

Exploring the World, Creating Connections: One man's quest to make a difference by following his dreams.

Written by Taylor Nicole Smidt

“How many of you dream?” Looking across the school gymnasium packed with elementary aged students, hands now waving excitedly in the air in response to the question booming over the sound system, I encountered Dean Jacobs for the first time. I was unaware of the presentation scheduled for the school that day, and I had no clue what was to come. From the conversations the teachers around me were exchanging I learned he was some sort of world explorer. The guy certainly dressed the part! He wore a green, wide brimmed hat, chunky brown cargo pants, and a red bandana tucked into the collar of his white, long sleeved shirt. Little did I know that this man was about to teach me to see the world from a new perspective. I have started thinking of it as “the Dean Jacobs Experience”. Dean Jacobs is a man who spreads a wealth of empowerment and inspiration, and touches lives wherever he goes.

How many titles can one person hold in their lifetime, or all at once? Author, photographer, inspirational speaker, teacher, humanitarian, world explorer....Dean is all of these and more. But this wasn't always the case. For ten years Dean worked for Pfizer, the world's largest research-based pharmaceutical company. Now he's traveling the world, giving presentations at schools, launching

charities, and interacting with young people all over the world, encouraging them to follow their dreams. How does one make such a transformation? For Dean, a few specific occasions led him to the gradual realization that while he was superficially “happy” with his plan in life, he wasn’t fulfilled. One of these occasions nearly ended in tragedy.

Dean was on the interstate driving home from a skiing trip in Idaho when he was involved in a severe car accident. He was extraordinarily lucky that day and walked away without a scratch. Thoroughly shaken up in the aftermath, he began a process of self-reflection. “My legs turned to jelly and I just collapsed. It just hit me, what had almost happened. I didn’t have a scratch on me- nothing. Driving home, in that conversation in my head with myself, I thought, if this was my number and God wanted to bring me home, this probably would have been a good opportunity. I realized there must be more I was meant to experience in my life. That whole process started this inquiry: How much “stuff” do you really need? Looking back, that was impactful.” Dean began to develop ideas about a society of consumerism and working for the goals of financial success. “You get on that hamster wheel, and we’re all spinning really fast. We think, maybe if I work a little bit harder, spin this wheel a little bit faster, I’ll get a little bit closer to what’s important to me. I stepped off the wheel, I stepped back and observed, to create this space and ask myself, what’s really important to me? Traveling was that way

to get access to a part of myself that had been dormant for a long time.” Dean has learned that the pursuit of wealth and success in the financial world does not equate true happiness and fulfillment in life. The turning point of his life was the moment he quit his job, sold his house, and stepped on a plane to chase after his childhood dreams of exploring the world.

The next time I saw Dean, he was rolling up to a coffee shop in Fremont, Nebraska in his small green pickup. “You find the place ok?” He asked as he hopped out, and we entered the shop. The barista lit up at the sight of him and greeted him by name. “They don’t let me pay, get whatever you want.” He greeted everyone around him, mostly by name, shaking hands and smiling. As we sat down, he waved at a couple that walked by, wishing them a “happy Thursday!” I couldn’t help but smile. His positivity and upbeat attitude were exactly as I remembered at Sagewood Elementary School- absolutely infectious. With him was an overstuffed backpack, well used and with various carabineers hanging off of it. “How old is your son? Does he like pictures? Give him this.” He slid a beautiful photograph of a tree frog across the table. His kindness is genuine, and his excitement about life has always shone through.

Dean was born in Wahoo, Nebraska and raised in nearby Fremont. He graduated from Fremont High School in 1980 and went on to pursue his bachelor’s degree in biology. “I had a simple childhood,” he reflected as the shop bustled

around us. “My dad was a trucker. My mom was a housewife who was a very simple person. She wasn’t really engaged in my life. That could be a burden or I could turn it into an opportunity. I could benefit from the freedom to decide what I wanted to do with my life.” Dean was never encouraged as a child to chase his own dreams. As a boy he had intense visions of journeys into all parts of the world. “I wanted to go to the base camp of Mount Everest, climb the mountains of New Zealand, sleep underneath the stars in the Outback of Australia, climb into the hearts of the pyramids of Egypt, be in the heart of Africa and see zebra, wildebeest, and hyenas. Those are my dreams.” Despite the lack of encouragement to pursue these dreams, Dean has made this his reality. Because he is aware of the fact that society rarely encourages children to express their dreams, he uses his experiences to send the message to never forget their visions. However, his presentations are not strictly motivational. They have an educational element, and he brings them to life in an extraordinary way.

When Dean travels he focuses primarily on culture, history, and the natural wonders and beauty of the world all around him. He sees the world in a way most people overlook and he uses this gift to benefit others. He recognizes that while young people may learn about different parts of the world in a classroom setting, they may never gain a full understanding or awareness of other cultures. He has immersed himself into different cultures throughout the world, from Damascus to

the Achuar people of the Amazon rain forest. “Eventually, I turn this into a teachable moment in schools- I give presentations that bring this to life. The Mississippi River isn’t just a squiggly line on a map, but a real place with real people and natural wonders.”

One of the main goals Dean has is to connect people, to spread awareness of all different cultures throughout the world. He faces the recognition that barriers exist, such as misinformation, prejudice and fear that prevent people from gaining a true understanding of how the “other side” really lives. “People are good everywhere you go around the world.” His biggest project to date is with helping the Achuar people of Ecuador, in the Amazon rain forest, to keep their home from being overtaken by oil companies and the Ecuadorian government. Launching charities to bring school supplies, medicine, and clothing to the village is a component of his plan. Dean plans to help educate these people, who love their land and don’t want to leave, so they have the knowledge and tools available to fight for their rights. He has spent large amounts of time with the Achuar, and simply can’t bear the thought of his new “family” losing their home. “Yatzoro,” he said, “they call me `brother””.

Dean is not backed by any corporate sponsorship and is not independently wealthy. He does hold a certification to teach English as a Second Language but has never been paid for his services to do so. Every time he approaches schools in

other countries it is on a voluntary basis. He doesn't see himself as anyone special or deserving of financial wealth, nor would he want that. "I'm not making the kind of money I did with the big pharmaceutical company but nothing's missing. If you can't be happy, what's the point? Happiness comes from relationships between people, and your engagement in the world and the positive contribution you want to make. I want to inform, educate and inspire kids- to teach them to be engaged in the world instead of afraid of it." It was clear in the faces I saw in the children at Sagewood Elementary school that day, that he has accomplished exactly that. Having personally had that fire lit within me I can absolutely attest that what he told me is true: "One person can make a difference." Dean is making a difference. His bucket is full. He fills the buckets of those around him. "I'm just a farm boy from Nebraska. My intention is simple- to leave the world better than I found it."

Resources

<http://deanjacobs.org/>

Common Ground 512- Explorer Dean Jacobs- Lakeland Public Television, January 2014

Jacobs, Dean. Personal Interview. 19 June 2014.