



Paul Downs EAS'85 and Jacob Lief C'99

have each had just one job since graduating from Penn—the former as the owner of Paul Downs Cabinetmakers and the latter heading up the nonprofit Ubuntu Education Fund. While their ventures are very different, these two alumni share an extraordinary degree of persistence and a rare candor—as shown in the following interviews and book excerpts, in which they describe the false starts, wrong turns, instructive setbacks, hard-won successes, and profound satisfaction they've experienced pursuing their respective dreams.



Confessions of a Small Businessman

In a genre dominated by tales of unambiguous success and recipes for personal enrichment, furniture maker Paul Downs writes about the real constants of running a small business: uncertainty, mistakes, and the thin margin separating fleeting survival from unmitigated failure.

BY TREY POPP

The business press is full of writers who claim insight into the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, or the *15 Invaluable Laws of Growth*, or the *22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*—to crib just a few random titles from the genre.

Paul Downs' *EAS'85* is decisively, resolutely, defiantly not one of them. The reason he sat down at a keyboard to begin with was to document what it felt like to drive a business into the ground.

After 23 years in business, Downs thought 2009 was going to be his last. His company had come to specialize almost exclusively in boardroom tables—after a picture of one on his website unexpectedly became Google's top search result for the term—and the recession had cratered demand. Downs had a couple grand in the bank and no new orders coming in. "I thought we were literally about to go out of business within a week," he recalls.

On a lark he wrote to *The New York Times*, whose *You're The Boss* blog had debuted earlier that year as a venue for small-business owners to share their experiences and advice.

"I said, 'Listen, I like all the stuff you've got in here, but you don't have anybody who's about to fail,'" he recalls. "And a lot of businesses fail—particularly now in the recession—but I can't find anything written about what that's like."

Writing about it, Downs thought, would be "something to look forward to as this whole thing collapsed around me."

It wasn't the sort of query the blog's editor, Loren Feldman '78, was used to getting. "I knew instantly," he recalls, "that I would probably never get another pitch along those lines ... Most of the business owners who want to contribute are hoping to get something out of it" in terms of positive exposure. Downs wanted to bare his warts.

A stroke of good fortune brought Paul Downs Cabinetmakers an order that delayed the day of reckoning, and he managed to limp through the recession. But his *Times* posts became a catalogue of the uncertainties he faced and mistakes he made along the way—with hiring and firing, running a Google AdWords campaign, battling credit-card processors, implementing a profit-sharing plan, setting his own salary, and other challenges rarely broached with the candor Downs mustered.

"A lot of people wouldn't have told their spouse" about some of the missteps Downs made, Feldman reckons. "But he put it in *The New York Times* ... And that created loyalty among his followers, because a lot of them couldn't believe how honest and transparent he was being."

In his new book, *Boss Life: Surviving My Own Small Business* (Blue Rider Press, 2015), Downs raises a magnifying glass to the ups and considerable downs of making it through another challenging year, 2012. Family life sharpens the drama. Downs and his wife, Nancy Bea Miller '85, have twin boys who face starkly contrasting futures as they enter adulthood. Peter lands a \$54,000-a-year software-coding job right out of high school, and delays his acceptance to MIT to pursue it. Meanwhile Henry, a severely autistic young man incapable of speech and prone to violent outbursts, approaches the end of the publicly supported special-needs schooling that the family has come to depend on. Meanwhile, Paul Downs Cabinetmakers reaches the midpoint of the year \$45,883 poorer than it began.

Downs spoke with *Gazette* associate editor Trey Popp about the boss life shortly after the book came out in August.

INTERVIEW

You start the book at the beginning of your 26th year in business. How did you set out on this path to

begin with?

When I graduated from Penn, I was intending to go on and get a graduate degree in architecture, but first I found a job as a carpenter's helper in West Philly, helping a guy renovate a house around 46th and Pine. And this carpenter was always going on about how great it would be to be a furniture maker—and he made it sound so good, I gave it a go.

I had \$5,000 I had inherited from my grandmother. My wife and I moved to Manayunk, and I rented an empty row-house shell, and bought a couple tools, and was like, *Okay, I'm going to do this*. I had no training, but when I was a kid I'd built model airplanes for a long time, so I had some hand skills. I knew I could put stuff together. I got some books out of the library—how to build furniture. The theory is simple. It's all about whether you can execute it. And then the real trick is whether you can design what you're building. You can always pull plans out and build traditional stuff, but in order to get a business going, you have to be able to design new stuff. And it turned out that I could.

