

Creating the Perfect Storm

Tine Hansen-Turton and Nick Torres 23 January 2013

Describe your first meeting and your first impression of the person with whom you entered into a partnership.

THT: Nick Torres and I first connected through the Eisenhower Fellows Network. I am a 2005 Fellow, and Nick is a 2008 Fellow. In 2008, Fellows in Brazil and Eisenhower Fellowships hosted a conference in Ouro Preto, Brazil that focused on health and education. They wanted both of us to go, given our diverse interests; I work in the healthcare sector and Nick is an educator at heart. This was my first trip to Latin America, so I was happy to know that I was traveling with someone who could converse in Spanish (although Brazilians speak Portuguese).

NT: I should have known better when Tine insisted (to the point of harassment) that I needed to get all my shots before I traveled to Brazil. We weren't going into the Amazon! Nevertheless, after two long international flights and an amazing conference, we found, despite our seemingly opposite styles, that we connected on spirit of having an impact on the world and our entrepreneurial spirit. We also were somewhat in awe of each other because it seemed that of our respective weaknesses

were made up for by the other person's strengths. We became the perfect storm.

Why did you end up partnering with this person the first time?

THT: To this day, I am still a little puzzled why Nick wants to partner at all. At the time we met, he had recently made an employment decision (at his previous job) to hire an external person versus an internal candidate. I knew the talented internal candidate, and told him, "You're an idiot and will lose this person." (By the way, I was right: that employee did leave, but the good news is the three of us are all still friends today.) His reaction was an expected "who are you" to tell me this, but then we started a conversation about ideas and what we wanted to accomplish, and that conversation is still going on to this day, except we've made many of the conversations reality through the social ventures we've created and partnered on, with many more to come.

NT: Partnering is the only way to get anything of significance accomplished. Tine is an unusual partner in that she views our professional life almost exclusively via a political and policy lens, whereas I tend to shy away from politics and policy and focus on the business and impact. To be successful in the social sector, we need both. Honestly, I probably will never be a politician or create major policy changes, but I've learned to appreciate its importance through Tine. In retrospect I might have

partnered with Tine simply because she is more persistent than a pit bull. Once she focused on me, I didn't have much of a choice.

What subsequent partnerships have you undertaken – and what has been their impact on the region so far?

THT and NT: Our first endeavor was to bring publicity to Eisenhower Fellowships for all the amazing work the fellows do in the Philadelphia region and beyond. We were fortunate to persuade the Business Journal to do a piece on the fellowship program.

The first major undertaking was the creation of the Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal (PSIJ). The idea started when we both pulled out the Stanford Social Innovation Review on the plane to Brazil – and started one of our many ideas conversations about how great it would be to have a journal that would focus more locally on socially innovative leaders and organizations. We read about agencies such as Teach for America (Nick was in the 3rd cohort of TFA), the Harlem's Children's Zone, etc., but there is innovation in nooks and crannies everywhere, including our region, and we thought it would be interesting to reveal those. The outline of the regional Journal idea was crafted on the way back from the Brazil conference. We began to meet with the local foundation community to garner support for the idea in fall of 2008, and officially launched it in September 2009. To date it

has a readership of 50,000 people, regionally, nationally and internationally. Hundreds of articles have been written by notable area leaders and innovators of all generations, specializing in education, healthcare, community/civic engagement, arts and culture, etc. Over 130 volunteers work with the journal, including a wonderful writing team. To date, more than 1000 unduplicated people have come to the Journal launch events. The idea was for the community to see the Journal as its own, and that is happening. Along the way, the Journal has become known as a national knowledge lab and thought leader for innovations, creating a common understanding of how to incubate social innovation and challenge social sector systems through dissemination of local best practices/solutions. Through the writing of articles, individuals/organizations striving to create social change are challenged to incorporate an understanding of their product (social innovation), double bottom line impact (social and financial), and policy implications. As such, PSIJ is creating a new standard for generating social impact within the social sector.

With most of the work we have done so far, one thing leads to another. Readers of PSIJ with support from our local advisory board (made up of regional funders) asked us to take the Journal to the next level with the creation of the Philadelphia Social Innovations Lab. This January, we launched the Philadelphia Social Innovations Lab, (www.socialinnovationslab.org), committed to promoting

and nurturing innovation for social impact. The lab is a partnership with the University of Pennsylvania and is a response to demands for new social enterprise models that are cost effective, financially self-sustainable, adaptive to feedback and metrics, with clear outcome accountability measures, and the potential for large-scale impact. Philadelphia is on the rise with the influx of many young people aged 24-35. Our challenge as a city will be to keep these young people engaged in the community, so they are more likely to become permanent residents. The Philadelphia Social Innovations Lab is a model that will develop the spirit of social enterprise within Philadelphia and will engage this younger generation to become part of our city's fabric.

