
Future of the Business World: Two Innovators Take Us Inside the Entrepreneurship Journey

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A few months back, Sruthi Rayaprolu and Ujjayi Pamidigantam, two high school seniors living on opposite sides of the United States, reached out to let us know about their book for young entrepreneurs: “How to Catapult Your Business: A Step-by-Step Guide.” Turns out, both of them are entrepreneurs in their own right, who embrace innovation and forward-thinking in different aspects of their lives. Wharton Global Youth invited Sruthi and Ujjayi to join our monthly Future of the Business World podcast and share some of their experiences and insights about business, STEM, and the value of documenting your entrepreneurship journey as a way to reflect on the process and learn from its many facets.

Wharton Global Youth Program: Welcome to Future of the Business World! The podcast that features conversations with Gen Z about innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership, and the latest youth-led business trends.

I’m Diana Drake with the Wharton Global Youth Program at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. At Wharton Global Youth, we design dynamic programs, competitions and content to help high school students discover all the ways that business touches their lives.

Our guests are always on the cutting edge of design thinking and global change. And today is certainly no exception. I’m happy to have the opportunity to speak with two enterprising high school seniors who met at an entrepreneurship program in 2019 and have since co-authored the book: “*How to Catapult Your Business: A Step-by-Step Guide.*”

I’d like to welcome Sruthi Rayaprolu from the San Francisco Bay Area and Ujjayi Pamidigantam from New Jersey. Thank you both for joining us on Future of the Business World.

It’s great to have two of you. This is the first time I’ve actually interviewed two people on the podcast, so it should be a lot of fun.

Ujjayi, I only recently found out that you are an incoming freshman this fall in the Roy and Diana Vagelos Program in Life Sciences and Management otherwise known as LSM. This is an undergraduate dual-degree program administered jointly between Penn’s College of Arts & Sciences and the Wharton School. Congratulations to you on being accepted to that distinguished program!

And Sruthi, you too hope to be Wharton-bound. I look forward to seeing both of you on campus someday soon.

Until then, let's talk about all your entrepreneurial energy – and there is a lot of it.

Ujjayi, let's start with you. You describe yourself as someone who applies “ingenuity to solve everyday problems with a global impact.” Tell us about your startup Wayfarer Diagnostics.

Ujjayi Pamidigantam: Wayfarer Diagnostics came from a concept I developed during my time at the entrepreneur summer program LaunchX, which is actually where I met Sruthi. So the idea was to provide a reliable portable and low-cost malaria diagnosis kit for limited regions across the globe. The product definitely has some distinguishing characteristics, but the real ingenuity comes from end-to-end of the distribution model.

Wharton Global Youth: Sruthi, you also founded a company called Spade to provide clean and reliable water to people in India. Can you tell us more about this venture?

Sruthi Rayaprolu: Spade is a student-led startup that also started from LaunchX, and it was originally aimed toward water-delivery issues and that's what we focused on in terms of the water filter we developed at the program. And then later on we pivoted our business to a more pressing need, which was emergency-use water filters that come during high flood seasons and monsoons. We partnered with the MIT research department for the natural filtration capabilities of xylem blood, and we worked with Professor Rohit Karnik and his PhD student Krithika. From there, we worked toward developing a business strategy to incorporate their research into our company.

Wharton Global Youth: You came together during this entrepreneurship program [LaunchX]. How did you meet? What prompted you to start collaborating on business and on a book? Were you just a match of personalities and it worked out well?

Sruthi: I remember the first day of the program Ujjayi came and knocked on my dorm room door and said, ‘Hey, do you want to come down to orientation with me?’ I think our personalities clicked together well because we have really complementary qualities. From there, our bond grew from our similar interests in entrepreneurship and how we wanted to take the concepts that we learned from our summer program and implement them into our companies that we were developing and be able to develop a resource for people like ourselves, our younger selves, who were interested in entrepreneurship but didn't really have a direction for how to build a company from the ground up. On the last day of the program, we were thinking about how to maintain this connection and this great bond we had created. So we talked about writing a book that would be able to pull all our insights in terms of entrepreneurship, leadership and developing both Spade and Wayfarer into something valuable that students like ourselves and our younger selves could use in the future in terms of developing their own companies.

