

STORIES  
OF  
POSITIVE  
PIVOTAL  
LEADERSHIP

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**SPARKING HOPE & SHAPING CHANGE**

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BOOKLET



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Masood Akhtar

Wes Shaver

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# CONTENTS

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Forward	05
Introduction	07
Stories of Positive Pivotal Leadership	10
<i>Magali Jiménez-Hernández</i>	10
<i>Wes Shaver</i>	16
<i>Mai Zong Vue</i>	21
<i>Masood Akhtar</i>	26
<i>Joan Gillman</i>	31
Story Starters	36
<i>Self Reflection Questions</i>	36
<i>Conversation Starters</i>	38

# FOREWORD

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Embarking on my professional journey at the tender age of twelve, I assumed the role of a paper girl, a coveted position among the aspiring "eager-to-be-adults" in my city. At \$25 a week and 125 customers to serve, delivering weekday papers was manageable, but the Sunday paper ritual with its bulky inserts and circulars presented a challenge for a 75-pound girl on a gearless bike. The demands of my route manager, insisting on punctual delivery by 6 am on Sundays and 6 pm on weekdays, proved especially trying for a non-morning person like me.

As a young paper girl, my friends and I transformed our Sunday paper deliveries into adventures, gathering afterward to share stories and enjoy ice cream. However, the 6 am Sunday deadline was a formidable adversary, and my tardiness prompted numerous sit-down meetings with my route manager and my mom. Little did I realize; those early accountability talks would become my initial lessons in leadership.

Throughout my adulthood and diverse career experiences, I encountered an array of leaders, each with distinct styles, commitment levels, and communication approaches. These encounters shaped not only my professional persona but also my understanding of myself as a human, a woman, and a subordinate. The early talks with my route leader resurfaced in my memory as I navigated my career, influencing my journey as both a leader and a follower.

The unexpected transition into a leadership role brought with it unforeseen challenges, from emotional drain to navigating the complexities of strategic thinking. My experiences encompassed valleys of hurt feelings, failures, battles for trust, and the struggles of managing up and being managed. Yet, I remained committed to applying the best practices I had envisioned in my early career.

The stories of my professional trajectory have become a coaching tool for my mentees, offering insights for those entering the workforce and guidance for those seeking change. Rooted in community advocacy and social change, my career has been dedicated to leading professionals in creating impactful programs for families across multiple states.

Stories have emerged as my most potent coaching instrument, connecting me to others on a deep, emotional level. Whether on stage or through one-on-one mentoring, the vulnerability inherent in sharing personal stories of leadership has proven to be transformative.

This book, a collection of leadership stories, invites you on a journey exploring the peaks and valleys of various leaders' journeys. It delves into critical aspects of leadership, from delegating duties to embracing change, professional growth, and understanding differences. Each story within these pages reflects the complexity of leadership, offering lessons, insights, and the not-so-fun aspects that accompany the role.

Our stories, as the oldest form of recorded communication, tap into our human DNA's ability to share our experiences and journeys. This book will inspire the next writer, capturing the stories of leaders who are changing lives in their communities. Before this book, I sought out these stories, and now I'm thrilled to present them to you.

I trust that you will find enjoyment and benefit from delving into these pages, just as I have.

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature reads "Danielle Y. Hairston Green" in a cursive, flowing script.

Danielle Y. Hairston Green, Ph.D., HDFS-CFCS  
Institute Director, Human Development and Relationships UW-MadisonExtension  
Host, The Moth in Madison

# INTRODUCTION

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The midst of change provides the perfect setting for hope to take root and thrive.

We are in a time of widespread, complex, and rapid change that is illuminating issues that have existed for decades - social justice, power dynamics, disparities for smaller organizations, and inadequate systems of response. The midst of change provides the perfect setting for hope to take root and thrive. It is the perfect opportunity to spark movements and systems change.

“Story has many different qualities that make it useful for the work of systems change. It’s a direct route to our emotions, and therefore important to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It coheres communities. It engenders empathy across difference. It enables the possible to feel probable in ways our rational minds can’t comprehend. When it comes to changing the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system, story is foundational.”<sup>1</sup> Sharing knowledge in a story format “has shown to increase an audience’s engagement, willingness to act upon the knowledge and use the evidence as a basis for their decisions.”<sup>2</sup>

This work focuses on answering the question, “How do we inspire hope and relational action in communities through story?,” specifically as it relates to systemic change. The focus is on stories of pivotal leadership that are happening throughout Wisconsin from a broad set of places, communities, sectors, and issue areas. The stories can be the basis for sparking hope and inspiring a new group of people to take action as leaders shaping community change.

## Pivotal

= Shifts in Mental Models and Structures + Innovation + Adaptation + Resiliency

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<sup>1</sup> Saltmarshe, E. “Using Story to Change Systems”. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. (2018, Feb 20). [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/using\\_story\\_to\\_change\\_systems](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/using_story_to_change_systems)

<sup>2</sup> Sundin, A., Andersson, K. & Watt, R. Rethinking communication: integrating storytelling for increased stakeholder engagement in environmental evidence synthesis. *Environ Evid* 7, 6 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13750-018-0116-4>

## Process and Framework

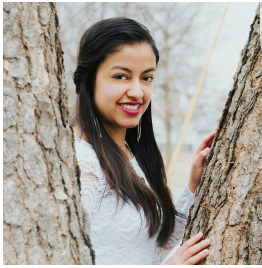
Following the award of a University of Wisconsin Madison - Extension Innovation Grant, the team solicited contacts for subject recruitment via an internal email sent to Extension colleagues. In Phase 1, potential interviewees were screened and provided consent. Once a final bank of interviewees was identified for Phase 2, interviews were conducted using the Positive Pivotal Leadership Framework (Table A) to analyze the interviews and select stories. Examples that clearly illuminated perspectives and experiences of leaders who had the ability to navigate challenging circumstances and create opportunities for positive pivots were brought forward for inclusion in the research project.

