

[Transcript] My First Million / Scott Harrison: From Nightclub Promoter to Charity Water Founder

You know, it turns out that the Red Cross is not looking for a nightclub promoter. Doctors without voters are they're looking for credible doctors, not, you know, DJs or promoters. So I remember being so dejected by the rejections.

And then one organization wrote me back and said, if you are willing to pay us five hundred dollars a month to volunteer and if you're willing to go live in the poorest country in the world, a country I'd never even heard of called Liberia.

And it was at the bottom of the United Nations Development Chart because it had just come out of a 14 year civil war.

And there was finally data on the country that they could stack rank it at the bottom of the world. And they said, we are taking a medical mission into this country and we'll take you if you pay us. What's up? I have Scott Harrison here.

We've been, I don't know, maybe planning to do at least in my head. I've been planning to do an episode like this for a long time.

So I invited myself on.

Let's be honest.

You did invite yourself on, but that's something I love about you.

It's because I like you.

You are you're also like kind of unashamed.

You are unashamed at like doing, getting the right thing done.

I met this guy once and he said, if your intentions are good, you can get away with anything. And I don't know if that's, you know, I don't know if that's 100 percent true, but I do think it's a good motto.

Don't be too shy.

So yes, you invited yourself on.

But I think it's going to be a good one.

Well, the alternative was you want people to die of bad water.

So I mean, right.

Yeah, well, which one is it?

I'm just kidding.

Scott's a good friend.

We met through a mutual friend, Michael Birch, and then I went on a trip to Africa with Scott and saw the work that he was doing.

So that was kind of cool.

I'll say this.

So a lot of people click on this podcast because they're schemers and dreamers. They're trying to figure out how to make money.

And we don't shy away from the fact that we enjoy making money and we enjoy the game of business.

I think for most people, here's their mindset coming in.

It's going to be charity episode.

OK, you know, maybe if I'm in the mood, but I'm going to tell you this.

So that person who's a little on the fence, let me tell you this right now.

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You're going to love this episode way more than the normal one for two reasons. The first is you're going to be inspired. Scott's story is very inspiring. I've heard him tell it many times. I'm going to give him the opportunity to tell it here because it's kind of one of these like real life movies in a way. And he started off as a not so do-gooder and turned into a very do-gooder. And I think the story is very good. And two, he's an entrepreneur and he took an entrepreneurial approach to charity, which I think very few I know. I know personally a very few examples of that and he's a very good storyteller. And for all of you people who reach out to me saying, oh, Sean, I love your stories. Well, the master is here. He's a much better storyteller than me. So if you take nothing else away from this, you'll pick up a lot on storytelling. That's what those are my promises to you, Scott. How did I do? Do you think that's a high bar properly? Yeah, I know. No pressure. Luckily, you've told this story once or twice before. Well, OK, I like schemers and dreamers. I was definitely a schemer and dreamer at 18 years old. I was born in Philadelphia, raised in a conservative Christian family. And when I was four, my mom passed out on the bedroom floor due to a carbon monoxide gas leak in our house. So we just moved into this new house. My dad was excited because it was reducing his commute. He wanted to spend more time with me, have a big family. And she was the canary in the coal mine, which her unconsciousness led to the discovery of this gas leak. And life was never the same again. Mom never recovered. It affected her because she was at home all the time. She was 24, 7. That's right. She was unpacking boxes from the move, you know, putting frames on the walls. Dad was working in a long hours at a job. I was at school playing with my friends at their houses. And she was she bore the brunt of it. And my dad actually got sick. So we had some weird food allergies, some migraines, but she got really sick. And this led to the discovery of the gas leak. My dad whipped out the furnace with his bare hands. He threw it out of the curb. And from that point on, her immune system was irreparably disabled.

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And unfortunately, I have 40 years of experience with the 3M family of masks. So my mom was always masked from that point on. Charcoal masks, N95 masks, everything chemical made her sick. So she was able to survive by creating isolation rooms for herself. This sounds strange, but my mom lived in a tinfoil covered bathroom. And she slept on an army cot that had been washed and baking soda 20 times. She was so sensitive that if she wanted to read a book, I would have to either bake her book in the oven or set it outside for a couple of days in the sun to get that smell of print out. Then I would knock on the door. I would hear the tinfoil rustle. I would hand her the lightly baked book and with her mask on and a pair of gloves, she would receive the book for me and shut the door. All right, let's take a second to talk about our sponsor today HubSpot. They have two new AI tools that are pretty cool. I want to tell you about. So the first one is content assistant. So we know that content is key for driving revenue because you write content, you get traffic, the traffic turns into leads, the leads turn into revenue. But not everybody's great at doing content. And so the content assistant is basically an AI based tool that will help you come up with blog post ideas or even draft the blog post or an outline for it. And you can use it to write the copy that you need for your website, your landing page, your prospecting emails, whatever you need to write content, this can do it for you. It's built on top of OpenAI's GPT model. And the differentiator is that it's an all in one AI power tool that's designed to help you get more done, save you time and help you grow your business faster. So that's the first one. The second one is chat spot. So chat spot, think of that like a chat bot that you can talk to and just ask it questions like, Hey, what's our web traffic or revenue? Or, Hey, is there anybody in our CRM that fits this criteria and it'll just pull it up? Or you can ask it to do things like, Hey, draft a email, follow up, to this prospect. So chat spot has got your back. Think of it like an intelligent assistant. So you can check these both out and get early access today at [hubspot.com slash artificial dash intelligence](https://hubspot.com/slack-artificial-intelligence). That's [hubspot.com slash artificial dash intelligence](https://hubspot.com/slack-artificial-intelligence). All right, back to the show.

