

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JACK WILSON
CONDUCTED BY MIRIAM MARGALA

**An entrepreneur, innovator,
scientist, educator and
philanthropist.**

A TRUE RENAISSANCE MAN.

This is the second part of the interview with Dr. Wilson, an American educator and entrepreneur. In this installment, we discuss his entrepreneurship experience, thoughts on philanthropy, effective communication and globalization.

PART 2

Looking at your philanthropic work, you seem to get a lot of satisfaction from becoming involved in making education available to as many people as possible. You have established a scholarship fund, an entrepreneurship center at UMass Lowell; you give freely your time to educational projects. Why is philanthropy important to you?

Philanthropy is important to me because I recognize that I have been an incredibly lucky person and have benefited from help that makes me want to give that same, or better, opportunity to others. I think that most people find that when they are able to help someone else, that it provided a very strong feeling of satisfaction and involvement. I am lucky to have lived long enough to see students that I have taught, or people that I have helped, who have gone on to make tremendous contributions to the world. I hope that they can find the same satisfaction in their lives that I found in mine. This means that satisfaction can be passed from generation to generation. Living in this way makes for a joyous life.

Let's talk about your company and IT entrepreneurship. You're the founder of an IT company, the LearnLinc Corporation – which was eventually worth \$500 million.

Correct, it could be easily characterized as IT entrepreneurship because we had to solve various information technology problems, networking, communication, computing, etc. However, our number one priority was always trying to connect communities of people who wanted to learn together, better and faster. We had to solve many technological problems but that's not why we founded the company. It eventually became very successful and later underwent various mergers – in early 2001, the company's market value on NASDAQ was \$500,000,000 dollars. Again, our goal was not to build a company and then to sell it for a lot of money. It was creating learning communities and helping them interact online. I saw that as something

not only interesting but also something that, even back then, I believed would later become an important way of learning.

Eventually, you sold your company. You were its founder, CEO and chairman. Was it difficult to move on – more generally, how do you know when to let go and stop?

Knowing when to stop is one of the most important and difficult tasks in anyone's life. I have seen too many people who have hung on to a role far longer than they should have. That hurts themselves as well as others. It is important to refresh oneself regularly and for those around you to experience fresh leadership. I decided that I would try to make a major change in my work every 7 to 10 years. I have held to that principle for my entire career. You need to make a reasonable commitment to anything that you start, but after 7-10 years, you should have accomplished your goals – or you probably never will. In either case, it is important to let new leadership take the organization in new directions. Now that I have done this six times in my career, I will say that sometimes it is hard to let go, but I have never regretted doing so. I have always found new and meaningful projects to work on next.

As a business professor and a successful entrepreneur, how do you prepare your students for mistakes or failures? The truth is simple - you cannot become an entrepreneur if you cannot bear the pain of mistakes – can it be taught?

We do try to teach students about failure and how to overcome it. We try to teach them that every mistake and failure, however painful, is an opportunity to learn and become better. But you're quite right to say that it's 'easy' to lecture about it. The best way to learn is of course to actually go out and go through that failure and have a mentor that helps you face the challenge. I have tried to mentor people through failures and help them understand that when they're in the depth of pain of getting punched

hard that it is just another learning experience. Mentoring is an important part of entrepreneurship. We have a couple of ways in which we offer it to our students. First, we bring in successful entrepreneurs who have gone through failure often more than once. Second, we try to see if we can find in the student's own background some experience of failure and use it constructively so they themselves can see what they learned from it. But I think in the end, to have a mentor to help through experiencing hard challenges is absolutely the key.

Clearly, it is also about persistence as an overall attitude.

To be an entrepreneur you certainly have to be persistent. You try to solve a problem, you get beaten down, then you come back, you try again, differently. And if it still doesn't work, you repeat the process. I call it "the Ps", passion and persistence, trying again and again. Oftentimes, entrepreneurs are seen as impatient. In fact, many entrepreneurs had had a career in a larger company where they became a squeaky wheel, even annoying. They didn't like the way things were done and they saw there was a better way. They wanted to implement their ideas, but to bring about change can be incredibly difficult in a large, traditional company.

So many of them become entrepreneurs. If they cannot implement their ideas within the company, then they leave and start their own company.