**Table A: Positive Pivotal Leadership Framework**

Category	Question	Intent
<b>Pivot</b>	What is the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?	Identify the pivotal moment in question
	How was the pivotal leader a catalyst for the pivot and following success?	Identify to what degree the pivotal leader was crucial to the success experienced
	Was there a demonstrable challenge or a need for change present prior to the pivot? What was it?	Identify a key element of a successful pivotal experience
<b>Approachable</b>	What has been the impact since the pivot?	Identify level of success
	What are the continued projections?	Identify likelihood of future success and leader’s optimism
	What is the age of the youngest person you could share this story with and have them understand the moral?	Measures simplicity and approachability
<b>Trustworthy</b>	What quantitative information do you have to support your measure of success?	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information



	What qualitative information do you have to support your measure of success?	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	Do you think everyone shares your point of view?	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
	Would everyone agree with your account?	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
<b>Emotional</b>	What was the most frustrating thing leading up to the pivot point?	Identify stressors
	What was the hardest mental challenge faced during the effort?	Identify high emotion moments
<b>Impactful</b>	Was there anything surprising or unexpected during the process?	Identify significant deviations from the norm
	If you could draw one key lesson from this experience and pass it on to your younger self, what would it be?	Identify potential inspirational threads



# MAGALI JIMÉNEZ HERNÁNDEZ

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ORGANIZER, BRODHEAD DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

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“The only way to grow and succeed is to release the reins and allow others to step in while providing the general direction and purpose.”

## **Summary**

*Magali inspired and organized a Dia de los Muertos celebration in her community of Brodhead, WI. She worked to bring together the cultures of her town and Mexican heritage attempting to foster understanding and community in a time of high racial tensions. Overcoming ignorance, lack of experience, and racially fueled opposition Magali was instrumental in the event’s success which showed the local community diversity and inclusion are possible and brought the community a little closer.*

## **The Story**

Magali emigrated from Oaxaca, Mexico to the US at the age of 13. She quickly transitioned from not speaking English to becoming involved in youth programs in her community. Seeing a need for diverse voices in government, Magali recognized she could speak out on behalf of youth as well as immigrant, Mexican, and more

predominantly Latine communities. She participated in a youth in government program where she was elected to represent her peers at the City Council. During this time Magali grew her network, learning and taking inspiration from this work, Magali looked for other ways to enrich her community given her unique voice and skills.

Magali was asked by a local Lutheran church to present on Dia de los Muertos, a culturally significant celebration in Mexican culture. The success and positive reception of this event combined with a chance encounter through Magali's recently growing network led to her being connected with the Brodhead city council and Adam Scheidegger, a chamber of commerce member who would become Magali's partner and guide. Broadhead leadership faced a problem where the annual fall festival was struggling, faced with competition from many similar events in the area during this time and stagnation. Thus, Magali partnered with Brodhead to expand her Dia de los Muertos presentation into the main theme of the upcoming fall festival.

**HONOR THEM**  
Bring a photo of your loved deceased ones (person/pet)!

**EN SU HONOR**  
Trae la foto de alguien especial ya fallecida (persona/mascota)!

**DRESS UP**  
Bring your best Halloween costume!

**DISFRÁZATE**  
Trae tu mejor disfraz de Halloween

**DECORATING THE SQUARE**  
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

**VENDORS SET UP**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**VENDORS SALE**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**PEARL ISLAND 5K RUN/WALK**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**FACE PAINTING**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**CHILI CONTEST**  
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM

**YOUTH TRICK OR TREAT**  
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

**TRADITIONAL BAND "BANDA NUBE"**  
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

**SQUARE PARADE**  
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

**DECORANDO LA CIUDAD**  
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

**COLOCACION DE PUESTOS**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**VENTA DE PUESTOS**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**CAMINATA/CARRERA DE 5K**  
10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

**PINTACARITAS**  
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM

**CONCURSO DE CHILI**  
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM

**TRICK OR TREAT/CAJERITA**  
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

**TAMBORAZO "BANDA NUBE"**  
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

**DESFILE**  
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

**Brodhead's "DAY OF THE DEAD" Historic Square**  
**YOU ARE INVITED 11-02-2019 ESTAN INVITADOS**  
**12:00 - 7:00 pm**

**"DIA DE LOS MUERTOS"**

The Day of the Dead (Day of The Dead) is one of the most famous November, when we welcome the spirits of our loved ones home for ones who have passed away. By decorating ofrendas (altars) and cemeteries (mausoleums), and incense (copal) (scented smoke), our tradition is when people do a representation of what it looks like when our loved ones, accompanied by a traditional band, people retrace the journey that our loved ones have to travel in order to arrive home for their yearly visit.

Mexican holidays celebrated during the first and second days of a short time. This tradition celebrates and commemorates our loved ones with papel picado (paper cutout banners), food, families honor our ancestors. One of the most memorable parts of this tradition is when people do a representation of what it looks like when our loved ones come from their tombs. By dancing from house to house across the area, families honor our ancestors. One of the most memorable parts of this tradition is when people do a representation of what it looks like when our loved ones, accompanied by a traditional band, people retrace the journey that our loved ones have to travel in order to arrive home for their yearly visit.

Initially Magali reached out to her immediate network, enlisting friends and family to help, while growing support within her peer groups and wider Latine community. Adam helped guide Magali through the process of creating the event proposal and administrative tasks, areas that Magali had no experience in. While she drew on the knowledge and skills of her community and mentors such as Victoria Solomon, a relationship resulting from her network growth, to tackle the momentous task of making the festival happen.