“To find your own network, you can go through LinkedIn or RoundPier, your parents' friends, and teachers. There are so many people out there willing to support you.” — Sruthi Rayaprolu, Entrepreneur and Author

Wharton Global Youth: Ujjayi, what strengths did each of you bring to this partnership? And can you give us a quick overview of your book? How does it help young entrepreneurs?

Ujjayi: I think each of us brings a unique perspective from our own entrepreneurial and academic journeys. I myself have taught a similar curriculum while interning at the LaunchX summer program, as well as while leading an entrepreneurship immersion course at Human Who, which is actually a nonprofit organization that I cofounded with my sister. So portions of that curriculum were really put to the test during these summer camps in the last year, where we walked students through the process of building 10-plus startups from the ground up. I'm also serving team chair of the Diamond Challenge advisory board, which has really allowed me assess their relative strengths and shortcomings of various innovations that teams are putting forward. All of this experience has prompted me to design specific activities

in this book to bridge all those knowledge gaps. Sruthi herself brings the raw concepts to our partnerships since she has taken more than four years of business courses in high school and is extensively involved in her school's FBLA chapter as the serving president. She is also currently conducting research on the operations management strategies of Exxon Mobile, which she's super involved in right now.

In terms of how the book is going so far, we've reached out to subject matter experts and professionals in academia and they have given positive feedback on how much of a need there is for this kind of book. We've also run [a crowd-funding campaign](#) that amassed more than 1,000 subscribers in just a matter of months. So, there are a lot of huge things happening right now.

Wharton Global Youth: Can you back up for just a minute and talk about your nonprofit?

Ujjayi: Sure. Human Who is a nonprofit 501C3 that I founded back in 2018 with my sister. The entire point behind that was to spread actionable STEM awareness in our communities. We go a step beyond bringing STEM knowledge to students and we give students ways to apply that in their own communities, whether it be through the workshops we conduct, the competitions, or the summer camps we just started this past year.

Wharton Global Youth: Sruthi, having a sense of purpose is a critical tool in building businesses from the ground up. What have you learned about purpose and persistence in your own entrepreneurship journey?

Sruthi: I think when it comes to developing a sense of purpose, it originates from self-awareness, in my opinion. I know I sound like a broken record when I say this, but when you follow your passion that will lead to your purpose. It's a quote that many entrepreneurs live by. I think it's really true to what it represents: if you're interested in fashion, or you're interested in video games or even Legos, whatever it might be, if you have a passion for something, you'll be able to build some sort of product or an idea around that because you have so much knowledge in that topic. When it comes to developing a sense of purpose, once you have that idea of what you want to pursue, the persistence factor comes in and it comes down to being self-motivated. Oftentimes, when you have a sense of purpose you won't feel like you're working too hard on something because it's what you enjoy. That's something that has kept me going as we've developed our book. It's something I'm really passionate about and that just led to writing whenever I have free time and it's a sense of therapy for me.

Wharton Global Youth: Ujjayi, your passion is in integrating technology, biomedical sciences and entrepreneurship. How did these stars align for you and why are you most passionate about creating medical devices that enhance the health conditions of underprivileged populations?

Ujjayi: From a very young age, I've participated in various medical hackathons and collaborated with accomplished professionals. Drawing from all that collective strength, we transformed great ideas into incredibly successful, all-encompassing solutions. So, basically, in our teams we had doctors, business professionals and engineers, which helped me appreciate how all these different skill sets are needed to transform our ideas into commercially viable solutions. That led me to embrace a multi-disciplinary focus in science, technology and business. Entrepreneurship with the mentality to make profit is gratifying, but when you have a social aspect to it I find it most fulfilling.

Wharton Global Youth: A key tenet of your book is that entrepreneurship is all about the doing. What advice would you both give to other teens to progress from an idea to the actual hard work of building an enterprise?

