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Q&A: A Commitment to Social Entrepreneurship

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Aniqah Zowmi is an undergraduate student at Brock University with a passion for youth empowerment and social innovation. She hopes to create a future in which youth are empowered to build communities through social innovation. Her current project is

Innov8athon, which aspires to be the world's premier social innovation competition for youth who are addressing the UN Global Goals.

Aniqah is a 3M National Student Fellow of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, an honour awarded to youth who have "demonstrated outstanding leadership in their lives and at their college or university." She has been recognized as one of twenty Emerging Social Innovators across Canada by Ashoka and American Express for her work advocating for marginalized youth. In November 2015, she represented Canada at the Commonwealth Youth Forum.

You describe your social action work as 'social entrepreneurship'? How do you define social entrepreneurship?

Social entrepreneurship is used as a 'catch-all' phrase for many enterprises that incorporate a civic-minded dimension. This is a rapidly accelerating area of organizational growth,



and so the term 'social entrepreneurship' has come to mean different things to different people. I define social entrepreneurship as *the creation of a business, enterprise, entity, or innovation that has the express goal to create ultimate good*. This could, for example, be an initiative that is

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dedicated to providing equal opportunities for educational access around the world. Or a new revolutionary technology that helps provide clean energy alternatives. Social

entrepreneurship, unlike corporate social responsibility, has, as its overriding goal, the mission of positively impacting the world.

The one caveat is that social entrepreneurship/innovation is not exclusive to non-profits - hybrid organizations or for-profit enterprises can also be social enterprises. One defining characteristic I seek out when identifying social enterprises is the ability for the organization to be self-sustaining.

[Can you describe a social entrepreneurship project you have been involved in that has been particularly meaningful to you?](#)

Much of my work stems from empowering youth to use the tools of social entrepreneurship as they endeavour to create positive change in their own communities. Though I have always been interested in sustainable projects that create social good, the first time I was explicitly exposed to the term 'social enterprise' was at the age of 19 when I had the opportunity to mentor youth through *TakingITGlobal's Sprout Ideas Camp*. Youth were navigated through the process of creating their own social enterprise/innovation, and I was able to share my own experiences working at the intersection of social justice and youth empowerment with other youth who were endeavouring to do the same. Never before have I had such a holistic experience, where I was wholly convinced that this was exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. The



incredible feeling of accomplishment and knowing that I was able to have an impact on the young participants is one of the main driving forces which continues to motivate me as I move towards a career mentoring other youth.

[When you get involved in a social entrepreneurship project, what are some of the things you pay close attention to in order to ensure the project succeeds?](#)

One thing I have recently been very focused on is sustainability. I know that I will probably not stick with one organization or one pursuit for the rest of my life, but I know that if I want to create sustained change in the world, I need to create sustainable organizations and plans that can survive when I and the other initiators are no longer around. Sustainability, and creating sustainability plans, is one of the most important considerations I think about when getting involved in a new project. I ask myself: How will this initiative continue on after I and others have moved on? Will the initiative need to be funded by donors on an ongoing basis or can the initiative fund itself over the long-term? Specifically, with non-profits, sustainability is a major issue as organizations that are dependent on others for money often do not continue to operate indefinitely. However, there is a societal shift within the non-profit sector that is focused on best practice strategies for ensuring sustainability. This is an effort with which I hope to become more involved in the future in order to create effective, sustainable, long lasting civic-minded organizations.

[What should high schools do to encourage students to think more critically about social issues?](#)

Sean Campbell, at the *Niagara Social Enterprise Forum* in January 2016, said that we need to find people who 'love the problem, not the solution.' I believe that the best way to get students involved in social issues, and driven to create



positive change, is to help them find something they are passionate about fixing in the world.

You don't have to find your passion right away, and you shouldn't feel discouraged if you can't easily figure out what your passion is. Sometimes, a passion can begin with a 'spark' of recognition. Other times, a passion can be a dull flame that grows slowly over time.

It's a phrase that's thrown around a lot these days - 'find your passion' - but it's often easier said than done. Personally, I found my passion by throwing myself into novel experiences, and allowing myself to be in uncomfortable situations.

It was in these situations that I

experienced the most growth, and learned more about myself and my goals.

My passion for youth empowerment stemmed from working with youth, and because I am energized by the problem, in the sense that I am motivated to empower youth, I am willing to put in the effort to reflect on the social issues that affect youth, and think critically about existing solutions to youth empowerment. In order to awaken the same passion in high school students, I believe students need to figure out the problem they are most passionate about solving. The exploration of the relevant social issues will naturally follow.

Finding one's passion is a difficult process, and can't be done overnight. It took me a few years to figure out what my passion is, and I'm still refining it as I engage with others. You don't have to find your passion right away, and you shouldn't feel discouraged if you can't easily figure out what your passion is. Sometimes, a passion can begin with a 'spark' of recognition. Other times, a passion can be a dull flame that grows slowly over time.

