



Stanford eCorner

Why Nika Water was Started

Jeff Church, *Nika Water*

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Social entrepreneur Jeff Church tells the story of Nika Water's inception, which came about after his family's experiences working on water projects during a trip to Africa.



Transcript

Five years ago I had the privilege to - I had that individual, Craig Kielburger from Free The Children, come to our home and he talked to us about poverty alleviation. And, really our kids were - I have four kids in high school and middle school and they were really taken by it. And, after he talked at our house, my children came to me and said "mom, dad, we're going to Africa this summer." And, I said well, I don't know how you're going to Africa this summer, but if you're going - but - and my wife, who is a good Jewish mom, said "if you're going, we're all going." So, we all upped and went, and we took 20 of us to Kenya and Ethiopia for a month, and we actually built water systems - helped build water systems, helped build schools and it became really a transformative experience. And, I wanted also my kids to understand the difference in relative poverty and absolute poverty. Relative poverty being I must be poor; I can't afford the latest iPhone. And, absolute poverty being I live on less than a dollar a day; I walk 10k, sometimes twice a day; oftentimes I get polluted water. We learned about the water crisis. The water crisis is that 4,500 people die every single day because of a lack of clean water, something as basic as that. And that's the size of one large public high school evaporating every single day and 90% of those people are kids under the age of 5. We learned that half the hospital beds in the developing world are occupied with people with waterborne related diseases.

We learned about the poverty trap and the poverty trap is that girls can't go to school in most areas because they have to get the water every day for the family. That's their job and because they get the water every day for the family, they're not going to school, they tend to get married and pregnant at 13 and 14 years old. And, then their children are born in the same poverty trap and this is a trap that they can't get out of. And oftentimes poverty alleviation, it's kind of like a ladder that's just one rung out of reach and all people need is just a little boost up to grab that bottom rung to begin to climb their way out. And, while we were there my 14-year-old daughter, Nina, at the time came to my wife and I and she had a bit of an epiphany and she said, "You know, dad, we really want to do something about this. We'd like to start a business that can kind of help these people in some way." And, we thought that was a really great idea and she got together with our other kids and cousins that were with us and they actually came up with the name Nika. Nika means to give in Zulu. And, before we launched it, we began to think - I began to think about this quote that I really like a lot, which is that destiny is not a matter of chance, it's a matter of choice. It's not a thing to be waited for, it's a thing to be achieved. And, when destiny knocks on your door, you don't say "hold on a second, I gotta comb my hair." You don't - you grab it by the throat, you wrestle it to the ground, you stomp all over it, you make it happen because you don't know when it's going to come back again.

So, we - as we got back to the United States, we began to create Nika, and Nika is a bottled water brand in the United States that donates 100% of its profits to - back to the developing countries. And, as we got into it, we picked water. A lot of people go "oh, why did you pick bottled water? Does the world really need another bottled water company?" And, as - we thought there was something very symbolic about providing clean water or selling water in the United States and providing clean water to others in the developing world. But, people really struggle with the eco side of it. So, we developed Nika with an

eco policy that we believe is best-in-place eco-wise for a plastic company. We use recycled plastic to make the product and we're certified carbon neutral with the product. And, as we really got into this over the years, what we realized is that it's only costing \$20 to bring clean water to someone for a lifetime, \$20 bucks. I spent \$12 at Starbucks the other day. I spent \$35 at the movie theater the other day with my family. Now, it's not made to make us feel guilty but that's made to make us feel like we can make these tough societal solutions.

We can solve these issues without having to give up that other stuff. And, we thought if we could be a \$10 million revenue company, which would mean we generate about \$1 million after tax and profits, we could bring clean water to 50,000 people a year. And, by doing that that's kind of one thing and that's one thing that we're motivated on, but what I'm really motivated on is talking to people like yourself. And, if a couple of you guys end up doing your own venture that has some kind of giveback component to whatever it is. And, then if TOMS Shoes is doing what it's doing and Newman Zone is doing what it's doing and somebody else on the other side of the world is doing what they're doing, now all of a sudden you add all those up and you've got a sea change of businesses that are, in one way or another, giving back. And, when those businesses give back, you can move mountains with it.