Over your almost 30 years in business, have customers' attitudes changed about what they expect from the furniture you make?

When people think about what value to put on the quality of an artifact, two things are constantly fighting. There is the delight in novelty—the joy or interest of seeing something new—versus the satisfaction of



longevity. And those two things are in a constant battle in our culture. And there's a constant bias toward the new.

The big challenge with boardroom tables is you have this huge expanse that has to be perfectly even, smooth, and shiny. People expect that. They think of their car, or their smartphone screen, or any other thing they think of as being smooth and shiny, and they're comparing it to that. So we have to do this very complicated thing of starting with a tree, which is a completely different physical object that has whole different concerns, and then send it through a bunch of different steps and impose this Euclidean geometry on it to make it perfectly flat, smooth in all the shapes we want it, and shiny. And it doesn't want to be any of those things. So the fabrication is quite tricky.

Also, we've been taught to think of the life cycle of objects in a very different way than 100 years ago. You replace your computer every two years, your cellphone every two years, your car every five years or whatever. So now people think of things as being more disposable—because a lot of things *are* more disposable. We're in more of a throwaway society, and it makes it a little harder for me to exist. Because we're not making throwaway things.

You wrote about some pretty substantial missteps in the *Times*. Was it hard to say publicly: Here's the story how \$150,000 went down the tubes because I wasn't careful enough about my electricity usage?

The interesting thing is, when I write about something dumb I did, it does help me, just to process it. It may help somebody else out there—like, jeez, I never looked at my electric bill. I wrote extensively about credit cards, and that's been the most-viewed thing that I wrote about for the *Times*. I get an email at least once a week from someone thanking me. If I'm not willing to look at the things that went wrong and just talk about them, then I'm just another business writer.

You know, there's a million assholes out there who each have their theory and are trying to line up speaking engagements. I'm not interested in being that.

You write that you qualified for WIC vouchers to help feed your twins for three years in the early 1990s. You also work out your average hourly wage, over a 25-year period, to be \$16.15—which is less than you pay many of your skilled workers. Meanwhile, you loaned the business more than \$340,000 to

keep it afloat—and took on a partner who ended up shouldering close to \$1 million in losses. Apart from how you managed to keep going, there's also the question of why, when the headwinds have been so persistently against you.

There's never been a day when quitting was better than keeping going. I've come very close to no hope, but I've never gotten there. Because when you quit, then you're walking away from a whole life of effort. There's also a lot that's really interesting about the business. You've got all these difficult problems to solve. So the same thing that attracted me to making furniture in the first place—you have to come up with a design, build a lot of parts, and put it together to make something good—that is true of a business, too. Every day when I come in here, something's going on that I can think about—and that I can affect, too.

The other thing about running a small business is that you get to sort of create your own tribe, and create the culture of that tribe. I get to decide how we treat each other, I get to decide who I hire and don't hire, I get to create a mini-country of my own, a little tribe of my own, and treat the people the way I want to be treated. And I get to build that and live in it.

In your desperation to keep the business going, you took a self-management seminar that featured a suggestion to buy a blank journal and fill it with pictures cut out of magazines representing the things success will bring you. You say that it made you gag. You also describe sales seminars that seem pretty hokey—but helpful. How did you find yourself getting education in this particular way, and what did it do for you?

The question of educating yourself as a boss is interesting. I started at age 23, and had my first employee at age 24. And this is back in the early '80s, when there was essentially no information available about running a small business, because it was a different era in terms of how information moved.

There were no books that were relevant. I wasn't going to be able to go to a class at Wharton about this—entrepreneurship was not a huge thing at that time. So for many years I had no information whatsoever about how to do it.

We decided to do the sales training because our sales were collapsing, and I got advice from somebody else to go do this. And that sort of brings up another question, which is: Why can't you take a course like that at Penn? There's a huge industry of small-scale private training operations just like this—and there's nothing like it for accounting, because universities do



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that. Whereas learning how to close a deal—my impression is that it's too icky for the academy to engage with. People see it as being a form of hucksterism.

But all the things you want to accomplish in your business—to make a nice profit, to interact with clients, to provide your employees with a paycheck—somebody's got to close that deal. So that's powerful motivation to get over whatever discomfort I have with the way the message is arriving.

