

**MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, April 2021**  
**Seth Maxwell: Building a World that TRULY Works for EVERYONE**



**Seth Maxwell** wears many hats: son, friend, entrepreneur, activist, producer, actor, and speaker. He is the founder and CEO of Thirst Project, a nonprofit with the bold commitment to ending the clean water crisis. A storyteller at heart, Seth has spoken internationally at schools, churches, conferences, and meetings at the White House with the Obama administration.

Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Seth outlines concrete steps for becoming socially conscious and active; steps that will lead to saving the planet and creating abundance and purpose.

**Winn:** Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to this issue of MASTERS. This incredible guy that I am sitting with is no stranger to MASTERS. I think that this might be the third time that I have featured him, and there's a reason for that. There's a reason why I want to keep on going back to this guy because not only his messages, but what he's doing behind the scenes. You know, lots of people talk a great talk but then behind the scenes, you find that they've lost the credibility simply because things aren't going on and things aren't happening. I need people like Seth Maxwell in my life because they are the ones that help me realize, yeah, I'm doing a lot but I can always do more. I love that. I learned that line from Gary Sinise. Yes, we do a lot but we could always do more, and that's what I gain from this good friend of mine, Seth Maxwell. So, Seth, once again, welcome to MASTERS.

**Seth:** Oh, thank you so much for having me.

**Winn:** So, Seth wears many hats so I am going to read some of this. He is a son, friend, entrepreneur, activist, producer, actor, speaker. Seth is the founder and CEO of the Thirst Project, which has been his messages in other interviews that I've done with him. And that's not so much what we're going to talk about today, but that is his foundation and the things that he has learned and the wisdom that he can bring now to us, not just in the nonprofit world, but even more so, I feel, in the for-profit world because—I mean, here I'm already jumping into questions, Seth, and I haven't even properly introduced you. But, Seth, you believe, because I believe this strongly, that the for-profit industry—so businesses that are in business to put money into their own pocket—could learn a lot from the nonprofit world and vice versa. The nonprofit world has a lot to learn from for-profit about the importance of budgets and marketing and all those things that absolutely make a business profitable. Well, a nonprofit needs to live by those same good practice businesses as well. Do you agree with that?

Seth Absolutely, 100 percent. I mean, there's no question that the guiding principles to lead an effective, social good organization, I believe—and I think you're seeing this more and more with demands from consumers who look to products that don't just provide the sexiest or the tastiest or most effective products, but people today want to know, "How is the brand that I'm supporting, or giving my money to, impacting the community that it sources materials and labor from or the world that I'm a part of?"

Winn: Well, I think we make a decision not just with our head but we also make our decisions on how we spend our money, products that we buy based, on our gut. So, yeah, my head might tell me that you're the cheapest product or that you're the best marketing campaign behind this product, so yeah, you got my attention, but my gut tells me, do I like you, do I trust you, are you making a difference? You're putting money in your pocket but how do you treat your employees? And I think that we make our buying decisions based on all of that as well, and that's what we're learning from the for-profit world.

Seth: Absolutely, 100 percent.

Winn: Okay, well, I have to tell you—so, it's still my turn Seth. I've got to brag you up a little bit here.

Seth: [Laughs]

Winn: You're a storyteller at heart, which I'm going to ask you about that because I like storytellers. You have spoken internationally to over 300 schools, churches, conferences, including the TEDx Hollywood Youth Conference, the Nexus Global Youth Summit, the Masters of Science and Communication commencement ceremony for Northwestern University, Envision's Global Youth Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. Seth has been in the White House meeting with the Obama administration officials to discuss how to activate millennials for social justice and social change. Seth serves the United States Department of State as a member of their U.S. Speaker Program for International Programs. This is a lot to even say and read about, let alone you're doing these things. You have received all kinds of different awards and accolades, including VH1's Do Something Award. I love that. Also, *Forbes* 30 Under 30. Seth, you are doing all kinds of things. Really, we could spend the entire interview here, just with your bio and the things that you have accomplished, so congratulations on all of that. Of course, I've had the privilege of sharing the stage with you a couple of times. More often than that, I have had the privilege of sitting in your audience and listening to not only what you say but the results from what you say and what you do. You are engaging people. And I'll tell you something: that alone, to engage people. I love telling this joke. So, this business owner is giving a tour of her business and the person asks, "So, how many people work here?" And the business owner responded with, "Oh, about half. About half work here."

Seth: [Laughs]

Winn: And the reason why that can happen is because people are not engaged. Maybe people are engaged with their time. They show up to work for one thing and one thing only, and that is to receive a paycheck, but they're not engaged with their power, with their passion, with creativity and teamwork and their hearts, and that's what I see that you are so good at: engaging people. People need to feel engaged, so congratulations. Can you tell, everybody, that I'm a big fan of Seth Maxwell's? I've also sat in the audience when people are chanting, "Seth for president," so you've got a fan club out there.

Seth: I'm going to have you introduce me everywhere.

