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Oral History Conversation with Christopher Yanov (Reality Changers)

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CHRIS YANOV (REALITY CHANGERS)

with Brontë Benesh, Jason Mendes, Matthew Fairorth, and Mshary Arnous

Matthew:

So what was your childhood like? Was there a specific childhood experience that might have served as a seed for the work that you're doing now with reality changers?

Chris:

So both my parents were teachers, they're high school and middle school teachers. So teaching's probably in the blood. I grew up in Los Angeles and when I was ten years old I moved to high school, well I moved to Ventura County, my high school was surrounded on all four sides by strawberry fields, so, my... The population of the high school was 60% Latino that made me want to learn more Spanish, but then growing up as we got older in high school, it didn't matter what background it was, it seemed like almost everybody got involved with drugs, but only a certain population got involved with gangs, and so when it was time to choose a college I decided to come to San Diego to be in the border region got into other schools, like UCLA and Berkley and said I want to be in San Diego to improve my Spanish because I was 18 and on my own for the first time, I wanted to figure out why do gangs exist and why do people start using drugs? And eventually found a path that would lead me to that answer and how to offer something better.

Matthew:

That's really interesting to hear

Jason:

During your time at the collegiate level, UCSD and USD was there a particular person or organization that kind of more opened up your eyes to social issues, educational disparities, juvenile delinquencies in particular, things like that?

Chris:

When I was at UC San Diego, it was really tough, I couldn't really find a place where it was my place, so I ended up finding somewhere off campus. So there was a Spanish speaking community center that I went to volunteer, just to improve my Spanish, and my first day there, I met this 12 year old kid named Alex and that day happened to be the one year anniversary of his older brother's death, a bullet to the head, by a rival gang member, and so Alex was a much more mature gang member than most 12 year olds because of his family circumstances. And within a year of being there I ended up being in charge of this youth program full of bald headed gang members because Alex brought his friends, they brought their friends, and then all of the sudden, I was just this guy who would go to class in La Jolla every day and by night try to keep kids off the streets, because they were just as smart as anybody in this room but the difference was they were dropping out in ninth and tenth grade. So I wanted to try to figure out what could be done, and really as an 18, 19 year old, there wasn't anything I could really do. It's just

like our purpose was to stay alive and that's like everyone's purpose if you really think about it. But on campus, there wasn't really anything there. I took the classes, I read the books, I wrote the essays, and I finished early because, there just wasn't, I just didn't find a place to connect. Then here at USD there was a class on gangs and society, so I took that, I audited that class, so as a master's student you just kind of sit in and get a free class, which is kind of crazy, but it was way more interesting in terms of subject matter than what I was studying. But I wasn't writing any papers or anything like that, I just got to see the academic side of why gangs exist. But really, while I was here, to give a little shout out to the building where we're at, SOLES didn't have its own building yet, they were still having classes in the peace and justice building, so we shared the same elevator to and from our classes, so I asked somebody from the program one evening on the elevator ride so how do you like your classes at SOLES? And she said, I use what I learn every single day, and when we're learning all these theories and concepts in International relations, and peace and justice, I wanted to be more involved in the practice and get dirt under our fingernails and actually do something. Not learn all these theories about it. But then what happened, 15 years later, now that we have a successful practice, everybody wants to know the theories and the concepts. So I have the background to say oh, this is why it works, and because of the education I wasn't necessarily hoping for or looking for or searching for in the beginning, but now it's becoming very useful explaining why things work in a way that people can understand. So, that was a long answer to your question, but...

Jason:

No, that was awesome, I appreciate it.

Brontë:

So what made you decide to go to Harvard for a certificate in non-profit management? And, how has that experience helped you in refining, or increasing the social impact that reality changers creates?

Chris:

So that was definitely a turning point, going to that program. I think it was for eight days and it changed everything for us, the entire organization. I went in 2011, so, that puts me I guess, in my early thirties, even though I say I just turned 23 again last September, that's not quite true. But I was, okay we'll say just turned, a little more than 30. And the program was already established, but going to Harvard, it was through the San Diego Foundation, they offer scholarships to go for two non-profit executives to go every year, they still do that, to this day.

Brontë:

I actually just got a scholarship from them.

Chris:

Oh really?

Brontë:

For USD.

Chris:

Oh that's awesome.