Did you ever take any business classes when you were at Penn?

No. But in the Design of the Environment program, I did learn to think about designing stuff. And in a business that interacts with people who have money, it's bound to be helpful to come from that world—just to be comfortable putting on a coat and tie and walking into a boardroom. And a lot of [my comfort in doing that] was because I encountered them at Penn.

Though the other thing that's been interesting about this business is, just as many times, I've had to take the coat and tie off and walk in through the loading dock.

I'll tell you a story. My brother is a very successful attorney. And when I was 25, and had been in business two or three years, he ended up clerking at the Supreme Court for [Chief Justice William] Rehnquist. We went down to visit. So I'm going from my shitty, heroin-ravaged neighborhood in Philadelphia to the Supreme Court with my brother, and we took a tour, and I saw his office, and I picked up a notepad from the Supreme Court. My brother gave us all one. It said "Memorandum of the Supreme Court" on top. And the next day I had to go to the plumbing supply house. And without thinking about it, I wrote my list of stuff on this pad ... So I hand my list to the plumbing supply guy, not thinking about it, and the guy shouts, "Who is here from the Supreme Court of the United States!? Holy shit!" And I was like, "Oh, that's me." And I had to explain to him why, and he was disappointed. But I was thinking, that's a hell of a step, that in one day I've gone from there to there.

The year you describe seems like a pivotal one. You completely overhauled your sales practices, changed the way you managed your workers, and turned what seemed like a potentially disastrous year—where at

EXCERPT

A Month So Good I Almost Wrote Myself a Paycheck

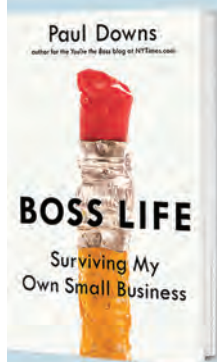
In our Friday meeting Will says that he plans to spend significant time training Kristian Scheld, who's showing great potential. I'm very pleased. Will is exactly what I've been missing all these years: a shop foreman with energy and imagination, who likes working with others, and wants us to be a profitable business. My other workers are all excellent craftsmen, but none has Will's extra spark. Where did it come from? His family is of modest means—his father works in a warehouse. But the Kriegers have a deep streak of mechanical genius. His father and grandfather can build or fix anything: welding, carpentry, electrical work, plumbing, auto repair. Will grew up helping them with all of this.

Will got his first paying job at the age of 14 in a local cabinet shop. His shop teacher knew talent when he saw it and encouraged Will to enroll in a local technical college, Stevens Tech. When he graduated, Will started working at a local sawmill, then moved on to another cabinet shop. One day it ran out of money, and Will was back on the job market. That's when he saw my want ad.

Will's background—modest education, modest college, bouncing from one crappy job to the next—is typical of the guys who work for me. I even have a couple that never went to college at all, and I suspect that Dave Violi didn't finish high school. That doesn't bother me. I'm not interested in credentials. I only care about performance. These guys are smart, and capable of doing excellent work.

When I look at Will, I'm looking across a class divide. He's a very intelligent, capable man. His rural upbringing, and his choice of woodworking as a career, put him in a sector of the economy where very few people get rich, and most barely stay afloat. What would his future be if he had been raised in a family like mine, and went to a decent school? He'd be on his way to the C-suite somewhere, by way of an excellent university. He'd be like my son Peter, who is also a self-starter. Peter, left to his own devices, taught himself to write code rather than work with his hands. Our local schools provided him with a solid education in math and writing to supplement his self-taught skills. And he's gone directly to a well-paying, professional job, even before getting a college education. What if Peter was more interested in auto repair than software? If he worked in a succession of small repair shops, for workman's wages? Would his classmates call him a success, or would he be a cautionary tale of brains and talent wasted?

That's probably how my peers see me. I'm the guy who jumped off the professional track after college, and ended up working with his hands. Struggled all my life to keep the business afloat. Never made real money. Never got advanced degrees. I get no recognition from my professional peers—woodworkers don't have professional organizations. I'm buffeted by an economy that encourages manufacturing to go to countries with the cheapest labor.



I attribute my survival, in part, to my intellectual abilities, not my manual skills. I've taken my Ivy League education, and my design and marketing talents, and built a business that, despite many problems, has grown and produced decent jobs. If my sales issue is really fixed, my next challenge is figuring out how to move beyond survival. I need to improve as a businessman. In order to make a more secure future for myself and my workers, I have to get out of selling, step away from minute-by-minute operations. Otherwise, I won't have the time or energy to take the next steps towards success.