While working on generating ideas, creating decorations, and guiding the process to reflect the key traditional themes of the holiday, Magali acknowledges she missed opportunities for help. She states that although there were many people willing to assist her, she saw several of these individuals didn't know how to help and she didn't always know how to approach them for support. In contrast Victoria says she was impressed by the way Magali approached her for help, always providing clear direction towards the end goal and making sure the work was not too burdensome.

Local news coverage helped spread the word about the event, but also brought out opposing voices. Small protests against the perceived "religious" event began in response to the upcoming celebration. From the onset Magali tried to make the clear distinction that although there is a religious connection to Dia de los Muertos in Mexican culture, the event she was planning strictly focused on the cultural aspect. Her goal was to blend her cultural heritage with that of the local community. The goal was to bring the Latine and historically white communities together through shared cultural experiences. Magali worked to balance calls from the Latine community for tradition along with keeping staples of the past fall festival such as the chili cook off contest. This also meant sometimes giving a difficult "No" to ideas that did not fit this delicate balance.

When asked if the protests against her work were difficult, Magali shrugged off the question saying how she has grown up being used to people having misconceptions about her, her culture, and the Latine community. She usually tries to see and acknowledge opposing views while educating and correcting misconceptions. She adopted the same approach in the face of this opposition and was not bothered by it, rather she saw it as an opportunity to teach others about her history, culture, and heritage.



The event was objectively successful with massive positive feedback from participants, a significant increase in event participation, and a recognition from the Mexican Consulate in Milwaukee with a pledge to help in future events.

Magali speaks about the difficulties of balancing a full time job, being a full time student, and putting in the required effort to make this event happen. In hindsight she recognizes one of her biggest shortfalls was being so excited that she wanted to be personally involved in every aspect of the event. This led to her taking on too much work for herself, not utilizing those around her to their full potential, and likely some missed opportunities. Looking back, one of the biggest surprises for Magali was when Victoria broached the idea of Magali organizing the event in the first place. Again, in strong contrast Victoria feels this was an easy and obvious decision as she sees Magali as a young, inspiring leader capable of energizing those around her while sharing in her cultural history. Magali feels the biggest lesson she learned was how to channel her excitement away from direct involvement with every detail and instead foster more help through delegation. She gained crucial skills in how to ask for help in the future, where to look for it, as well as the confidence of working

with people to support her vision. She underlines the fact that without the ability to gather others to her cause and allowing them to help the growth potential for any project, such as this event, is finite and quite small. The only way to grow and succeed is to release the reins and allow others to step in while providing the general direction and purpose.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Intent</b>
<b>Pivot</b>	<b>What is the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?</b>  <i>Brodhead accepting to have Dia de los Muertos festival</i>	Identify the pivotal moment in question
	<b>How was the pivotal leader a catalyst for the pivot and following success?</b>  <i>Inspired event and was crucial to success</i>	Identify to what degree the pivotal leader was crucial to the success experienced
	<b>Was there a demonstrable challenge or a need for change present prior to the pivot? What was it?</b>  <i>Failing fall festival, separation between Latine and white communities</i>	Identify a key element of a successful pivotal experience
<b>Approachable</b>	<b>What has been the impact since the pivot?</b>  <i>Cross cultural understanding, festival success</i>	Identify level of success
	<b>What are the continued projections?</b>  <i>Brodhead wanted to continue event, possible larger Dia de los Muertos in La Crosse this year</i>	Identify likelihood of future success and leader’s optimism
	<b>What is the age of the youngest person you could share this story with and have them understand the moral?</b>  <i>Middle school</i>	Measures simplicity and approachability
<b>Trustworthy</b>	<b>What quantitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b>  <i>Attendance up</i>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information

	<p><b>What qualitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>Positive reviews of attendees</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>Do you think everyone shares your point of view?</b></p> <p><i>Most, outside few protestors no negative feedback</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
	<p><b>Would everyone agree with your account?</b></p> <p>No, many were less critical of Magali than she was of herself. She saw shortcomings and opportunities for growth. Others saw her success</p> <p>Some disagreed to the level of protesting the event.</p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
<b>Emotional</b>	<p><b>What was the most frustrating thing leading up to the pivot point?</b></p> <p><i>Misconceptions about Hispanic community</i></p>	Identify stressors
	<p><b>What was the hardest mental challenge faced during the effort?</b></p> <p><i>Doing too much, unable and unwilling to ask for more help</i></p>	Identify high emotion moments
<b>Impactful</b>	<p><b>Was there anything surprising or unexpected during the process?</b></p> <p><i>Recognition from others like Victoria</i></p>	Identify significant deviations from the norm
	<p><b>If you could draw one key lesson from this experience and pass it on to your younger self, what would it be?</b></p> <p><i>Find more help, step back, and make space for others to do more</i></p>	Identify potential inspirational threads



# WES SHAVER

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PRESIDENT, PRIDEFEST MILWAUKEE

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“It is crucial to never assume you have the solution for others, rather do the work to engage, listen, and learn what their needs are, then help and support them to make them successful.”

## **Summary**

*Wes was instrumental in building up the success of Milwaukee PrideFest and healing the rift between PrideFest and the Pride Parade. Wes brought key leadership together, healing years of animosity between the two organizations, changing the culture into a supportive and inclusive one, while managing to successfully lead the organization through the troubles of the COVID pandemic. Faced with ignorance and hate, administrative issues, and organizations that have not shared a good working history, Wes transformed the relationship while guiding the organization to growth and success. The community has reaped the rewards of Wes’s work and continues to see and experience his message of support.*



## **The Story**

One would think serving on the board of directors of PrideFest Milwaukee for two years (2014-2016) would adequately prepare Wes Shaver to step into the President's role and according to Wes himself, one would be wrong to make that assumption. In 2017, when Wes took on the lead role of President, one of his first realizations was how unprepared he was to serve in that capacity. Wes recalls quickly realizing that he was unaware of the history that was crucial to his success. The history and struggles of the LGBTQ+ community, which he is an active member of, as well as the specific history of PrideFest Milwaukee and the ruined and contentious relationships it held within the community, most notably with Milwaukee Pride Parade. Wes described the need to work in the present, fulfilling his day-to-day duties, while being focused on the past, acknowledging, healing, and learning from the histories of the overall LGBTQ+ community, PrideFest Milwaukee, and the local community he was trying to help.