Brontë:

It's a great organization.

Chris:

Yeah. And to go to Harvard, you don't know what to expect. You hear the name, it's like yeah whatever, but they gave us a binder of reading, that I mean, it was days of reading almost that you had to read beforehand, and while you were there. And, the reason why the age was important, was because I had been out of school for say ten years and I wasn't used to doing all the reading and the researching, I mean it had been a while. But you go there, to that particular program at least, and I was operating on four hours of sleep every day, and didn't eat anymore, I was just reading, reading, reading, because every hour I spent reading the case studies, I would probably spend at least four or five hours thinking about it. And I just couldn't turn my mind off about how to do things differently, and how to build a social enterprise, and that's really... there were a couple turning points in the organizations lifetime and one was, when it got started, shifting from, I don't know if we're going to talk about it later, but shifting from the prevention model to the promotion model, of doing things where... Prevention programs for gangs and drugs, they usually have messages like, don't do drugs, don't be in gangs, which is like the equivalent of yelling at a kind on a tightrope, don't look down. Well intentioned device, but counterproductive, because they're magnifying the dangers below. So that was one shift. I mean, I think that all prevention programs, they're well intentioned, but they probably have a bigger negative effect than a positive one, because they're normalizing the negative behaviors they want to extract from society. It's not what they intentionally... I don't mean to slam other non-profits that do prevention work, I'm putting myself in the front of that firing line because that's what I did for five years with the gang members at that community center, you know with no results, nothing. The second shift was going to Harvard and saying, so not only am I saying non-profits have it wrong when they're saying prevention, but also, the funding model is not sustainable when you're depending on other people generosity to survive. Other peoples' generosity, as great as the people are, it comes and goes. They have family issues, their business has a bad year, foundations change their funding priorities, and this happened, just a couple years... in 2015, our top five expected or past sources of funding disappeared, and that top five, we have a thousand, but that top five represented 50% of our budget, one point one million out of two point two million and we had to claw our way back somehow. So non-profits depending just on generosity, it's not going to work I think, I mean, they try but they're always struggling, so to find a way to make a social enterprise work, I think that's the wave of the future for non-profits.

Brontë:

Now, just to follow up on that, do you think there was something in that Harvard that gave you the specific tools, or knowledge to be able to create a social enterprise that can be long lasting without depending on those contributions?

Chris:

Yeah, so it was the second case study we read, about the arivin eye hospital in India, and... are you familiar with that? It's pretty, I mean, you've never heard of an eye hospital in India usually, but this one...

Brontë:

Oh, yes yes yes.

Chris:

It's pretty famous in the social world.

Brontë:

It's like the most profiting right?

Chris:

So, essentially, they do eye surgeries, and there is an A type of surgery, and a B type of surgery. And the A type of surgery, they get top notch quality care, they get their eye sight back like right away, I don't remember the details, but basically and they get their own room, and the treatment is top notch, because, they're paying for it. Then there's the B surgery, where the vision comes back in a few days and the recovery room, they just lay on mats in what looks like in the pictures, like a big gymnasium, like we'd be used to here. But they get their eyesight back and they pay nothing. And essentially, the doctor started the paying version on one side of the street so that he could earn the income, admission driven revenue and have that support the real cause, giving the masses their eyesight back.

Brontë:

So focus I think, on certain part of the population, the ones that could pay, and in a sense paid for the ones that couldn't? So how does that tie into yours?

Chris:

Right, so because of that case study, that's what we try to do at Reality Changers, and guess what? It didn't work. SO remember, even being in the Harvard dorm room where everybody stays and that's where I came up with the name of College Apps Academy, which, isn't the greatest, but it describes... It's really hard to describe applications, because now with cell phones, everybody think applications are something you put on your phone, they don't automatically think college applications. So we made it a big old long name, College Apps Academy so everybody knows what it is and try to make it sound fancy with the word academy. And the idea was, have families that can pay for college application help, and you have them pay for our services and use that money to help low income students for free, like we continue to do and just have a different source of revenue, beside donations coming into Reality Changers. So what happened? The first year we offered it, one person paid \$2,500 for it. Now at Realty changers, our budget is two point two million this year, which essentially means, I have to find \$10,000 a day if I want to take weekends off for the program to sustain itself. And if I don't find \$10,000 one day, I got to find \$20,000 the next. If I don't find \$50,000 one week, I got to get 100,000 the next. And that's just to budget 2.5 million, that's top five percent of non-profits nationwide I think in revenue they say, but there's others that are way bigger, and 2,500 bucks from one person, that's not going to cut it. And so, it takes iterations, that's the whole point, you have to keep on trying and trying until you figure it out. You can plan it all you want, but until you finally put it out there on the market, you're not going to know how the people are going to respond. And the first response to that initial iteration was, why would I send my son or daughter to Reality Changers? That's for my maid's children, something like that. Why would I send my son or daughter, my son or daughter is going to an Ivy League school, why am I going to send him to City Heights for help on college applications? Never mind our success stories and all that... that was one side of it, maybe some stigma attached, the other side is, we're really good at getting low income students to join the program for free. We have no background in middle and high income families to pay for membership. So part of it was the perception, but part of it was our own internal abilities to market it wrong. So do you want to keep on hearing the next phases?

Jason:
Yeah this is great.

Bronté:
Yeah

Matthew:
Yeah

Chris:
So that wasn't working, to try to get people of means to try to pay. So then we said, okay, we'll go to the schools, because that's what we do best, and we'll offer a section for twenty students, who are on free and reduced lunch and let them have college apps academy for free.

We have no background in getting middle and high income families to pay for membership, so part of it was, I think, the perception and another was our own internal abilities to market it well. So do you want to keep on hearing the next phases?

All group members:
Yes.

Chris:
So that wasn't working to try and get people of means to pay, so then we said we okay, we'll go to the schools because that's where they're at, and we'll do what we do best, offer a section for 20 students who want free introduced lunch and let them have CollegeApps academy for free, in exchange for those schools marketing our program for the students who can pay for it. Basically we'll have two sections; one for low income students, and one for middle and high income students who can pay for it. The criticisms that we were expecting is that we were separating the students by class if you do it that way. That was a criticism we were willing to accept because the efforts were to, essentially, integrate the college systems that have been skewed the other way for so long and we'll be able to get more low-income students in. So this had a little more success, but only so that paying members would pay for both sections, but it wasn't a good growth model because still once those seniors graduated and went off to those great schools, what happened to word of mouth? There is nothing left. So we had this churn year after year of trying to get in families and it didn't really work that way either. So the latest iteration is instead of trying for families one way another is to have the right customer, and you have to figure out in your business who is the right customer. We thought it was wealthy families, we thought it was middle income families that are doing okay and just don't have that help they need. There are about 2,000 families that pay for Princeton Review SAT prep every year, but those SAT scores mean nothing without a good college application to go with it. So we know we're in the right space there's nobody else out there doing it, but we couldn't find the right customer, until finally we think over the last year or so we've cracked the code. Any ideas who the right customer should be?

Bronté:
Probably the students themselves, right?

Chris:

Nope because they don't have any money to pay.

Bronté:

The colleges then?

Chris:

They have 100,000 applications they don't need anymore.

Bronté:

The schools?

Chris:

Yes, the high schools and the districts. Because they have thousands of students every year and hundreds of millions of dollars in their budgets. One holdup is that no one holds high schools accountable for how many students they send off to college or how many scholarship dollars they get, unless maybe an elite private school. But still now finally high schools are coming to us and saying "we know you're the best ones out there, so how much will it cost to do that". Just a week ago, its not public yet so I will not say which school district yet, but it is a very well known school district in San Diego, they are going to pay us \$160,000 to go to 8 schools just for one year. So \$160,000 is between 5-10% of our budget so that's a significant amount, and it's serving primarily low income students on free and reduced lunch. So we get to stay with the target population that we know how to work best with while getting paid for it as well. We also have a deal with a foundation that's going to work with another district here in San Diego county, and we have talks in OC as well, and this upcoming school year (2017-2018) we're offering our programs to any school/district in the state of California. To give you a little future, we are not done with the iterations we still have one in the works. The price tag is \$25k per 20 students, donors love that because they donate \$25k that group of twenty students earns 1.7-1.8 million in scholarships on average, so they get a 70x return on investment in a years time, they love it. What do schools typically think about that pricetage? That's about half a teacher's salary for a year, so that's been difficult. So now we've been able to tap into after school funds and things like that and partnering with foundations and individual donors, any source of funding we can find. To reduce the price for the schools we are now offering 'train the trainer' licensing program. So the teachers and councilors and non-profit professionals can come to SD go to our conference, get all of our curriculum and take our online platform back to wherever they came from and have their students use our online platform and we can monitor the person who is doing the curriculum as well as the students' progress and results. So that way it is brought up cheaper and we can serve more students, and hopefully more low income students as well. So this is all taken to summarize, in 2011 I went to the Harvard school for that program, so 6 years later we think we've finally figured it out. Same with working with gang members and tough guys, I worked with them for five years before starting Reality Changers in 2001. To think I've got this great social enterprise idea, let's do it, our experience has been, they usually say if you don't have it figured out after 3 years its probably not goin to work, for us it's taken 5 years + . I don't know if that's good or bad, maybe like I'm really slow and cant figure it out, or good because we stuck with. I think one difference between us and other social enterprises is that we are completely dependent on the school year calendar. So if we don't figure it out by September of Senior year we have to wait another 12 months to try the next thing again with the next class,