For that to happen, Dan and Nick need to succeed. And if they do, we're going to need to change how the shop operates. Will looks like the guy who can drive that transformation. Today I saw something that I haven't seen in 18 years: a shop foreman eager to spend time training a new worker.

At the Monday meeting, I report our sales for the month: \$261,371. And cash is strong. Incoming deposits have reversed last week's slump. \$78,372 in, \$24,310 out, our balance is now \$151,104.

The following morning, I check the overtime numbers on the pay sheets. My guys get paid time and a half for every overtime hour, which I see as a bargain. If I assume that I cover all of my fixed costs in the first 40 hours they work, OT hours are almost 25 percent cheaper, due to the lack of overhead. If the guys can keep working productively during the extra hours, the more they work, the better. But our call for overtime has yielded mixed results. Will Krieger and Dave Violi, as usual, are doing plenty. The problem is the other guys. Kristian did 14 extra hours—a good effort. Ron did 9.5 hours. Bob did 3.5 hours in the first week, but didn't even make 40 hours the second week. Sean worked one extra hour. Steve Maturin did none. I'm baffled. Who doesn't want to make more money?

On Friday, Will and I discuss the situation. He's talked to the slackers and has listened to a variety of excuses. It seems that some of the guys just don't want to be here any more than what's required to cover their bills. What should we do? We've already told the guys that it's mandatory, but we don't have a policy in place that addresses what happens when they don't comply. I could write one, but what would it be? Should it be a termination offense? Firing someone would teach a lesson to the remaining employees, but dismissing a highly skilled, difficult-to-replace worker would not help raise short-term production. It's one of those situations with no clear best choice. We decide to do nothing.

Friday afternoon, after everyone has gone, I stare at my cash spreadsheet. We sold another \$98,157 last week. Much of that came with deposits, and we're still getting pre-ship and finals from work we've completed. Our haul this week: \$81,852. It was tempting, as I wrote payroll on Tuesday, to give myself a paycheck. I'm just surviving on the \$3,225 monthly interest payment that the company is paying me for the money I've loaned it. That takes care of my mortgage, but Nancy and I are in Recession Mode for all other expenditures: no new clothes, no travel, lots of macaroni and cheese. Peter will be starting school next fall, and I don't have enough money to pay for it. Maybe he'll be able to save some of his salary, and maybe I'll get some financial aid, but I don't want to assume anything.

Before I'll pay myself a penny, I want to clear up the credit card debt. The balance—\$42,097—is due on Saturday. And I've just sent out a heavy payroll, and a bunch of vendor bills: goodbye to \$81,274, more spending than any other week this year. I end up \$578 ahead of where I started. Paying off that credit card, though, is a huge relief.

On the last day of the month, we get three more orders, bringing us to \$396,697. It's been a good October.

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some points you only had enough cash to operate for two weeks—into a profitable one. Yet your profit was only \$41,000—and that could vanish in the course of a bad month, or even less. How have things been in the three years since?

Well, 2013 and 2014 were good years. And this year is very similar in a lot of ways to that year, except not as bad. It started with trouble and we're digging our way out of it. We're going to lose a fairly large amount of money this year, on a revenues basis. No so bad on a cash basis. And it's just the way it goes. Now I know how to deal with these things better.

In talking to fellow business owners, my experience is not unusual; I'm neither better nor worse than many, many business owners. A lot of them go through these cycles of good year, bad year. It's just the way it goes. And it's not well understood by people who either have always been employees or are looking at this experience from the outside. Because nobody really wants to talk about it while it's happening. Nobody wants to go to a party and say, "Hey, I lost a quarter of a million bucks this year!"

Your book largely focuses on challenges and your often imperfect approach to tackling them. What have you done the most right?

I think in the furniture-making profession, probably 98 out of 100 don't make it. The thing that I'm good at is designing. And being persuasive, in the early years, when there wasn't much to back it.

