Make the Impossible Possible: One Man's Crusade to Inspire Others to Dream Bigger and Achieve the Extraordinary by Bill Stricklan

EXCERPT
CHAPTER ONE
From the Ghetto to Harvard Business School

It was a winter morning in 1996 and I was standing center stage in the pit of a jam-packed, wood-paneled lecture hall at Harvard University. Rows of wooden seats loomed above me in curving tiers. In those seats, with their expectant gazes bearing down on me, sat about one hundred razor-sharp young men and women—graduate students at the Harvard Business School—waiting to see what I had to offer. As a result of my work with inner-city kids and adults at the Manchester Bidwell Center in Pittsburgh, I had been asked to serve as an HBS case study, to share a little hard-earned business savvy from the other side of the tracks.

As Professor Jim Heskett introduced me to his class, I positioned my beat-up old slide projector on a tabletop, then opened a battered cardboard box, held together with duct tape at the corners, and lifted out a loaded carousel of slides. The students looked me over. In recent weeks, such other speakers as Disney honcho Michael Eisner and Southwest Airlines chief Herb Kelleher had stood where I was standing to share their business philosophies and reveal their secrets of success. Now it was my turn in the spotlight. I knew the kids weren’t sure what to expect from me. To tell the truth, I wasn’t so sure that they could get what I had to offer. After all, I don’t run an airline or an entertainment empire. If you wanted to be technical about it, you could say I’m not a businessman at all. As the founder and CEO of Manchester Bidwell, a community arts-education and jobtraining center in Pittsburgh, my mission is to turn people’s lives around. We do that by offering them two distinct educational programs under the same roof. The first program, which we call the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, offers rigorous after-school courses in the arts that light a creative fire in at-risk kids and inspire them to stay in school. Classes at the Craftsmen’s Guild are taught by a staff of established artists and skilled instructors, and the curriculum is designed to rival courses taught at the best private schools and academies. Our center also houses the Bidwell Training Center, which provides state-of-the-art job-training programs intended to give poor and otherwise disadvantaged adults the skills and direction they need to land meaningful, good-paying jobs that provide the foundation for a much brighter future. Our students include welfare mothers, recovering addicts, ex-convicts, laid-off manufacturing workers, and others who have had hope or even dignity snatched away by the difficult circumstances of their lives. Our younger students at the Craftsmen’s Guild face similar struggles. Many of them are on a fast track to failure when they come to us, flunking courses, skipping school, on the verge of dropping out or being suspended. Some of them swagger in, angry, defiant, bristling with hostile attitude. Others hide behind a prickly shell of apathy and withdrawal.

When we started out some twenty years ago, most of our students were African-Americans from the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Today, almost half our student body is made up of disadvantaged white folks. We greet them all with the same basic recipe for success: high standards, stiff challenges, a chance to develop unexplored talents, and a message that many of them haven’t heard before—that no matter how difficult the circumstances of their lives may be, no matter how many bad assumptions they’ve made about their chances in life, no matter how well they’ve been taught to rein in their dreams and narrow their aspirations, they have the right, and the potential, to expect to live rich and satisfying lives. It takes some time for them to adjust to that message and trust our faith in their potential, but once they do, the transformation is remarkable, and our success rates, compiled over more than twenty years, show that we must be doing something right.

More than 90 percent of the kids who come to us get their high school diplomas and 85 percent enroll in college or some other form of higher education. Our job-training programs for disadvantaged adults are yielding similar successes: Almost 80 percent of our adult students complete their vocational training and 86 percent of them find employment after graduation.
And I'm not talking about flipping burgers. These are good, substantial jobs—as sous chefs, chemical and pharmaceutical technicians, and the like—jobs that can lift an entire family out of poverty and personal inertia, and offer a real chance at a stable and rewarding future.

The success of Manchester Bidwell has won us a lot of respect and support from the business community across the country, and it has helped us forge dynamic corporate partnerships with companies like IBM, Alcoa, PPG Industries, Heinz, Hewlett-Packard, Bayer, Mylan Labs, Nova Chemicals, and many more. Leading figures in politics, education, and the arts have also singled us out for praise (we're one of very few programs, I'm sure, ever to draw the enthusiastic support of both Hillary Clinton and prominent conservative Rick Santorum, the former U.S. senator from Pennsylvania), and our work here has brought me a humbling litany of honors and personal recognition. I've been appointed to the National Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Two presidents have summoned me to the White House to discuss our operations, and ten universities have awarded me honorary Ph.D.'s. In 1999, the MacArthur Foundation gave me one of their famous "genius grants," and I am now a trustee at the University of Pittsburgh, the school that had to be coaxed to accept me as a probationary student thirty-four years ago. Along with my staff, I've also received some remarkable attention from the world of music in recognition of the jazz program that has evolved at the center as part of the innovative mix that gives the place its creative spirit. Since 1987, Manchester Bidwell has hosted a live jazz concert series, which draws the top jazz artists in the world to perform here, in the intimate music hall that is part of our facility. Our music program, one of the oldest and most successful jazz subscription series in the country, has made Manchester Bidwell one of the most highly regarded jazz venues in the nation, and it has also spawned our own recording label—MCG Jazz—which produces and distributes jazz albums by some of the premier jazz artists on the planet, including Nancy Wilson, The Count Basie Orchestra, the New York Voices, and Brazilian superstar Ivan Lins. The quality of our recordings has been validated again and again by the music industry: Seven of our releases have been nominated for Grammy Awards in various jazz categories, and four of those nominated albums brought Grammys home to Manchester.