because we can't, oh we're gonna start these up in January when the college apps have already been submitted. We only get one shot per year of our latest and greatest iteration.

Brontë:

Yeah that could almost answer the question of why it's taken five years to take some pressure off.

Chris:

That'll make me feel a little better.

Jason:

To tail off that, everything we've talked about in our class about social entrepreneurs has to deal with uncertainty and all these problems, and you talked about all these iterations and not getting too downtrodden about it. Has there been anybody or anything that keeps you going? Is there a go to person that keeps you going through it all?

Chris:

No, no. Usually it is a great fight to convince people to try something new. That's what it is. And you have to convince them everytime, and I never present things like "we think we've cracked the code". Have we yet? Not until we start bringing in tons of them. And everybody was nodding there head, wow \$160,000, okay that is a lot of money, but then again that's only 16 days of Reality Changers existence, half a month and that's it. You have to believe in what your idea is but you can't be stuck with it and married to it forever and ever, saying 'this is how it's gonna be', we just have to jam our way through until we figure it out. We made lots of turns around corners we couldn't see and so I take a lot of criticism internally by not having everything planned out and all this, and I don't like it necessarily because I don't know what's around the next corner and I don't want to be stuck to a certain plan to get us there, because that eliminates us seeing what's around the corners if we're just headed in one straight direction. I like to see what that corner is and then we have a new perspective on everything, there's a new world that we're open to and available to do that. Again this is not common practice for how most people do things, most people like to plan things out and if they like it then they say yes if they think it's going to work. I do things a little bit differently, instead of being a 'how?' first and then 'yes', I say 'yes' this is the idea we're going to stick with and then I found how. That makes a lot of engineers nervous, that's not how they operate, and it's a different style, not better or worse, but it makes a lot of people not satisfied with that, but when you say 'yes, we're committing to this', and you're back's against the wall, that's when the creativity really comes out because you've committed to figuring it out you just don't know how you're going to do it yet. For me, the planning is in the work when you're actually doing it. That's not the same for everybody, but for me it is because if we had tried to plan out what CollegeApps academy was for years, and then tried it, we would be years and years behind. So we had to put it out there, have it fail... is it a fail? Well we learned from it or whatever you want to call it. But the point was we put it out there to see what works and what didn't, not to expect a successful product but to keep on making progress, and being like 'oh this didn't work because of this, so now we'll do that', you do that enough times and eventually you figure it out.

Mshary:

Since we are talking about Reality Changers how would you distinguish it from the work done by government agencies or an organization like San Diego Workforce partnership?

Chris:

Well it's tricky when you're trying to fund a non-profit, that's what I spend a lot of my time doing these days, and so a lot of times there are gov. grants out there that say 'we'll give you a million dollars if you do this program like that.' So essentially that makes us default to please the government to run a program that isn't as good as ours, so we only apply for grants that allow us to run the program the way we have been over the last few years. I think a lot of the programs from the government are prevention based, especially in California where gang prevention is the thing, but I would argue that the conventional wisdom is set up on the system of prevention, intervention, and suppression. Suppression is the cops and law enforcement, and you need them because they're the last line of defense, but to get to the suppression, you only need the suppression because the intervention didn't work, and you only need the intervention because the prevention didn't work. So I think that that model sends people off on the wrong direction. Instead what I advocate is promotion programs that create greater understanding so that kids can transcend all the negative activities happening in their neighborhood. So promotion, understanding and transcendence. So you PUT students in programs here, you PUT them there and you have them doing things there and soon enough they'll be exposed to the hundreds of different options that are out there. As with Workforce Partnership, they are our landlord.