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So all that to say, a very weird childhood in a caregiver role, doing the cooking, doing the cleaning, you know, helping my dad, my dad was an amazing loyal man, a stock buyer, believed that one day God would make sense of all this. And, you know, my mom just lived with this for the rest of her life. So, you know, the first kind of chapter of my life, if you'd run into me as a young teenager, I was going to be a doctor. I was going to cure mom and everybody else sick with a condition like hers. Instead, I became a schemer and a dreamer. And at 18, yeah, I moved to New York City and just had that wake up moment. Now it's my turn. Now it's my turn to break the rules. I don't want to take care of anyone anymore. I want to take care of myself and I want to have sex and I want to do drugs and I want to drink and I want to be rich and famous. And I stumbled into this job as a New York City nightclub promoter where you had a pretty good shot at achieving those markers of success. And I became really good at throwing parties at the high end. Selling \$1,000 bottles of crystal, selling \$25 vodka Red Bulls that cost us 25 cents and creating spaces for movie stars and actors and musicians and, you know, fashion moguls and designers to party. And, you know, it couldn't have been more opposite, maybe from the slightly repressed Christian upbringing and, you know, a picture of my life 10 years later was me and a DJ booth with a famous DJ spring champagne down over the crowd. Puppy's at table one, Jay-Z's at table three, and I'm at table two thinking I'm a rock star because we have prettier girls at our table than Jay-Z or Puppy. And this was, you know, it was dinner at 10, the nightclub at 12 and then after hours at 5 a.m. and to bed at noon taking Ambien to come down with a whole lot of self loathing, you know, if it caught up to us, which it did, you know, far too often towards the end of that. So it was 10 years for me to realize that I had made a mess in my life. I had come so far from the spirituality, from the morality that my parents had tried to instill in me so far from wanting to become a doctor to help others. And one day half my body went numb. And, you know, maybe no surprise to anybody listening as I just described what I was doing. But I just remember thinking like, I'm going to die. I'm going to die. I've been living like I'm going to live forever and now I'm going to die in a week. I've got some brain tumor. I've got something very wrong with me because I can't feel half my body. And I went to doctors and had MRIs and CT scans and, you know, they hooked diodes up to me and electromagnetic pulsing, all that. They couldn't figure out anything wrong with me. But it was a wake up call, Sean, that if I did die,

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my tombstone, the best it could read would be here lies a man who's gotten a million people wasted, because the only thing I had to show for when you were in the doctor's office and you fill out the little form where you just like, yes, on all the questions.

It's like, have you in the last six months consumed any drugs?

I remember being brutally honest.

Yeah, because I think everybody kind of cheats a little like how many alcoholic drinks, right?

You shave that by half, typically.

I think I was honest and like how many alcoholic drinks, like one hundred and sixty five a week, something just how many packs of cigarettes, two and a half a day.

You know, anyway, they couldn't find anything wrong with me.

But this led to a pretty radical life change and maybe the close of chapter two as this sycophantic, hedonistic nightclub promoter living only for himself.

And I wondered whether I could start life over at 28 and really ask myself, what would the opposite of my life look like?

You know, I realized a pivot was not in order.

You know, this was this was not a small course correction that needed to happen.

This was like do and think and say the hundred and eighty degree opposite of everything you've done and thought and said for the last ten years and see how that plays out.

And I live for these kind of like these moments, these self talk moments.

I think most of life is just in my own head.

It's me. It's me with me.

And we're having a conversation.

And so a lot of times it's small talk, it's surface level stuff.

And then there are these times where I have the like the real conversation with myself in my head. Do you do you remember what that like those days or like what made you really like have that that that conversation with yourself at that point?

Yeah. Well, there was a faith piece.

So I started praying again and, you know, kind of going back and like, hey, what do I believe any of that stuff from childhood?

You know, there was a lot of religion.

There was a lot of rules, you know, but there was a lot of good in there as well.

So I sort of, you know, tried to kind of come back to faith again.

So there was a lot of prayer, like, you know, God, are you there?

And what should I be doing?

And is there is there anything else for me?

And I remember the self talk really saying, OK, well, if you're if you're exploring the opposite of your life, what would that look like?

And I thought, well, it would be volunteering

on a humanitarian mission in the poorest country in the world.

That was the spec that would be the opposite of a nightclub, you know, bottles and models lifestyle.

