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EXTREME ENTREPRENEURSHIP



INSPIRING LIFE AND BUSINESS LESSONS
FROM ENTREPRENEURS AND STARTUPS
AROUND THE WORLD

ADAM J. SULKOWSKI

EXTREME ENTREPRENEURSHIP:

Inspiring Life and Business Lessons
from Entrepreneurs and Startups
around the World

(*Extreme Entrepreneurship*TM Series,
Book 1)

ADAM J. SULKOWSKI

Associate Professor of Law and Sustainability
Babson College

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Praise for *Extreme Entrepreneurship*

“For *Extreme Entrepreneurship*, Adam Sulkowski traveled to 120 countries (!), gathering the fascinating stories of business creators from literally around the world. As you read the 1st person accounts of people making change happen in their communities—from a Pakistani bookstore owner to Malagasy women incubating food businesses around solar mini-grids—you will be both educated and inspired.”

—P. W. Singer, *New York Times* best-selling author and Strategist at New America

“*READ THIS!*”

—Alex Mashinsky, serial entrepreneur (20+ successful ventures), holder of 50+ patents (including VOIP), founded and leads Celsius Network (a financial platform with \$13B+ in assets under management)

“This book is a compelling set of stories about how entrepreneurs are starting businesses that change people’s lives all around the world. It renews my faith in seeing business as a force for good.”

—R. Edward Freeman, Professor of Business Administration, Darden School of Business, University of Virginia

“Adam Sulkowski tells lively, big-hearted, and often surprising stories that anyone can read and relate to—as an entrepreneur, parent, activist, reader, traveler, or seeker. They tap into

universal dimensions of the human spirit: resilience, courage, humility, curiosity, and imagination. Read and enjoy!”

—Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO, New America

“As a start-up founder, awesome to see practical tips—including from fellow female founders at the frontlines of positive change—collected from super-tough environments.”

—Courtney Boyd Myers, Co-Founder and CEO, Akua

“This is a combination travelogue and business ‘how to’ book that establishes Adam Sulkowski as the Anthony Bourdain of entrepreneurship. Sulkowski shares fascinating stories about entrepreneurs in parts unknown who face daunting challenges in starting their businesses. One of my favorites is the chapter on a team of women who are determined to bring solar power to villages in Madagascar.”

—George Siedel, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan

“Awesome tips for life, work, and travel.”

—Michael Blakey, Managing Partner at Cocoon Capital Partners Pte Ltd

“110%, I recommend this for entrepreneurs and travelers (actual, aspiring, or spectators). You’ll laugh, possibly cry, and be inspired as you get to know how these real-life heroes are doing nearly impossible things—in places most of us barely know or understand, from East Timor to Madagascar to Suriname. **You won’t regret the time invested in enjoying these stories.”**

—Jason Cipriano, serial entrepreneur, executive at MassMutual, formerly State Street, 1st Lt., US Navy

“Finally, a ‘truth on the ground’ approach to wisdom on entrepreneurship.”

—Elizabeth Kim, Strategic Initiatives Specialist, Babson College

“A must-read. This book is not *just* for entrepreneurs—there’s wisdom here for everyone. Each story in this book—collected from an astounding variety of environments—provides lessons on how to succeed when many factors align against you. This is an invaluable fresh twist on the kinds of research and teaching that have kept Babson the #1 rated school for entrepreneurs of all kinds for decades. **The themes and lessons of this book are both timely and timeless.”**

—Leonard A. Schlesinger, Baker Foundation Professor and Chair of Practice Faculty, Harvard Business School

“Gripping and compelling stories of people and their unique journeys, challenges, and approaches to questions of strategy and sustainability.”

—Sandra Waddock, Galligan Chair of Strategy, Boston College

“*Extreme Entrepreneurship* is like three books in one: travelogue, entrepreneurship case study collection, and distillation of tips on how to navigate through life. Great to see underrepresented voices elevated as a source of wisdom. And great to see so many stories related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fact over half of the stories are those of female founders is a bonus.”

—Cheryl Y. Kiser, Executive Director, Lewis Institute for Social Innovation, Babson College

“A must-read. Adam shines a light on the values that are driving these diverse protagonists—and weaves their stories into a tapestry rich with actionable lessons, universal observations on

the human spirit at its best, and tips anyone can use.”

—Mary C. Gentile, PhD, Professor of Practice, Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, author of *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right*

“Exciting! A strong achievement. The book subject is important. It shows entrepreneurial activity can thrive in almost any environment. **Bodes to be influential.**”

—Robert C. Bird, Professor of Business Law and Ever-source Energy Chair in Business Ethics at the University of Connecticut, President, Academy of Legal Studies in Business

“Be prepared to be moved by all of these characters: from Liliana in Peru (helping kids that previously were kept in cages to become independent, productive, and happy) to John in Guatemala (going from homeless, to smuggling in a priest’s attire, to becoming an export baron with a heart). Partly a travel memoir, partly a collection of interviews and stories brimming with wisdom on business and life, this is **a fantastic voyage to meet inspiring heroes in unfamiliar places with universal lessons.**”

—Dariusz Jemielniak, serial entrepreneur, Professor of Organizational Studies at Kozminski University, Faculty Associate at the Berkman Center at Harvard University

“Fascinating, informed, and informative!”

—Manoj Narender Madnani, Founder and CEO, The DSA Group

“A book full of leadership lessons in sustainability! Entrepreneurship in food systems and renewable energy is essential as the world seeks innovative business solutions in the face of global

climate change. **From Colombia to Madagascar, the inspiring stories in this book underscore the possibility of entrepreneurial leadership applied in the global context.** The stories include great details without losing sight of the big picture.”

—Rockford “Rocky” Weitz, serial entrepreneur (8 ventures), Professor of Practice and Director of the Fletcher Maritime Studies Program at Tufts University

“Tomorrow’s disruptive innovations often evolve first on the edges of today’s systems. Over time, the more successful ones fold into the core of our societies and economies. They become the new normal. As these innovations accumulate, the prevailing paradigm begins to shift. And then, before we know it, reality isn’t what it used to be. **Adam Sulkowski’s *Extreme Entrepreneurship* takes us to the edge of the known**, into worlds darkened by poaching, civil war, and even genocide, bringing extraordinary change agents into the spotlight. **Unsettling—in a positive way—and deeply informative.**”

—John Elkington, serial entrepreneur, Chief Pollinator at Volans Ventures, and author of 20 books, most recently *Green Swans: The Coming Boom in Regenerative Capitalism* (Fast Company Press)

“Having worked closely with the author, this collection of stories is what we’ve come to expect: making space for **an array of gifted people at the fringes of mainstream economic opportunity to tell their amazing stories.**”

—Sadie Burton-Goss, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Babson College

“It was fun to cooperate in telling our stories! **Please enjoy.**”

—Lydia Wanjiku Kibandi, CEO, Lensational, and

—Lieutenant Colonel Faye Cuevas, US Air Force

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Preface

Why Go to 120 Countries? Why Collect Stories of Startups?

IT WAS 2005. I felt I'd won the lottery. I had received a job offer for a full-time job teaching law at a business school. After being unemployed for a few dark months that felt like years, I literally went from down-and-out to being on track to security in a dream job. I would be paid to help students interested in commerce learn about law for eight months of the year. The other four, I'd be free (and expected) to write. And I could do that writing anywhere.

Yet I felt like a charlatan—a phony. Not because I hadn't spent time practicing law or running a business. But because I'd been reading books about life in “the Global South”—as we euphemistically started calling poor countries—and how the world was much more connected than the 4 percent of us in the US imagined. Plus, I'd been reading about sustainability and the fragility of both environmental and economic systems.