Chris:

So promotion, understanding, and, transcendence so you put students in program here and you put them there so and all the sudden they gonna be exposed to the hundred of different options out there. As for workforce partnership they are landlord so the greatest program out there possibly you can imagine but actually they focus just on getting people how to work sometime young out of school and work to get jobs and that's important you have to get people jobs helps the economy and gets people out of the street. however, what we found in the number one reason why students would leave reality changers while they're still in high school is to get a job and all the sudden they have a 10 dollar an hour salary and they're working somewhere with managers who tells them you have to be here on these nights and after their family obligation, school obligation, and work obligation reality changers comes in forth and so they are making couple hundreds bucks a week maybe and they think that they are rich, they have lost on being one of our graduates that has an average of scholarship of 80,000 when he's 18 years old. So we really discourage the students from getting jobs until after they graduate from high school and work during that summer and college is on the horizon they have a real reason to have money and to save money, now that's it most of our student's family have habits of wanna eat three times a day so sometime they have to work, they have to help the family, but we tell the family that if they can all avoid it and have the student focus on their studies cause what gonna get them the big scholarship in long term. And finally, we have found that students who have a job before starting reality changers somehow they are able to manage it because they've had that job before but the one that is the program, first they get job that is the fastest way out of the program which is a sad because of the quick money and they think their problem solved and they are stuck in that salary then the rest of their lives.

Matthew:

What made you want to focus reality changers on (this particular segment of youth)? and taking it a step further, could you recall a particular interaction or a particular teenager that you consider transformative, be it in a favorable or an unfavorable way?

Chris:

Umm so the long answer, do you want the long answer or the short answer? The long answer is after college, I started teaching as a substitute teaching in middle school was the worst school I didn't know that the worst school I've never seen because they were in the middle of principle transitions and 60 students were expelled, vice principles were suing the kids for assault it all source of, it was madness they had 10 minutes nutrition break it was almost like the bell to a boxing match ring and where is the next fight going be, I saw the students But still they get A's and B's from their old brothers and sisters and the gang type from reality changers I knew they are probably dropping out one year or later and so that's why I said alright I'm gonna take this 4 students who I think could actually graduate from collage but probably want to make it through high school without any sort of extra push and that's it, it's only four students it was the basically the amount of people in this room that all of us it was 300 hundred buck in this idea of getting to college and I saw an advertisement in my first year when I had this idea in the newspaper that high school students can get collage credits at UC sandiego for a three weeks residential program where students stay there in the dorms take collage classes get college credits I said huh here is a reason for us to exist and 2 of the 4 students were qualified to raise their grades at the first year and the other two the next year and the last couple year we sent couple of hundred students to this program to attract kids worldwide from many different countries to this three weeks programs so that's why it was I thought the students were smart to do if they had the reason to, that's the long answer. The short reason why I started it is because I didn't want to go to any more funerals for teenagers and you go to enough of those and it's that's enough driving force alright we have to figure out how to make this work out because we know what could be the result not for all of them, but you know one of them is way too many anyways and see just what we could do it was in the same year it was 3-2months after I started the program I was just 22 when I started it, so people maybe think of reality changers now they don't realize how big it was when I started, wow you started when you were 22, I mean this is it, it was five people but 2 months later never been in a funeral in my whole life and I went to two at the same day both of the kids were buried in their soccer uniform and it was start a reminder how was thigs could end up and sine then nothing like is ever come close to happen close as well one student recently is the first time in 15 years he did get shot in- out bullet it went through his chest like it was he was turned sideway and just went straight through and it happen on a Monday night I was like what on a Monday that was first night of our program he should've been in the program and who get shots on a Monday nights? What ever happens that's just not the right thing to so we know there is high stakes and that's the motivating factor for us to keep on going, so I think that is the first half was there a second half of your question?

Matthew:

Yeah, you went to that very well, it was just you did just recall a particular interaction about the students in the shooting but yeah that was more focusing in a particular teenager or group of teenagers that you consider transformative.