At the end of the day, when you're making a thing, an artifact, what happens in the shop is almost irrelevant. That's my life—the drama of building something. But at the point where we deliver it, or drop it off at somebody's house, then it's just on its own. And it's either good or not good. I'm not around to explain it, or provide excuses for its failures. It's just a thing that's out there, living its own life, and everybody who encounters it knows nothing about what it is other than how it explains itself. You design a chair, and it either looks good or it doesn't; you sit down in it, and it either hurts your back or feels great. The thing has a quality on its own, and I've been able to come up with things that have enough quality on their own to live a good life out there. ♦

Philanthropist of the Few

In a sector increasingly dedicated to scaling up and out, Jacob Lief zeroes in on supporting individual children “from cradle to career.”

BY DAVE ZEITLIN

During his senior year at Penn, Jacob Lief C’99 signed up for eight credit cards on Locust Walk to get the Ubuntu Education Fund off the ground, hoping to “do some good and help some people out” without any real idea of how it would shape his own future.

Seventeen years later, his nonprofit organization, based in the impoverished townships around Port Elizabeth, South Africa, is challenging contemporary thinking about the most effective ways to help children in severe poverty. And Lief has emerged as a countervailing voice in the world of activism and philanthropy with his insistence on giving a relatively small number of children every opportunity that other kids might have, rather than “going to scale” to reach more children with fewer resources.

In his new memoir, *I Am Because You Are: How the Spirit of Ubuntu Inspired an Unlikely Friendship and Transformed a Community* (Rodale Books, 2015), Lief discusses his organization’s radical model as well as his unusual journey from Penn to South Africa, which began with a chance encounter in a South African tavern with Malizole “Banks” Gwaxula, who would become Ubuntu’s co-founder, before Lief even graduated from Penn.

Lief spoke with Gazette contributor Dave Zeitlin C’03 about the book, why he still gets frustrated with people’s views on philanthropy, and what lies ahead for him.

INTERVIEW

we’ve done for this young woman over her life, she still talks today about the pink dress, because she looked dignified and proud to walk across the stage. I thought it was just such a profound image. So much of what I try to do is instill the idea that the kids we deal with are just like our kids here. They’ve just been dealt the wrong hand in life. And if you do it for your own child, we should do it for them.

You mention at times in the book that some people are surprised or even offended by your costly approach to give these students the same things any other kid might have. Does that bother you still? Have you sensed people perhaps changing their minds about it?

We’ve definitely seen people shift. But I’ve also realized that when people say to me, “Jake, there’s so much poverty in America. Why should I give to South Africa?” I’m never going to change their minds. I used to try to fight those people. It’s sort of the same with the cost-per-child. Listen, we’re all about efficiency and improving systems and bringing our cost down. I’m not saying to spend money frivolously. I’m just saying the first question you ask shouldn’t be “How do you reach more kids for less money?” It should be “What does a child actually need to get out of poverty?” We’re not manufacturing coffee mugs here. They’re human beings.

Do you consider your model to be a radical one?

I don’t understand why it is so radical in this sector, but it is. There’s a handful of us operating this way—yet I could go to a forum of well-to-do, upper-middle-class people and

You started the Ubuntu Education Fund 17 years ago. What made you now decide to want to write a book about your experiences?

When I started Ubuntu, I remember my Penn advisor saying to me, “Well what are you *really* going to do with your life?” People weren’t going into the nonprofit sector then. Now, I just taught a course at Penn this past year [“Transforming Grassroots Investments Into Global Dividends”], and young men and women want to go into this field. But it’s almost become a lifestyle. I’ve seen it become a very “cool” thing. I don’t want to say people aren’t well intentioned, but I really felt it was necessary to both inspire young people but also remind them this is really difficult work. So much of what we do *doesn’t* work.

You go to Northern California, and it’s like a badge of honor for young entrepreneurs to talk about their failures, their startups that didn’t make it. In my

sector, no one’s allowed to talk about failure. My book is really a story of learning—of trying things, taking risks, and failing along the way.

The family that I followed throughout the whole journey, I specifically chose them because they didn’t all make it. The young boy, Star, unfortunately committed suicide after the book came out. The youngest daughter, Lungi, finally got back on track—and she was just raped by two guys. And the older daughter, Zethu, made it. It’s a reminder that we need to create a better dialogue for this sector that talks about risk and failure.

The first chapter tells the story of Zethu, who was orphaned as a young girl, graduating from university, and your decision to buy her a dress for the occasion. Why did you decide to open the book that way?