I was about to teach eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds about business. Eventually, MBAs as well. And yet I'd never set foot on most continents. I'd never been to a factory in China, a war zone, or a bazaar in the Middle East or transacted with someone in the ocean of humanity in a city of more than 15 million people like Mumbai. I'd never seen rainforest stewardship by Indigenous

Preface

peoples or by intact communities founded by escaped slaves or encountered a jaguar mother and cub deep in the Amazon. Nor had I met someone fine with cutting all these jungles down, so long as he got his share of the cash. I'd never imagined how much I'd see malnutrition resulting from modern neocolonial trade patterns replacing locally-sourced food. I'd never eaten in a slum anywhere, walked through a refugee camp's gates, or fallen asleep knowing that a Muslim call to prayer would wake me up.

In short, I felt like a charlatan because I was about to explain aspects of business in the world, but I'd lived in the realities that less than 10 percent of us call home. I had zero firsthand experience in the reality that more than 90 percent of people call home. And it's now become cliché to observe, but we're all connected through business and the functioning and fate of the natural environment. If I was going to teach law to business students, I thought I should see and know more about the world out there. So, I looked up old friends, spent the lion's share of the last of my savings on plane tickets, and hopped onto a flight to Africa and later that year to Asia. That was the start.

Having now visited 120 countries—and through a mix of gobsmackingly unlikely luck and serendipity, the suggestions and help of others, and sometimes intentional searching, and despite more missteps than I'd like to admit—I've met and collected stories of people who've started solving problems by creating organizations in some seemingly impossible conditions. Based on these stories, it turns out that some challenges are universal. Other stories fascinate because they're specific to a place, time, or person. I've shared some of these stories in classrooms and online with hundreds of students over the years. We practice spotting problems and opportunities, applying theory to practice, and trying to answer: “what will we do when we find ourselves in a similar situation?”

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Here, finally, in this book is a collection of some of my students' favorite stories from entrepreneurs I have met during my travels. The reaction of my students is one reason I know that these stories stir emotions and curiosity. At times, the contexts of these stories may sadden. In other moments, a vignette may make you laugh. The most common comment I've read in anonymous student surveys is that these stories *inspire*.

Some of the stories about entrepreneurs and startups contained in this book I've told before, in a longer, more academic format. When I've shared them, some have won awards from organizations dedicated to legal studies and to entrepreneurship. This also suggests something may be learned from these stories. But in contrast to academic contexts, the stories published here—some of them for the first time—have a greater focus on the people involved and a greater emphasis on each story's context and the aspects that are entertaining, inspiring, and thought-provoking.

Having published over fifty times in scholarly research journals and conference proceedings, it is wonderful to finally tell stories without using the fancy jargon that is the norm for academic writing (plus, in the case of legal writing, hundreds of footnotes referencing supporting sources of information). I also have never shared this much detail about the stories before. If there is an entertaining or enlightening backstory—the why and how—of how I came to meet someone, then I've included it. You, the reader, could find lessons or inspiration in some of these individual backstories. If you ask me, some examples of these possible takeaways are:

- action is sometimes better than exhaustive planning;
- it pays to show up, ask questions, and ask for help in what you're trying to achieve;

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- it's sometimes okay to have a tendency to say "yes" to life's random opportunities; and
- maybe above all, to stay curious.

You may, however, draw other lessons, make your own observations, and come to your own conclusions. Additionally—or instead—you might read some of my confessions about how I came to meet the people featured in this book and conclude that I'm a bit eccentric in how I spend time on my semester breaks. Either way, I've kept the spotlight on the main characters and their stories, and I've included a selection of stories that I know to be "audience favorites," varied in terms of context and similar but different.

I am keenly aware the world is filled with thousands more stories like the ones in this book. I did *not* attempt, with this collection, to generate a portfolio that is representative of the world nor that is proportionate to the scale and difficulty of problems that countries and the world collectively face. I'm hoping the stories in this book are a first collection. And maybe it will inspire more stories like these.

Thanks to all the people described in this book for sharing their stories and entrusting me to tell them. My thanks also to students and colleagues who provided feedback and encouragement. And thanks to you, the reader, for reading these stories. I hope you're entertained and inspired and maybe even find something useful.

Introduction

Intended Use for This Book

Why I wrote this book

This book was written to:

- entertain by sharing some good stories;
- inspire with examples of people succeeding in difficult circumstances;
- introduce relatable problems from unfamiliar places; and
- raise awareness of challenges (and great ideas for overcoming them).

The stories in this book were written with the following readers in mind:

- entrepreneurs (of all kinds—plus those who aspire to be entrepreneurs or who just enjoy spectating);
- travel addicts (those who are traveling, going to travel, planning to travel, or are enjoying travel vicariously); and
- last but not least, the just plain curious (learners of any age and in any context).

Earlier drafts of these stories have been:

- shared with people who have started companies;
- reviewed by colleagues who teach in business schools; and

- used with students as issue-spotting exercises in business school courses.

My hopes for readers of this book

For the aspiring entrepreneur or the entrepreneurial leader of any organization:

From those entrepreneurs interviewed and described in this book, I hope you find inspiration and useful ideas for how to see, hear, think, plan, and act.

For the aspiring traveler, or you on the road, or you who misses traveling:

Similarly, we (those entrepreneurs profiled in each chapter and I) hope you find inspiration and actionable ideas, even if you're limited in how far you can travel and are presently enjoying vicarious voyages.

For students (whether in school or reading this as an autodidactic):

I hope you find the stories in this book entertaining and useful for several things:

- issue-spotting, meaning defining exactly what is a problem;
- practice in applying abstract concepts and imagining options for action; and
- learning about the contexts of parts of the world that might be unfamiliar to you.

Format of this book

The chapter formats will vary slightly. My top priority was to

Introduction

convey the words and reflections of the people at the center of each startup story. Therefore, some chapters almost exclusively consist of reordered and repackaged highlights of interviews. A second priority was to convey context and the story of how I met these people, inasmuch as those stories may be interesting or valuable as well. Regardless of the format, each chapter ends with an enumerated list of takeaways that you, the reader, can apply to your business or personal life.

Here's hoping you find something valuable and interesting in the stories in this book. And I wish you good luck in your adventures. If you have questions or know of similar stories that you think I should consider for a follow-up book, please do not hesitate to contact me directly—my contact information appears in the About the Author section toward the back of this book. In addition, to read or hear my most recent stories and conversations with people like the ones in this book, please visit: www.extreme-entrepreneurship.com.

Chapter Summaries

Each Story in a Nutshell

1. Peru: A Pioneering School for the Differently-abled Built during a War Faces COVID-19

As punishment for asking questions, a student is banished to work with outcasts: kids with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and autism. She finds her life calling: to co-teach (with their families) these kids to be independent, productive, and happy. She built her school with volunteers using discarded wood during a civil war from 1980–1992, sometimes carrying a white flag to avoid being shot. Forty years later, her work has touched 15,000 families in seven countries. The drop in donations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing at the time of this writing, has presented their greatest challenge so far, even though their work in homeschooling support and distance learning should be more valued now than ever.

2. Pakistan: She Persisted Selling Books at The Last Word

Despite extremist violence and betrayal by unscrupulous businessmen, a community comes together to support Aysha and her business selling Western and secular books in Pakistan.

3. Timor-Leste: Pride in Local Food and Hunger for Information after a Genocide

In the wake of genocide, in a smoldering city with not a single working computer left, local journalists and an Australian with access to discarded equipment start a newspaper. Now, a local chef is reviving pride in local food after globalization leads to malnutrition.