The rift between the two organizations, PrideFest Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Pride Parade, went back as far as 2011 where internal conflict, disputes over resources, and bankruptcy left a seemingly uncrossable chasm between the two bodies. In his new leadership role Wes decided to take on the daunting task of repairing this relationship. In 2017 he approached the organizers of Milwaukee Pride Parade and asked if he could join some of their meetings, his focus was exclusively to listen. Actively listening and being receptive allowed Wes to build a foundation. He backed this up with a commitment to being transparent, involving the parade with festival operations, and supporting the parade. These gestures alone were not enough to heal the wounds of the past, but they allowed Wes to identify opportunities and needs. In 2018 he started a substantial grant to the parade, recognizing that the parade had relatively high costs compared to no real sources of revenue. Such actions backed up his earlier declarations and helped break down barriers as the two organizations began working more closely together. Demonstrating the commitment to this partnership, ahead of the 2022 festival, PrideFest announced the festival will be operating a day less than usual, closing on the Sunday of the festival weekend to fully support and promote the Pride Parade and all of its events.

“Do the work. Good intentions don't equal effectiveness.”

Wes also faced significant internal challenges. PrideFest is an all-volunteer board and at the time Wes took leadership of the organization there were 30 years of bad habits engrained in the board's culture. Beginning to tackle change from such a state hit a massive speed bump as festival planning came to a halt in response to the COVID pandemic in 2020. Wes recognized that this was an opportune time to conduct an internal review and make meaningful strides forward during the time normal operations were on hold. However, those plans faced a very different reality. Internal challenges faced by board members ranged from typical disruptions to job loss, homelessness, and deaths in the family. Wes recognized that this was a time where the workload needed to be lessened and helping on a personal level became the priority. Focusing on serving his board members as individuals he was able to strengthen those personal relationships, something he says is fundamental to the current success. Through empathy for individuals, he was able to foster cultural change.



*Photo Caption Here: Note this is from his LinkedIn Profile, need permission.*

Looking to the 2022 festival and the future, Wes shared and acknowledged the challenges of being a private organization in a space that celebrates all, trying to balance the fact that everyone has an opinion on what PrideFest should be doing, or how, without having the knowledge of what happens behind the scenes, capabilities, or restraints of reality. He feels nearly all the pushback he experiences is rooted in ignorance. He recalled a meeting between himself and three other partners representing vendors and festival park operations. The meeting left everyone feeling excited as it signaled the return of the festival after the disruption caused by the pandemic, Wes decided to share his excitement on social media with an accompanying picture. Some in the community negatively commented that they hoped the festival itself was more diverse than the four individuals in Wes's post. This underscores Wes's observations about the challenges of criticism based in ignorance. While PrideFest is one of the most diverse pride events in the country

and attended by mostly LGBTQ+ individuals, those that are responsible for making it happen are predominantly straight, from festival staff to vendors, sponsors, and partners. Wes uses this example to highlight the fact that hyper inclusion can easily become exclusive and numb to the past. He constantly strives to build a culture of inclusion and diversity in a way that doesn't blindly focus on individuality so that people forget to share space and time with others.

Reflecting on lessons learned so far, Wes preaches that it is crucial to never assume you have the solution for others, rather do the work to engage, listen, and learn what their needs are, then help and support them to make them successful. Thinking about when he first took on his role in 2017, he says it would have been impossible to succeed without first doing the legwork to learn the history and build a community that was crucial to the place and people he was working with. Good intentions do not equal effectiveness. Good intentions alone can lead to frustrations over things like lack of a network, causing resentment and increasing friction, which only breeds division. The only way to avoid this and succeed is to put in the work.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Intent</b>
<b>Pivot</b>	<b>What is the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?</b>  <i>Bringing the festival and parade back together and healing the relationship</i>	Identify the pivotal moment in question
	<b>How was the pivotal leader a catalyst for the pivot and following success?</b>  <i>Initiated, led, and pushed for healing this relationship through empathy and listening.</i>	Identify to what degree the pivotal leader was crucial to the success experienced
	<b>Was there a demonstrable challenge or a need for change present prior to the pivot? What was it?</b>  <i>Two orgs having pride events on the same weekend that disliked each other.</i>	Identify a key element of a successful pivotal experience
<b>Approachable</b>	<b>What has been the impact since the pivot?</b>	Identify level of success
	<b>What are the continued projections?</b> <i>Very close relationship and mutual benefits along with positive impacts in the community.</i>	Identify likelihood of future success and leader's optimism

	<p><b>What is the age of the youngest person you could share this story with and have them understand the moral?</b></p> <p><i>Teenager</i></p>	Measures simplicity and approachability
<b>Trustworthy</b>	<p><b>What quantitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>Record attendance in 2019, 45,000+</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>What qualitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>Fest and Parade are working together again, Fest will be sacrificing a day to support Parade</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>Do you think everyone shares your point of view?</b></p> <p><i>80%+ there are always voices of dissent but overall, there's a unified direction</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
	<p><b>Would everyone agree with your account?</b></p> <p><i>Yes</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
<b>Emotional</b>	<p><b>What was the most frustrating thing leading up to the pivot point?</b></p> <p><i>Rift and bad history between Fest and Parade</i></p>	Identify stressors
	<p><b>What was the hardest mental challenge faced during the effort?</b></p> <p><i>Lack of knowledge of crucial history combined with need to work in the present</i></p>	Identify high emotion moments
<b>Impactful</b>	<p><b>Was there anything surprising or unexpected during the process?</b></p> <p><i>How much supporting individuals impacted culture change overall</i></p>	Identify significant deviations from the norm
	<p><b>If you could draw one key lesson from this experience and pass it on to your younger self, what would it be?</b></p> <p><i>Do the work, good intentions don't equal effectiveness</i></p> <p><i>Empathy for individuals leads to cultural/community change</i></p>	Identify potential inspirational threads



# MAI ZONG VUE

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## COMMUNITY INCLUSION OF HMONG REFUGEES

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“There are two things necessary for success – a need for change and a desire to make it happen.”

