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Aspen University Commencement Speech

What is your educational journey?

My educational journey includes both traditional academic classroom learning and practical, on-the-ground learning.

1- Traditional Academic Experiences:

- My traditional academic learning started with my undergraduate degree in psychology, when I remember sitting in a classroom of 300 students and wondering ***if I made a difference.***
- After I graduated, I got a job working at the Boys and Girls Club, where I learned about gangs, child abuse, and the importance of prevention programs. And I knew I needed more education to make a larger impact.
- After a few years I then pursued my masters degree in Educational Counseling. One of my professors there went out of her way to encourage me to take a summer trip to Africa to gain more **practical experience** about what I was wanting to learn. So off I went. And it ended up changing my life's trajectory.

2- Practical, On-the-ground Learning:

- I soon found myself in Uganda, sitting on a cold floor of an orphanage, holding a little girl for hours who was burning up with a fever. Nobody worried about her. They didn't have time. **And I knew in that moment I mattered for that child.**
- A week later I spent an entire day rocking a baby who had HIV, and who sadly died the next day. **And even though it's hard to explain the impact I made to funders that day in metrics, I knew that I mattered to that child and that's exactly where I needed to be in that moment.**
- Soon after that I found myself sitting in a small make-shift hut, in the middle of Kenya, wondering ***how I could make a larger impact and difference*** as I saw all the suffering around me.

Once I returned to the US, I moved to the Bay Area, where I took a job in the San Francisco School District as a School Counselor where I learned more about homelessness, poverty, hunger, suicide prevention, and the importance of working with the police to see better outcomes for these high school kids.

I soon realized that I wanted a more global experience. So I started a nonprofit and began running and participating in medical and humanitarian expeditions to Africa, India, Dominican Republic and Central America.

Throughout these experiences I continued to ask myself.

How can I make a difference?

And so I ask you: **How can you make a difference in the communities you live in?**

A few years ago, I realized that in order to make a larger impact, I needed to do research and obtain my doctorate degree.

How has Aspen University and our mission helped you achieve your academic and professional goals?

I searched for a university that would give me flexibility in learning and a place where I would get the support with what I wanted to accomplish. I looked at in-person universities but found it wasn't a fit to allow me to pursue my work and learn **what I needed to progress my desire to make a difference in the world.**

Looking back, Aspen University and the professors I had, were the perfect fit for me. I found my experience there to be encouraging and supportive in my goals.

Talk about my Interests and Research

Throughout my classes, I was drawn to articles and stories about the nonprofit sector. What leadership style works best with nonprofits, and how best to motivate individuals to get involved in the community and global issues.

Then I started being drawn to articles about human trafficking. The challenges that exist and the realities of 40 million people in this world who are enslaved in modern day slavery. As I learned more, I became more firmly rooted in being part of the solution to help in the cause to stop human trafficking.

My Research study:

The focus of my research study was to better understand the challenges that nonprofits face as they work together with other nonprofits, law enforcement and the community to fight human trafficking.

As I did my research, this time I didn't wonder if I could make a difference, I knew I could.

In my discussions with my professors and as I better understood the challenges that nonprofits face through my research, AND having seen these challenges in the last 20 years of working in the nonprofit sector, I have been able to develop a tool to help. A nonprofit called WikiCharities.

WikiCharities.org

WikiCharities is creating an online community for the nonprofit sector, where we've developed a nonprofit validation to improve transparency and connect nonprofits with funders, volunteers, other nonprofits, and even those who need their services (like victims and survivors of human trafficking). Similar to what Linked did for the professional space, WikiCharities is bringing the nonprofit sector together on a global scale.

In my research, I discovered that there are 3 reasons why victims of human trafficking don't get help.

- 1- Afraid of Trafficker (or trauma-bond with)
- 2- Don't trust authorities
- 3- Don't know what services are in their community to help them. - WikiCharities is working to solve #3.

We recently uploaded 1.7 million US based nonprofits on our platform where you can search for them, and their services, on our map by topic and location. We also just launched our nonprofit validation where nonprofits can now claim their own profile page and become validated. We hope all foundations, funders, and companies will require our validation prior to giving - to improve how funds are used and making services more accessible to those who need them.

I invite you to check it out, and become aware of the nonprofits in your community that you can support. Maybe these causes match up to how you want to make a difference in your community!

As I went through my journey in my research and developing WikiCharities, I found myself continually asking:

- **How can I make a difference in this area?**
- **What research can I do that will help make a small dent in this field?**

I've been asked to share words of wisdom for my fellow graduates. To end, I would offer up 3 things that have helped me and hopefully YOU find helpful, as you discover the questions you need to ask in your journey.

What words of wisdom do you have for your fellow graduates?

1- Know Yourself: Develop "Self Awareness"

Creating the time and space to know who you are.

Do you know what you like and what you don't like?

What do you feel passionate about? What do you care about?

"I have a dream.. " said Dr. King.

What is your dream? Once you know, make sure you write it down.

2- Make a Plan:

Take the time to think about why you feel passionate about something and what you can do to be part of making a difference. And then get to work.

3- Find People Who Believe in You:

I think this is key to success.

Do you have people around you who are supportive and believe in what you're doing? If you don't, go where you are appreciated.

I want to thank the professors and individuals at Aspen University who created an environment for me to accomplish what I needed to meet my goals in making a difference.

I'll end with one of my favorite quotes by Robin Williams,

"No matter what people tell you, words and ideas matter."

"May today there be peace within.

May you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others.

May you use the gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content with yourself just the way you are.

Let this knowledge settle into your bones, and allow your soul the FREEDOM to sing, dance, praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of us."

~Mother Theresa♥

Thank you!