Winn: Okay, okay! So I want to jump into this because we've put some time, and it's not like this is the first time that we've met and I'm brand new to this information that you're going to share with us, but I do want to set this up because listening right now is every type of audience. So I've got young, brand-new professionals; maybe they're in their late teens or early 20s and they're still in school or they're getting ready to launch a career, and you better believe they want to have a career that they're passionate about, where it's not just about making money. So yes, they want to belong to a company, to an organization, that is going to acknowledge not just the fact that they can produce, like you say, ATM machines, which we'll talk about that—

Seth: [Laughs]

Winn: But they want to know that, yeah, I'm getting a paycheck and I'm helping the company make money but am I making a difference? Do I have any purpose here? So, I'm talking to that audience but, Seth, we're also talking to the older generation, and I'm putting myself in that category. I'm 60, oh my gosh, almost 62 years old so I am a baby boomer. So I employ. I have attending my schools a lot of that generation that you are engaged with, and so I'm talking to bosses. And if you were to ask—maybe you could answer this question, Seth. If we were to ask the average—don't consider me in this, okay? I'm not average. If you were to ask the average, say, 50, 60-year-old, to say, "Tell me about this generation of today," what would they say about them?

Seth: Ah man, I think you only have to watch the news for a few minutes or read any article or—I think *Time* even, five or six years ago, had a cover story. The cover of *Time* magazine referred to millennials and then the emerging Gen Zs and generations beyond as the me-me-me generation that were lazy, narcissists, self-entitled. And I think that that narrative is pervasive from almost any, we'll lovingly call "old person" looking at the emerging generations. But I think what's so interesting is that's not a new narrative. Think about when you were a kid. What did the generation before you say? They said, "Kids these days don't know how good they have it. I had to walk uphill both ways in the snow." This is not a new idea or feeling and it's so interesting, I love John Green. He's a

philosopher, an author, and he had a video that he put out on YouTube a few months back that said, “What was so interesting about this sort of generational cyclical complaint that the older generation has for the younger generation, no matter what age or year it is, is that so often you hear the number-one thing parents want to do for their kids is to give their kids a better life than the one they have and then yet we seem to complain when kids enjoy that better life.” So it’s such an interesting dichotomy.

Winn: *[Laughs]* Well, my experience with that generation is that they’re the catalyst for some amazing changes. We say that they’re entitled, that they maybe don’t want to work as hard as we worked, and I think what they mean by that is that they want some balance in their lives. Yeah—

Seth: Mm hm.

Winn: —I want to work for a paycheck but I also am passionate about my friends. Why shouldn’t I be? I’m also passionate about going to the gym and walking my dog every day. And I’m passionate about volunteering my time because I care about lots of causes globally. And so I think that they are the catalyst to bring about things that all of us want. I’m 61 years old but guess what? I want to walk my dog. I, too, want time away from work to be with my family and to pursue hobbies and to volunteer and to make a difference and so thank goodness that it’s maybe this generation and other things that are happening that are bringing about this necessary change, and so I embrace this generation. I’m thrilled with the changes and at 61 years old, people might think that I’m kind of tired. I’m not, but they could think that I’m tired and I look at it this way. My future is not based solely on what I can do myself, it’s what this generation is going to be able to pull off and so you better believe I believe in them and I want to empower them and that’s exactly your message and how you built your entire career in the nonprofit world, correct?

Seth: Absolutely! Yeah, young people are, without question, the most powerful agents for social change, period.

Winn: Okay, is that your opinion or what are you basing that on?

Seth: I think it’s both but I think it is my opinion that is supported by fact, or at least several facts that I think would underscore it. So, for me, the general idea that I subscribe to is when we look at the young people that we have worked with—and I obviously only have my own experience to draw from in leading the Thirst Project and now an org that we’ll talk a little bit about later called Legacy Youth Leadership—but in leading those organizations and connecting young people to issues or causes that they care about and giving them the tools they need to take action around it, what we have found is—I’ve worked with both young and older people, right? Because obviously we need support and donors and volunteers of kind of all ages. And so I’m not unfamiliar with working with people that are not students or young people and yet what I find consistently,

every single time, when I engage with a young person, whether it's a student, or if I engage with an older person and I present them with the same issue, the same story, there is, in the amount of time that it takes someone to take action, almost no disconnect with a young person. In fact, they may have far fewer resources, whether it's money or influence or otherwise, but the amount of time that it takes from hearing or learning about an issue and the amount of time that it takes them to take action is almost none. It's, "Someone's hurting, I should do something. What can we do about this? How can we engage our school, our community, whatever, right now? How can I use what's in my hand, what's in my house, who's in my sphere to take action?" Whereas with adults, there is this, always it seems, this sort of layered filter process that things get filtered through of, "Oh man," there's that same moment of, "Wow, someone's hurting" or "Wow, there's this need that's really sad." But rather than the immediate response being, "I should do something," the immediate response becomes, "Okay, well, how much time do I have? I've got these kids. I've got this job. I have this house. How much money can I afford to give? I have this mortgage payment," and there are all these layers of filters that things have to go through before we actually get to the point of that person taking action. And so, if nothing else, in terms of the amount of time it takes to take action and activate, but then similarly what that lends itself to, in terms of the energy you are able to metabolize and get people to do something in mass, it's just so much easier, at scale, to organize large numbers of young people quickly to take action around something than their older counterparts.

Winn: And I firmly, strongly believe that this is true in the for-profit world as well.

Seth: Mm.

Winn: Meaning it's just not just nonprofit: "Hey, there's a need, a cause, get busy, get active, do something about it." I firmly believe that if that generation, that young generation, is properly educated and supported and they have the resources and the belief system, and the belief from their boss that, *I think that you can make this happen. I think that you can bring the company to this next level. I think that you can reinvent customer service. I believe that you can build a better product.* If we have that belief in them, then they're going to mobilize. One more thing and then we're going to jump into this. If your belief—and so I'm talking to my generation, I'm talking to bosses and leaders—if your belief of this generation is outdated and it's different than what Seth and I are trying to share with you right now, but if your belief in them is that they are lazy, that they're entitled, that they're irresponsible, then guess what? That's exactly what you're going to bring out of them. That is exactly what your experience will be of them. What do they say: what you focus on starts to grow. You focus on the worst in people, you better believe you're going to bring that out of them. I guess before we jump into this, my challenge right now, to all of you, is to open up your mind and choose to think differently. At least consider the possibility that maybe you're wrong. Consider the possibility that maybe, maybe there's a better way to think about this generation, to approach this generation, to

empower them, to love them, and to support them and guess what? Seth is going to give us some real good skills on how to move in this direction. So, how's that for an introduction, Seth? Did I nail it? Did I set you up properly?