4. Guatemala: Broke to Smuggler to Legal Exporter of Illegal Mezcal

The path to sharing wealth with local artisans involves navigating a corrupt and dangerous border.

5. Madagascar: Empowering Local Economies in Villages with Solar Mini-Grid 3.0

By building relationships, a team of women executes a plan to bring solar power into villages to nurture small businesses and encourage the re-localized production of nutrient-rich food.

6. Colombia: Resurrecting Rainforest during a Civil War

Both sides of a civil war spared a decades-old reforestation community that continues inventing novel products and solutions.

7. Kenya: A Counter-Terrorism Officer Targets Poachers by Listening to Locals

An intelligence officer (and single mother of three) working with US Special Forces in combat zones starts noticing correlations in early warning indicators ahead of terrorist and poaching inci-

dents. She gets “left of boom” and starts advocating for women’s entrepreneurship as a key to winning cooperation with local communities in both contexts.

8. Cuba: From One Dollar per Day to Top-Rated Place to Stay

Though capitalism is officially illegal, a former tailor starts and grows a top-rated hostel.

9. United States: Cooking-Up a Revival in a Former Mill Town

Two friends lead an economic renaissance along an economically stagnant main street of a small town.

10. Suriname: Preserving the Maroon Culture and Rainforest in a Pandemic

For centuries, descendants of escaped slaves have farmed sustainably in the jungles of Suriname, preserving a unique culture. Illegal mining increasingly devastates these rainforests.

11. Outer Space and Inner Space: Astrophysicist to Heart Hacker and MindMics

An astrophysicist develops a platform for using earbuds to gather precise medical data.

Chapter 1

Peru: A Pioneering School for the Differently-Abled Built during a War Faces COVID-19

TO AVOID BEING SHOT, Dr. Liliana Mayo carried a white flag when crossing parts of Lima to pick up volunteers for her pioneering school for the differently-abled, as she insists on calling her students. Dr. Mayo's innovative experiments in education as a psychology student starting in 1979 coincided with the increased activity of a local terrorist movement. Deadly violence, plus power and water outages, would become part of the second longest-running civil war in recent Latin American history, lasting from 1980 until 1992. This was the context in which Mayo developed her unique way of, as she stated it, "providing a first-world service in third world poverty with fourth world compensation." Actually, Dr. Mayo achieved something that had not been done before, even in the most developed countries in the world: her school has arguably been *better* than a first-world service.

The following sections of this chapter are excerpts from my interviews with Dr. Mayo and describe the incredible true story of a student sent—as punishment—to work with children who were outcasts. In doing so, Dr. Mayo found her life's mission in helping them become independent, productive, and happy. She

built a school with no resources during a civil war, improved the lives of 15,000 families across seven countries, and is now facing the most difficult challenge of her life: run on donations, Centro Ann Sullivan Peru (CASP) is, at the time of this writing, in dire financial straits due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



1.1. Dr. Liliana Mayo with a former student of her school, Centro Ann Sullivan Peru (CASP), named Patty, in Lima, Peru.
(Image courtesy of Dr. Liliana Mayo.)

From punishment to finding her life's mission

As a psychology student, Dr. Mayo had made the fateful error of asking questions that irritated one of her professors. Her temporary punishment-by-banishment—exile, to work among children with special needs—turned out to be where she realized her life's mission. On the way to work, in poorer neighborhoods, Dr. Mayo saw that children with autism, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome were sometimes kept naked and tied up or in cages on rooftops like maltreated animals. Upon learning that a child was neurologically atypical, many men would abandon their wives and families. Dr. Mayo was sure there was a better way to raise and educate these children.

How to even begin the impossible, with nothing? How did she find resources?

Dr. Mayo credits her parents with letting her use the garage of their home to try a different approach to teaching differently-abled children. In so crediting them, she attests to the value of sharing one's crazy ambitions with others. As another example of this value, Dr. Mayo recalls sharing her dream and her needs early on with someone and soon receiving a donation of eight chairs for her first students to sit upon.

That first benefactor, who donated the chairs, had been “looking for a mission” and had informed others—including her husband, a local businessperson—of Dr. Mayo's needs. He donated scrap wood—the remnants of boxes used for transporting windows from a factory—as the first building material. Off-duty police agreed to provide the first carpentry services, with so many showing up at Dr. Mayo's home that “neighbors thought there must be drug trafficking going on,” she recalls.

Dr. Mayo reflected: “You never know what will happen when

you are ready and apply learning and tell people what you need. . . . When we most need it, a miracle arrives.” This theme consistently emerges in other stories in this book: that people—including acquaintances and strangers—can be surprisingly encouraging and critically helpful when they learn of a chance to help someone realize a crazy—yet positive and constructive—dream. Forty years later, CASP helps hundreds of students around Peru and the world every year to become, in the words of its slogan, “independent, productive, and happy” and has inspired similar centers in several countries.

Dr. Mayo’s focus: persons with different abilities

Dr. Mayo insists on calling her students “persons with different abilities” to highlight two things. First, that they are people—not a label. Second, that we have to concentrate more on their abilities, not their limitations. She strongly believed that her students could be independent, productive, and happy if she (and now, her instructors) work as a team with her students’ families. Dr. Mayo and her team call this “the power of two.” And they have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach.

“I can’t die yet . . .”

Dr. Mayo recalls telling herself, in 1980, as she crossed violence-torn Lima, “You can’t die until you teach the children.” The violence of the civil war would continue from 1980–1992. Through the pandemic of 2020–2021, which has been especially destructive in Peru, she said she did not waiver in her resolve. “I can’t die until every person with different abilities in my country has the opportunity—they and their families—to receive an education.”

In developing her expertise, mostly acquired through real-

world experimentation, Dr. Mayo showed that neurologically-atypical children can be taught to be independent, productive, and happy. More than one hundred students who received their education at CASP are now working adults contributing to more than forty businesses in the private and public sectors. They have proven that they can perform excellently in different jobs. For example, they excel as banking professionals due to their long attention spans, quantitative abilities, and scrupulousness, among other traits. However, as described later, Dr. Mayo's journey was far from smooth and safe, and it contains several generalizable lessons for anyone.

What were the key factors to CASP's success (that could help in any situation)?

Dr. Mayo says that passion and having a team are the two factors that led to CASP's success.

Where did Dr. Mayo's passion come from, and why aren't there more people like her?

I had previously guessed Dr. Mayo's answer might be that a lot of us behave monstrously because we are rewarded for—and see the idolization of—the acquisition of wealth and fame. Instead, she attributed her mindset, values, and readiness to act to her parents. She credited her parents for giving her inspiration and values and for serving as role models: “My parents were pharmacists—I saw them providing a service in poor neighborhoods, and my mom told me all about MLK [the lesson being, to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., ‘to be persistent, to follow the impossible dream’] . . . and JFK [the lesson being, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, ‘to ask what you can do for others, not what others can do for you’] . . . and Mohandas Gandhi [the lesson being, to

paraphrase Gandhi, ‘to be the change you wish to see in the world’].”

What about the other factor: how did Dr. Mayo find her team?

In response to this question, Dr. Mayo described telling people about the dream she had for who would work at the school. She looked for two things: a good heart and open-mindedness. Five people who joined her in the early days of her school are still with her on her current team of eighty. This echoes a theme found in other stories in this book: skills can be taught, and so instead it may sometimes be equally or more important to screen and hire for character, disposition, and other “hard-wired” (or difficult-to-acquire) traits than to hire based on skills. Again, Dr. Mayo cites her parents for creating the conditions that taught her what to look for: she was made to do her chores, was made to see obstacles as opportunities, was taught how to be happy, and was taught that “you only have what you give.”