Chris:

OH yeah, there is plenty of stories.

Brontë:

What is your favorite story?

Chris:

You are picking my favorite my favorite student?

Matthew:

The one that sticks out your head

Chris:

Probably the story that got the most visibility a guy named Eduardo who joined the program as a freshman and a few weeks later he got in trouble with the law and he was facing 6 years of (30:08) cars racing? in juvenile attention facility and I went with him he was so sad and ashamed but he still was tough from both sides his family was really involved in gangs and but he was attracted to the idea of scholarship to this program and what he told me about what happened over the weekend how they took him in he was so sad and he head wan hanging and his tears were running down his cheeks they were just falling straight down popping down to floor so how he's head was hanging too low and we walked in to his court date and we gave a reality changers yearbook to his lawyer and she comes back about 5 minutes later and say if you have to happen to have another copy, I was like yeah sure but why? because the judge wants his personal copy, okay that could be good 5 minutes later she s back again and says do you have another one? Yeah why this time? It's because the district attorney the people want to lock him up, they want their personal copy as well so our hopes were get high here and walk in Eduardo approaches the judge, the judge said: Eduardo what we are going to do with you now? He says I don't know and the judge say I'm going to give you one month to prove me that you are the man inside this reality changer yearbook instead of the kid the cops arrested, so in that month Eduardo doubled his GPA to 3.8 brought back 13 letters of recommendation and got accepted to the UCSD summer program, the judge let him go to that program and this bold headed kid from the toughest parts of town ended up winning the top two design prizes in the mechanical engineering and sort of two stories about coming and going to that program I saw him Eduardo walking from his house to the building from the office window carrying his logged dragging them in the side walk and I was like wow this is the first time in all of my years I've seen somebody looks like is going somewhere he looks like he had somewhere to go, and when he returns few weeks later despite his parents filling out forms all that he arrives back in Saturday morning with all that suitcases his looked at him and said ohh you are back, he was like yeah the program is over and they said we thought you would run away because it's just the idea of him going to collage as a ninth grader it's just didn't register with them and we have to bring the whole family along now Family makes three visits to that college campus all the three weeks to make sure that they are part of the entire experience as well. So what happened to Eduardo he graduated on time from regular high school and he's now at sandiego state university he's a few semesters away from graduating and he's helped running his college town program and he's there almost every night all week Since he graduated from high school getting the next generation ready we could be talking about challenging but now he's working with eighth graders and has 2.0 gpa's or below trying to get them college ready by twelve grade and he's also a start of PBS documentaries that's air nationwide so you can see that online as well it's called the graduates.

Brontë:

What's an inspiration, to be part of creating that or making that possible!

Chris:

Well yeah, that's a great one, there's 1300 other graduate that's have stories like that we have another 400 more at the end of this school year. the federal reserve did a recent report it said the difference in life time earnings between high school graduate and a college graduate is \$800 – \$30000 so it's just simple math if you multiple \$800-\$30000 times the 1300 graduates and turns out that reality changers have over billion dollars impact on the California's economy and if there is 400 more close to 1.5 billion dollar in other way couple more , a billion dollar to me I don't know about you it sound a lot of money, but 1300 students honestly not that much not that many students it's about a hundred high schools in just San Diego county and so that just means we need to have this kind of difference on 13 more student per school have extra billion dollar impact on the county every single year, it doesn't seem that much in my humble opinion.

Jason:

Kind of actually going off of that, obviously you've been receiving a number of awards, most admired of CEO's and other things like that and then through you visibility you were saying like, stories like that. Has that kind of helped in accelerate the growth of the organization and keep you more motivated kind give you more air and keep yourself motivated as well ?

Chris:

I can answer that yes or no I think, it's a lot harder to run an organization with a group of five people and so they is still a lot organizational things that have to be done it's just not really that excitable now do we get more visibility to other things its possible I think that the result surprise speak for it I've been writing the grands again last year and a half and so by having results then that allows to ask for more but you can't ask for something big without, well some programs they get tons of money for whatever reason they don't have any programs behind it we are kind of the opposite we spent all of our time building up a program so now we know that our program is solid but what is tough is the scaling and that is what we have to learn we have to get funding for.