### **Summary**

*Mai Zong worked diligently in her Appleton community on integration of Hmong refugees. She broke barriers and stereotypes within her Hmong community while creating a television show to support her community development efforts. Addressing issues from everyday cultural quirks to gender roles and difficult cultural conflicts, she successfully produced her show and supported her community for years helping to bridge the gap between the emigrated Hmong and local Appleton communities. A source of pride is the creation of the Hmong Institute, the achievement of a decades-long vision.*

### **The Story**

As a Hmong refugee, Mai Zong Vue saw a big need to break down cultural barriers in Appleton, WI between her Hmong community and the broader American community that she now called home. She recalls facing a stereotype that the Hmong people are too primitive to survive in the relatively modern society of America. This is despite a history of resilience, adaptability, and survival of the Hmong. Mai Zong worked on various projects to help her community transition into

American society while educating others about Hmong culture. One of her biggest successes was a local TV show aimed at the Hmong community that brought to light everyday tasks we may take for granted, but were drastically different in the Hmong culture and for other refugees coming from Asia. Mai Zong stressed that there were two things necessary for success, a need for change as well as a desire to make it happen. She talks about facing strong cultural differences. For example, the struggles of traditional Hmong families where women deal with internal issues while men are seen as the ones responsible for external ones. New circumstances of refugees would challenge these traditional roles leading to misunderstandings, jealousy, and domestic problems.

Mai Zong's success hinged on being able to translate between traditional Hmong culture and American norms. She had to overcome challenges within her own community as well, with traditional gender norms being a big challenge. She reflects that initially less than half of the community's leadership embraced the need for change and many within the community were resistant. She also faced technical problems as she had no background in TV, knew nothing of filming, angles, or limitations of TV programs. She reflects on the strong initial reservations of the community, and while she was testing traditional gender roles, she also garnered credibility, which was key to having her message being well received. She was always conscious of respect for her guests and the broader community while balancing her desire to help and provide change.

She speaks to the challenges of starting from nothing but drew on this as many in the community were living the same reality, starting their lives over in a foreign land from nothing. She speaks to the importance of working with partners. For example, learning from her camera crew about sound and limitations of cameras while educating about Hmong cultural differences. For instance, a female Hmong guest would be much more uncomfortable with a man clipping a microphone on her for a segment compared to a typical female guest. Mai Zong talks about how having her clip on the microphone for such a guest was a small change that went very far in respecting her guests and creating trust.

“Do what you can when able and do the rest when the time comes.”

Having the show run for 8 years was a large success and provided a big connection and wide pool of support for Mai Zong’s Hmong community. Her ability to gather a coalition and stand with a foot in two worlds to help bridge the gap was crucial to the success. The fact that the show was discontinued after Mai Zong left the leadership role - due to lack of adequate drive and leadership - highlights her role as a pivotal leader.

Mai Zong says one of her biggest lessons was learning to prioritize - to do what you can when you’re able and do the rest when the time comes. An example of this lesson was the creation of the Hmong Institute.

The Hmong Institute is a nonprofit that was launched in 2018 and was the product of Mai’s decades-long vision of providing communal, culturally relevant wrap-around opportunities for the Hmong community. The Institute’s vision is focused on education, health, and heritage preservation. Its programs include direct service, youth programming, and a senior site dedicated to making and providing Asian food for seniors. The youth center focuses on culture and language programming that provides youth with an opportunity to learn and celebrate culture, as well as an academic program to support academic achievement for Hmong students. The Hmong Institute also offers programs in effective citizenship which includes a Hmong Day at the capitol where participants learn about government structure and also meet policy makers. The Institute consistently works to keep moving forward to find solutions for challenges as they emerge.

Category	Question	Intent
Pivot	<p><b>What is the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?</b></p> <p><i>Once the community saw she was providing for a need AND that she was credible</i></p>	Identify the pivotal moment in question
	<p><b>How was the pivotal leader a catalyst for the pivot and following success?</b></p> <p><i>Driving force, came from “both camps”</i></p>	Identify to what degree the pivotal leader was crucial to the success experienced
	<p><b>Was there a demonstrable challenge or a need for change present prior to the pivot? What was it?</b></p> <p><i>Need for cultural education for Hmong refugees and for the community</i></p>	Identify a key element of a successful pivotal experience

<b>Approachable</b>	<b>What has been the impact since the pivot?</b> <i>8 years of very needed community support</i>	Identify level of success
	<b>What are the continued projections?</b> <i>Show ended after 8 years</i>	Identify likelihood of future success and leader's optimism
	<b>What is the age of the youngest person you could share this story with and have them understand the moral?</b> <i>Pre-teen</i>	Measures simplicity and approachability
<b>Trustworthy</b>	<b>What quantitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b> <i>8 year running time</i>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<b>What qualitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b> <i>Community impact, members speaking to benefit</i>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<b>Do you think everyone shares your point of view?</b> <i>Yes, most</i>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
	<b>Would everyone agree with your account?</b> <i>Yes, some in community unable to see past traditional gender expectations and saw a single woman as not able to be a community leader, most overcame this view</i>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
<b>Emotional</b>	<b>What was the most frustrating thing leading up to the pivot point?</b> <i>Gender expectations from within community</i>	Identify stressors
	<b>What was the hardest mental challenge faced during the effort?</b> <i>Balancing traditions and expectations against doing needed work</i>	Identify high emotion moments



<b>Impactful</b>	<b>Was there anything surprising or unexpected during the process?</b>	Identify significant deviations from the norm
	<i>Growth of support from within community</i>	
	<b>If you could draw one key lesson from this experience and pass it on to your younger self, what would it be?</b>	Identify potential inspirational threads
	<i>Do what you can when able, rest when time comes</i>	



# MASOOD AKHTAR

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FOUNDER, WE ARE MANY - UNITED AGAINST HATE

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“I am creating a village.”