The early years and a new approach: respect and listening

Dr. Mayo said that a critical factor in her first successes was listening to her students. She is convinced that they felt and understood what was conveyed nonverbally: most critically, that she respected them as people. One of her first eight students was a girl named Patty (pictured at the start of this chapter, in a black-and-white childhood photograph, and in a more recent photograph at the end of this section). Mayo recalls: “I have never seen tantrums as horrible as hers. She would slap her own face. She could destroy a room. Some thought she needed an exorcism. But she was my teacher.”

Peru

The books on differently-abled persons said Patty would learn slowly, if at all. Mayo found otherwise. “Once we began to work with her and teach her other ways to ask for what she wants, she began to change. She was my inspiration. She’s the one who gave me hope that these kids could learn. If she could learn so fast, then we were using a correct approach.” By 1981, there were fifty students.



1.2. Dr. Liliana Mayo with a former student of her school, Centro Ann Sullivan Peru (CASP), named Patty, in Lima, Peru.
(Image courtesy of Dr. Liliana Mayo.)

Teaching kindness and giving

From the beginning, CASP taught students to give back, including to their parents—to “pay for light and water and to take their parents to dinner, to take care of them when they are sick or in cases of emergencies. And kindness—to say ‘hi’ and ‘thank you.’” Also, Dr. Mayo emphasizes her belief that “adversity is how you grow faster.”

The devastating impact of COVID-19

Dr. Mayo emphasizes that she still believes, especially in this time of COVID-19, that there are both crises and opportunities. Specifically, Peru has suffered unusually-high fatality rates and a devastating blow to an economy in which annual income averaged \$500—before the shutdown of economic activity—as well as suffering a decline in charitable donations. CASP has had to furlough employees and cut down on some in-person activities.

CASP: ahead of its time in assisting with distance learning and homeschooling

CASP was an early pioneer in distance learning and supporting homeschooling. As previously mentioned, from the beginning, the essential foundation of Dr. Mayo’s approach was the “power of two.” Namely, training families to be essential partners in co-teaching their children. Even as there is a dire shortfall in fundraising, there is a greater need than ever before for this core competency.

What about changing CASP’s model, to not rely on donations?

Ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic has hurt CASP financially,

even as its expertise in distance learning and support for families teaching their children at home is revealed to be more valuable than ever. I asked Dr. Mayo if there's any chance of adopting another financial model—one more like a business, where the employers of CASP alumni (who enjoy the operational and reputational benefits of hiring them) pay for their tuition. “No, we’ve asked,” replied Dr. Mayo. “They don’t seem to be ready, and this doesn’t seem to be the right time for something like that.”

Dr. Mayo has a point: the COVID-19 financial shortfall is *now*. Both CASP and the companies are short on cash. Companies short on cash don’t feel they have the extra money on hand for what would be, at present, a donation. And even if they agreed to pay for the education of a potential future hire over time, this would not address the need for money CASP has today.

Another potential adaptation would be for CASP to expand its training and distance learning practices to reach richer regions of the world and then charge more for its services there. This would effectively subsidize CASP programs in less-wealthy regions. Apparently, this is a possibility.

Is it true that some males do not stay involved with their children?

“In Peru,” Dr. Mayo explained, “fathers of children diagnosed with autism or other disabilities would sometimes abandon their families. This has changed since the 1970s. It does not happen as often.” Still, Dr. Mayo does teach mothers entrepreneurship—helping them to succeed in making income with their own economic activity. Dr. Mayo checked after our conversation and confirmed that thirty mothers in CASP’s network are now abandoned. Dr. Mayo calls them “courageous.” Both mothers and

fathers are also trained to be “life” coaches, and Dr. Mayo employs them. She also helps them to get hired elsewhere or to sell goods as street merchants, making their own income.

Mentors and “the children are my teachers now”

Dr. Mayo described Dr. Judy LeBlanc from the University of Kansas and their thirty-eight years of cooperation as key to CASP’s success, and also Dr. Steve Schroeder. Dr. Mayo said they both saved her from a few mistakes, such as accepting a government job. Dr. Mayo hastened to add: “Children are my teachers, and my son Alonso is another mentor now.”

Why does Dr. Mayo believe her innovative approach was developed in Peru, not in Europe or the US?

“Poverty pushes us to make our students independent,” Dr. Mayo pointed out. There is “no help from the government to families that have children with different abilities. . . . So, this is why we teach the families to be partners in the education of their child and to work in a team with the professionals.”

What was your toughest challenge?

I expected that Dr. Mayo would say her toughest challenge was turning away a child or family—deciding that someone could not be helped. “No,” she answered, “we have never turned anyone away.” Dr. Mayo elaborated that “ANY child can be helped if the family is willing to help.” She clarified: “We don’t do miracles. We treat them like a human. We set high expectations. We emphasize the ‘power of two’—meaning that the parents must be actively engaged as our partners.”

The reader will likely be surprised by what Dr. Mayo identi-

fied as the toughest challenge she remembers—prior to the pandemic of 2020, that is. She said it was “flattening the hierarchy of the organization more than twenty to twenty-five years ago.” This echoes what other entrepreneurs articulate as being difficult: eventually, growing a business and expanding its impacts requires the trade-off of sharing and delegating control and decisions.

Dr. Mayo echoed precisely that point, saying: “It means delegating, entrusting, giving up a degree of ownership and control—it’s tough to do, you have to work on your own ego—it’s not ‘my event’ anymore.” Her mentors advised the flattening of the organization and sharing of responsibilities, she recalls, “so as to improve teamwork and motivation.” She noted that “There are now five people ready to take my position—there are shared decisions and attention. That is because we let others feel they could make a decision.” This is good because Dr. Mayo said she is in “a process of detachment” and now is “looking for ways to make it [CASP] truly self-sustainable financially.”

Any disappointments?

Dr. Mayo recalls that she cried when she saw “a previous student of ours who was overweight and begging in the street—he had such potential when I saw him the first time when he was six years old. If only his family had committed to working with him. What wasted potential, . . . what he could have been. This is why it is so important to work with the families in a team.”

Anything more, after forty years, that you have learned that you want to communicate about the neurologically atypical?

“They understand more than we know. Sometimes I work with

students, and I don't know their language, but they know how I talk to them and from all my nonverbal behavior that I believe in what they can do. We always are using the phrase 'I believe in you, . . . YOU CAN.'"

Any advice that you have for others, based on your experience, which they can use in their own efforts?

"The reason we succeed is that we believe that children with different abilities can be independent, productive, and happy if we work in a team with the families. We have demonstrated this for forty years. We focus on their abilities: on what they CAN do. We treat them as they want to be treated."

Dr. Mayo elaborated: "Again, it is very important we work in a team with the families. This is why we have the School of Families at CASP, where we trained more than 400 families every fifteen days to be the best parent-teachers for their child. If we didn't work with the families, we would never have obtained the success we're having with our students. Parents traveled with their children with different abilities to other provinces in Peru to make the multiplicative effect of teaching other parents."



1.3. Dr. Liliana Mayo with a student at her school, Centro Ann Sullivan Peru (CASP), in Lima, Peru. (Image courtesy of Dr. Liliana Mayo.)

Takeaway lessons that could help you in other situations in life and business

- (1) A setback—or even a “punishment”—could lead to something positive, possibly even discovering one’s mission in life and founding a pioneering organization.
- (2) Do not underestimate people—even those who are written-off or differently-abled. By listening and showing respect, you may unlock undiscovered potential.