Speaking as a social entrepreneur who strives to make a difference in the lives of others, do you think all projects in schools should have some sort of social action component?

I believe that one of the biggest 'missing pieces' in education today is the real-world applicability of the content that is



taught in class. The nature of our educational systems prioritize the ability to regurgitate information when prompted. An equal emphasis on the practicality of what is learned is not always as evident. To be sure, a class can discuss the failures of the current political system, but how can we translate that knowledge into meaningful action? I believe that every school should, in some way or form, integrate experiential learning or a social action component into students' learning. There are many things I learned through my experiences as a social entrepreneur that, even if I had been formally trained in social entrepreneurship or business, I would never have learned without the opportunity to apply what I was learning to experience. I believe that's the nature of our education system today - there seems to be a 'coddling' effect, where students are made to feel 'comfortable', and become complacent in their educational environment, only to realize much later that the 'real world' is not quite as forgiving. Entrepreneurship - and really, any real-world pursuit - can often be a 'trial by fire.' Without social entrepreneurs, who were willing to put their livelihoods at stake, we would not have some of the leading edge inventions and businesses we have today.

For example, Elon Musk is known primarily for being the co-founder of Paypal and the founder of SpaceX and Tesla Motors. He invested much of his money into the creation of Tesla Motors, which creates cars that run on renewable energy. Musk has completely shifted paradigms related to accessible and renewable energy, not only by creating a social enterprise that is driven by the mission to reduce pollution, but also by freely licensing to others the patents for Tesla Motors' electric car technology.

You noted that social entrepreneurship can be 'trial by fire' in your last response. How do you deal with the potential for failure?



I believe there is value in attempting to pursue an initiative even if it turns out not to be successful. My first community organization, *The ReConnect Movement*, was not successful, but I learned many lessons from that experience that I continue to employ today. Failing presents us with the opportunity to learn important lessons that we can then apply to future pursuits. I am committed to the 'fail-forward' philosophy where one embraces the learning that comes from making mistakes.

What advice would you have for a student in upper elementary school or early high school who is keen to make a difference the world?

Just do it. Entrepreneurship - and any type of work that aims to change the world - is scary, especially when you are on the outside looking in, but nothing can prepare you for the feeling of accomplishment, the journey, and the exhilaration it brings. Through social entrepreneurship, you will learn how to create civic-minded businesses and organizations, strategize with people, network, and pitch your ideas, but you cannot prepare fully for the experience beforehand. Through social entrepreneurship, you will learn so much about yourself, and just how much you have to offer the world. Age is not a factor when you are planning to change the world. Go for it - it will be hard, it will be scary, but it will also be soulfully rewarding and memorable.

What advice do you have for students who are passionate about a social issue, but who might be worried that they might across as too 'gung-ho,' especially to their peers?

Some of the best advice I received when I started my social entrepreneurship journey was this: find your tribe. Social entrepreneurship, and working in the field of social justice, is a tiring, and sometimes lonely, undertaking. Surround yourself with people that will motivate you, inspire you, and who will



So my advice is this: Keep on working hard, using your voice to create positive change, and don't be afraid to surround yourself with a community of like-minded individuals who see the world through a civic-minded lens similar to your own.

understand the obstacles that you will no doubt face when you are on your own journey. These are the same people who will understand why the fire burns so bright within you, and who will not question your motives. It can be hard to find these people, but sometimes, all you need to do is ask. I have, many times, emailed people I look up to with no prior introduction, simply because I am trying to find that tribe of like-minded people. It seems bold, but I found one of my current mentors - the Executive Director of *TakingITGlobal* - simply by sending her an email out of the blue. The less frightened you are to ask people to be part of your tribe, the faster you will see the group of people who understand you and your work on a fundamental level, grow.

So my advice is this: Keep on working hard, using your voice to create positive change, and don't be afraid to surround yourself with a community of like-minded individuals who see the world through a civic-minded lens similar to your own.

How do you keep yourself motivated?

Motivation can be lost in one of two ways: burnout or losing sight of the ultimate goal.

When dealing with burnout, I remind myself that it is okay to step back from my social entrepreneurship commitments in order to take the needed time to reconnect with myself and/or friends. I am cognizant that sometimes I will need to consciously remove myself from my work in order to recharge and ultimately be more effective when I return to my work.

In terms of losing sight of the ultimate goal, it is sometimes easy to forget why I pursue the work I do in the tediousness of the day-to-day tasks that build up. I find it incredibly helpful to take some time out of each week to reflect on what my vision for the world is - one in which youth use their stories to create



new opportunities for empowerment for both themselves and other young people - and how I am contributing to that ultimate vision. This helps me re-center myself and my commitment to social entrepreneurship.