

Brian Kreiter
Jefferson Awards Speech
Delivered, June 22, 2004
Union Station – Washington DC

The man's name was Wimpy. And he was massive.

Walking down the street in New Haven, CT late one spring night in 1998 – I met a man who would unknowingly change the lives of thousands.

He approached a couple of us on the street, and asked us for a few dollars – We gave it to him.

In turn, we asked him if he would like to join us for a couple of beers – and he agreed .

We returned to my dorm room and Wimpy and I asked each other about our respective lives.

Wimpy's story was wholly unique yet profoundly universal.

He'd had tough run– some problems with the law, he'd been homeless at times. He never really had a steady job, so it was now nearly impossible for him to find a job.

As I listened to Wimpy recount his story - for me, the first seeds of NSP were planted.

It seemed that there were resources available for people in need, and talented and dedicated, social workers, educators, and public administrators to lend their talents. But the roadmap of social services can be complicated or intimidating.

Wimpy needed help, wanted help – but like all of us, he would need a guide.

Shortly thereafter, Kirsten and I began the task of designing a system, and an organization, that would be an immediate-impact one stop shop for all different kinds of people, with all different kinds of needs.

We would make sure that an individual who completed a job training program was then connected to job placement, and child care, and transportation assistance. And once that job was secure, we would make sure that the individual was already training for the next career move forward.

We created a catalog of all the social services available in the community - State, Federal, Faith-based.

And that catalog eventually morphed into a menu that clients who walked into our first tiny office would use to select their futures -

But to do this we would need to find expert administrators - individuals who would listen patiently, learn diligently, but most of all cut through the bureaucracy...

Our search was brief....we found OUR generation of student leaders.

A group that would one day change the system - but today - would simply work it.

We hand-picked a diverse team of would-be social entrepreneurs from amongst our classmates, and asked them to volunteer their minds and hearts, both and equal. We asked them to look beyond boundaries that too often divide. We asked them to look beyond the ivory tower. We asked them to be aggressively creative - to look for solutions everywhere - to replicate state of the art systems of the business world and to imagine cutting-edge software from the evolving frontiers of the technology sector.

Together we began to turn our aspirational fantasy into operational reality.

Our New Haven office opened and clients began trickling in - and then they streamed

We poured ourselves into the community and the community poured itself back - and the results were magical. Social service organizations began calling to forge partnerships.

Employers began calling asking for resumes or our clients - *individuals who now had foundations strong enough to build meaningful work experiences.*

And National Student Partnerships was born.

Our tiny ripple of hope was soon eclipsed by a magnificent swell of energy, of creativity, of opportunity, and anticipation. Illinois, Virginia, North Carolina, Texas, knocking on, sometimes kicking down doors - seeking students who wished to take the risk of invention...seeking communities that would welcome our contribution.

We grew the organization under the banner: We Are A Generation of Leaders – All of Us.

Kirsten and I were consistently struck by the truth of that statement. We saw the organic idea take shapes we never could have predicted, offices that were only Spanish speaking in San Antonio and The Bronx – clients who would become our very best volunteers.

Walking into an NSP office, it can be difficult to discern who is the server and who is the served. Who is the teacher, and who is the student. Need is not a permanent state – each of us, regardless of background, sometimes just needs a little bit of help organizing our options, finding our allies, and stepping into our dreams.

NSP asks our volunteers one central question – if you won the lottery, and your neighbor's house burned down on the very same day, how good of a day did you have? What if that house was across the street, or in another part of town? What if that house was across the country? How much do we allow the fate of others to affect our own? How much responsibility do we take for our family, defined in the largest possible sense?

This morning, in 15 cities across this country, student volunteers from 43 universities walked into NSP offices **and proved that they draw their circles wide.**

We are a generation that has the energy, the discipline, and the will to drill down into the granular details of change and to get the job done.

Thank you to everyone who has come together to build what we hope are just the beginnings of this organization. Some of you are in the room, and we are incredibly grateful for your gentle teaching, and selfless contributions. Thank you to our friends and family who are the endless sources of energy and love.

Thank you to the American Institute for Public Service, to Mr. Beard, and to the other award winners -- we only hope to follow in your footsteps in the years to come.

Please know that the good work of healing the world is continuing – we are using your ideas and achievements as the platform to find new solutions.

We are a generation that is **strong** and **willful**.

We are indeed humbled by those who have come before us – **but do not mistake our humility for complacency...**

We are building passion upon passion, toil upon toil, hope upon hope.

We are proud to join you in the struggle –

We are proud to join you in dreaming of brighter tomorrows while crafting a more perfect today.