- (3) Telling people about your crazy but constructive ambitions can result in a surprising amount of support.
- (4) Key factors to success in this story include passionately believing in a cause and other people, growing a team, and a service-oriented and positive mindset.
- (5) Trial and error, in reality, can sometimes lead to breakthroughs in areas where theories (or plans based on theories) have to date failed to provide a clear path toward solutions.
- (6) A lack of resources can sometimes force experimentation, methods, discoveries, and results that are better than a context with an abundance of resources.
- (7) Focus on what can be done rather than on limitations.
- (8) Magnifying your impact and leaving a sustainable legacy requires, at some point, delegating authority and trusting others.
- (9) Share and be proud of what you do but remain teachable and open to input.

Chapter 4

Guatemala: Broke to Smuggler to Legal Exporter of Illegal Mezcal

A BROKE TRAVELER did not set out to build a distinctive brand in a crowded global market that has a total value of over half a trillion dollars and is dominated by big established companies. Rather, John Rexer's café, bookstore, and bar in Antigua, Guatemala (plus his business distributing mezcal to the United States under the brand Illegal Mezcal) show what a blend of desperation and creative impulses can eventually produce after sixteen years of work.

First disclaimer: I almost didn't include this story, because I don't want, as a law professor, to be perceived to be encouraging law-breaking or intoxication. Suffice it to say that my youngest brother died in an incident involving alcohol—a fact I always mention to my temporarily immortal-feeling students. So, please be careful and temperate if you choose to imbibe. But ultimately, John's story is so entertaining, thought-provoking, funny at times, and instructional that I have to include it. Enjoy responsibly.

Second disclaimer: more so than is the case with the other stories in this book, I had no way of verifying every detail that follows.



4.1. The Santa Catalina Arch, in Antigua, Guatemala. (Image by Adam J. Sulkowski.)

How to get money when you are broke?

The bar, Café No Sé, was John's first business and was actually born out of a combination of spur-of-the-moment impulse, having no resources, and improvising in a key moment of opportunity. John had left the US in the early 2000s, explaining he'd "had enough" of the politics of post-9/11 America. He had backpacked through Mexico and Central America and, in 2003, found himself broke and looking for shelter in a downpour in Antigua.

An elderly gentleman asked John if he would like to come in and potentially rent his building, and he invited John in for a tour. Just to get out of the drenching rain, John agreed. Inside the colonial-era walls, the space was a dilapidated workshop, in shambles and filled with scrap parts and material.

As John tells the story:

To this day, I still don't know where this came from, but I

said: “Great, I’ll take it, and I’ll put a bar in front.” The problem was, really, I didn’t have a penny left. Even the credit card I had was so worn out and melted that it wouldn’t work. Again, I really don’t know where this idea came from—I said: “Look . . . but . . . I have business partners, and they have conditions. They won’t agree to pay first month’s rent, and actually, there’s a lot of work to do to set up, so we won’t be able to pay rent for the first two months, and we cannot pay a damage deposit.”

I had no business partners, but it sounded better than admitting I was broke. Also, I had a few drinks in me. Divine inspiration, as it were. He agreed to deferring payments for a few months, and I agreed to whatever he’d asked for in terms of monthly rent, on a handshake, not having a clue if it was fair market rate or not.

A matter of minutes later, a couple showed up and explained that, having been suddenly displaced out of their salsa dance studio, they were looking for a new location. They begged to tour the site to which John had just been introduced.

Again, in John’s words:

The elderly gentleman smiled and said, “No sé (I don’t know), it’s up to this gringo here, talk to him”—pointing to me. So, I find myself giving a tour of a location I had literally, a matter of minutes earlier, first seen. They said, “Perfect—we’d love to put the salsa studio here in front.”

I said, “Wait, hold on, that’s where my bar will be. You can have the back, but . . . look . . . my partners have strict conditions: we’ll need two months’ rent up front and a damage deposit.” They agreed to the same rate that I had been offered—

half of the total for their share of the space, with the first payments and the damage deposit due immediately. Again, I still had no idea if it was a fair rate—but I now had some money to start something here.”

John had a location and startup capital. Other than that, he had nearly no other assets, except for his knowledge—from his time vagabonding through the region—about small farmers in Southern Mexico producing small batches of mezcal for personal use or local sale—unregulated, uninspected, and not certified for export.

Time-out: how I got to meet John

Before we continue with a description of how John grew his businesses, the way we met bears mention. Having taught a class on intellectual property law on a morning in March 2017, in Boston, I made it onto a sequence of flights that got me to Antigua, Guatemala the same day, after dark. My hostel was locked. A guy was sleeping outside so peacefully that it seemed impolite to wake him up by knocking. Plus, across the street, painted on a wall, was a name that had caught my eye in a guidebook: *Café No Sé*. *Huh*, I thought. *What luck. It's not that late. Why not check it out?*

To set the scene: Café No Sé, John's office, and his bookstore and café are on a cobblestone-paved colonial street. Antigua is one of those 400-plus-year-old Spanish-built cities where the exteriors of buildings have not been modernized much. Arriving at night, it's easy to imagine you've stepped into another decade, another era, or another century. None of the businesses in that area had signs protruding into the street to catch your eye. There's just a door and words painted on the wall outside.

Inside Café No Sé, it's small, hazy, cozy, candle-lit, and always—every night—there was (until the pandemic starting in

2020) live music in the first room, across from the first bar. In the back is a second bar (and further back, I'd later learn, is John's office, labeled "Bad Idea Factory"). I'd also later learn that the refrigerator door in the second room was not a decoration but rather that it opened to reveal a mezcal bar with nothing but small-batch mezcals, informally brought in from Mexico. It was these mezcals that gave this business its notoriety and, as described later in this story, was one of the reasons for the memorable choice of name for John's mezcal brand.

Upon my entering the bar and sliding up to the counter, an expat told me a story about the founder, John Rexer, dressing as a priest to smuggle mezcal from Mexico into Guatemala. Then he pointed: "That's him in the corner." So, that night was my introduction to both John and the smoky liquor made from the distilled heart of agave, mezcal, made in Southern Mexico (related to but distinct from tequila, and not related at all to the similar-sounding hallucinogen mescaline).

The next day, John agreed to meet and speak with me. Distilled (pun intended) from three hours of walking and talking, the following sections of this chapter are the highlights of our conversation.



4.2. Outside view of the entrance to John Rexer's bar, Café No Sé, in Antigua, Guatemala. (Image by Adam J. Sulkowski.)



4.3. Bottles of mezcal lining a shelf at John Rexer's bar, Café No Sé, in Antigua, Guatemala. (Image by Adam J. Sulkowski.)



4.4. The entrance to John Rexer's office at his bar, Café No Sé, in Antigua, Guatemala. (Image by Adam J. Sulkowski.)

What was it like starting out?

"I had no f'ing clue what to do," John started. When John said he had run out of money, he really meant it. He had to turn the cash from his subletters into a profit quickly, but he had more obstacles than a short runway. "When the owner showed me the place," he explained, "there were piles of junk—it was a dump—one of those places to weld chicken buses. I slept here, at the age of forty-three, a backpack under my head, in front. I didn't know anyone here yet. I could have called friends back in New York and borrowed money, but I didn't want to be in debt to anyone."

John continued: "Also, I didn't have enough money to do this legally. It would cost \$1,200 to get licenses. But then again, the town was relatively lawless then. At first, I passed bottles through the window in the door to people willing to pay, while I frantically figured out how to turn beautiful junk into a bar and furniture with a handsaw and a hammer."