And I remember it from a I was I'd taken some time driving just aimlessly

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north trying to find myself.
I wound up in Maine in an internet cafe on Moosehead Lake
with dial up Dell computers, and I started applying to humanitarian aid
organizations that I'd tangentially heard of over the decade.
Certainly not that I'd given any money to,
but doctors without borders, save the children, Oxfam, World Vision, the Red Cross.
And I I was very clear that this is what I wanted to do, give one year.
Of the 10 years that I had selfishly
wasted or lived and see if I could be useful.
Well, maybe no surprise, I was denied by the first 10 organizations.
You know, it turns out that the Red Cross is not looking for a nightclub promoter.
Doctors without borders are they're looking for credible doctors, not, you know,
DJs or promoters.
So I remember being so
dejected by the rejections.
And then one organization wrote me back and said,
if you are willing to pay us \$500 a month to volunteer,
and if you're willing to go live in the poorest country in the world,
a country I'd never even heard of called Liberia.
And it was at the bottom of the United Nations development chart
because it had just come out of a 14 year civil war.
And there was finally data on the country
that they could stack rank it at the bottom of the world.
And they said, we are taking a medical mission into this country
and we'll take you if you pay us every month.
And the job or the volunteer role I signed up for was a photojournalist.
So I was going to be taking pictures and writing.
And I was always a pretty good writer and a pretty good hobby photographer,
you know, through the club club years.
And I'd gotten a degree part time at NYU for that because it was the easiest to do.
You basically did the real life version.
I don't even watch Seinfeld, but I know about this episode where George is like,
Jerry, I'm doing the opposite now.
Whatever I used to do, I do the opposite.
You basically had the real life version of that where you're like,
go from New York City, nightlife, you know, rich, famous, fast living too.
I'm going to go to the poorest country on earth, pay to volunteer
and basically donate a year of my time just to kind of course correct
and like break my own frame and shift.
Just it sounds like you didn't even have
like a long term plan or like this grand vision for yourself.
I was like, I just need to shift like where this direction I'm going now into some
I need to swerve in a hard hard turn.

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And then a couple of things happen.

Yeah, that's exactly right.

I wouldn't have told you more than a year of line of sight.

I met the chief medical officer, so I was going to be living on a hospital ship, a 500 foot converted ocean liner that was 50 plus years old.

So not, you know, not a nice cruise liner.

And it had been gutted and turned into a state of the art hospital with a very simple idea for this charity.

Let's sail a giant hospital ship with the best doctors in the world on their vacation time and let's take it to people who can't afford medical care.

And and because we can control the environment,

let's bring them on the hospital ship, perform these life changing surgeries and then set them back on land with transformed lives and transformed health.

So I met the guy who is running this whole thing and his name was Dr.

Gary Parker, and I learned that he was a plastic surgeon from California who had heard about this opportunity and he signed up for three months.

And when I walked up the gangway of this

hospital ship to to surrender my passport, he had been there 21 years.

So he never went back to his California plastic surgery practice.

And he dedicated two decades of his life to this work.

So I remember just thinking, what if that's me?

What if it's not a year?

And I wanted to know everything I could about him

and what two decades of service would look like or feel like or the impact that a person could have.

All right, let's take a quick break.

I want to tell you about a podcast you should check out on the HubSpot podcast network. It's called The Product Boss.

It is a podcast where it's like almost like a workshop style strategy hour around social media and marketing strategies that you can use to up level yourself in terms of sales and in your marketing strategies.

So there's a couple of episodes that you could check out.

There's one called Why Being Ready is a Lie, which is don't wait for don't wait to take action. You'll never take action.

You know, if you keep waiting, the truth is you'll never be ready.

And they talk about why it's important to take that leap of faith and trust that new doors will open for you if you just go ahead and take action.

So check out this podcast.

Go listen to The Product Boss wherever you get your podcasts.

So my third day there is the patient screening.

So the ship's arrival has been announced by an advanced team.

Flyers have been posted throughout the country.

And we have been given the football stadium in the center of town,

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the soccer stadium by the government to triage the people who might come to visit our doctors. Now, I know we have fifteen hundred available surgery slots to fill. I remember thinking to myself, like, are there fifteen hundred sick people with facial tumors or cleft lips or blind or lame with leprosy? Like, you know, that sounds like a lot of people. And I remember at five fifteen or five thirty a.m. putting on hospital scrubs, it was still pitch blackout jumping into this convoy of landrovers with doctors and surgeons and nurses. And we kind of snaked through the city and we came to the stadium and there were five thousand people standing in the dark in the parking lot waiting for us to open the doors. And that was such a powerful moment for me. Realizing, oh, crap. We're going to send three thousand five hundred of these people home without seeing a doctor, without any answer for their affliction. And I later learned you probably used to having a long line outside the door. That was a different kind of line. This was a bad thing now. The parallels, you know, there have been some interesting ones. I later learned some of these people had walked for more than a month with their children from neighboring countries, just hoping that a doctor might save their child's life. So I remember Dr. Gary said to me, focus on the hope. You know, don't focus on the thirty five hundred people we're going to send home. Focus on the fifteen hundred people who are going to help. And that's what I really did for that first year on the ship. And I was documenting every single one of them before surgery and after surgery for the medical library and that you know, mercy ships would be able to use those photos to raise money and spread awareness to the work. The other cool thing that happened was I was blasting my club list of fifteen thousand emails with pictures of facial tumors and flesh eating disease and leprosy, you know, being healed and, you know, or patients being operated on. And, you know, back then email open rates were like a hundred percent. So there were definitely a lot of unsubscribes, you know, I signed up for that cool Prada party you threw once, but not like the tumor party. But then, you know, most people were intrigued. They were fascinated. I had no idea that there were doctors on a ship saving people's lives. How do I get a piece of this? How do I sponsor a surgery? How do I come on the ship like you? I remember somebody writing me from Chanel once. She's like, I sit here in a brightly lit cosmetic headquarters and I'm weeping,

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you know, because I want more.