## **Summary**

*Masood is fighting for racial justice and community understanding following high racial tensions and increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric in 2016 and on. Masood has championed communication and understanding at levels ranging from the federal to small local Wisconsin communities. Masood’s work has brought countless people together and started even more conversations. Masood stood up for equality, and continues to do so, inspiring many others to fight for the same in the face of aggressive hate, violence, and ignorance fueled expression.*

## **The Story**

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks the perceptions of the Muslim community changed across the world, especially in the US. During the 2016 presidential election inflammatory rhetoric against the Muslim community increased once more. In 2016 Masood was asked to appear on local television as a prominent member of the Muslim community to give his reaction to a proposal of a Muslim Registry by the president. Seeing strong parallels to Nazi Germany leading up to WWII, Masood hoped to use this platform to speak out against such an idea. In the middle of the interview, he came up with an idea of an “Anti-hate registry” and allowed his mouth to outpace his mind, making the announcement without having any plans or ideas on how to proceed. The Anti-Hate Registry idea transformed into We Are Many – United Against Hate (WAM-UAH) Movement. Overnight, Masood was flooded with over 500 emails from people offering to help and pledging support. Masood began working on the foundations, enlisting a diverse board of advisors, and focusing on education through real life stories. In 2017 Masood held the first public event for the

organization, expecting attendance to be around five hundred people, he was shocked when five times that showed up for the event. Two students in the crowd of this event would return to their home school requesting Masood hold a similar event there, stating “Our lives changed” as a result.



Masood’s approach from the onset has been to gather a broad and diverse group of voices to guide his movement. He states multiple times, “I am creating a village.” The honorary board consists of such diverse voices as Muslim leaders, subject matter experts, to past KKK and Al-Qaeda members. A large part of promoting the organization is done by local media outlets, often reaching out to Masood. Local middle schools and high schools have started chapters of the organization with support from Masood by creating student ambassador boards. The organization has stepped in to help educate and heal communities. For instance, responding to the Baraboo High School Nazi salute scandal. Masood has been contacted by various counties and states hoping to replicate his work and received an award from the FBI for his efforts.

Masood stresses that the success of the work lies in a non-partisan approach that is focused on highlighting real life stories, education, healing through mutual understanding, and empowering people, specifically students. He acknowledges one of his biggest frustrations is the lack of open support from the political right in today’s polarized climate. Even at the local level in Dane County, initial support by Republican leaders has been walked back.

Masood’s message stresses the importance of breaking people out of their silos to bring together voices from various communities. He is adamant that the success of We Are Many – United Against Hate would not be possible without empowering leaders across various communities while simultaneously getting these leaders to come together outside of their typical silo of operation. One of the biggest surprises Masood experienced was the strong media reaction in support of his work and how the community flooded *en masse* to support the cause. He feels it is as if everyone was ready to act but needed a catalyst, a spark, to bring people together and point them in the right direction. Masood believes that creating We Are Many – United Against Hate was that spark and the organization provides the direction needed.

#### **UNITED AGAINST HATE’S SELECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

- Completing a project funded by the Dorris Duke Foundation - “Wisconsin Muslim Project” - which will be the culmination of work by PBS Wisconsin, Milwaukee Muslim Women’s Coalition (MMWC), and WAM-UAH in an effort to change the perceptions non-Muslims might have about Islam and Muslims in society.
- Worked in collaboration with the US Department of State in hosting two events on “Countering Violent Extremism” for international delegates from Africa, Middle East, and Europe.
- Since this is a grass-root movement, students are empowered by creating a Student Ambassador Board. Three schools and one UW campus (UW-Stevens Point) have already started chapters of WAM – UAH led by students to build an inclusive campus/community where they live by engaging school administrators/teachers/staff, parents, businesses, local elected officials of both parties, and finally local media. Other states and countries are now in conversation to start these chapters as well.
- WAM – UAH have been involved in helping the Wisconsin state government and various businesses build their Equity and Inclusion Plan by providing webinars about its Movement and how to build an inclusive environment in each of these State agencies.
- Worked with the Biden administration on ending the Muslim Ban and creating new policies on domestic terrorism by capitalizing on many columns he had published and TV interviews he had given on these critical topics.

*Source - United Against Hate’s website*

Based on the positive impacts of his movement in building unity in classrooms and communities, Masood has received many local state, and national awards, including the “Uniters Award” (1 out of 19 selected out of hundreds nominated) by President Biden at the White House on September 15, 2022.