Once Café No Sé opened, John described a not atypical startup grind of “falling asleep at 2 a.m. and waking up at 5 a.m.” and living “hand to mouth.” There was also some regulatory uncertainty, besides initially not having a permit: “A year before, there had been a purging of bars. For a while, only beer and wine were officially permitted to be sold and consumed. One solution was serving liquor in a mug with a string of teabags. I wrote on the menu, ‘Ask about our special white tea.’ When [clients] did [ask], I’d say, ‘Under the bar we have gin, vodka, rum, tequila. [But] I have to serve it in a teacup.’”

Was there a vision for Café No Sé?

“I knew I wanted live music,” John responded. “At first, musicians would meet, gather, and practice in back. But no, there was no vision. But I knew it would evolve into a funky Petri dish of romantic souls.”

How would you respond if someone critiqued the business saying that you’re making money from a substance that is addictive and can end up causing harm?

“Bars are important. People meet. They exchange ideas. This is not a place where we shake people upside down and take all their money. There’s a community here.”

What’s the secret to creating an atmosphere that becomes world-famous out of an old workshop?

“A bar is not a place,” John explained. “It’s the people. Including the people who work here. Bartending skills are not that important to me. My customers can attest to that. I don’t hire based

on bartending skills. What I do hire for is someone able to talk: [someone] who understands things from the other side of the bar, who knows how to ignite conversation and introduce one customer to another. Good energy, but also won't take s**t from anyone. A bar is a world of characters, so you should not try to control the chemistry of the room unless things get boring. It should be a place for the bungled, botched, and brilliant."

What about the bookstore and café?

"The place adjacent to No Sé was bright blue, yellow, and fluorescent. An Internet café. I hated it. My landlord wanted to rent it to me. I said if you take out all the damn computers, I'll rent it. I was still broke, not thinking. Just moving, got to get it done."

What ties Café No Sé together?

"A couple from California once asked, 'What is your concept?' Simple: I put all my vices under one roof—live music, poker, booze, a dash of madness, and later books and coffee—and hoped people would show up."

How did Café No Sé become known in some circles as one of the world's best dive bars?

"It was discovered in about 2005. Writers and journalists were passing through. We got overrun with politics that year. The bar became a journalist hangout."

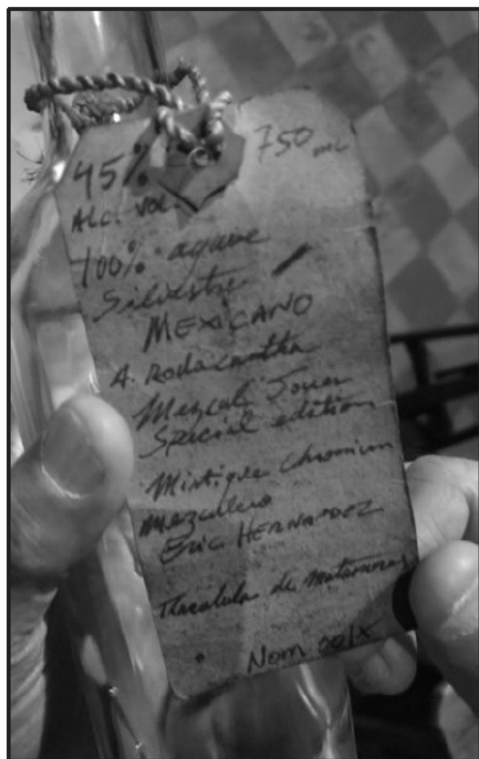
What's with this story about smuggling mezcal from Mexico?

"So, I built this place," John began. "I wanted something like an

agave, mezcal, tequila bar. But for that, I needed good Mexican spirits. And I knew from traveling through Mexico about this great mezcal that small-time farmers made in their backyard distilleries which they call *palenques*.

“I went up to Mexico, to villages, buying mezcal by taste and production methods that appealed to me, sometimes in bottles, or putting it in five-liter gas cans. I’d write notes about the taste and origins and attach those, bringing twenty to thirty liters back over the border. This matters. The quality of mezcal can vary from *palenque* to *palenque* significantly. I got to know who took pride in their craft. It’s all in the details.”

John explained that Café No Sé’s mezcal is “made in Oaxaca—either a twenty-four-hour trip by bus or about twelve hours in total by car.” Because these were literally backyard stills, and totally unregulated, it was important to know the sources and who had good practices. So, yes, we started bringing small batches down informally. We started to serve more and more mezcal. People loved it, and they loved the stories of how it got here.”



4.5. A label hanging from a bottle of mezcal at John Rexer's bar, Café No Sé, in Antigua, Guatemala, showing his notes on taste and origins of the mezcal in the bottle. (Image by Adam J. Sulkowski.)

What are your best stories about smuggling mezcal?

"You have to remember this has been one of the most corrupt borders in the world. Everyone looks to either extort or steal from you: border guards on the river, military, police, gangs, and thieves. At first, we were bringing in several bottles in duffel bags

pretending it was personal luggage and just hoping no one would inspect carefully or else rob us. But even then, it was a day and a half by bus to get to Oaxaca, plus several days of running between villages to collect mezcal before the day and a half trip back. Not an efficient way to stock a bar.”

What is this about dressing as a priest?

John told the story: “Once, I was coming back from Mexico, at the official border crossing with my friend Lucas with about fifteen duffle bags with maybe sixty bottles of mezcal. We stopped at a market to get some clothing—any cheap stuff—to conceal the bubble-wrapped bottles of mezcal in our luggage. Lucas is a romantic madman—a painter and musician who resembles Salvador Dali, with a pencil-thin mustache and, as I was about to discover, a weakness for porn. He was more than a bit tipsy from sampling some of the mezcal that we’d procured. So, there I am, at the Mexican-Guatemalan border with contraband and a drunk man resembling Zorro on my hands.

“Lucas saw a priest’s outfit in the market and said that I should buy it and put it on: ‘who’s going to challenge a priest?’ he asked. It seemed like a good idea. In fact, we did get through the checkpoint on the Mexican side of the river very smoothly.

“Continuing to customs on the Guatemalan side, Drunk Zorro got through without a hitch. But a border guard stopped me and asked what was in my duffle bags. I replied: ‘Regalos para mis amigos y libros para los niños’ (gifts for my friends and books for the children).

“The border guard stared at me, and then pointed to one of my bags and ordered: ‘Abra su maleta’ (open your bag). Of course, I complied. At first, I thought this was not a problem, because we had stuffed plenty of clothes and books at the top of the bag to

conceal the mezcal underneath. But my friend had not told me that, back in Mexico, he had made a last-minute purchase of porn and shoved it in, at the top of this bag. There they were, hardcore porn mags, staring back at the border guard and me, in my priestly attire, and both of us equally shocked.

“The border guard let out a breath and looked up at me: ‘Que es eso?’ (What is this?) I was sweating, and my knees were shaking. I repeated: ‘Regalos para mis amigos y libros para los niños.’ Another long moment passed before I asked: ‘Esta bien?’ He shook his head laughing and waved me through: ‘Esta bien, Padre. Esta bien. Pasale. Pasale. (It’s ok, Father. It’s ok. Pass. Go ahead.)’ Fifty percent of the time I was terrified doing this kind of thing. I was raised a good Catholic boy.”



4.6. John Rexer sits on a stool at his bar, *Café No Sé*, in Antigua, Guatemala. (Image courtesy of John Rexer.)

How did you keep up with demand once you started selling more?

“We had to get creative when demand increased. We either had to find people with whom to work, or else just avoided trouble by going around the official crossing. The first time that someone offered to sell a whole pallet, and I said there was no way I could sneak hundreds of bottles across, he smiled and said, ‘No te preocupes, yo tengo un tío’—meaning ‘Don’t worry about it, I have an uncle.’