I want more than to sell makeup every day.

I want more for my life.

I want more purpose.

So I learned that maybe the same gift of promoting, getting people to stand outside of velvet rope, to queue, to hope to get into a nightclub, telling the story that if you came in my club and you spent thousands of dollars and you left with a cute boy or a cute girl, then your life had meaning.

You know, that same maybe gift or skill of promoting could be used to promote something entirely different and redemptive and important for other people.

So the year ended and I just signed up for a second year because I didn't know what was next, so let me go do this again for another year.

And that was when I found water.

So the second year I got off of the ship, I spent more and more time.

I bought a motorcycle.

So I'm driving around West Africa, Liberia, you know, with 14,000 United Nations peacekeepers and soldiers and I've got this little press badge.

And I'm spending time in these rural areas and I see the water people are drinking.

And they're drinking from swamps and ponds and rivers,

brown, green, viscous water, and I learned two things. I learned half the country

is drinking dirty water and I learned half the disease in the country

is because people are drinking dirty water.

So, you know, for contrast, you know, a year previously, I'd been selling

Voss water for ten dollars a bottle to people who would just order 20 bottles

for the table and not open any of them because they were drinking vodka or champagne.

So there was just something so profoundly

contrastful of watching a human drink dirty water that was making them sick

in real time and knowing the excess of my former life.

And I remember showing these photos to Dr.

Gary and I'm like, Dr. Gary, no wonder 5,000 sick people are standing outside

a parking lot of a stadium, you should see what they're drinking.

And he said, yeah, I know.

And in fact, a billion people drink this water every day.

One in six people alive on the planet.

He said, why don't you go do something about it?

Why don't you make this your mission?

Instead of raising money for, you know, the next 1500 surgeries on this ship,

why don't you just go get everybody in the world clean water?

He said, yeah, something like you'll be the you'd be the greatest

medical professional in the the history of the world if you just brought people

the most basic need for health, the most basic need for life.

And I was 30 at the time.

I'm like, well, OK, Dr. Gary, that sounds good.

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You know, and I came back to New York City and said, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to try to bring clean and safe drinking water to every single human on earth before I die, because that seems like a good idea.

And it'd be great if 5,000 people didn't have to stand outside a stadium if 3,500 people didn't have to get turned away because they had clean water in their villages, and that was really the start of charity water now 17 years ago.

And you this story, I would say two things.

One is your story is so good that the first time I heard it, I thought that sounds almost too good, like too good to be true, like the story is almost like Hollywood in that sense.

As I got to know you, I learned that you're the real deal.

I went with you to Africa.

I saw the wells that you guys have created.

I saw the drinking water.

We did the water carry of how far the women and children have to carry water.

That's not even that clean, but the cleaner water back home just so they have water.

You know, we saw the schools that were like, you know, now could function because they had this, we saw so much stuff.

So I've seen the impact of it on that side.

Yeah, I remember thinking this almost sounds too good to be true.

It turned out to be the real deal.

That's the first thing I want to say.

The second thing is when you have that moment, you're like, all right, here's what I should do with my life.

I know I've felt this, I'm sure other people felt this too.

The difference between what you feel like you should do and what you actually do is often held back by some sort of fear or limitation.

Did you like once you left Africa and you get back to the to New York.

Did doubt creep in or did you have any second thoughts of like, well, maybe I'll just send the check and go get a job somewhere like, you know, or were you really are you just wired differently where you were just sort of gung-ho like, no, I'm doing this.

I think what helped was that I had lived there for almost a year.

You know, you hear about a lot of people that go on a mission trip with their church and they spend five days in Guatemala or in Africa.

Five days is not enough to change.

Right.

You change everything about your life for most people.

A year of immersive proximity to an issue was.

So there was a responsibility to do something about what I'd seen that that took more than a week or even a month.

Right.

So I remember coming home.

In fact, the ship was sailing to South Africa while it was going to be dry docked

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every year, so they would kind of make repairs on the ship.
And everybody went on vacation to wine region for a month.
I'm like, I don't want to waste my time doing that.
I'm going to go back to New York City and I'm going to put on a gallery exhibition of all the photos that I've taken and I'm going to invite all my club friends in and I'm going to ask them for money.
And I did that.
I got a gallery donated in Chelsea.
I got a bunch of, you know, printers to donate, you know, high res giant photographs and I put together 108 of my before and afters in a gallery.
And I invited everybody from the clubs to come in and we raised about \$100,000.
And then I went back on the ship to show people what we had done with their money.
Right. To kind of follow the donation.
And so let's talk about the approach that you use to build shared water.
So first, let's zoom out.
At this point, Charity Water has been around for how many years and how much money has been donated and how many people have been given clean drinking water?
Since since we're at this moment.
We're in year 17, just started year 17.
We've raised \$750 million and we've helped 16.8 million people get clean water.
Amazing. And and in the world,
there are 770 million people without water.
So it's now one in 10 people alive as we record this are drinking dirty water.
82 percent of them live in rural areas.
So 17 years later.
Now, back to year one of that, your approach.
So you took a very interesting approach to this.
I want to start with a quote that I had heard you say once.
It's like this toothpaste quote.
You'll tell it better than me.
But I remember I still remember this.
I had you first told me this like eight years ago or something.
And that one stood out to me.
It's stuck with me ever since then.
You want to say the quotes?
Yeah, but this was Nick Kristoff of The New York Times.
Toothpaste is peddled with far more sophistication than all the world's lifesaving causes.
Exactly. So is better than doctors without borders at telling their story.
Right. The marketing, the sophistication, the photography, the story, the storytelling, all of it that goes into selling random commodity products, deodorant, and toothpaste.
And what stood out to me when I kind of encountered what you guys were doing at Charity Water was it was like best in class marketing, best in class product,

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best in class storytelling, like you would find with the way that, you know, traditional consumer packaged goods brands are run, but you were doing it with charity. And I had never seen that.