Seth: I'm going to hire you—

Winn: *[Laughs]*

Seth: —to go with me to every meeting, every event.

Winn: Okay, okay.

Seth: Before you do, though, like jump into this, I love what you just said, just personally. I mean, it's the idea that there—I talk about this a lot. I don't have kids. I do want kids one day and so I'm one of those, like weird, early thirty-somethings that spends time thinking about, "Oh my gosh," overanalyzing all the missteps I will inevitably make in parenting, but I was talking about it with a friend of mine who's a pastor and he said, "There's two ways to parent a kid. One says, when they mess up, "Why do you always do that," right? Which immediately, inherently, calls into question the identity of the kid. What is wrong with them, inherently wrong with them, that they would always do this thing? The other way says, "You're a Maxwell and Maxwells don't roll that way," which immediately identifies in them something higher and calls out of them this higher identity that we want them to have, right? And it's like treating someone as you want them to become.

Winn: You're saying that and I'm laughing because of a conversation that I've had, literally, within the last couple of weeks with our daughter, who's almost nine years old, and it was a conversation on her being able to eat chocolate on a school night. If she eats chocolate on a school night, she's not going to sleep, she's up too late, she's tired the next morning. You know, "Well, so-and-so gets to eat chocolate in the middle of the week," and we're like, "Well, what's their last name?"

Seth: Mmm.

Winn: "They have a different last name than we have. When you have their same last name, you can have chocolate during the week, but guess what? You're a Morales-Claybaugh and that's not how we do things in our house." I love that. Good for you. Okay, so here's the plan. The vision is, here, to build social consciousness and activism. So, Seth, walk us through this. And the good news is, Seth is not just going to talk in his opinion or in what-ifs. He's got some concrete evidence and research that backs this up. The fact that, again, as founder and CEO of Thirst Project, you have raised how much money in how many years, Seth?

Seth: About \$12 million in about ten and a half, eleven years.

Winn: Which means you have provided clean water to how many people?

Seth: A little over half a million people in 13 countries.

Winn: Wow! So, he has something to back up. What he's talking to you about right now, and maybe you're just trying to get your kids to follow the rules at home or you're trying to get your brand-new employees to perform better at work or to be engaged, he knows what he's talking about. Set this up for us, Seth.

Seth: If you don't know me well, you wouldn't know necessarily but you may have already picked up that I'm a pretty big nerd and so I love storytelling—

Winn: *[Laughs]*

Seth: —that's absolutely true, but I also love data. And it's interesting because, again, if you're not super familiar with our story, whether from past MASTERS or just the work that we do in general, I started out about 12 years ago working to end the global water crisis. There are, still today, about 600 million people who don't have safe water and I do believe it's the most pressing humanitarian crisis we face as a global community. But what we did in starting the Thirst Project and building that organization was we worked over that period of a little more than a decade to activate high school and college students around that issue and what we found was students were doing incredible things as we met them where they were. And the impact that we were able to make with and through students was incredible. But about four—a little over four years ago, we sat down in a room, me and our education programs team, who work with our schools and students, and there was a question that had been kind of vexing me for a while, which was a question, by the way, no one else had ever asked of us. It was just something that I was wrestling with, which was—it was really easy for us to point to the impact we were making in the water crisis, right? The number of projects that we had built in villages or communities to bring people safe water, the number of people we'd brought water to. Even more important things, though, like the reduction over time in waterborne disease and waterborne mortality. It was really hard, though, to point to the impact we were making in the lives of students and young people, and we knew we were. We knew we were making incredible impact in those students' lives. And we knew this because I would get letters or cards from students I'd never even met, saying things like, "Thank you so much for starting Thirst Project. If it wasn't for Thirst Project, I don't know what the highlight of my senior year would be." That was a real card I got from a student once and that's one of dozens and dozens each year, and yet it was really difficult to quantify that impact. How do you define what that impact is and how do you measure it? And so we sat down and I asked the question that you kind of alluded to a little bit ago, which I said—again, nobody ever asked this of us—but I said, "Apart from using young people as ATMs to fund water projects, which, if that's all we ever did, is still a noble use of that time and resource, but apart from that, what is the value that we provide to a student or a young person and how do we identify it, how do we