“Sure enough, when we got to the river, there was a warehouse with everything in it you can imagine and rafts built of inner tubes and wooden slats. You could get anything across that river—anything. You can still get an elephant across the river and avoid the official crossing. But it was still a desperate experience, slogging through mud on the other side, guns everywhere, fearing or knowing we’d be ripped off.”

As someone who teaches law, I gotta ask—any regrets about taking part in smuggling?

“What if there’s more crime, corruption, and risk of violence doing it the legal way?” John pointed out. “Again, this is one of the more corrupt borders in the world. Years later, when we got mezcal certified for export, we would try to do it legally. It could be more corrupt, dangerous, and result in a total loss. What if you pay a tax or fee at the border, and the border guard radios friends, and thirty minutes later you’re held-up by a policeman who also wants mordida, a bribe? And next, a bandit is tipped off and you get extorted again or get completely robbed at gunpoint? That happened to us more than once.

“Many times, we tried to do it legally, officially. And we got jacked—a total loss. So, what if there’s less crime and less risk of

robbery and violence by avoiding the legal route? What if, the other way, you pay a fee once, and you're done? When what is ostensibly legal is corrupt, should you be a boy scout?"

It is a great brand name—"Illegal"—did you partly do the smuggling to justify the name later, knowing you would eventually go into business exporting it?

"No, the smuggling at the beginning was out of desperation and necessity. I was a broke bar owner with a supply problem—it wasn't part of a premeditated plan to make as much money as possible. Also, the name 'Illegal' was partly inspired by people from the communities where we buy the mezcal. Many have loved ones that have gone, out of desperation, since there were no jobs available locally, to the US to work as undocumented laborers. As we all know, they're wrongly referred to as 'illegal' too. These are people with whom we work. I thought about the name 'Illegal' a lot. It's also a nod to them and hints at concerns a lot of people share related to immigration reform, borders, surveillance, and freedom."

Did it ever cross your mind, though, in the early days: "This will justify a cool, edgy, naughty-sounding name someday later, if I export this stuff?"

"No, I was just waking up every morning in a fevered sweat, thinking: *how am I going to get this bar to survive.*"

Are there still mornings like that?

"All the time! In 2006 and again in 2014–2015, I put up the bar as

collateral to borrow money to keep the mezcal business alive. We were down to our last \$80,000, not exporting much. Competing on an international stage is exceedingly expensive, and you lose money for several years in the hope of building a successful brand. Then, and more importantly, there is also the importance of paying a fair price for mezcal and the hard, manual labor that goes into producing it.

“From an early stage, I thought about economic sustainability for the distillers we work with, which means not just paying good wages but providing them with consistent year-round business. I reiterate, this is a very expensive field of endeavor. It requires investors, and when we began, few had faith in mezcal. Now, I do not wake up in a fevered sweat, because I never sleep.”

When was the first inkling you would go from smuggling small amounts to creating an export business?

“I saw people loving the taste of mezcal—the varieties, the stories, the history. By 2006 or 2007, people were coming to the bar specifically requesting mezcal. When mixologists from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and London started emailing me about mezcal, I knew we had something.

“I was lucky to be one of the earlier foreigners to have built relationships with *mezcaleros* who made fine mezcal. I thought: if we are going to do this—meaning build a brand for export—we are going to figure this out ourselves and do it well. We’ll also do all the creative parts of branding and the difficult part of education about the category, as well as the sales. I would tell those working with me that we have *tabula rasa*, so we have both an opportunity and an obligation to try and do this right.”

The export business—how did you go from smuggling mezcal to getting it certified for export to bringing it out legally, and what else did you do to sell mezcal in the US?

“The process took a lot of time: sending samples to government laboratories, getting trademarks in Mexico and other countries, and getting certification for quality under what was then the newly-formed regulatory body for mezcal called COMERCAM (now called the CRM). Mezcal has *denomination of origin* similar to Cognac and Champagne, which means mezcal is specific to a country and region. The only place in the world mezcal can be produced is Mexico. Oaxaca and seven other Mexican states are certified under the CRM. Then, with certification, you can export legally to a place like the United States. The process of securing intellectual property rights has cost the company roughly \$500,000—probably more.”

**Almost half a million dollars? Just for IP?
How big is this operation now, selling mezcal around the US?**

“About fifty people now work for Ilegal assisting in distribution, marketing, and branding. We now sell in about twenty-five countries, with the US being the biggest market. In 2019, we sold about 27,500 nine-liter cases. This may sound like a lot, but in the world of spirits, we are still quite small.

“As we grow, the promise of our company is to stay true to quality, small-batch, and artisanal production and put economic and environmental sustainability at the forefront of all we do. The last thing we want to do is destroy the beautiful spirit and harm in any way the culture that produces it. We will never industrialize

our mezcal or rush the process. But we have the ability to grow over time by hiring more people and adding more artisanal 200-liter copper stills with the two partner distillers we work with in Oaxaca.”

You mentioned Bacardi made an investment in Illegal Mezcal?

“Yes. They bought a minority stake in our company in 2015. Some people freaked out about it because Bacardi is a multinational liquor company with many commercial brands. The fear was that we would become industrial. Nothing could be further from the truth. Bacardi values how our mezcal is produced, realizing that the truly handcrafted nature is what sets mezcal apart from other spirits. Part of our agreement is that our artisanal production methods will not change. Where Bacardi has been a huge help is providing a route to national distribution, which is very difficult for a small brand to obtain without a major industry partner.”

Do you worry that any of what you do at Café No Sé—the bar’s character—will get ruined if Illegal gets too much attention? What about Illegal Mezcal: will it get ruined if it becomes too mass-market, too popular?

“About our bar and customers: we attract self-selecting visitors, with a different way of thinking. This is a huge generalization, but there is a very real sense of community. We’re small and communal yet international. A somewhat dark underbelly. Educated folks who dropped out because they wanted community—a human interaction. Kill your preconceptions.

“As for Illegal, well, for a liquor brand to survive, it has to be-

come somewhat mass market. The attrition rate in the liquor business is staggering. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of brands perish every year. If we maintain our quality by producing artisanally, and if we keep to our values of social and environmental responsibility, then commercial growth is a very good thing. We will be able to provide more quality jobs in Oaxaca and perhaps in some small way set an example of what a better business model is. The other thing is that Illegal is not just a commodity, it is a culture built around community, music, travel, literature. It is, in many ways, a way of thinking. I often say it is not a ‘lifestyle’ but a glorious ‘death style’ since we are all headed in that direction anyway.”

You mentioned politics and community. This might be the moment to explain the political ad you used to promote Illegal Mezcal and how it went viral.

[Note: Whether a reader loves the message or hates it, John’s ad is interesting because it is hard to intentionally plan a campaign to organically go viral. Sorry in advance if the following story offends your political sensibilities or sense of propriety, but this seems worth including.]

“I went back to visit family in 2015, to New York City,” John recalls. “We’re at a restaurant, and when the waiter came over, I asked him where he was from. He told me Puebla, Mexico. I told him how much I loved Puebla, that I had lived there many years back, that I loved the food, the town. The waiter said to me, ‘It’s good to know everyone is not like Trump.’ Then he said, ‘Donald es un pendejo’ (Donald is an a**hole). I thought this is probably how many Mexicans felt at that moment. Then I thought of all the hard-working Mexicans we work with on both sides of the

border.

“Very spontaneously, without thought of repercussion or even thinking of this as an ad campaign, I decided to paste thousands of posters around Manhattan and Brooklyn with a silhouette of Trump, reading *Donald, Eres Un Pendejo* [followed by the text *The Only Thing That Should Be Illegal Is Mezcal*]. I used ‘eres’ instead of ‘es’ for emphasis: ‘Donald, You are an a**hole.’ We later did giant graffiti projections on buildings with the same image. Think of images the size of Batman’s bat signal. It went crazy viral.”