Notably, from the beginning, Masood’s approach has been to identify, enlist, and empower others to carry on the message. For example, amplifying the healing story of Arno Michaelis, a former white supremacist leader, and Pardeep Kaleka, the son of Sikh leader killed by a white supremacist in Oak Creek. Masood stresses that these are great examples of what can happen if we come together with the goal of mutual understanding and do so in an environment that forces us to step outside our typical boundaries.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Intent</b>
<b>Pivot</b>	<b>What is the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?</b>  <i>Announcement of “Anti-hate registry” during interview. Initiating bringing people together</i>	Identify the pivotal moment in question
	<b>How was the pivotal leader a catalyst for the pivot and following success?</b>  <i>Took the one step, announcement, that gave those wanting to act a place to turn</i>	Identify to what degree the pivotal leader was crucial to the success experienced
	<b>Was there a demonstrable challenge or a need for change present prior to the pivot? What was it?</b>  <i>Yes, ongoing need for understanding and healing across different communities.</i>	Identify a key element of a successful pivotal experience
<b>Approachable</b>	<b>What has been the impact since the pivot?</b>  <i>We Are Many – United Against Hate growth, healing in many communities, chapters, etc.</i>	Identify level of success
	<b>What are the continued projections?</b>  <i>Continued growth of Masood’s “village”</i>	Identify likelihood of future success and leader’s optimism

	<p><b>What is the age of the youngest person you could share this story with and have them understand the moral?</b></p> <p><i>Teenager</i></p>	Measures simplicity and approachability
<b>Trustworthy</b>	<p><b>What quantitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>5x attendance expectations, growth, FBI award, etc.</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>What qualitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>"Our lives changed"</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>Do you think everyone shares your point of view?</b></p> <p><i>No, but most do. Some are extremists, some agree behind closed doors but are afraid to agree publicly</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
	<p><b>Would everyone agree with your account?</b></p> <p><i>Most, it has been transparent and public</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
<b>Emotional</b>	<p><b>What was the most frustrating thing leading up to the pivot point?</b></p> <p><i>Hate to Muslim community and provocations from political leaders like the president in 2016</i></p>	Identify stressors
	<p><b>What was the hardest mental challenge faced during the effort?</b></p> <p><i>Lack of public support from political right fearing losing fringe voters</i></p>	Identify high emotion moments
<b>Impactful</b>	<p><b>Was there anything surprising or unexpected during the process?</b></p> <p><i>Massive media support, as if they are starved for this type of story</i></p>	Identify significant deviations from the norm
	<p><b>If you could draw one key lesson from this experience and pass it on to your younger self, what would it be?</b></p> <p><i>Empower and un-silo leaders</i></p>	Identify potential inspirational threads



# JOAN GILLMAN

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BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, CROATIA

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“Leaders shouldn’t stay in one place too long, or their weaknesses become those of the institution.”

## **Summary**

*Joan Gillman supported post-war business development in Croatia following the war in the 90s. She fought for a comprehensive approach and continued support for the entrepreneurs of Croatia going beyond short term “lump-sum cash” solutions and building lasting organizations. Overcoming administrative, cultural, and bias-based problems, she was pivotal in establishing environments that resulted in continued and sustained growth and success aiding in rebuilding Croatian communities.*

## **The Story**

Having extensive experience in entrepreneurship and being the executive director of the Small Business Development Center would lead one to believe Joan Gillman would be a “cannot fail” candidate for business development work in Croatia following the Croatian War of Independence in the 1990s. However, one of the first observations Joan makes is a trend in U.S.-led reconstruction efforts to throw money at a problem only to have the work crumble as soon as the aid ends. She stressed her approach to development is rooted in sustainability, building programs that will

succeed in the long term, with an eye to being able to function once U.S. funds and support end.

While reflecting on working out the logistic plan of how Joan would travel to, and work in, Croatia a key item stands out. The first thing Joan asked for wasn't perks or equipment, but the ability to bring her Croatian counterpart, Slavica, to Madison. Joan's primary concern was to make sure the two would get along and that they shared similar visions for the work ahead. They needed to build a foundation of a relationship to ensure future success. This approach was pivotal to the success of Joan and Slavica's work in Croatia, while being markedly divergent from the prevailing views on U.S.- led reconstruction work at the time.

Joan helped build a strong and diverse coalition with her Croatian partner, bringing everyone together, from well known donors like George Soros' Open Society to students like a Polish PhD candidate named Piotr. She worked in creating education programs and incubators that supported entrepreneurial work and stressed sustainability and longevity. Empowered by Joan, Piotr's coalition was able to grow and expand the programs involving neighboring countries, like Bulgaria (1998) and Macedonia (2000). Joan stresses that such success would not be achievable if it hinged on her doing all the work personally, especially in situations where she was the "outsider" and did not have boots on the ground and a daily, direct connection to the needs of the community.

Joan dismisses the existence of a pivot point, or overcoming a major hardship, anytime during her work in Croatia and underscores that the work was a continual, growing progress overcoming normal barriers that arise in such instances. The key to the success was the right mindset at the outset, creating a proper foundation, having a shared vision with those around her, and strongly focusing on sustainability of the projects. Joan placed heavy emphasis on working with young people, growing and mentoring them while relying on their skills and insights. One could argue that the pivot was Joan's commitment to these ideals and refusing to compromise in applying them. As a result, many of these young individuals have now gone on to become professors and mentors themselves carrying on the lessons kindled by Joan in their youth. She talks about growing their own community, a place where the shared vision and sustainable-focused drive could be fostered and applied to future work. Through her efforts in Croatia, Joan saw the growth of up to 100 programs and shifted focus to improving existing business ventures alongside growing new ideas.



“If it is your business you can be in it for life, but only bring in new people as long as you’re willing to listen to them.”

Joan’s approach has seen success in other unlikely parts of the world. For example, she was able to take a group of women to Saudi Arabia during a time when many would objectively say women were seen as second-class citizens in the nation and was invited back as a result of her success in building relationships and partnerships. She was asked by their Chamber of Commerce to bring fifteen entrepreneurship business professors from around the country, both men and women. They invited her back to run small business workshops for two weeks. Joan brought a female colleague along with her, as she could not travel along with a man who was not her husband.

She has been asked to be a commencement speaker in places like Macedonia, and the current success of Croatia as a European tech giant speaks volumes to the work Joan contributed to. She describes herself as “the gal who can’t say no” and accredits her inability to pass up opportunities as a big reason for her success. Joan talks about the interwoven relationship between small businesses and heritage, with the goal of a successful business always being to build something that will remain and can sustainably function for future generations. She shares that failure is inevitable, as many times trial and error is necessary to find out what works. Aside from the lessons mentioned above Joan reflects that hiring people brighter than you has always been a guiding principle she has followed and a key component in building successful, sustainable programs.