quantify it, what does it look like?” Our go-to answer or response for a really long time was, “Well, we’re building a socially conscious and active generation of young people,” which sounds really good but nobody ever asked, “What does that actually mean?” So we set out to define what does it actually mean to be a socially conscious and active young person? Could you identify key steps or phases in that journey to consciousness and activation around an issue? Could you then identify different data markers for each of those steps or phases that determined where a person was in that process? And then, most importantly, could you be intentional about designing programs in a way that actually solved for those outcomes and tried to achieve those things so that, yes, fundraising may be one metric or one goal but in doing this we wanted to measure the transformation, the change over time, the value we brought or skills that developed in a student or young person as they went through one of our programs. So, to do this, we engaged the help of a local group that’s a social science group that, that’s what they do, they study human behavior. And we really wrestled, for a long time, with word choices and what to call things and how to frame this but we really identified, over time, that for us there were really four primary steps on the sort of journey to social consciousness and activation and those were awareness, comprehension, empowerment, and activation. You might hear that and go, “Oh wow, like all those words are pretty common words, especially in the social good space, wow super revelatory.” But what was more important was, after we wrestled with and landed on those words, after a pretty long labor-intensive process, the most important part we found was that there were very clear data markers that we could actually measure for each one of those four categories that determined where somebody was in that process. And that we could measure and see, from a year of having never done anything with one of our programs to after a year of having gone through them, where a student was in that process. There were different skills that we could measure. So, yeah, absolutely. What we found was that there were 14 different hard and soft skills, very real skills that we could point to after having gone through a year of one of these programs that, if we did our job well, students should acquire, that we could be able to point to and go, “Yeah, in this way, this person developed their public speaking skills, their strategic planning skills, their organization and team-leading skills, event planning and marketing.” In that, these were very real skills that students could use, not only in a cause-agnostic way, but these should be applicable to any cause or issue that a young person cared about. These are skills that students could use in their academic career and, perhaps even most importantly, their real-life careers and beyond.

Winn: Well, of course. If somebody came to me and, “Look what’s on my résumé. My résumé includes that I’m really great at public speaking, I’m really good with organization skills, I’m really good—” Oh my gosh!

Seth: Yeah.

Winn: That’s exactly what we’re looking for, right?



Seth: One hundred percent. And so when we discovered this—those four steps, those 14 skills—we realized, man, there's incredible value. That is the value we are providing in the lives of these students and young people and we can measure it and we can then solve for it. And so, in doing so, we realized, kind of what you said, it was this really beautiful moment of, man, we can do a better job of building programs that, yes, absolutely solve for trying to raise money for charities, raise money for bringing people safe water. But also, we can really reinvest and give back and support the communities that we're working with here in the lives of these students by developing their leadership skills, developing them as young leaders, and connecting them with the tools they need to live the lives they want to live and build the kind of world they want to build.

Winn: I'm lucky here because I got the printout of the journey that you're going to take us on right now. So, just to set this up, Seth, are we going to go through those four stages: awareness, comprehension, empowerment, and activation? Is that where you're going to take us? And then I know that under some of these, there's additional information. And then are we going to be able to get to the 14 skills that you're helping them develop?

Seth: We can try. I don't know if we're going to get through all of it but we can certainly try. The thing you're looking at that nobody at home can see—so again, I'm a big nerd and so when I was talking with Winn about, "This is what I've been working on lately. I'm super fired up about it." In order to arrive at these results, just to, again, give you guys some insight, we worked with this group that studies social science and we architected this survey that we basically took 1,000 young people or students through, which is a pretty large sample size. And what we did was we took students who had never done anything with us before, had never been a part of any program, and then measured over a year of them having self-identified that they wanted to do something and take action with us and join a program and then did so. We measured the change in them over time in this way. And so it's a pretty large sample size to get the data we got and it was pretty amazing to observe the change in them over time. That sort of was the basis, this data project was the basis on which then we created a lot of these assessments that we're talking about that really drive our programs now, that you are looking at on paper, Winn. But you know, those four key areas, it may seem again kind of like, oh wow, that's not that exciting, you know, awareness. Of course if you're making an impact on an issue or cause, someone has to be aware of it, but the reason that's first is super critical, right? Like you can't take action around an issue you don't even know exists and only once you are aware that an issue exists, can you then—and you believe that it's real and has negative impact on the world—can you then move to the next step, which is comprehension. Because you can be aware that an issue is real and exists and has negative impact on the world but still not truly understand or comprehend the objective truth or facts or nuances about how that issue impacts the world. And the things that you measure for each of those two steps are different, right? When we measure

awareness, we measure things like how much time did a student spend, before they got involved with us, looking for information about important social or world events? Where did students look for that information? Can a student identify the difference between a piece of information or content that was curated by a professional journalist who, at least in theory, is adhering to industry standards of objectivity in reporting or ethics, versus Grandma's Facebook post, right? Where are students getting information about the world they live in and the issues that affect their world? Their ability to discern those things. So, only once you're aware an issue is real and has negative impact on the world can you then fully comprehend that issue. And the things we test for in comprehension are where it becomes a little cause-agnostic because it really is specific to that cause or issue. The reality of the issue of the water crisis and how it functions or impacts our world is different than the reality of homelessness or our people facing the houseless crisis, which is different than food insecurity.

Winn: Okay, I'm going to back you up a little bit.

Seth: Yeah.

Winn: I remember you said earlier that this generation acts immediately, whereas people my age, it's like, "Well, you know, let me think about this. Can I afford it? do I have the time? I've got a mortgage." Whereas they're immediately active. And I tell the story of our little eight-year-old girl who one day was exposed to homelessness and immediately went home, she disappeared into the office for a couple of hours and came out with this whole campaign on how she was going to raise money for the Fred Jordan Mission, which is on skid row in downtown Los Angeles. Same thing happened when it came to animals. She started her own little club called Animal Rescue and has since raised \$15,000 for Best Friends Animal Society. And again, there were no layers here. She was exposed to it, she immediately used the resources that were available, which were, again, boxes and scissors and clipboard. Sign here if you want to save animals, sign this column if you don't want to save animals. Like who's going to sign that column, right? But there it was. I mean, she was immediately active. She immediately knew what she needed to do. So, I hear you and—oh, and by the way, because you're talking about involvement with this, when they become aware and empowered and active, what it does for them. Yeah, they're raising money and raising awareness for important causes, but what it does for them, the skills that they then develop because of their involvement with something that's making a difference. And again, I've already seen that with my little girl. If she struggles with math, her answer to that or how she gets through the day or gets through the assignment is, "But Daddy, I raised \$15,000 for animals." "Yes, you did, and I know grown adults who haven't accomplished that yet, so be proud of yourself with that." She takes pride in that: that I'm a human being that is making a contribution. I'm maybe not good on my math assignment tonight but, boy, am I good in this other area. But I want to ask you, so how did you become aware and conscious of the water crisis?