I was used to going to a charity website.

There was some old and crusty Craigslist looking site.

And I push a button and it asked me for money through some old payment method that I don't even know how to use.

Six pages long, right?

And then I'm like clicking accept, accept, accept.

I have no idea where this money is going.

Never hear from them again.

You know, and that was my charity experience.

And then Charity Water is very, very different.

So talk about how you decided to approach it from like first principles and what were those like core tenants that you built on top of?

Well, I had the advantage of not knowing what I was doing with many entrepreneurs to start, you know, anything that becomes the entrepreneurial advantage.

I didn't know any better.

I didn't come from the establishment.

So I knew nothing about traditional philanthropy, how to set up a charity.

I actually went and bought the yellow dummies book, you know, non-profits for dummies.

OK, and then I bought HTML for dummies because I'm like, well,

I don't have money for a web designer, so I need to also, you know, build our website.

So I was living on a closet floor at the time in Soho, New York.

My old club partner took me in for free rent and I was living on his walk-in closet.

And but I had a very clear mission.

So if you'd run into me 17 years ago,

I'm going to bring clean water to everybody in the world.

Same thing I'm saying, you know, now.

The as I talked to everyday people who worked at MTV or VH1 at the time, who worked at Sephora, who worked at Chase Bank,

I realized they were cynical and skeptical about charities.

They just didn't trust charities writ large.

And I remember coming across a USA Today poll found 42% of Americans just flat out said distrustful of charities.

70% of Americans in a more recent poll said they believe charities waste their money.

So 7 out of 10 potentially generous people think charities are wasting their donations.

So I thought this was a huge opportunity.

And a new business model could solve some of this skepticism or speak to the skeptic.

So I thought, well, what if we could open up two separate bank accounts?

And in one bank account, I would raise all of that nasty overhead.

The staff salaries, the office costs, the toner for the Epson copy machine,

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the flights to Africa and Indian Asia, where we'd eventually build our projects.
What if I could raise that in a separate bank account?
And then in the main bank account, 100% of every donation, whether it was a dollar or a pound or a euro or a million dollars or a million pounds or a million euros could go directly to build water projects that saves people's lives. And nobody was doing this at the time.
I mean, this would have made us different than 99.99% of charities in the world because it's very difficult to do, but I just thought this would be clear.
I could say to a six year old, go sell lemonade, turn in 75 cents.
If all 75 cents will go directly to help people get clean water.
So that was kind of number one idea.
Number two was then kind of realizing, wow, money's not fungible.
So we can build technology tools to track these small amounts of money down to the project that they funded.
And I remember meeting the founder of Google Earth and he pressed this medallion into my palm.
So Charity Water started right before Google Earth and Google Maps.
And he says, you know, I'm building a place where you can put every single well, every water point, and you can show people where their money went.
So I'm like, great, we're going to be the first charity to geolocate every completed project and we're going to build the most transparent charity the world has ever seen.
So proof became the second pillar.
And then the third thing was this idea of building an epic brand.
Charities so often use shame and guilt to peddle their wares.
Where would the apple of charities, where was the Nike?
You know, Nike doesn't sell shoes by telling people they're fat and lazy.
You know, Nike sells shoes by telling inspirational stories of people overcoming adversity.
And Nike believes if you have one leg, you can win a marathon.
You know, if you have one arm, you can win the shot put competition at the Olympics with your other arm.
And, you know, Nike believed greatness is inside you.
And that's the way that they market and someone's like, maybe I should turn off the TV and stop eating Cheetos and try and go run a quarter of a mile.
So I wanted charity water to be modeled on, you know, the whimsy of Virgin, the kind of beautiful design of Apple.
And then this, you know, this opportunity or inspiration of of Nike.
And I just didn't see it out there.
So brand was kind of the third thing, the third pillar.
And then to actually get the work done, I believed, you know, as we built wells and built gravity fed systems and filtration systems, and it would need to be led by the locals in each of these countries to be culturally appropriate and sustainable.