Chris:

Some programs they have they get tons of money for whatever reason. They don't have any programs behind it. We're kind of opposite. We spend all out time building programs so now we know our programs are solid., but what's tough is the scaling and that's what we still have to learn and get funding for, for that. We've found it's easy to scale out our 12th grade programs, just a one year deal, but everybody wants our 8th thru 12th grade program, which sounds like a 5 year deal, but really its not because as 8th graders move up and 12th graders graduate you back fill with other students and so when you offer this new program elsewhere it's not a 5 year program it's a forever program because you can't do it in 5 years and tell the sophmores after 5 years, sophmores then, sorry program's over. It just doesn't work that way so that's why it's yes and no. There's just a lot more, um, technical things that have to get done, um, and that's not the driving purpose. If you look at our staff handbook and our board handbook they're over 50 pages a piece of rules and regulations. There's like all these processes. Do they get people out of gangs? Not really, but as an organization that's what you have to have in place in order to keep operating.

Brontë:

And just so just to follow up on that question, how has Reality Changers changed you?

Chris:

That's a good one. Well it's proven to me that it is possible. I remember saying when I started in 2001 I told that person in charge of community center they said um if this idea lasts a week or a month or a summer and students stop showing up well then I'm done trying. This is my last best shot. And so it proven to me the students have shown that it is possible and it's helped me have a platform to be able to speak to a wider audience, but I think there's a lot more to go. People say "oh you have 1300 out of how many million, so there's still a long way to go. And it'll be interesting to see what happens next.

Bronté:

What do you think your nearest goal is?

Chris:

Well to bring it back to social enterprise, but the goal well the dream is to have the program be completely self sustaining so we have enough money coming in to help covers all our programs. We love generosity. We love people making donations, but it gives us oxygen to breath and to do our work, but when everything is not in our ability to say how things are going to come in then that difficult so if we could get the social enterprise to bring in 25-50% of our revenue and count on that every year that would be a big deal for us.

Bronté: Definitely

Mshary:

So in one interview you talked about the role of Reality Changers in relation to tight rope walking. So we think this idea can stick in the minds of young people. So, how did you come up with this idea?

Chris: How did it start? I've been talking about this for a long time. And I'll tell you there's four life cycles to new ideas. Do you know what cycles are before they're accepted? To any new ideas The stages are crazy, crazy, crazy, obvious. So I'm hoping like we're coming out of the third cycle into that last fourth cycle. I've been told. I've written a manuscript, its not published yet, but I think I started in 2009, so we're talking it's almost been 10 years. It's been my head, how I actually got that idea in the first place. I don't know. I don't remember. But in that manuscript there's 10 chapters with nine other chapters. The first chapter is called the tight rope theory. There are nine others are just like that. To pin point when I actually got the idea was in 2009. I think its um what's good about it is you're trying to figure things out that's easy. Everybody gets it its really fast. The closest comparison, its sort of fallen out of favor a little bit, but the new york city broken windows model. Where it one window is broken then that's going to lead to a lot more broken windows so you have to fix that first broken window. It's like to what got the squeegee off the corner of New York City. It's because its prevent the bigger crime from spreading you have to take care of the smallest things first, so that it doesn't spread. It's just as simple as that. The tight rope theory. What's that? It's like, well, does the program's message like don't look down. If it is, it's magnifying the dangers and not telling anybody or teaching them how to take the steps across, get across to the other-side or giving them the balancing point they need to make it. It's really easy I think, but people come up to me all the time. Oh yeah. I love the tight rope theory it's not about prevention. Now that's why we tell our kids never to use drugs ever again. It's like no. Now see?

Brontë: Oh God.

Chris:

The Superbowl commercials are like five million dollars now I think for 30 seconds these days.

Brontë: Something like that.

Chris: That's almost, geez, that's almost \$150,000 per second to place a product in front of someone's face. So why in the world are we having assemblies at middle schools and high schools about the dangers of drugs and gangs without getting some sponsorship money from the drug dealers and shot callers because we're advertising their products for free. So, and there's programs out there that do that and it's sad because very well intention programs and I sound like I'm the guy bashing them. And again, I'm bashing myself first because that's what I did for 5 years. But then look at the comparison, at our challenge assemblies. We invite all the 8th graders from the toughest schools in San Diego that we can find that have GPAs of 2.0 down to 0.0. They don't know why they're there. If they ask, we tell them that you've been specially selected. We hear you have a good story to tell. And if they have below a 2.0 in those neighborhoods, I promise you they have great stories. They come in. We give them a big hand shake. Their names tag already has their name printed on it, so they walk in saying, "wow they want me here?" They're being friendly to me? I see my name written down for something good? They're very confused. They're not happy, they're confused. They usually respond...