Kirsten Lodal
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The most gratifying part of my current role as NSP's CEO is having the chance to travel across the country and to see our work in action. To return to that first office in New Haven and see it thriving; to sit in that fully Spanish-speaking office in San Antonio; to meet 19-year-old sophomores in college right here in DC who are becoming true experts in navigating the public housing system for their clients, all the while thinking about the ways in which they are going to restructure those systems once they are policymakers.

In my travels over the past few months since we found out that we would be receiving this award on behalf of NSP, we have been celebrating with our volunteers across the country, and trying to make them feel as much a part of this honor as we do.

On a trip to Chicago the week before last, I had a rare moment of down time with our local site coordinator, and he – always the philosopher – mentioned how little we had discussed Jefferson himself throughout the course of this celebration. After all, these awards pay tribute to Jefferson's pioneering influence on the American values of public service, and charity, and volunteerism. So what could we remember having learned in school about this fascinating politician / architect / inventor who built so many of the foundations on which we now stand as a nation? What ideas of his could we connect back to NSP?

I have to admit that the most I ever knew about Jefferson was about 14 years ago, when I was 10 years old and in the 5th grade, and we studied all the early presidents. So, I may not be able to say this as well now as I could then, and I'll just ask all the historians out there, including Mr. Burns, to bear with me as I try to run through about 230 years of history in 2 minutes...

Jefferson had countless important ideas about what it meant to create a free society – to create America. But, he championed two concepts in particular that have always struck a chord with me. First, he believed that a healthy, functional society was predicated on each person's ability to pursue happiness. I love that "the pursuit of happiness" is placed right up there with liberty as an unalienable right in our Declaration of Independence.

Second, Jefferson possessed this very idealistic notion that human beings in a free society intrinsically loved each other and had a passion to serve each

other, and that – when given freedom and basic human rights – people would form their own organizations, through which they would support each other, clothe each other, feed each other, you get the picture – the origins of the social entrepreneurship we talk so much about today...

Well, it turned out that the process of forming this free society was wrought with complications and divisions, many stemming from our difficult history of slavery and later segregation. So, zoom forward 180 years or so, and we needed pioneers like Reverend Shuttlesworth to fight for that “blessed community” that he and Dr. King spoke of, where all were valued, all were welcome, and all were cared for. And we needed leaders to be idealistic enough to believe that people could come together to support and nurture each other – but to state that Jefferson’s vision couldn’t become a reality until it was truly inclusive of all humankind.

Given all this as a backdrop, as Brian and I started to develop our own consciousness of the disparities that exist in the world – many of which were especially pronounced when we compared our idyllic university setting with the community that immediately surrounded us – it was impossible for us to stomach the idea that other Americans still didn’t benefit from the opportunities, or even access to the opportunities, that they were entitled to pursue. We couldn’t compute that after all the struggles, and despite all the strides we had taken as a nation throughout our history, there might still be people who lacked even the basic support network of a community of caring people to help them along their path. People, like Wimpy, who seemed to have been all but forgotten and dismissed as someone who would never contribute and never see his dreams to fruition.

We also saw ourselves amongst a group of extraordinarily idealistic peers who had also been dismissed – dismissed as part of a generation that supposedly no longer had a movement or a fight / dismissed as part of the internet era consumer culture that wouldn’t care even if there were a fight to be fought.

And, so in addition to all the research we had done, and all the elaborate systems we’ve now built up to manage our offices nationwide, as much as anything, NSP was spawned as a means of creating a space in which Wimpy’s aspirations and dreams of what the world might be, along with Brian and mine, could co-exist and could be pursued through the simple act of people helping people.

We hope that we’ve been able to give a voice to the energy, the idealism, and the love of others that our peers have to share. And we hope that, in some small way, we have pushed us a little bit farther towards that “blessed community” that Jefferson, and Dr. King, and others envisioned. In the NSP

community, there is a place for anyone to go, with any kind of problem, where he or she can receive thoughtful support, and gain a partner through any stage of the pursuit of happiness.

Perhaps the most profound thing we've learned in the last few years of building NSP is that the most important parts of this journey we're all on are also the most simple – and that, at times, we need to counteract our impulse to overcomplicate the act of helping. That in the end, this is really just about sharing our strengths with the world, and receiving in return the lessons and support that others have to share with us.

In accepting this honor tonight, we'd like to first and foremost thank our families, without whom NSP would never have succeeded. We'd like to thank the thousands of volunteers and clients who take that risk of going into the office every day and doing the hard work, as well as the small but fierce staff that coordinates this all. And we are honored to thank the other awardees – the extraordinary and inspiring local recipients, whom we had the chance to meet last night, and our fellow national recipients – Reverend Shuttlesworth, Justice O'Connor, and Mr. Burns, thank you for fighting the tough fights, defending the outcomes of those fights, and documenting our history so that we may learn from it, understand it, and apply those lessons to our own lives. Thank you.