Seth: I had a friend who was the first person to expose me to the water crisis. She was a photojournalist and she had been sent on assignment where she lived for about six-week periods at a time in different communities across Southeast Asia, South and Central America, sub-Saharan Africa. And her job was to go into communities and observe the progress that had been made on the U.N.'s Millennial Development goals, which if you're not familiar, there are these 15 goals that were set out at the turn of the millennium to try and eradicate extreme global poverty. And so they included things like access to safe water, sanitation, hygiene, food security, education. So she came back and we got together to catch up and I sat across from her stunned for about 45 minutes as I didn't just look at compelling photos or pictures but I listened to stories of people who she had spent a good deal of time with, weeks at a time, and it was stories like, "This is Sophie, she's nine, and we hung out for six weeks. I watched her drink from this water source, I watched her contract cholera." Crazy stuff. And the common through line she kept finding was we're attempting to make progress to address education inequality by building schools and outfitting them with teachers. But you can't bring education to a community if all of your kids are out walking for seven or eight hours a day to collect dirty water or if they're home sick with waterborne diseases. So if you care about education, you care about water. You know, or—

Winn: Wow!

Seth: Similarly you can't bring agricultural development to a community to try to combat food insecurity and hunger if you don't have safe water. So, if you care about hunger, you care about water. That was really how I became aware of the issue. And then, again, kind of moving into that second step of comprehension, I went and I researched and found out as much as I could about it. And I think the most interesting, sort of two categories of this data project that we were working on that launched this new organization, was the last two: empowerment and activation. It's so interesting because I hate the word *empowerment* because it's so overused in the nonprofit and social-good world and I actually really fought for this category to be named something else, but empowerment really measures belief. It measures your belief in your ability to do something and what we found was the same data points that we measure for empowerment are the same ones that we measure for activation. The only difference is, with empowerment we measure, "*Do you believe* that you using your time, your money, your voice, or your vote can actually change the outcome of a social issue? If not, why would you bother to raise money? Why would you bother to cast a ballot in an election otherwise?" And an activation measures those same data points but it measures, "*Do you use* your time, your money, your voice and vote?" And we can observe that change over time and so it's super fascinating.

Winn: When you get into something like comprehension, you say that your team developed a seven-question test. What was that all about?

Seth: So, again, the comprehension step of those four steps is the one that is probably the most cause-specific. It's going to be different depending on what the issue or cause you're talking about is. Where the others, all three others, are kind of white label: they can apply to anything. So, for us, we tested around the water crisis and so the question was: well, once a student said, "Yes, I want to get involved," and they learned about the water crisis, either through our school tour or through one of our documentary or video pieces or otherwise, then presumably if that piece, if that video, if that program did its job, those students should have some kind of base knowledge about this issue that we could test for. So it tested for things like their understanding or comprehension of the scale or scope of the water crisis. How many people are affected by it? What kinds of waterborne diseases are the most prevalent that we see that we're trying to combat? Those kinds of things, which again would be different if we were testing for comprehension on homelessness or on racial justice, but again, that's probably, like I said, the one category that's most cause-specific.

Winn: Not to keep on taking this back to this first one of awareness, but I'm reminded of my good friend Tim Storey, who, you know Tim as well.

Seth: Mm hm.

Winn: Just talks about the importance of exposure. He tells the story of, as a little boy, being exposed to a better life than what his parents could afford at the time and how that was all of a sudden born in him and he saw that, "Whoa, I have potential beyond what I was originally exposed to. I could do more with my life," and how it was so important that he was exposed to that. Do you have any advice for leaders or for parents on how they can bring that awareness, that exposure, so to speak, to this generation so that they are passionate about something? Because I guess the best way I know how to share that, when people ask me, well, how do I know? It's like what keeps you awake at night? For Sofia, again, she saw that homeless person and that was just going to keep her awake at night. That was just going to bother her. For me, it's the fight against sex trafficking and it's how we treat our elderly and it's sick children and it's lots of different causes. So what advice, or—I don't know. Did I ask a question? I'm sure you have an answer. *[Laughs]*

Seth: *[Laughs]* I think the question of where do you go to look to expose your kids to important issues in the world? I mean, unfortunately, it's not hard: there are so many needs and so it's a question of I would say, "Get outside of the world that you live in, your immediate world." That might mean whether it's with your church or a local organization, going to maybe your downtown of whatever community that you live in and finding a way to connect with populations there that may live without houses. Or whether that is if you're passionate about animals. Going and volunteering at your local ASPCA or a local shelter. Or even things like, you don't have to even leave your house to go outside of the world you live in and explore. There are lots of great resources that are both family or kid friendly that talk about issues from racial justice and inequality and

the history there that you can begin exposing your students to. And so I think it's that. I think it's about being intentional about taking yourself outside of just your world that you live in and finding those things. And I think, like I said, unfortunately it's actually really easy to do because the needs are so many.