Sruthi: For me, organization is key. I have a running to-do list that's like 14 pages long and has monthly schedules, day-to-day schedules and a to-do list with specific things to do that has actionable goals. Being able to organize myself in each of the projects I have going around [is key]. There are a lot of different moving parts and being able to break that down into specific tasks and being able to set a timeline and deadlines for each of them is really helpful in terms of

progressing and making sure to chip away at each of my projects consistently, instead of having it all pile up to one day when I have to go through it all together. I think that's really helpful when building up an enterprise because entrepreneurship is a lengthy process that can't just be done overnight.

Wharton Global Youth: It's great for me to have both of you on because you are successful young women in STEM — science and technology — but also I think you both are looking toward a future in business. What advice would you have for other young women who are thinking about taking this similar path?

Ujjayi: I would advise young women to document their journeys, I think. This is also another huge key tenet of our book. Keeping track of everything from the idea formation to the iterative approach of product design and testing is something you should be able to look back on and learn from. That's just a huge takeaway for anyone going into business.

Wharton Global Youth: Do you want to add to that, Sruthi?

Sruthi: Yes. When it comes to being able to innovate and being able to have a long-term project you can continue, a lot of it is to find the right peers to support you and the mentors. For me personally, and actually for both of us, we've been able to find those peers through LaunchX – some of our peers who also attended the program, or the mentors that were there to support us in developing our companies. And, for people to find your own network you can go through LinkedIn or RoundPier, your parents' friends, and teachers. There are so many people out there willing to support you. People don't realize how much people are willing to support others. Once you are able to actually find what sort of resources can really benefit whatever projects you're working on, that's when you can launch whatever you're working to succeed in.

Wharton Global Youth: One question I like to ask all of the innovators we interview on Future of the Business World is...If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be? Ujjayi, let's start with you.

Ujjayi: I'd love to see a world where people would take more action and hold themselves accountable. Just having more people that care about themselves, about others, about the future, would surely lead to a world of innovators and forward thinkers.

Sruthi: For me, one thing I'm really passionate about is responsible consumerism. My family is quite minimalist and we try to cut down on whatever excess resources we have. And we like to help make a sustainable environment and make our mark in terms of having a healthy environment. It stems down to responsible consumerism.

Wharton Global Youth: And Let's wrap up with our lightning round: Since we have two of you, I'll alternate questions:

Ujjayi, What skill or interest do you have that would surprise us?

Ujjayi: I have dedicated countless hours since I was like 5 or 6 towards the South Indian classical dance form called Kuchipudi, which tends to surprise people.

Wharton Global Youth: Sruthi, What is the hardest part about writing a book?

Sruthi: I think the hardest part is taking high-level concepts and breaking them down for a younger audience, while preserving that depth of the material.

Wharton Global Youth: Ujjayi, the most fascinating thing you've learned in the past week?

Ujjayi: I'm reading Rolf Dobelli's book called *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, and I recently came across this concept of survivorship bias, which I think is applicable to young entrepreneurs. It's basically how we tend to have this inflated visibility of success and it can oftentimes be misleading. To counteract this, I've been trying to be more mindful of the biases in place and learning from the failures of others.

Wharton Global Youth: Sruthi, what would you be caught binge-watching at midnight?

Sruthi: Definitely either *Shark Tank* or *The Vampire Diaries*.

Wharton Global Youth: Ujjayi, a business person you would like to take to lunch, and why?

Ujjayi: Kind of a cliché, but Jeff Bezos. Not just because of the giant business success he's experienced, but definitely to learn more about his far-reaching vision.

Wharton Global Youth: Sruthi, you are starting a late-night talk show...who is your very first guest?

Sruthi: I would definitely say Rihanna. Her company Fenty Beauty is not just about selling quality make-up products, but I feel like it has a deeper meaning behind it; embracing diversity and different cultures, and I think that's really beautiful.

Thank you both for joining us on *Future of the Business World*. It's been a pleasure speaking with you.