I didn’t have any sisters and a pink dress was never important to me. It never resonated with me. But with all the stuff

ask them how to raise their own kids, and they all know how to do it. It's the idea of applying the same standards you do for your own children and affording them the same dignity. For some reason that has become so radical.

And it's an old recipe. Everyone always asks, "What's your big innovation?" There's no innovation here. You ensure a healthy birth. You feed them every day. You make sure there's a roof over their head. If they're getting sick, you get them a doctor. You make sure they see a dentist. If they're failing math, you get them a tutor. You're there to support them as much as you can.

Are there many other nonprofits that have a similar model or is yours relatively unique still?

The one that I modeled so much of what we've done on is the Harlem Children's Zone. Geoffrey Canada wrote an incredible book called *Whatever It Takes*. He's worked the last 25 years in a small little section of Harlem, and he was the one who told me if you don't start with pregnant mothers, it's too late in the game. The truth is parenting begins when a woman gets pregnant, and what goes into her body correlates directly to a child's cognitive development. We start with HIV-positive pregnant moms and we ensure a healthy birth and we work with those kids straight through.

Since we last caught up with you four years ago ["Alumni Profiles, Mar|Apr 2011], how has Ubuntu changed?

Well, we were just opening our Ubuntu Centre at the time. It's basically a facility that's on par with the finest education facility you'd find in Manhattan. But it's built in the middle of one of the poorest areas in the world. The idea is that access to healthcare and education should be a child's right, and not a privilege reserved to those of us with opportunity or born into a better situation. Yes, it's just a building. But when you have a clinic in there that's as nice as anything in the world, when Cisco wired the whole thing, when Apple built the first iMac lab in the whole country there, when there's a robotics program for high-school girls—it's like a beaming center of excellence in the middle of this destitution. And it really allowed us to improve the quality of our programming.

I write about this in the book: a woman in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, when I was doing a big fundraising breakfast, said, "How dare you spend \$7 million on a building when there's so much poverty." I asked, "Do you have kids?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Do they go to school?" She said "Of course." I asked, "Where?" She said, "Dalton." And Dalton is one of these \$50,000-a-year elementary schools. Why is it OK for you to send your kid there, but I can't send these kids? And these are good people I'm dealing

with. These are the ones who want to invest socially and philanthropically in South Africa. It's very frustrating, but we keep at it and we're determined and we're changing perceptions. We built our own environment where we engage with our investors and donors and get them to see differently and commit to the long-term investment of these kids. That's the only way to do it.

Do you believe one of the biggest hurdles is changing people's mindset in general on charity?

I do. I have a podcast series coming out through [The Center for High Impact Philanthropy at Penn] where I interview eight major thought leaders in the field. It's called "Philanthropy Unfiltered," and we debate how you invest in socially poor communities. The idea is we need to create more platforms to change the way people think about these issues. There's just not enough risk being taken in philanthropy. So much of the funding is heavily restricted. People say, "Well, I need this grant to be spent on program supplies." And I'm like, "I don't need more computers, I need good people—teachers, nurses, doctors, psychologists." But that's considered "overhead." It's a very confused and depressing sector, despite all the attention being given to it. There are a lot of misguided conversations.

How much do you keep in touch with the kids who pass through the program? What do they tell you about Ubuntu and the building now that they can look back on their experiences?

We have 146 graduates now and we have an alumni network. Some come back to work for us. Most don't work for us, but that's a good thing. I remember when our first kids graduated, I was so depressed that none of them wanted to work for us. But truthfully, not everyone's going to be a teacher and not everyone's going to work in the social sector. We have some amazing young men and women who do work for us, but the majority are part of our

alumni network who work in the private sector—and they're doing well. And they come back and help mentor younger kids. Some of them are donors even, which is amazing.

That must be very gratifying, to see the alumni return and help younger kids.

It is. You look at disadvantaged communities anywhere in the world and what are missing are community institutions. When you look at successful, thriving societies, the cornerstone of these communities are strong, functioning community institutions. At the end of the day, all we built is a community institution. We're sort of a foundational rock of that community. It's a very special thing.



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time to get good
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And we're just
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What have you learned over the last 17 years?

I've learned you can't change someone's life who doesn't want to change their own life. We always talk about a motivated client. If one of our kids isn't motivated, there's nothing we can do. That was a hard thing for me [to realize]. I used to think we could get everybody and that the kids that weren't motivated needed me the most.