Brontë: What did I do?

Chris:

What is this? And we shake their hand with a big smile. And we say, "well come on in and find out." And they say, "Is there anything bad? And it's like no. That cop car in front of the school is not for me?" Well not this time. We serve them a very grand lunch that consists of pizza and soda. Which sounds like nothing to you guys but we actually buy the giant pizzas that you can barely fit them thru the door. They cost as much as Little Caesar's pizzas, you know the five dollar small ones. But because they're so big, they look majestic. And we pour the cups of soda for them. One by one. What would you like? And we get the school leader and we'll pour it for them. So they're treated like something special is happening. And that's a big change for them. Then, we sit them down. Get them quiet. They come in kicking, screaming, cussing, and we also toss in students on the waiting list who have already applied to the program and tend to have better GPAs into the mix, so when they look around its all the bad kids. Oh well that one has a 4.0. Why are we all together? They have no idea. Then we show some videos that captures their attention. Graduates share their stories. Then we come back at the end and present the challenge at the assembly. Whoever gets their grades up the most over the next month will skip over Reality Changers' year long waiting list and join the program six months before high school starts. And we tell them, you don't have to have the best GPA in this room. But its just the ones in this room and you have to be the top twelve. And they look around at all the knuckle heads in the school and say I can do better than all of these guys. And so, sure enough, up to 60% of the toughest students in the worst parts of town will raise their grades in that next month with no tutoring, no services, just this idea and hope that something else out there could be better. And, so sure enough we take the students and all of a sudden these big huge guys who think they're the king of their middle school campuses walk in to Reality Changers, which is a program for high school students, and the eighth graders shrink before our eyes and because they're in the

shadow of these older peers. And we found that the secret sauce to Reality Changers is that if you want an eighth grader to buy something, whether it's drugs, gangs, or this crazy idea of going to college, just have an eleventh grader sell it to them. And they'll buy whatever product is being offered to them. And that's our secret sauce. And those eighth graders with 1.5 GPAs or 0.0 GPAs really want to go to college? They can't even name colleges and what they are, let alone want to go. But if their eleventh grader friends are going and they get to go with them, they'll be willing to do crazy things like study, go to class, turn in their homework, again not because they want to go to college but because they don't want to be left behind. And that's the motivating factor. Is this positive peer pressure, by near peers who can be their role models and bring them along with them.

Brontë:

That's great. So on that note, I think that was a great answer the last question. Is there anything else you want to share with us about your experience or Reality Changers in general?

Chris: Social enterprise is the way to go for non-profits. The biggest barrier is that nobody knows what that is. I've had an attorney, obviously well-educated, many years of education, thinking about putting her kids into the program. We call this social enterprise and she said no my kids are too social already they don't need to be in this program. So people just don't know what that, unless maybe you like in Boston or San Francisco and maybe LA, what a social enterprise is and what it's supposed to accomplish. It's just not known. What makes it difficult for us is to try to teach what a social enterprise is before we can even present our product of college application support. So it has to be much better known and often times, it breaks the current model of yeah we have organizations that support us year in and year out of ten, fifteen thousand dollars a year, which is a nice size. So you know what? We'd love to have the location of College Apps Academy at on your campus. It's not a school or anything but it's they have a physical space as large as school like classrooms. No we can't have any group come in and charge money for their services because we're just in charge of giving money out, donations, but we can't have you make any money on our property. Well this could double or triple the amount that you're giving us every year. Yeah we can't, we can't do that. So people are just not comfortable yet with this idea of social enterprise and that's a huge barrier to us because to have to explain anything twice as long, like when you see, I don't know, pick a gum commercial, or whatever it can be. If you had to explain what you're supposed to do with gum first before you actually say wow look its this and has sparkles and it can do all these things. It just makes it a lot more complicated. So we need everybody's help to spread the word what social enterprise is, so that people are more responsive to it and can invest in it fast. Either directly as a donation or just multiply their investment faster or get their families involved in it as well.

Brontë: Awesome. Well thank you so much for being here!

— End of Transcription —