Winn: That's a beautiful answer. I knew you would have one. And I apologize that I'm making you jump from one step to another step. This is probably driving you crazy. Your little nerd in you is just going crazy—

Seth: *[Laughs]*

Winn: —right now. So we talked about awareness and comprehension and you have written that this third step, empowerment, for you, is perhaps the most fascinating and why is that?

Seth: Well, because the interesting thing is, we found that the data points, the things we were measuring in this section or this category of empowerment, were things like how people use their time, their money, their voice, and their vote. And even within those four categories, there's even subcategories. Money isn't just do you donate money. Do you give it personally? Do you raise money? With your voice, do you have conversations with people in your immediate circle about issues that you have information about, that they may not? I think what's so interesting is that empowerment measures your belief in your ability to use one of those four things to actually change an issue. One of the ones that is most interesting to me, even though the organization that I founded is not a political organization, we are intentionally, completely apolitical. We are areligious. But what's so interesting is that measuring a student's or a young person's belief in the ability for them to use their vote to actually change the outcome of an issue or an election was super fascinating. And again, it may seem counterintuitive because you might think, *Well, you're looking at a population that can't vote*, if you're talking about high school students or certainly younger. And yet we found, especially high school and above, every young person can vote in their school election or some of the population we work with, once they turn 18, are able to vote as well. And so I think what we found was—and this was one of the things I was the most proud of, even though it has nothing to do with the water crisis or the work of Thirst Project—was from a year prior to having been involved in one of our programs to a year afterwards, we showed, I think it was like 13.9 percent increase in students moving from self-identifying that they did not believe that voting in an election could actually change the outcome of that election, to believing that it could. And then when you measure that same data point in activation, that next category, we showed it was like a 40 percent increase in students who said, "Yeah, I didn't vote in the last election I was eligible to vote for, before being involved with this organization," to actually choosing to vote in that next election. For us, the ability to change that belief and change that action is huge.

Winn: You said that a person could be going through these steps of awareness, comprehension, empowerment, but then not do anything with it. So, this fourth step of activation, I mean, I would think that that's one of the key ones, right? Like you're —

Seth: I mean it's the whole point.

Winn: —ready. What's stopping you from using your time, your voice, your money, and your vote to actually now go do something with this?

Seth: So, you talk about me going crazy by jumping around but the interesting thing is these four steps are incredibly linear and they build on each other and you can't really have the one without the ones that come before it. Only once you are aware that an issue is real and has a negative impact on the world, can you then fully comprehend and have done the work to learn about it and understand that issue and comprehend it. And only once you comprehend it can you move on to actually believing or being empowered to believe that you using your time, your money, your voice, or your vote could do something to change that issue. And again, if you didn't believe that using your time to volunteer or get someone involved then it would change it, why bother? If you didn't believe—

Winn: Is it Oprah that says that? Once you know better, you'll do better?

Seth: Absolutely and that's the thing, again. If you didn't believe —that's why empowerment, I told you while I hate the word it's probably my favorite of the four steps in this process because if we can change someone's belief in their ability to use their money, to give money, to fundraise, to choose to purchase a product from an ethical or sustainable brand, if we can change that belief then almost 100 percent of the time, you'll change the action or outcome.

Winn: Seth, if you were talking to that youth demographic, maybe 18 and up. For me, that represents kids who are graduating from high school, they're in college, they're in their career mode, maybe they're getting their first job here. If you had that audience in front of you, what would your message be? Not just your message, because you're brilliant in talking through theory and telling your personal stories, but at the end of all of that, you want to challenge them, you want them to go do something. What would that be?

Seth: My message would be, like we talked about earlier, I know there's no shortage of needs. There are so many people and issues in the world, things that need help, need attention. I think that so often times, those things that break your heart, it's so easy to go into the place of thinking, *Well, if I was just a little bit older or if I just had more money or if I just had a higher education or some other skill set, then I could go about the business of taking action or changing the world.* I'm here to tell you, the world can't wait for you to have just a little more something. The world can't afford for you to have one more zero in your bank account. The world can't afford for you to be just a little older. People

need you now and the reality is your voice, your time, your resources and energy and the capacity you have to organize and move people to act, can make very real impact in your world in a very positive way today. What you don't need is another lecture on how to or not to do something. What you need is permission. Permission to be exactly who you are, which is dangerous in the best way possible, and someone who has an incredible ability to take action today to make real impact in the world.

Winn: Okay, now that audience is made up of their parents, their bosses, their leaders. People my age. What is your message to us?

Seth: So my message to older people would be our lives, at least for me, I don't believe and I don't think I have found that my life is effectively compartmentalized. I don't think I get to be someone who has integrity in one place and not in another. Someone who has grace for people in one way and doesn't have grace for people another. Who is fun in some spaces and is not fun in another. I think that idea of I will go and be generous in this other area after I suck as much value out of someone else as I can, it's not true, it doesn't work that way. I think, not to put too fine a point on it, but I think we should all be acutely aware of how little time we really have and how to live as integrated as possible and that the world needs you now more than ever. And where our young people have time and an immediate amount of energy that they will take action around and passion, you have experience and resources and money and expertise and wisdom that the world desperately needs to be imparted. I would say in that same space, either (a) find those young people who need support and come alongside them, or find existing groups, organizations, that are working to address the things that break your heart and pour into them. Because the life that you want to leave, the legacy you want to leave, is being built every moment of every day from the way you treat the people that are employed by you or that you work alongside to how you spend your time outside of it. I just don't think our lives are compartmentalized. I also don't think that generosity is something that's attained once you have a certain amount of money. Like, if you're a stingy person who is poor, you're going to be stingy when you are wealthy. If you are someone who is afraid, courage isn't something that you gain once you have a black belt in karate. It's practiced every day.