The other is while it's incredibly difficult, being able to work alongside a group of friends—real friends—is incredibly powerful. It's part of why I enjoy going to work in the mornings. These are real friends of mine. Socially, we hang out. It's a really great group and that's been a really rewarding aspect of this whole journey.

What else have I learned? I learned it takes a long time to get good at something. And we're just starting to get good. That's the truth. And that's what I hope came across in the book. Everyone wants the quick-fix solution to everything. It takes a long time.

What do you hope the book accomplishes and what kind of people do you hope read it?

I really hope the book inspires young people to find their way of giving back. It doesn't have to be going to South Africa and it doesn't have to be starting an organization. But I think the larger message is we all have a role to play in improving the world through our communities.

The word *Ubuntu* means that we're defined as human beings by the way we treat each other. And *Ubuntu* has become really sort of a guiding North Star for me.

What are your hopes for the future, both personally and for Ubuntu?

My personal passion is trying to carve out a larger platform—whether it's through things like teaching, like I did at Penn, or this podcast—to challenge people to think differently as to how to invest in the non-profit sector. That's really driving me personally. I'm also trying to figure out how to continue to separate my work and home life. I've got two little boys of my own.

Professionally, I like the idea of building some sort of institute to help identify young entrepreneurs at the early stage in their ventures—really get in bed and invest with them and help them develop organizations of their own that can have a profound impact on the world. ♦

“This is Exactly What We Do”

In many ways, Zethu was like any other kid in the townships of Port Elizabeth. Her family struggled to make ends meet—her father was a municipal worker, and her mother was unemployed. They lived together in what was once a men's hostel for migrant workers, sharing a small space with other families. Still, they were a happy family, and laughter filled their home. Then, in 2004, her father died three months after coming down with an HIV-related illness. The following year, her mother fell sick, also with an HIV-related illness, and died after only two months. Zethu's life turned upside-down.

At 14, Zethu became the head of her household, taking care of her younger brother, Star, and sister, Lungi. “I started asking myself some questions,” she later recalled. “Questions like ‘What am I supposed to do? Should I just go? Should I just run away? I've got dreams. How can I face this thing?’ But I told myself, ‘These are my siblings. This is my brother, this is my sister. They deserve the best.’”

For a few years, Zethu had been participating in programs that Ubuntu Education Fund ran in her school. She had grown to trust Zuki, one of the health educators who worked there, and so she confided to her that she and her siblings had been orphaned. Zuki quickly acted. Fezeka, an Ubuntu household stability counselor, visited Zethu's home and figured out what the three children needed immediately. Of most concern was the safety of their home. Burglar bars on the windows, a better door, and a sturdy lock went on the checklist. She brought them a food parcel, with fresh vegetables and pantry staples. They needed better light so they could study, and new uniforms. She assured Zethu that her school fees would be paid.

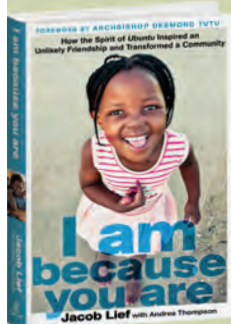
Zethu wrestled with feelings of anger and guilt, along with her grief. Why was she left alone to take care of her siblings? How could she be a mother to them when she was their sister? Small and slight, she hardly seemed strong enough to carry the responsibility.

Yet, she did. And when she felt overwhelmed or anxious or afraid, she called Fezeka. If they'd run out of cooking oil, or her sister's skirt was too small, or her brother had begun acting out in school, she'd come to Ubuntu for help. And, sometimes, she'd come to Ubuntu to forget all her responsibilities for an hour or two and just be a kid ...

We all celebrated with Zethu when she started her studies in managed accounting at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. And as she approached her final exams, we held our breath: She was so close to a diploma, one tangible marker of success.

Finally, the moment arrived. Zethu checked her scores with a knot in her stomach. One after another, she read the results: Passed. The relief swept over her. She was going to graduate.

In the back of her mind, underneath the relief and excitement, there was a small kernel of sadness. With graduation came the graduation ceremony. To participate, you had to buy a gown, and most students' parents treated it like a special occasion, with a new dress, a trip to



the hair salon, nice shoes. But Zethu didn't have a mother or father to take her shopping and she knew she didn't have the money. She resigned herself to reality: She would be content with knowing all she had achieved, and leave the celebratory trappings to others.

