so that students would come. So, I got Rubicon, because I had a connection in Rubicon and I got juice on tap, which was a juice company back in the day.

And we catered it and we had the line things out there to walk across and frisbee and we had some music and some stuff and it was cool. But we spent a lot of time and a lot of effort for one event. And so that was a build up to the solar cart in a sense that I saw Juice on Tap that was making money within the school, making money, doing their own thing on the side and I was seeking, striving for that sort of independence. Because I was working at the apple store, 25, 3 hours a week and then I had my own passion project which was Revibe, going on as well. So my employment I'm kind of unhappy with my on campus I don't really have time for it, and also because I'm a full time student. So, I needed to mess all of these things into one, and I have this community sense from Whidbey Island that I want to incorporate into it and it builds up to the creation of the company.

Morgan: So do you think that event that they threw was like a big pivotal moment?

Tyler: Yea, I think it was a pivotal moment in that we had positive feedback and I think that it integrated me into the network of USD, which was the most important thing. That I became close with John Loggins, and with JC and Chris that were in the Changemaker HUB. So, that connection is still working today and is still part of my close nit of people within the school. My school family to work with them and to do some things now, putting a cart over at the bayside community center which is up in Linda Vista, which is one of the most impoverished communities in San Diego. But not a lot of people know about that. Students don't know about it. Its a mile and a half up the street, they got gangs, they got a large majority of the youth are on reduced income out of their food, out of their schools. Theres a ton of stuff up there, they're working on to improve food security and employment and education and a bunch of other things and we don't even know about it here. We have no idea. I didn't have any idea. No one knew about it. So interesting stuff going on, but thats where Changemaker and that event was just the beginning of becoming creating our own sense of community within the school.

Keegan: So, you were talking about impoverished areas, around our community but when or where did you find the experience, where did your focus on green energy or anything like that come about?

Tyler: So where did the green energy come about on with that? So that is a good question. Because when I started the business like I said, take a big jump and a bigger net will catch you. I was coming up for my 21st birthday and I was working at the apple store and I'm like screw this. So, I quit my job and 4 days later bought a food cart off craigslist and I went to vegas because I turned 21. Then I came back and I spent about 6 months that following year, this would have been 2014 into 15. I spent about 6 months with this thing in my garage trying to figure out what I was going to do. Originally I was going to do like the Chuck Wagon, which would have been like a Chuck Norris themed hot dog wagon. And I had all these ideas, and all these things and acai had been a popular thing. Because I worked at Rubicon and Rubicon has good acai bowls and we would make all kinds of acai creations when the bosses weren't looking and do all of our own kind of stuff. So, I had this idea for acai and then I thought I need to look into the county regulations. So, I start looking into all the different specs, like if I did the ChuckWagon you got to have a hand washing sink, you got to have a waste water container, you got all these different things that are a pain in the ass if you want to do a food business. Procedures, cleaning, take down. I had some experience with my mom's coffee stand in that regard, that I don't want to spend a lot of time and money on the food side of it. So, came up with a prepackaged acai bowls. No one had done a prepackaged acai bowl yet. And so experimented with that and I designed my thing and then I how am I going to keep it cold? So I started to look on the internet and started with dry ice but in a cooler, I could do normal ice, I could do a generator, I could do all those things and so I thought why wouldn't I do solar, why would you not use the sun's energy. Thats where I came to a point in where humanity is like if we have the technology, do everything, make the adjustments to where you can make it into something like this. Because we have it, it exists, and it wasn't that hard. Via youtube, and sales rep at a solar company in Chino, and a few other resources on the internet, I taught myself everything I needed to know about solar and about electricity and about batteries and about freezers and about all sorts of things in a span about a month and a half. So it really wasn't that long and I knew just about everything about solar in a short amount of time. To where I can apply it to the cart. So, I taught myself

online and the name kind of came out of that. I was talking about solar powered but where could I insert my own good vibes and sense of community and that's where it came from soul that we put soul and solar, So soulr power. so the double entendre speaks to both sides of the community and the usage of solar power.

Morgan: So you never had to call in for backup with the whole solar power, did you do it all by yourself?

Tyler: Well I did it all on my own in the beginning then I brought on one of my buddies I met down at Mission Beach and who then became my neighbor later on John Moran. Who later became part of the tech side. So, I can handle some of the business type stuff. So as soon as we got started he helped during the beginning and it was interesting because I was taking an entrepreneurship class. While I'm getting the business going. So one of the most interesting things about the business was that for every class that I was in. I tried to make it a point to make solar cart the project of the class. And that gave me a ton of resources and free labor. Because all of a sudden I had 4 kids who were working on my project. And I became the master of free labor. And I used the legal clinic to get it started to form my entity, I used group projects, even the model to model the fundraising model was that students would fundraise the group and would have to pay them labor in a sense and end up being more costly in the long run but it did good and enough to pay for the labor expense. So, the first day I opened the business I was on television. I was on a tv program MBC was doing called Quit Your Day Job. It was on Oxygen Network. So, I got this flyer out of my entrepreneurship class one day randomly and for this new show that they were casting so I shoot them an email, all I had at that point was a digital rendering that I had made on sketchup of the cart, they loved it, they did like 6 interviews and I'm tv. So it was one of those things, a divine intervention and willpower to make something happen that came together and took a big jump and a bigger net caught me and it was interesting because the first day at Belmont Park down at Mission Beach. It just turned out that for the first time in his career, the acquisition manager of Pacific Real Estate was my finance professor, Nick Biancamano. And Biancamano is one of the titans in commercial real estate in the west coast of the United States and they bought Belmont Park at Mission Beach. So, I end up going to Biancamano's office and I'm like "yo bud, hook me up with a spot down at the boardwalk" and sure enough I keep chatting him up and he gives me a spot down at the boardwalk. and the so the first day down at the boardwalk, I have my cart, which my dad flew down from Seattle and John Moran who I had brought on who I was just speaking about. So we get on this tangent was help me build out of my garage and so we build it out of the garage and we got everything done and my mom and my sisters and my little nephew came down helped me scoop acai bowls we got everything set up and we're down there at the beach and we had the first day of filming down Mission Beach and we still have the lease down there and Biancamano is still one of my advisors and that was kind of the first start. But it was definitely one of those interesting things that every part in what I needed something and I least expected it in came about and that is some information that I would pass on to all of you, to anyone that is when you do want something, think of it and start taking steps about it but just know that it will happen and it will. Because it's very funny how the universe sows things together so that you would be successful.

— End of Transcription —