All this unlikely and unexpected recognition has created an ever-widening ripple of interest in our operations, and for years I've been crisscrossing the country, sharing the Manchester Bidwell story with anyone who will listen—at conferences and seminars everywhere, with audiences that include influential leaders in the fields of business, education, government, and the arts, from laid-back, denim-clad technology tycoons in the Silicon Valley to the prim and pious parishioners of evangelist Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral.

I welcome this attention, because it means people are noticing that we are doing something special at Manchester Bidwell, acknowledging that our success here has something to say not only to the disadvantaged people we serve at the school but to people everywhere, from all walks of life. Still, on a personal level, as a guy who never forgot where he came from, and who knows firsthand how the realities of race and circumstance, poverty and lowered expectations, can crush human dreams, it amazes me more than a little. I was certainly amazed when Jim Heskett at Harvard got interested in our work. He was intrigued with the news of our success and with the unconventional methods we use, and thought his students might learn something from the way I operate. So he decided to make Manchester Bidwell the subject of a Harvard case study, an extensive, intensive business analysis of what we do and how we do it. Over the next few months, his students studied every aspect of our organization with the same hard-boiled scrutiny they’d bring to bear if we were a software giant or cell phone manufacturer instead of an organization dedicated to From the Ghetto to Harvard Business School shaping and guiding the human spirit. Then Jim invited me to his class to answer his students’ questions and offer whatever wisdom I’d gathered from my long years in the trenches. Or something like that. To be honest, as I stood there in the lecture pit that winter morning I wasn’t really sure what Jim wanted from me. But one thing was certain: He wasn’t expecting me to spout a lot of conventional business wisdom; he knew enough about my story to understand that I don’t have much of that. I’m no textbook CEO. I don’t have an M.B.A. Never took a business course in my life. The truth is, I never set out to be a corporate executive or to run any kind of operation at all. When I started out, all I wanted was
to give some kids a chance to work with clay.

I was nineteen years old in 1968 when I founded the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, the tiny neighborhood arts center that grew into Manchester Bidwell. Our first home was a derelict row house on Buena Vista Street in Manchester. My plan was to use the space as a studio where I could teach neighborhood kids to make bowls and pots. I was a neophyte potter myself at the time, and making pottery was one of the great joys of my life. I liked the way the wet clay felt in my hands. Working with clay calmed me and excited me all at the same time. There was a sense of control, but also one of rich possibility. And there was a potent sense of accomplishment and pride once you developed some skill at it. A high school art teacher had turned me on to the craft and has been my hero ever since. I was just another aimless kid, coasting through school, bored and disengaged, with no sense of what I’d do with my life after graduation, when Frank Ross invited me into his classroom and let me sit at his potter’s wheel. The magic I felt when I first laid my hands on wet clay gave me the belief that I could do something interesting with my life. It opened up doors to meaning and possibility that showed me, for the first time, that I had talents and capabilities no one had seen before and that I had never dreamed of. I’m convinced that those insights not only gave me a vision of my future, they literally saved my life.

In 1968, Manchester was suffering from the racial strife that rocked so many inner-city neighborhoods in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Homes were in flames, riot cops and armed National Guard troops patrolled the streets, there were shootings and frequent clashes between demonstrators and police, and in the middle of it all were a lot of terrified kids, wondering if someone was going to shoot them or set their house on fire. I wanted to do something for those kids, but I had no experience as a social worker, teacher, or community activist. I was a know-nothing freshman at the University of Pittsburgh at the time, trying my best to keep from flunking out and to get my own life in order. All I knew was clay and what it had done for me. Intuitively, I knew it could do the same for them. I knew what they needed—a safe, sane, quiet environment where they could escape the madness that reigned in the streets, work on some clay, find a way to shape something personal and beautiful, and spend some time in a bright, clean, nurturing place where it did not seem pointless to dream. With the help of local Episcopalian churches, I was able to secure a ramshackle row house, which I cleaned and painted, then furnished with potter’s wheels and stocked with clay.

Then I christened the place the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild and opened the doors. Curious kids trickled in off the sidewalks to see what I was up to. I taught them how to use the wheels, how to center and shape the clay. I don’t know what I thought would happen. On some level, I knew I needed such a place as much as the kids did—a place where I could keep believing in the power of my own creative possibilities despite the darkness closing in all around me—and I hoped the place would shield them from all the poison that was in the streets. At first it was enough just to see them being kids again, giggling each time one of their wobbly pots collapsed into a slippery lump. But some of them kept coming back. I worked with them until they could get the clay to rise and hold form, then work it carefully into a shape that would please the eye. It was an amazing thing to see the looks on their faces as they worked—the concentration, the sense of purpose and power, and the sudden glint of excitement as they watched the clay morph into the very pot they had pictured in their minds. I knew what that felt like—like you had the whole world in your hands. That was the magic I wanted them to feel. And I knew that, for those moments at least, the troubles of Manchester were far away.

From the start, I loved the work I was doing, the feeling it gave me to help others open their eyes and see the possibilities before them. But I had no long-term vision for the Craftsmen’s Guild. I saw it as a stopgap measure, a life raft for those kids. I certainly never thought it would lead to my life’s work. My plan was to get my education degree, then teach history to high school students. But life takes some odd twists and turns. I started hearing from teachers in nearby public schools. They noticed that the kids who came to the Craftsmen’s Guild were showing up at school more often. They were behaving better in the classroom, too. And their
grades were starting to improve.

That drew people’s attention. Word soon got around that something interesting was happening on Buena Vista Street. Neighborhood leaders began to mark me as a guy who was doing some good in the community. Local artists lent us their support. I was introduced to all the right people, and sources of funding appeared before my eyes. I hired a staff and added programs. More kids walked through the door. The place was taking on a life and an energy of its own, growing rapidly in size, in complexity, and in the scope of its missions. I had no choice but to grow with it. And that meant developing my leadership and management skills, often on the fly.

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