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When you came with me to Ethiopia, there were 350 local staff working on the charity water projects, running eight different drilling rigs. There wasn't a single person who looked like you or me. Right in that entire program of 350 people. And we just believe that we would create thousands of local jobs as we scaled. And our role would be to get people to care about this issue, get people to say, it's not OK on my watch that we are looking for water on a planet over 100 million miles away and 770 million people are risking their life every day because they don't have clean water here in our planet. So our job would be to get people to reject the apathy that, you know, is easy to assume with any of these paralyzing global issues and say, let's do something about this, let's get everybody on earth clean water. Like we can all agree on that. Republicans can agree on that. Democrats and independents and libertarians and Jews and Christians and Muslims and atheists and Mormons like everybody can think that clean drinking water is a good idea. So it started in a nightclub. I mean, the only idea I had 17 years ago was to throw my 31st birthday party. I got the club donated. I got open bar donated and then I charged everybody 20 bucks to get in as a donation. And at the end of that night, we collected \$15,000 in this big plexi box and we counted it and then we counted it again and then we photographed everybody counting it and then we took 100 percent of the money to Uganda and we built our first well and then we sent the photos and the GPS coordinates of that well back to the 700 people and we say, you did this. Here's where your twenty dollars went. And that sounds so simple, but that was so revolutionary. People never expected to hear from the charity again. I mean, they went to some party in a club for some dude's 31st birthday and they threw 20 bucks in a bin. And that idea, we said, let's just put that at the core of charity water. And in everything we do, let's try to connect people to what their money accomplished to the people who they helped. And so you you kick it off like that with the nightclub. Go back to you go back to the to your kind of roots as far as what do I know how to do? OK, I can throw a great party, but this time I'll I'll do it with a twist. And then tell the story about Mark Zuckerberg and Michael Burch and trying to scale this up because I thought this was an amazing story. Yeah. And this is where at some point, your genius business model of not keeping all the overheads separate and letting all the donations, one hundred percent of the donations go to the cause. Sounds good in theory, but there's a reason why charities don't do this.

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Because it's hard to cover the overheads.

So talk about how you got into a little bit of a pickle and then what happened from there?

Yeah. So about a year and a half in, well, let's just say the hundred percent model was working and we'd raised a few million dollars just right out of the gate.

People love that idea.

In the other bank account, a lot harder to raise that overhead.

So we had a moment where we had eight hundred and eighty seven thousand dollars ready to go out to build water projects.

And we were about to miss payroll and the overhead bank account.

And it was interesting.

The advice I was getting from people was, hey, go borrow from that eight hundred eighty seven, right? I mean, you've got to pay your people.

Right. Like you'll pay it back later.

Right. A little IOU in that account.

And I remember thinking, if we borrow one penny, we've compromised our integrity.

There's a crack at the foundation and I don't want to work here and nobody will want to work here again.

So I'm just going to shut the charity down and say that this business model didn't work.

And I started calling lawyers to say, like, how do you wind down a charity

18 months in because all the naysayers were right.

It's too hard getting people excited about overhead.

At the same time, I had just come up with this idea of trying to scale the birthday party, but not a birthday party in a nightclub, taking it online.

And for year two or the one year anniversary of Charity Water,

I donated my 32nd birthday and instead of throwing a party,

I just asked everyone to give thirty two dollars for my 32nd birthday.

And I wound up raising 60 grand

for X because a lot of people had thirty two dollars to give, especially if they could see exactly where it went.

So I had googled, you know, top three social networks and, you know, my space was number one at the time.

So I emailed Tom, Facebook was number two, emailed Zuck.

It's like called Bebo that I hadn't heard of was number three.

So I remember scraping Michael Burch's name from the domain registry, you know, who is dotnet and I emailed him and I said, hey, I'm this kid.

I'm trying to bring clean water to the world.

And I'd like everybody on your social network to donate their birthdays to my cause.

It's your age in dollars, a hundred percent goes.

You know, this is a great idea.

Well, that didn't write me back.

Tom didn't write me back.

Michael did. And he said, I actually love this idea.

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And on the side, I have this site called Birthday Alarm, which reminds people of their birthdays. And he said, you know, the timing for me is terrible right now. But, you know, keep up the great work. And by the way, the website design looks awesome. So this was six months before the bankruptcy moment. And around this time, when we're about to wind down, you know, I remember praying, I'm like on my knees, like, God, I thought you gave me this dream, you know, where's the money? Like, show me the money. You show me the money in the wrong bank account. And I was praying I had no faith that anything would happen. And at this time, Michael Burch's time turns up and he says, hey, I'm going to be in New York. I've got an hour, you know, can I stop by and see your office? And I remember sitting with him and taking him through a presentation on my laptop and just being really honest about how hard it was to raise money for overhead. And I remember thinking he just didn't like me. I mean, he was British, you know, he wasn't smiling, not not a lot of warmth or encouragement. But two days later, he emails me at midnight and he says, hey, I really enjoyed meeting you. I just wired a million dollars into your overhead account. And I remember logging on to the bank and I saw it one comma zero, zero, zero. It was 13 months of overhead funding. So we went from insolvent. And he said, I think he said, keep rocking. Just you just need more time. Love the idea. You just need more time. And again, that was seven hundred and fifty million dollars ago. And today we have one hundred and thirty one entrepreneurs and and families that pay all the overhead. And we have never been close to the line since. And you know, we grow that group by selecting 20 new entrepreneurs and 20 new families or so every single year as the organization grows. And, you know, Michael and Zochi have been very generous. They've given over 20 million dollars. They've come and come to 14 or 15 countries with me now, bringing their kids all over the world to see the impact that they've they've made. But that was that was that was a moment. I've asked Michael, I was like, you know, you've done all these different projects. So he did multiple internet companies. He did the battery at the battery.