Her first call was to Fezeka. "I've passed!" Zethu told her. "I'm going to graduate, can you believe it?" Over the years, Fezeka had watched Zethu struggle, fail, pick herself back up, and go back to work. Over all these years, Zethu never acted entitled or grasping; she accepted help with grace, but she often held back from asking for more. Fezeka knew what went into graduation: the hair, the nails, the clothes. But she also knew that Zethu was conscious of all the ways in which she was more fortunate than others and tried not to ask for anything that wasn't vital.

Fezeka asked, "Zethu, don't you need new clothes?"

"Oh, I don't have money," Zethu answered ...

Early one afternoon, I was in my office in the Ubuntu Centre, where I was entertaining a donor. He'd come down to visit—basically, to kick the tires of our operation and see where his money was going. Lots of donors have this impulse: They want to feel and see and hear what exactly their thousands of dollars have built. On this visit, I'd shown him around our multi-million-dollar, award-winning new home, which provided much-needed space for our after-school programs, tutoring, clinic, and pharmacy. We'd thrown a *braai*—a South African barbecue—in his honor, where he'd been able to meet many of our staff and students. Over a plate of roasted pig, he had heard about university plans, summer internships, and new jobs.

The donor's generosity didn't blind him to weaknesses in any organization, and he asked lots of probing, perceptive questions, gauging the return on his investment. Were we cost-effective? What impact did one of his dollars actually have? How were we reducing unnecessary costs? We'd been reviewing the details of Ubuntu's financial health for nearly an hour when a conversation outside my open door caught our attention.

"Zethu is graduating in a few days, and we want to buy her a new dress along with the graduation gown, and to take her to get her hair done," Fezeka was saying. "This is a big milestone. I think we should make her feel special."

"I don't know," we heard Jana, our program director, reply. "I'd love to do it for her, but does it make sense to spend the money there?"

"It's such a huge day for her, we have to celebrate," Fezeka responded. "You're right, of course," Jana said. "Let's look into it."

As they walked away, the donor looked at me with his eyebrows raised. "You can't possibly be considering buying one child new clothes for graduation, can you?" He said. "With all the strains on your budget, how could you possibly justify something so frivolous for a single girl?"

It was a fair question. What Ubuntu does—intensive, cradle-to-career services—costs a lot. In Zethu's case, her decade in our programs cost close to \$65,000. In the world of development funding, where today's buzzwords are "scale," "sustainability," and "cost-effectiveness," this is a shocking number. Adding to that number by buying a special dress for a single occasion? Unthinkable.

But clearly Ubuntu doesn't follow the well-trod path. Later that afternoon, I talked to Fezeka, Jana, and other team members about giving Zethu a new dress. The unconditional feeling was "Of course we should do it! This is exactly *what* we do."

I thought again about Ubuntu's mission. It's more than metrics of cost and benefit, of return on investment—that's only one part of it. What we do, pure and simple, is help raise children. And part of raising children involves fielding those unexpected requests for things that may not be *necessary*, but make a child feel special.

So, yeah, let's get Zethu that new dress. Let's make her feel amazing on this incredible day when she will become the first person, not only in her family but also on her entire street, to graduate from university. Let's celebrate this accomplishment with her. Let's feel proud, like any parent would feel proud, and let's help her feel proud, too.

On graduation day, Fezeka went to pick up Zethu for the ceremony. She hadn't been able to go dress shopping with Zethu; Zethu had teased, "Good! You'd make me buy an old-lady dress." When Fezeka arrived, Zethu was putting on her final touches. After a few minutes, she emerged with a radiant smile, wearing

a dress that fell to just above her knees.

For a moment, Fezeka was silent. Then she said, "Wow—is that you? How come you are wearing this short dress?" She laughed, delighted at Zethu's transformation.

Zethu laughed, too, and said, "Ah, that is why I didn't want you to go shopping with me! This is what is being worn, and it's going to be under the gown anyway."

As she crossed the stage to collect her diploma a few hours later, Zethu paused to look out at the audience. Her sister, Lungi, was there, and her neighbors in the township, who had done all they could to watch out for her over the years. Fezeka was there, with tears in her eyes, and so was one of her teachers from high school, who had always treated her like a daughter.

After all that she'd been through, all the days of being overwhelmed and angry and sad, Zethu thought, this moment felt like the start of a new life. A pretty dress didn't make her a success, but it reminded her she'd become one.

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