Winn: Wow! Oh my gosh, you just brought so much up in me as you shared that information. I like what you were saying about not being able to compartmentalize. What do they say? Someone who is nice to you but mean to a waitress is not a nice person.

Seth: Yeah.

Winn: You can't be nice to your lover but mean to a waitress. You can't compartmentalize that. I love that message loud and clear. I believe that it's a basic human need that we need to have purpose. We need to know what our

*why* is and we need to experience that purpose, not, again, just when we're volunteering for a nonprofit but also as we're going to work every single day. And so I challenge those bosses and those leaders to give permission, because maybe that's the message you were sending out, is that that generation needs to have permission. Well, they give permission to themselves but we can give permission to that generation. For someone my age to come along and say, "I believe in you, I believe in your ability, I believe in your awareness, I believe in the energy that you have, I believe that you can do incredible things," and maybe that's the permission that they need and that you're talking about.

Seth: Yeah. I wish I could take credit for this idea or this theme but there was a great commencement speech—because, again, I'm a nerd who watches other people's commencement speeches, but it was given by—

Winn: [Laughs]

Seth: —a guy named Jon Lovett, not John Lovitz the comedian, but Jon Lovett, who was a speechwriter for President Obama and he's now one of the hosts of, I think, of Pod Save America. But he gave this speech where he talked about sort of this idea that this emerging generation has so many ideas that the world desperately needs and they are unbridled by the idea of quote-unquote what does and doesn't work. You know, I think that we have so many experts today who are absolute experts in a world that does not exist anymore. And there is this optimism, there is a new way, there is a better way sometimes that—I think believing in the subway rule. He says when you're at work and you're in that meeting, he goes, "What you will regret most when you are older is not speaking up. If you see something, say something." The subway rule. He goes, "You are young, you are smart, you are driven." He goes, "The flip side of that," to sort of transition into the second question you asked about what would you say to older people is, "Not only are those young people young, smart, hungry, driven, and that there sometimes is a new way and a better way that they should speak up about, they are also very annoying and they should sometimes listen to people who have been around the block and know something better than them." And it's that tension, right? How do you navigate between knowing when to say something and when not to; knowing when there is a new way and when you need to learn the way that actually works. And there's no perfect formula to know that answer but I think it's figuring out how to step into that space and bring yourself, not compartmentalized, on your A-game, articulate the best you can, and then also be open to learn from each other all the time.

Winn: Wow. Seth, you're such a great storyteller and I think that's just such a great way to empower and to lead people. And you and I were talking recently about this book that you're writing, and of course I'm like fascinated, "Tell me all about this book!" And you told me this story and I asked if you would be willing to share the story of something that happened to you in high school.



Seth: Yeah.

Winn: Do you mind if you share that story as we just wrap this up today?

Seth: Absolutely. It's one of my favorite stories in my life and probably the best part of what's been written so far in this book. But, when I was a junior in high school, I was growing up in Indiana and it was a pretty big high school. We had about 4,000 students in the school and so we had a pretty robust newspaper program. It was this very legit, amazing newspaper and the teacher who led that program was also an English teacher and he was hard on his students, there was no question, but everybody loved him. If you were a quote-unquote good kid, bad kid, there was no one who didn't like him because there was just never a question that he was going to push you super hard because he just cared so much about his students. He was an incredible English teacher, incredible journalism teacher, and when I was a junior there was a student in my class, who I knew actually, who killed someone, who had committed murder. It was Indiana. This was the biggest news story in the state and it was so interesting because the kid who had committed this murder, I don't think they set out to do that. They broke into this older person's home and I think they thought he wouldn't be there and they were just sort of surprised that he was and panicked and so they ended up tragically killing this man. The kid himself who did this, he was kind of regarded as this fully, quote-unquote not a good kid necessarily. I had managed, somehow, to find favor with him because I was just the goofy, awkward kid who was pretty nonthreatening. And it was just so shocking. It swept through the school and it was the only thing anybody talked about. So the journalism department got permission, even from this young man's family, to write an article covering this piece, which again, was everywhere already and there were just so many rumors flying around and so the purpose was just, hey, we're just going to very tactfully, tastefully dispel these rumors. In fact, the kid's mom was even quoted in the piece. And so this piece comes out and some of the friends of this kid who had done this got really upset, like how dare our school write a story about our friend, who at this point had been arrested. These kids' parents called in and complained and I think the administration kind of panicked and so they pulled all of the newspapers and actually went so far as suspend this teacher on grounds of insubordination, saying he didn't have permission to run this piece, which wasn't true. So the school just mobilized immediately. Everybody came in wearing shirts that we'd had made, white T-shirts that we wrote on saying I SUPPORT MR. TULEY, I SUPPORT OUR FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS, all these different things. It was somehow a weirdly polarizing issue, though, so I remember I went to my fifth period U.S. history class and I sit down and the way that the class was situated was all of our desks obviously faced the front, the board, but the teacher's desk was behind all of us. So if you were sitting down you couldn't necessarily see it unless you turned around. The bell hadn't rung yet and I'm unpacking my stuff and the teacher had like a big booming voice. And for context I was a pretty good kid, honor roll student, got along with my teachers. But I sit down and I'm unpacking and I hear, from the back of the class, this booming voice say, "What