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So he's got this members club, like, you know, a physical building, a giant, beautiful, 60,000 square foot building.
He's done, you know, hundreds of investments, whatever.
I was like, you know, what's your favorite?
What's the best thing you've done?
And instantly he just goes charity water.
He goes, yeah, he goes.
The most fulfilling work that I've done is basically help, you know, donating and then helping, helping Scott and and taking my family, my kids to Africa. They I think they go like almost every year, every other year or something like that to go and see the work and the projects.
And he's like, I love those trips with my family.
My kids love it.
It's taught them so much.
And, you know, he's like, that's the best thing I've done.
Hands down.
And I thought that was pretty impressive.
Here's a guy who's made like a billion dollars and built social networks with, you know, whatever, millions and millions of users and all that good stuff.
And I thought that was pretty, pretty remarkable.
And it sounds like because when I met you,
I went to one of your events and then I went to the Ethiopia trip with you.
And the Ethiopia trip, you know, it was like the who's who was like, you know, famous tech founders, actors, actresses, people from Hollywood, people from the music industry, and you just was on that trip, I think we are such a fun group of people.
Yeah, it was kind of an amazing group.
And, you know, just like the kind of bus ride conversations were just incredible for the group.
And then
then I played Wonderwall at the fire and people saw that I only know three of the four chords of Wonderwall.
And so we go there and I'm like, this is an incredible way to like, you know, the best products in the world are products where you can either show somebody a before and after photo, even better, you just put a product in their hands or even better, what you were doing was just if I let you see it, you're going to believe.
And so what have you learned in that process of like going from almost almost bankruptcy to now raising seven hundred fifty million dollars for charity? Which, by the way, is a fraction of what we need to raise to make the impact that we want to make.
So, you know, seventeen million people, that's great.
That's one forty seventh of the way there.
So, you know, we are we believe we're in like the second inning of this.

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Right. I looked at the twenty seven stock twenty seven year
Justin Khan tweeted this a couple years ago, twenty seven year stock chart of Amazon.
Seven percent of the value was created in the first twenty years.
Ninety three percent of the value years twenty one through twenty seven.
So, you know, things take time, you know, and we believe that, you know,
this is just a mile marker on, you know, hopefully the expansiveness of the
charity water community and the generosity that is yet untapped as we again try to
get everybody clean water.
I mean, there's probably nobody listening that thinks people should die by
drinking bad water simply because of where they were born.
Right. We all agree.
And what is the cost to give someone clean drinking water?
I know you I remember there was a number and then and then I remember you were like,
hey, that number is outdated.
It doesn't take into account these other things.
Let's raise it.
And I remember being like, well, I don't know that.
Do we want to should we just round the number?
And you're like, no, we don't round the number.
We just say what the actual cost is.
Like, yeah, I really appreciate the integrity of it.
And I think this year was it's \$40 to give one person clean water.
On average, we work across 22 countries.
I think last year's actual was 39, 67.
And so so \$40 and that's for a year or that's for a lifetime.
That's for 10, 10 plus years, you know, for the life of the project.
Some of these projects last 40 years.
You can change. You can absolutely change somebody's life.
40 bucks. I know.
And
talk about some of the things that you've tried.
So now let's kind of go into the the slightly entrepreneurial section of like,
you know, stories of stuff you've tried or opportunities that you see
more in the spirit of kind of how we typically brainstorm things around here.
Yeah, I mean, we've, you know, innovation has been a real
core of the organization, as you say, trying new things.
We made one of the first virtual reality films seven years ago.
This is before they had VR cameras that you could buy.
We got GoPros donated, made a modified rig and shot a six day journey.
We're a 30 year old girl gets clean water for the first time in her life.
We debuted that at a gala where we put headsets on foreigner people in black tie.
We press play and synchronicity.
We took them all to Ethiopia for this week of, you know, water magic.

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And then the minute the film ended, we just asked them for money and raised a couple of million dollars. So, you know, that was a fun one.

You know, a couple of years ago, we got into the Bitcoin space and we started a trust called the Bitcoin Water Trust, where we raised a hundred Bitcoin to start.

And we said, we're going to lock them all up in cold storage until at least 2025.

So we're not going to sell it.

Charity water, charities, typically when you give them stock, you know, they immediately liquidate who are we to ever take a position on any asset.

Right. Right.

And we said, we're going to take a position on this.

And we think, you know, there will be people who would only give us a Bitcoin donation, you know, to hold past, you know, the next halving and maybe even longer, but would never give us a Bitcoin, you know, to immediately liquidate.

They'd rather give us cash or some other asset.

So we raised over a hundred there.

And that's that that campaign is open, is still going with that same promise that a hundred percent will then, you know, get unlocked at some point, 2025 and beyond, and then go to have as much impact as possible.

Gosh, I mean, we, you know, the birthday idea raised over a hundred million dollars by getting over a million people involved just in that simple idea.

And that's now been taken by lots of other charities.

And what's the best way to open up a physical space?

My birthday is in two weeks.

I want to give up my birthday.

Do it. I'll be your first donor.

All right. It's at least worth it to set up the page in 30 seconds.

Is it still at my charity water dot com?

Or where do I go now to do that?

I think you just I think it's probably on the home page now.

OK. Wonderful.

Yeah. So that's another way people get.

And then we have we have an amazing subscription community called The Spring, which is that has really helped the organization triple over the last five years.

And it's I remember being in a Land Rover with Daniel Eck from Spotify.

And he's like, Scott, your business model sucks.

Every January one, all that money you raised last year, your ticker starts at zero.

You got to go re-raise all that and then grow.

He said, why don't you build a community of people who will sign up every single month to give what they can?