Other endeavors include the planning and funding of the Congreso Health Center, a partnership between Congreso (which Nick previously ran), and my employer, Public Health Management Corporation and the National Nursing Centers Consortium. In 2008, we introduced our teams to each other – which resulted in a national planning grant from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Primary Healthcare to plan for a health center with the community around Congreso in North Philadelphia – and culminated in the funding of a new health center in the Summer of 2011, which opened in early 2012.

Also in 2009, we connected with some local funders interested in supporting school health. Since fall of 2010,

in partnership with two charter schools, Pan American Academy and Belmont, we have operated school health clinics staffed by nurse practitioners providing both school nursing and primary care services. Patterned after the retail clinic model, which I am involved in through the Convenient Care Association, the nurse practitioner school health model has been a game-changer for the schools. Children with chronic illness are being treated in school, preventing them from missing the school day and pulling their parents away from their jobs. Results have shown an increase in school attendance, overall readiness and improved test scores, to name a few.

Since 2010, we have taught Social Innovation and Leading Nonprofits at the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. We enjoy teaching and working with the students who help write for PSIJ.

One important project to date has been the creation of a statewide K-12 Cyber Charter School focusing on children with learning disabilities, Education-Plus Academy Cyber Charter School. The school idea came about in 2009, when my then 9-year-old was struggling with reading and writing in school. The schools simply could not support Nikolaj (my son), and my husband and I as parents were at a loss of how to help him. Nick put me in touch with his mom in Idaho, who is a special education and reading specialist, and the conversation led to us having Nikolaj tested and ultimately placed in a private school for children with dyslexia, AIM, which has been great for him.

Nick's mother assists by tutoring Nikolaj on Skype weekly. What we learned through this process is that there is a complete lack of support for kids with learning disabilities, in particular dyslexia (basic reading, writing and math disabilities). It is upsetting to think that we build prisons based on those who do not exceed a third grade reading level. It would make preventative sense to instead funnel resources into our schools to better educate the 17 percent of the school population with learning disabilities in an effort to prevent them dropping out of school and ultimately, unnecessarily, finding themselves entangled in the criminal justice system. Well, we asked the usual question – why can't we offer what private schools offer children with special needs? We began the research and planning in 2010 of a public school that would focus on children with learning disabilities and provide evidence-based programming. In the summer of 2012, the school was chartered by the state and it opened in September with 250 students.

What makes this partnership work?

THT: It is much easier to make change and challenge the status quo when you have a business partner, someone who can always watch your back. In fact, no one should ever do it alone. We both came into the partnership with the belief that everyone (including ourselves) has to win for any partnership to work out. We bring this philosophy to all our partnerships and endeavors. It is pretty simple.

We still live in two worlds – Nick’s passion is education and mine is healthcare – although over time, our interests have begun to overlap. Had it not been for Eisenhower Fellowships, which foster this kind of connection, we’d probably still be working in our two worlds. Nick and I partner with lots of amazing people and colleagues. We are both connected in our worlds and now we are bringing those worlds together along with the folks we want to work with. We may have been the instigators of new ideas, but none of them have been created in isolation, we have so many people to thank for joining us and believing in them – this is shared team-work beyond us.

NT: What a political answer – Tine will always be the politician. The truth is the partnership almost fell apart in the beginning because we hadn’t learned to trust each other yet. We had our fights and almost walked away a few times. However, over time we realized that we were both in it for the right reasons. The partnership now works because we have developed trust and honesty. When things get rough, we just introduce a little humor into the conversation to relieve the stress and then we get the work done.

What need does this partnership fulfill for you?

THT: It is through the connections of people from different worlds and spheres of interests that innovation happens. We both love the pursuit of new ideas and

seeing them through to fruition in partnerships with our colleagues in the community. Nick's got a brilliant ability to focus and hone in on crystalizing the idea – and I am more of the sales person, I suppose. But the combo seems to work.

NT: I'm a serial entrepreneur. I love to design and build things and then find good managers to continue the vision. Tine is more than a serial entrepreneur as she has a new idea every hour. The partnership fulfills me because my intellect is stimulated, and then together we bring these ideas to life. Most people dream. I get to dream and then participate in the process of making the dream come true because I have this unique partnership with this unique, if slightly overzealous, person.

What advice would you give to leaders about spotting and sustaining productive partnerships like this?

NT & THT: Go with your instinct when you connect with a new colleague – and don't get too comfortable in your own professional circle. While we are different in many ways, we have key attributes in common and similar interests. We are serial entrepreneurs, have endless streams of ideas, and work to execute them. We both fundamentally believe change can happen if you are persistent, strategic and focused in your pursuit. We are not afraid to take risks, excel in the pursuit of creating new social ventures and we have fun doing it. When the

outcome is bad or unsuccessful, we both own it, which makes it easier to move on. Consequently, when we are successful, you have someone to share the success with. We also bring different skills to the table. And last but not least, mutual trust is critical to our partnership. It is the covenant that ties any partnership together, in personal or professional life.

Bottom line, in a partnership like this, you need to commit for the long haul. Once you find that person, hang on! In the end you will find professional happiness.