

Jim Citrin Leadership by Example



Tracking Success in Real-Time

by *Jim Citrin*

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It's one thing to analyze success stories after the fact. It's quite another to delve into an unfolding situation where the outcome is uncertain, and the protagonist is neither rich nor famous and faces real risks with limited resources.

In this first of two-parts, I'll share the story of Michael Evans, a young man who's working on bridging a religious and cultural divide. As you read it, consider how he might take his cause forward, and how he can balance his desire to build a legacy with the realities of pursuing a career. The answers to these questions are at the heart of achieving professional success, personal satisfaction, and long-term financial gain.

A Divide Worth Bridging

Evans is a 25-year-old former basketball star who played for elite Hamilton College in upstate New York. After graduating from Hamilton, Michael moved to Belfast, Northern Ireland, to work for a charity organization that uses basketball as a means of reconciling conflicts.

He worked with elementary schoolchildren, using the fundamentals of basketball to get the kids to communicate and hopefully understand one another. But when he came home after a year's time with the organization, Michael was dissatisfied with the results he'd seen. The children he and his coworkers had coached showed no signs of friendship. In fact, they openly expressed antipathy toward each other.

Venturing into the neighborhoods in which they lived, Michael found the kids' surroundings to be hate-filled. How, he wondered, could he help create some sort of permanent friendship between youth in Belfast, a city that is one of the most segregated in the entire world?

Meeting the Opposition

Michael developed a risky plan and returned to Belfast on his own, and on a student's budget. His idea was to attract an older group of kids and work with them differently -- still using basketball, but taking small steps to build a foundation on which to make progress.

He targeted two high schools in the same geographic area, but that were culturally distinct: One was Catholic, the other Protestant. His hope was to create a basketball team from a selection of boys from each school, which were on opposite sides of a 50-foot-wide, mile-long dividing wall that was erected to prevent exactly what Michael was aiming for -- bringing the two communities together.

As Michael spent time in each school, both teaching basketball and getting to know the boys, he concentrated on earning their trust as a coach and as a friend. He went to dinner at their homes. He met with them on the weekends. He dedicated his personal time to learning exactly what the kids liked and disliked, and just how hateful they were toward the other side of the wall in Belfast.

Through hard work, patience, and persistence, he found five boys from each school. When he decided it was time, he told them they would be a part of a travel team. The catch? They'd have to play with the boys from the "opposing" religion.

A Rough Start

The idea was beyond the realm of plausibility in Belfast, and Michael thought his project was doomed. But rather than give up, he decided to go to those who set the tone for the conflicting communities. Through contacts he developed with great care, Michael was able to meet with some of the most influential -- and dangerous -- men in the city: The leaders of the city's various paramilitary organizations.

He believed that if he made his case with these men, as risky as it was, they'd come to see the benefit of a program like his. If he was able to get their endorsement, it would make a difference to the boys and give him the necessary boost. Fortunately, the men all believed that his program was exactly what the community needed. Some even offered to help him raise money, which he graciously declined.

Back on the court, he was able to convince the Catholic boys to attend a practice at the Protestant school. This meant sneaking them in to avoid the possibility of a fight or even a riot. Practice started, and things went fairly smoothly. However, to Michael's discouragement, the two groups wouldn't even look at each other. He pushed and coaxed them, and held practice twice a week.

Back in the U.S.A.

Next, Michael came up with the idea of bringing the team to New York and his hometown in Connecticut as a final push to encourage their camaraderie. With the help of a Catholic priest and a Protestant reverend, Michael was able to raise some money and find host homes for the boys. The news of the trip, coupled with a victory in their first game, moved the team into the initial phase of bonding.

More games and more practices pushed the boys even further. They connected in small conversations and in the grueling drills that Michael put them through. The team organized fundraising efforts and was able to raise additional money to pay for the trip. All the while, Michael used his own experiences from college ball and coaching to urge deeper bonds between them.

On the team's trip to the States, their friendship finally began to take hold. Having placed a Protestant and a Catholic boy in each of five host family homes, Michael was able to foster the relationships between the pairs he thought most compatible. Communication levels skyrocketed during their games, and on their last night in New York City, Michael found the boys huddled together in one of their hotel rooms laughing at the triviality of each other's rebels' songs -- written by the men and women whose influence Michael most wanted them to avoid.

You Be the Judge

The good news is that after the trip, the boys continued to communicate, although it was still too dangerous for them to visit each other in their respective neighborhoods. The bad news is that although they're in their second season together, the program is dwindling and losing momentum in Michael's absence.

After the team returned to Belfast, Michael came back to Connecticut to earn a living. He found a job on the overnight shift as a journalist for a local news station. Today, he's earning enough to pay the rent and other living expenses, but he has little spare income or time to continue working on bringing the boys together again in the United States.

So does Michael let it go, satisfied in having made some meaningful progress with them? After all, he's only one person with very limited resources, and he's already done a lot. What would you do in a similar situation? What would you suggest to Michael? Let me and your fellow readers know in the comments section below, or write me at dynamicpath@spencerstuart.com and I'll share your suggestions.

Next time, I'll reveal the plan that I came up with for Michael, and what he's doing to take his cause and his career forward.