In your career, you have had to deal with all sorts of people. At one point, you had to work with both Ted Kennedy, an iconic democrat, and Mitt Romney, who was a Republican governor. What does it take to be an effective communicator?

There are different approaches to communication. There's the manipulative approach where somebody tries to talk to people and say what they want to hear. Then there's the communicative goal where you listen and try to understand the other. You don't have to agree with

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other people's points of view but you learn a lot when you listen to them. Indeed, I have had the great opportunity to visit and talk to quite a few American presidents. I even met our latest president (Donald Trump) who I will say is very interesting to speak to. I've never had a problem communicating with other people, whatever their beliefs are, because when I meet them I want to learn about them. I want to see what makes them tick, what they're interested in and I don't have to feel I am advancing my point of view. I might, depending on what we're talking about, but that's not the goal of communication. Learning is the point of communication for me.

You have traveled extensively; you are enthusiastic about globalization - can you discuss its importance and impact?

I traveled in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before the Iron Curtain came down. I watched these countries cope with a very different economic system; I watched Russia go through many changes. I watched communist Europe become free. I also spent a lot of time in China where they've undertaken a very different path. You learn a lot through traveling and actively engaging in international projects and I encourage my students to get international experiences, to immerse in different cultures but at the same time I try to make sure that they have exposure to the culture here in the US. For those that can't travel, I teach a global entrepreneurship course. I teach about the differences in the economic systems, entrepreneurship attitudes and free trade. Obviously, I am a huge fan of globalization, of free movement of ideas, of entrepreneurship across borders, of free trade. I recognize that trade hasn't always been as free or smooth as it should have been and that we always have to be looking at how to make sure that different countries benefit as much as they can from free trade. I believe there are no benefits to isolation. We can all learn from each other,

we all bring good ideas we can share and work on developing them together.

How do you see Europe as an 'international' American?

First of all, my own heritage is European - Bavarian and Austrian. I grew up in Pennsylvania which was very much affected by European culture. Specifically, by people from Central Europe – Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Polish. Later, I was able to visit these countries. I had applauded the rise of the more unified Europe; I admire the changes in Europe. I used to go through Check Point Charlie in Berlin during the old Iron Curtain times and that was no fun. Today of course, it is very different - much more free and it's a much better world. I watched the excitement of all the communist countries after the Iron Curtain went down; I observed their aspirations and optimism. But also a degree of disappointment - they succeeded in building a pretty healthy economic system but it takes a lot of time for the economy to fully develop, to make sure everybody has a chance to participate in it. Some of that has been done very successfully and some still needs to be done. And that's true also in the US and elsewhere. That's another reason why globalization is so beneficial. We can all work on making sure that everybody has a chance to participate in a healthy economy.

What do you say to those who claim that globalization brings in a degree of homogenization which is counterproductive?

This criticism is a bit tricky to address because in fact globalization does mean that cultures are exposed to each other and adapt ideas from each other. How much of that is good and how much is bad? We certainly see countries that try to preserve their identity and almost regulate it. Does that work? If we consider history and go back to the trade between Europe and Asia during the Silk Road era, we realize how cultures have influ-

enced each other for millennia. We think that spaghetti and meatballs are a typical Italian dish but it was brought in and adapted from China. Or consider Japan. Their entire written language was adapted from China. So is it a bad thing? A good thing? I think it's neither – as long as it works for a particular culture.

I will also say that to a certain extent, the argument of trying to protect one's culture is of course valid. I do like to see cultures and languages preserved but I don't like to see taken this to a point where you try to refuse ideas from other cultures completely. The world has advanced by borrowing ideas from each other, taking and shaping them according to the needs of a particular culture. That's how I see globalization – sharing, adapting and exchanging freely.

By Miriam Margala



Dr. Miriam Margala enjoys a rewarding and eclectic professional career. She is a university lecturer, teaching academic writing, communication and philosophy of language. She mentors other professional women through an organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Women Accelerators, where she is a member of the Board of Directors. She also translates literature, both poetry and prose, writes academic articles, conducts interviews for various publications, presents at international conferences and is involved in international projects dealing with innovation in education and diversity in industry. She is also involved in art projects both in the United States and Europe.