And that's the spring that now has members from 149 countries and is really the core of so much of our growth.

The average is about 30 bucks a month.

So it's a little less than one person getting clean water.

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But there are a lot of people that can give one person clean water every single month and not even miss it, not even think about it.

You know, it's two Netflixes in a Spotify, right?

Or two HBO Maxes.

And instead of getting content that you probably don't even need to watch more of anyway, humans are getting clean water as 100 percent of that goes.

So that's people could learn more about that at thespring.com.

And there's also a video there that's gotten over 100 million views, which is a is a short telling of our story with some of the visuals that you mentioned.

And I'm going to ask you one impossible question, which is kind of like, you know, you asked Michael Jordan, how do you do?

How do you do it? Right?

It's like, you've told me little things in passing around because I kind of admire your brand building, your storytelling and your event thing also.

Like we didn't even talk about the events that you guys throw and how those drum up so much interest and passion and donations.

And you had told me one thing about the events that I shared on the podcast that a lot of people liked, which was when I asked you, why are your events so good?

Why do people rave about the events?

And you said, I got this from Vic, my wife.

She says, you know, it's about the moments between the moments.

And you gave me that little philosophy.

I don't even think I understand 80 percent of that.

But either way, we should get my wife in here.

It's provocative.

Right. It gave me something to think about.

I'm curious. Do you feel like, is there anything that you've kind of is your your personal philosophies or isms or sort of like life hacks when it comes to either the storytelling, the sales, the marketing side, the brand building?

Like, do you have any other moments between the moments that I can I can take with me this time?

Well, I think the more you give, the more you give.

So I think it's like a muscle and practicing generosity, practicing saying yes, just makes you want to say yes more.

It makes you want to help more people.

You know, I think a lot of people just they have the walls up.

Oh, my gosh, if I say yes to this charity, I'm going to say the next one.

Right. Yes, to the next one.

And like, everybody's going to be asking me, like, that's OK.

Try that, you know.

And if you have to take the amount that you're giving down to all of them so you can say yes to more, try encouraging a social entrepreneur.

Try encouraging someone who has mustered the courage to ask you to support

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their run or, you know, their son's leukemia treatment or the food pantry or a cause like water around the world, like, say yes.

And it's a joy to give.

It's a blessing to give.

You know, the first three letters in the word fundraising, it's fun.

Like, it should be fun to raise money for important causes, to raise money, to give money, to end needless suffering around the world.

And I think the more you do it, the more you want to do it.

And the more you say no, the more you're inclined to say no and miss out.

Right. Well, I will I will take your challenge.

I will say yes.

So I'm going to set up a birthday.

My birthday is in a couple of weeks.

I'm going to set up a birthday campaign right now.

I'm going to put the link in the description of this podcast.

Awesome. I love it.

So if you if you love this podcast, if you love me, normally that we have this thing called the gentlemen's agreement or the ladies understanding, which is basically says, go subscribe to our channel today.

It's a little bit of a different gentlemen's agreement.

Donate your age and dollars.

How old are you going to be?

35. So if you want to give me a gift, 35 bucks towards charity water, I'm going to put the link in the description and then I will donate \$35,000 on top of whatever gets donated from people to charity water as well.

And so that will be my gift.

And Scott, thanks for coming on.

I promised you I'd get you out of here on time.

So I got to I got to wrap it here.

But thanks for coming on generous.

That's that's really incredible.

That means so much to me.

And thank you for kind of showing.

I don't know. I've learned a lot from you.

That's a little bit of my education from you on on brand building storytelling and doing things, you know, like, I don't know.

You you have the you have a lot of courage.

You you chose to spend your life doing something that matters.

Like you you didn't care about this stuff.

But I remember when I went to Ethiopia with you and we went to one of the schools where a well had been built and literally when we were coming in,

I was like, are the Beatles behind us?

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What is this giant crowd?

Huge crowd.

Like the whole town was there lined up and literally I was like, Scott is like Jesus to them.

Like there were signs with your name.

And I was like, of course there should be because of the impact.

And, you know, for somebody who you work on the internet, like I'm sitting here in my boxers right now doing a podcast.

Like we live a pretty charmed life.

We get to do things that are pretty, pretty, you know, easy in the grand history of the world.

I think it's pretty easy to be disconnected from reality

and what's going on for billions of people out there.

And so, you know, I thank you for giving me that experience.

And, you know, if anybody has the opportunity to kind of turn a little bit of your attention away from kind of the Twitter and the TikToks of the world

and take a look at what's going on in the world,

I think it will help you and kind of make an impact for them the same way it did for me.

Oh, man, I appreciate the chance to tell the story.

And thanks again for your generosity.

That means that means a lot to me and more importantly,

the people who will be on the receiving end of it.

And if people want to go learn more about you, the charity, shout out where you want to send people to.

I would just say charitywater.org and thespring.com.

Okay, awesome. Thanks, Scott.

Thanks, Ben. Thanks for having me.

All right, everyone, that's the end of my first million.

However, I've got good news.

You see, if you liked this episode,

we actually have another podcast.

The Hustle has another podcast.

It's called The Hustle Daily Show.

It's a daily podcast that has everything you need to know about business and tech in only a few minutes.

It's awesome.

Our best writers like Zach Crockett are behind it.

It's incredibly fascinating.

I listen to it daily.

So check it out.

This is the Hustle Daily Show.