

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/from-surviving-to-thriving-cody-coleman-coactive-ai/>

Cody Coleman, co-founder and CEO of Coactive AI, shares his life story to explain what motivates him as an entrepreneur. As a child and young man he was focused on survival, but as he reached his goals, he realized he could think about thriving and reaching for even more.



## Transcript

Cody On the surface level this is like it's great, 00:00:06,663 I have the resume, I check all the boxes, it looks great.. For being a founder, an enterprise deep tech founder.. I have the, you know, degrees at MIT and Stanford, done research, connected to the right people.. But that doesn't really tell you, you know, who I really am and, you know, why am I here? Why am I actually, why did I wanna start a company? What am I trying to do? So I actually want to dive a little bit deeper into who I am, and I'm gonna save you from my like TED talk.. And instead, I'm gonna kind of go through the SparkNotes of my story and where I came from, because that'll help you understand, you know, where I am now and where I'm trying to go.. So, I love this image.. This was the student registration form that my mother filled out to register me to go to elementary school.. And it basically captures in a single page, you know, the high level kind of SparkNotes of my life.. So first off, first question, you know, city and state where child was born, and she wrote in Monmouth County Correctional Facility.. So my mother was actually in prison when I was born..

She was on federal hold.. So I was put into foster care and then eventually adopted by my maternal grandparents.. Eventually she was released from prison, but during that time while she was incarcerated, she was also diagnosed as, you know, being mentally ill, probably suffering from something like paranoid schizophrenia.. Eventually she was released and my grandparents having, you know, very big hearts for adopting, you know, me and my siblings, they also let her back into the house.. So she was a part of the household growing up.. But it was only my mother, you know, I actually didn't know my father or anything like that.. And you can start to see kind of some of those interesting questions here.. So, you know, the next question on it is, you know, please indicate the racial or ethnic designation you would want to appear in future records.. Only choose one.. You know, this is a different time..

That's probably a problematic question to like, ask today of only choose one rather than like, you know, kind of a multiple choice thing.. But, you know, my mom, she wrote in this kind of interesting answer of like, he's interracial, but he's not half white, half black.. Which is kind of an odd way to answer this question.. Like, wouldn't you imagine that you would just go and like, say what he is rather than what he is not? But then this ultimately gets to kind of my favorite question, which is father's full name.. And my mother, she wrote in Rafael Sanchez question mark.. And to this day, you know, I still don't know my father's name.. You know, I asked my mother when I was growing up, like, you know, what was my dad? I asked my

grandmother, what was my dad's name? And still to this day have no idea.. They looked at me with blank faces, with zero idea of who this person was, which is kind of crazy to imagine that this is like someone that was so critical to like the creation of my life and just nothing.. There's no recollection, no anything there.. And then it continues to go on..

So you see, so not only did my father leave before I was born, but we grew up in poverty.. So in terms of, you know, name the place of employment or address, my mom writes in none.. And then in parentheses, welfare.. And I grew up with one of my older brother Shannon, who you can see was, you know, 11 years older than me.. So there was a massive age gap between me and my siblings.. And we ultimately grew up with my grandparents.. You know, my grandparents grew up in the Great Depression.. They only had, you know, a fourth grade education, a second grade education.. But they worked really, really hard in order to have a house and to actually be able to provide for their family.. So for me, growing up, we kind of started from really nothing..

We just had my grandparents' social security and welfare to live off of, and a roof over our heads and Winslow Township High School, which is, you know, I love it, I love Winslow.. I love the teachers there because they made, you know, all this possible for me, and encouraging me and in believing in me.. But it wasn't a great high school.. We were just a poor public high school in New Jersey.. We're ranked 300 out of 322 schools.. You know, I was the first student from my high school to ever go to MIT.. And you know, part of that, you know, part of this whole thing was, it was originally outta survival.. Growing up, you know, I wasn't athletic.. I wasn't, I didn't have any musical abilities or anything like that.. And kind of at home, it was a hostile environment, actually..

You know, my biological mom actually loved cats and dogs and had a dream of, you know, starting her own pet shop one day, but she wasn't that organized.. So we had a lot of cats and dogs in the house, 13 cats or 12 dogs, something like that.. The only problem was I was actually allergic to those cats and dogs.. So all I wanted to do kind of growing up was just survive to actually get outta that environment and to just be able to have kinda a normal life where I could afford the things that, you know, I needed and do some of the things that I wanted.. And through, through a lot of, you know, passion and perseverance and grit, and just, you know, sticking with it, that became a reality for me.. You know, I went from, like, when I first went into undergrad, I know many of you are in undergrad, my entire goal at MIT was just to be able to get a good job to work at a place like Google so that I could afford the things that I needed and do some of the things that I wanted, like travel.. And I was able to do that.. And in that moment, you know, I, like, after working, after finishing undergrad, I actually accomplished that dream, that dream that I had for my life.. And, you know, I had a steady paycheck and I could see it like, you know, my bank account balance going up month over month.. And that was really, really great..

But then something, you know, kind of switched in my head and I went from thinking about, you know, survival to actually, you know, I could see the picture of my life.. I could see the next 40 years of what my life would be, and it would be a great life.. But I wondered if I could do more, if I could actually, you know, go from, you know, survival to thriving.. And ultimately that kinda led to what is, you know, my personal why and what is my personal mission in life, which is to demonstrate that regardless of where you come from, that you can be successful and, you know, success can mean many different things.. So, you know, originally I wanted to go to MIT and like have academic success, so get a 5.0 GPA, didn't do that for my bachelor's.. I got a 4.9, so I stayed for a master's, you know, and I got a 5.0, then from a master's of engineering.. I was a skinny kid in high school.. I couldn't even bench the bar.. So, you know, I wanted to eventually be strong and there's this thing called the thousand pound club and power lifting, which I was able to do.. And this past weekend, you know, I ran my first half marathon and finished in under two hours..

So I am kind of strong and kind of fast.. And then, you know, after those two goals, I was like, I wanna start a billion dollar company to demonstrate kind of business or financial success.. And then, you know, my last goal is to be president of the United States.. So we're so far, two out of four working on the third, and then we'll figure out the fourth one after that..