are you doing wearing that shirt?" My first thought was, "Oh somebody's in trouble," and he's like, "Maxwell, get out of here and don't come back until you change your shirt." I was like so kind of stunned because I'd never gotten in trouble with this teacher, much less hardly at all anyway. I was like, "Uh, oh okay." So, I got up and I packed my stuff and the protocol was if a teacher decided that you needed to change an article of your clothing because it violated the dress code, you would go to the dean and they actually had clothing that they would give you that was dress code approved. So I walk into the dean's office and I'd never been there before and they're like, "What are you doing here, what do you need?" I was like, "Well, Mr. Fengya says I need to change my shirt," but I slap my student handbook down on the guy's desk and I was like, "But I made sure when I made it that I didn't violate any of the dress code policies so I need you to tell Mr. Fengya I don't have to change my shirt." The dean was like, "Well, it also says that if a teacher decides even if it's within the bounds of one of the policies that is considered appropriate, but it's disruptive or distracting to the learning environment, they can still require you to change that article of your clothing." I was just like, "Uh-uh, no," and I just turned and walked out. And so I walked to the principal's office and I was like, "Hey, can I see Mr. Koers?" We were pretty friendly and they said, "Okay, sure. Yeah, go ahead." So I went in and he said, "What's going on? What do you need?" I sat down and I said, "Hey, I need you to tell Mr. Fengya I don't have to change my shirt." He said, "Seth, I can't. I can't undermine his authority in his classroom. I'm sorry, I can't do that." And I said, "Okay, totally understand your position." I was like, "Here's what's going to happen." I was like, "Either you tell Mr. Fengya I don't have to change my shirt or I'll go home, I will go about every period for the next several weeks as normal, but when it comes to my U.S. history class, I will just go sit in the guidance counselor's office. I will take the zero, fail the class. It will be the subject of my college application essay for every college I apply to and also, I promise you tonight, I will go home and call every major news outlet in town and at 6 a.m. tomorrow morning I will stand in front of your school building in this shirt, giving them the extension to the already hottest story in the state." First of all, what a punk little kid, by the way, to the principal. But the best moment is he just looked at me and he said, "Seth, don't do that," and so I said, "Okay." So I got up and I walked out and I went to the guidance counselor and I called my mom and I said, "Hey, here's what happened. I need you to come pick me up so I can leave school and call all these news outlets." And this is the moment where the story — the reason I tell it is people will ask a lot of times, "Hey, life goals. What do you want to do with your life?" And I've had, obviously, so many goals that have changed over time. At one point I thought I wanted to be the Secretary of State and I wanted to produce movies and I wanted to end the water crisis and all these things, and more and more, in the last several years, I've said, "You know, I want to build a family." I think it would be easy to hear that response and go, "Oh wow, how common place; you want to build a family." But the reason is this. That moment when I called my mom and said, "Hey, I need you to come pick me up. Here's what I did," well, I think maybe almost every other parent would have been like,

“You said what to the principal? Get back in there. You go do what they tell you to do.” She said, “I’m on my way,” and she came and we called that night. She helped me make more shirts and posters and we called every news outlet and, sure enough, she drove me to school the next morning at 6 a.m. and there’s news footage of me standing with the school behind me, talking about what we thought was this grave injustice for this teacher, who was just doing his job. It was incredible. The next three or four days went by and I went to all of my classes but sat out fifth period. And about the fourth or fifth day a student came down and said, “Hey, Mr. Fengya wants to talk to you.” He said, “Hey, look I’m sorry I yelled at you. You’re a good kid. Please just come back to class. You can wear your shirt. I’ll apologize in front of the class if you want,” and I was like, “No, you don’t need to do that. Thank you.” But for me, on paper I fully acknowledge I have no business doing what I do. I didn’t study water. I didn’t study nonprofit management. I have a degree in theater and so I think so much of the things that drive me and keep me awake at night and get me up in the morning and fire me up and the things I believe about the world and my ability to, even if I don’t have all the skills, find the people who are excellent at those things and get them active around the things that I believe are important and to build the world I want to build, there’s no question that I wouldn’t think that I could do those things were it not for who my mom was and who she created me to be. And so when I think about having impact in the world, the ability to raise a child well and who knows who that person will grow up to be, I don’t think there’s any greater opportunity for impact or legacy than that. So that’s, yeah, that’s the story.

Winn: That’s a great story. It’s a great story for so many reasons, and just the storytelling that you have and the works that you have behind all of this, the fact that these stories have meaning and they have purpose and you’re using your stories and your example in life to empower a whole other generation as well as even us old guys as well. We need to be told that we need to have more faith and belief in that generation. That’s the person I want to be and—

Seth: Yeah.

Winn: —I just thank you so much, Seth. The world that you have created around you is truly remarkable. And one more thing that I know about you is that you don’t have any ego attached to this. I see the accolades and I see these major, major celebrities that show up to celebrate you and talk about you, and you don’t have any attachment to that. You’re just doing your thing. You’re just out there being a good guy, doing what you need to do to be a good human being. So, thanks, thank you so much for all of that, Seth, and for your time here today.

Seth: Ah, well, it’s not without an immense army of support so thank you for everything that you do and for being my friend and everybody who makes it all possible. I love you.

Winn: I love you, too, and thanks to my listeners here. Please spread this around, tell people about this, and keep on listening and subscribe and I'm going to continue. I'm not going anywhere and today was just a really good reason as to why I want to keep on doing this so, thanks. Thanks, Seth. Thanks, everybody.

Seth: Thank you.