I saw that on Business Insider some time ago. You must have gotten millions of dollars in free advertising for Illegal Mezcal. And that wasn’t planned?

“It was an impulse. Sometimes an impulse gets you into trouble! But instant death is doing things by committee. Viscerally, I knew . . . this felt right. . . . It was just: ‘Let’s go, this is great.’ My attitude is: ‘As long as we are all racing headlong into the abyss, might as well take [a] chance [to] stand and fight for something, feel alive, get some good stories.’”

What do you think of the whole sustainability movement?

“Everyone talks about sustainability. There is a lot of lip service paid to it, and often, it is just a marketing blurb. Often people either have idealized or cynical ideas of what is needed for the developing world.

“From a business point of view, in terms of what we are doing with mezcal, there needs to be volume to have an impact in terms of economic sustainability. Piecemeal, very sporadic work does

not provide secure income and leads to migration. Whole villages in Oaxaca were decimated in the 1980s and 90s due to lack of jobs and low wages. People fled to the US to look for work.

“Moreover, you cannot build a business if those who work with you are financially insecure. Economic stability means providing secure jobs and good wages. It’s both the right thing to do and good business. Our goal is to grow in tandem with our distillers so that they know we will be here in twenty years and that they, too, will be here. It has to be beneficial for both parties long-term.

“As to environmental sustainability, well, I mentioned before that we had *tabula rasa*—a chance from the start to do things correctly. We are fortunate that we have the ability to look at best practices from many industries, be it coffee producers, fisheries, forestry, and of course well-run distilleries. Alongside the *mezcaleros* we work with, we have begun to employ practices to recycle water, reforest the certified wood we use for distillation, eliminate plastic and other non-recyclables, etcetera.”

Final reflections

My conversation with John turned a bit philosophical, contemplating the big problems in the world and how to make sense of—and act in—systems that often seem broken and corrupt. He explained: “I make a living doing the best with what I know about the world. There’s cognitive dissonance sometimes, but you do the best you can in the Petri dish you are in. Or you compartmentalize. It’s easy to become a modern-day sociopath: those people sometimes seem to be the most successful. We tell kids, ‘Here are morals,’ and then we check what we told kids—our values—at the door of work. Society sometimes rewards checking morals at the door, teaching you to be amoral, not to really

care.”

John continued: “Money is secondary. It is lower down the totem pole. It is actually the biggest impediment to creativity, to doing well. When you have nothing—no capital—you see what is there and make something of it. You have to be resourceful, and that is the fun. The resourcefulness becomes infectious, and you make an amazing connection with other people who want to join in the creativity.

“It is harder now than before, but there are still opportunities. There is social or peer pressure that demands that you are successful quickly. But then you are just money-driven. That can leave things horribly soulless. The last thing we want is to live in a world that is purely mercantile and mercenary.”

Takeaway lessons that could help you in other situations in life and business

- (1) Desperation and impulse can sometimes be steered constructively.
- (2) We cannot tell when or where inspiration will strike, but following creative gut instincts can sometimes produce “outlier” results, where a safer decision-by-deliberative-process would have resulted in a much less interesting story.
- (3) When startup capital is nonexistent and credit is unavailable, defer cash outflows and take cash upfront for whatever can be sold, rented out, or sublet.
- (4) Hire for disposition and personality characteristics that cannot be taught or imparted—skills are secondary and can be acquired.
- (5) Build upon whatever makes you or your service unique.

Guatemala

- (6) Scaling-up and creating a business that is sustainable economically can give you credibility and influence to encourage environmentally- and societally-positive changes.
- (7) Money is not the only or primary motive to keep pursuing a business, and a rollercoaster of emotions and ethical ambiguities are a part of an entrepreneur's journey.
- (8) As in some of the other chapters of this book, both John's story and the backstory of how we met are, again, examples of a balance between some planning (or background knowledge), being aware of and engaged in what is around "in the moment," and being open to serendipitous opportunities.

Chapter 5

Madagascar: Empowering Local Economies in Villages with Solar Mini-Grid 3.0

“DON’T WORRY, WE KNOW it’s precious, we got this,” said a Malagasy villager, one of about three dozen unloading one-ton pallets of solar panels and equipment by hand from a tractor-trailer. The odds of a disastrous drop seemed 50/50. In contrast to my doubts, the project leaders seemed confident that the equipment would all be safely unloaded and used to complete a solar-powered mini-grid. Beyond that, they seemed sure that selling access to electricity in Marosely, a village of about 2,500 people, would make enough money to pay for itself and even return some money to investors.

Camille André-Bataille, Co-CEO of ANKA Madagascar, provided the explanation to me. Camille was one of several women entrepreneurs and a total of over fifty-five native Malagasy and expat sources (known as *Vazaha* if they happen to be light-skinned) with whom I spoke in the summer of 2019. Some were brutally candid about the challenges of starting a business in a neocolonial economy where the legal system doesn’t always work as it should. But Camille sees a way forward, as imagined and now jointly realized with her Co-CEO, Nico Livache.

This chapter describes the adaptations needed by a business to

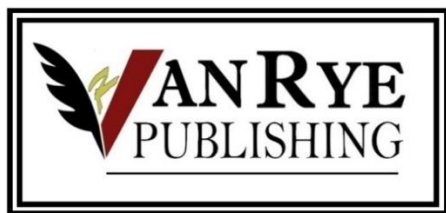
bring electricity to rural Madagascar, where 90–95 percent of people in villages are not on any power grid.



5.1. Malagasy villagers unload a crate of solar panels from a truck, in the village of Marosely, Madagascar. (Image by Adam J. Sulkowski.)

How I ended up there

Never underestimate the power of saying “hi” to strangers. In case you didn’t notice in the last few chapters, that is a recurring theme of this book. On a cold nighttime run during a sleet storm along the Charles River in Boston in the winter of 2019, someone ran past me with music blaring from a backpack festooned with colored lights. Several runners followed. It was apparently one of those running groups that give each other mutual support. Long story short, I ended up chatting with one runner in the group who shared that he invests in places where other people do not and that he was off to, among other places, Madagascar to see how his



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About the Author

ADAM J. SULKOWSKI is an associate professor of law and sustainability at Babson College, ranked as the #1 school for entrepreneurs for decades, according to *US News & World Report* and other authorities. As a professor since 2005, he has earned tenure twice (at UMass Dartmouth and again at Babson), has won more than a dozen teaching and research awards, has been published over fifty times (including over three dozen times in academic journals), and was a Fulbright Scholar (in 2014–15). Before beginning his teaching career, Professor Sulkowski received a BA from the College of William & Mary and an MBA and JD from Boston College. He also ran a business and worked as an attorney at firms, at businesses, and on behalf of environmental causes.

Professor Sulkowski grew up in the greater Boston area as the multilingual first child of two immigrant scientists who survived war and communism. Stories passed on from his grandmother about the improbable survival of his relatives made him intrigued by other times and places and helped inspire his interest in travel—“the further from home, the better,” he says. Professor Sulkowski has now visited over 120 countries, including as a visiting faculty member of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences. Wherever he is, he feels most at home in conversations, whether in classrooms or (especially) on the road with people solving big problems in hard times and tough places. He has a passion for turning those conversations into stories that entertain, educate, and inspire others.

You can follow or contact Professor Sulkowski on Twitter (www.twitter.com/adam_sulkowski), on LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/in/adamsulkowski/), or via email (asulkowski@babson.edu).