Category	Question	Intent
Pivot	<b>What is the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?</b>  <i>Sustainably focused mindset at beginning.</i>	Identify the pivotal moment in question
	<b>How was the pivotal leader a catalyst for the pivot and following success?</b>  <i>Joan came in with the experience of her work at the SBDC and courage to empower others</i>	Identify to what degree the pivotal leader was crucial to the success experienced

	<p><b>Was there a demonstrable challenge or a need for change present prior to the pivot? What was it?</b></p> <p><i>Need for reconstruction in post war Croatia with programs that would continue to succeed after US aid ran out.</i></p>	Identify a key element of a successful pivotal experience
<b>Approachable</b>	<p><b>What has been the impact since the pivot?</b></p> <p><i>Croatia is a tech giant in Europe.</i></p>	Identify level of success
	<p><b>What are the continued projections?</b></p> <p><i>Continued growth and success of the nation and programs built with Joan's help.</i></p>	Identify likelihood of future success and leader's optimism
	<p><b>What is the age of the youngest person you could share this story with and have them understand the moral?</b></p> <p><i>Teenager</i></p>	Measures simplicity and approachability
<b>Trustworthy</b>	<p><b>What quantitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>100+ programs under Joan's leadership, current economic growth in Croatia</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>What qualitative information do you have to support your measure of success?</b></p> <p><i>Young people initially working with Joan going on to become pivotal leaders themselves</i></p>	Gauge trustworthiness and potential for more information
	<p><b>Do you think everyone shares your point of view?</b></p> <p><i>No, but the work speaks for itself and it's hard to argue with results</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads
	<p><b>Would everyone agree with your account?</b></p> <p><i>Most, it has been successful and building up others shouldn't be controversial</i></p>	Gauge level of bias, identify key leads

<b>Emotional</b>	<b>What was the most frustrating thing leading up to the pivot point?</b>  <i>US led projects where money is thrown at a problem and then things fall apart when the money ends</i>	Identify stressors
	<b>What was the hardest mental challenge faced during the effort?</b>  <i>Building from scratch, it's easier to improve on existing</i>	Identify high emotion moments
<b>Impactful</b>	<b>Was there anything surprising or unexpected during the process?</b>  <i>Rapid growth and expansion</i>	Identify significant deviations from the norm
	<b>If you could draw one key lesson from this experience and pass it on to your younger self, what would it be?</b>  <i>Hire people brighter than you</i>	Identify potential inspirational threads

# STORY STARTERS

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## SELF REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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### **Learning From the Past and Looking Forward**

Social research shares that our life journey is greatly influenced by key points. These include when we are born, when we become an adult, and when we face our first challenge or pivotal moment as an adult. Take a couple minutes and reflect on these times in your life. How do these key times in your life inform your value system?

Take a couple minutes and reflect on a time of change in your life. Start by identifying the challenge or need for change.

What was the pivot point or short period in time that you feel was the “moment things turned for the better”?

What has been the impact since the pivot point?

If you could draw one key lesson from this experience, what would that be?

How could that lesson be applied to your current self?

How could that lesson be applied to a pivot you want to create?

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## CONVERSATION STARTERS

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We learn so much from having conversations. Use these conversation starters as ice breakers, story starters, or as ways to dig deeper during conversations or interviews.

- If you had to write a one-sentence mission statement for your life, what would it be?
- Considering all the big-screen movies that you've ever seen, which one do you believe has had the greatest emotional impact on you?
- Suppose you had the opportunity to choose three people, past or present, with whom to eat dinner. Who are the three people that would be joining you at the table?
- If people could truly read your mind, what would they discover that you think about most often?
- When people find out what you do for a living, and after you've done your best to explain, what is the most typical question they are likely to ask you regarding your job?
- If ten people who know you were asked to write down on a piece of paper the one adjective that each of them thinks best describes you, what do you think would be the most common word written?
- Forget about soft sounds like babbling brooks, gentle showers, and warbling birds; what is your favorite *loud* sound?
- Aside from your family, friends, or pets, what would be the most difficult thing for you to give up in your life?

- What is one field or profession that you never pursued, but that you think you probably would have been quite good at?
- In one sentence, what do you believe is the secret of life?
- What was your favorite thing to pretend when you were a young child?
- “Money doesn’t grow on trees,” or so the expression goes. Imagine, however, that something unusual - besides money - *could* be grown on trees, available to be picked whenever the need or urge struck. What would you want those trees to produce?
- In your own not-so-humble opinion, what is your most likable quality?
- What is the one thing that for years you have been saying you should do but as of yet have not done?
- In hindsight, what particular class in school above all others do you wish you had paid more attention to or taken more seriously?
- What is the best piece of advice you have ever received?
- What is something you enjoy doing that would probably surprise many of the people who think they know you well?
- When you meet someone for the first time, what particular fact about them are you most interested in learning as quickly as possible?
- If you could give your current job a new title, one that would make your job seem far more exciting or important than it actually is, what would you choose as your new title?

- If you were given the opportunity to be an apprentice to any person, living or deceased, from whom would you want to learn?
- Aside from a member of your own family, what person do you more or less hold up as your role model in life?
- If you had to enter a talent competition tomorrow, what would you more than likely do on stage?
- What is the most impactful thing that you've done in the last twelve months?
- Suppose that income taxes still had to be paid, but instead of going to the government, your tax dollars would go to any one cause or charity of your choice. Where would you want your money to go?

*Nicholaus, B. and Lowrie, P. (2000). The conversation piece, 2. Bellatine Publishing, NY*