

David 00:00:03 As part of our Y Combinator pitch, we took one of the VCs and we just recreated their entire website in front of everyone in five minutes. Right. We typically do that for the pitch. If we'd meet an investor for a pitch, her eyes would get big because they presumably spent a lot of money and a lot of time to have that website be created. And so they really saw the potential

Ryan 00:00:31 This is Dare to disrupt a podcast about Penn state alumni, who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host Ryan Newman. And on the show today is David we're. Sanko. David is the head of e-commerce at square and founder of Weebly, which was acquired by square in 2018, the \$365 million wheelie. Now forms the foundation for Square's online solutions to help businesses of all sizes expand online. Over 50 million people have created a site with Weebly and half of the United States visits, a weekly site every month. David is the youngest recipient of the prestigious Penn state alumni achievement award, and has endowed to entrepreneurship focused scholarships at Penn state. He graduated from Penn state in 2007 with a degree and information sciences and technology.

Ryan 00:01:35 David. It's so great to be speaking with you. Thank you so much for joining us on the dare to disrupt podcast.

David 00:01:41 It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Ryan 00:01:43 I just want to start off by really thanking you and really commending you for what you've done. It's, you're definitely someone that when we think about Penn state entrepreneurial-ism we, and what you and your co-founders did is one of the first things that comes to mind. So it feels only fitting that we have, you make time for us for an interview. We really, really appreciate your time. And more importantly, all the things we'll still have time to talk about that you've done both for the entrepreneurial community, as well as for Penn state.

David 00:02:10 I'm excited for the conversation.

Ryan 00:02:11 So David, we'd like to start generally at the beginning. And so for you, we'd love to just hear where are you originally or from where you grew up and your formative experiences prior to coming to Penn state?

David 00:02:23 Sure. So I, so both my parents were American, but we actually lived in France. I was born in Paris when I was seven years old, our family moved to Casa, Blanca, Morocco, and I lived there until I was 18. And then from there moved back to Penn state to the U S full-time for the first time to go to Penn state, my dad went to Penn state base was always Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And so it was kind of a natural choice, but quite a change of circumstances and moving from Morocco to attend Penn state.

Ryan 00:02:51 That's amazing. I mean, you don't typically hear folks that had that type of international experience growing up. Can you talk about what it was like both living in Paris, as well as Morocco and the way more importantly, that that experience shaped your perspective and worldview?

David 00:03:04 Sure. I mean, I think parents, I left when I was seven, so I don't remember too much. I went to the French public school system in kindergarten and first grade in Paris and then the French public school system actually existed in Morocco as well. And so went to French public school through eighth grade when I transferred over to an American school. So I think probably a few different influences there in terms of Morocco is a country. You know, it's an amazing country. It's a very great country to visit. There's obviously things that are very different about it than the U S a strong emphasis on negotiation as part of day to day life. It's just one thing that comes to mind immediately.

Ryan 00:03:38 And then once you moved back to the U S you mentioned your father going to Penn state, was it any question for you where you would go or what was the decision process that led you to decide on Penn state?

David 00:03:47 Yeah, so I looked at a few other schools. I was looking at Carnegie Mellon. I was looking at, um, Princeton and a few other places. And I think Penn state for me, there was really two things. First of all, I was accepted in the triers honors college and in the IST, but both of those programs were very appealing to me. And I think just understanding that I g --

-- rew up overseas, that was very different experience. And so coming back to the U S and kind of integrating Penn state felt like the right place to do that.

Ryan 00:04:13 So you get to Penn state, you arrive as a freshman and you have to decide what college you want to join. What major you mentioned the honors college, any other early sort of decisions, or when did you first get the inkling that maybe entrepreneurship was going to be in your future?

David 00:04:27 Yeah, so I started a company in high school and was running that company while attending Penn state as well. So I always wanted to be an entrepreneur, something I kind of knew from an early age that starting or running a mountain company was something that really appealed to me, but I actually started off as a dual major IST and E and I kind of realized that that wasn't really going to be for me. And I actually switched over to a dual major in MIS never actually ended up finishing that degree because I left school early. I finished my ISE degree, not my MIS degree because I left school early to go and run Weebly full-time. But I did appreciate the first three years of the business curriculum there as well, which I think has been helpful.

Ryan 00:05:08 So you're in school. You, you mentioned having a business in high school for our listeners who are not entrepreneurial, it's hard to even fathom starting a business, let alone starting one in high school. I realized as an entrepreneur that may just seem sort of second nature to you, but can you, how best would you articulate to somebody who doesn't have that entrepreneurial instinct, what it was that caused you to want to have the interest or instinct to really do that in high school?

David 00:05:34 Sure. I mean, I think so let's be clear. It wasn't a big business, you know, it helped put me through school and it was beer money. It wasn't like it made a ton of money, but I think everyone kind of has these ideas on ways the world could be better and ideas on how to start a company. And I think oftentimes people get really intimidated in terms of what it's like to start one, you know, it's actually less effort than it seems. It's just, you know, a lot of times just going out and taking that first step and actually committing to, starting to work on it. And sure it's a lot of work and it seems intimidating, but it's just such a fantastic learning experience. And so I think that the experience of doing that in high school, it wasn't very successful, but the technology experience, the experience having that responsibility, the business experience that was gained starting a company is always just like drinking off the fire hose in terms of the experience that you get. It's just, you know, it's just such an awesome thing to do

Ryan 00:06:25 While you're at Penn state. Uh, you obviously were very focused on some entrepreneurial activity. You had a lot of technological interests. Can you talk more about what other interests you had or how you spent your time or what life was like as a college student and, um, and sort of going through those early years of your experience?

David 00:06:41 Yeah. I mean, life has a college student. I don't think it was any different than most at Penn state. One of the things I did also is picked up part-time work as a DJ for frats and bars. And so between the business I started in high school and my deejaying work that's, you know, that's effectively how I paid my way through college.

Ryan 00:06:59 Now, deejaying has changed. The technology has made it a much more so useful on a laptop as opposed to, but we talking about like literally spinning records here. I mean, what was your actual DJ experience? And did you have your own gear?

David 00:07:12 Uh, yes, I did have my own gear at the time. There was kind of a transition away from records to CDs, believe it or not. So CDs was kind of like the main technology. And then towards the end of my time there sort of new stuff coming out with USB drives and using more like digital files as opposed to CDs, but yeah, all kinds of challenges there was skipping and scratch CDs and all that kind of stuff, because it was good times.

Ryan 00:07:34 So you're at Penn state, you're interested in technology you're deejaying. And at what point did your entrepreneurial instincts kick in and what were the initial formations of kind of an initial busin --

-- ess, uh, that, that sort of took you to, to, uh, ultimately where you are today?

David 00:07:52 Yeah, so at the time I was trying to figure out how to get my high school business to be like a full-time thing. And I didn't know if it was going to happen because it wasn't really growing that much. It wasn't quite there to be able to support even one person full-time, but we were really thinking about how do we expand, how do we grow the business? And so that was kind of the context that we were in. I had a class Dr. Jerry Santoro was actually the first IST class I took. And then he also taught an IST 4 0 2 class, which was basically an open-ended right, a web app, kind of a single project-based class. And as part of that class really came up with the initial idea with a group was, um, well, all Penn state students at the time had to create an e-portfolio before they graduated.

Ryan 00:08:33 And the way that you did that at the time was used basically Microsoft front page or Dreamweaver to do that. And it was just, I was helping one of my friends through it and she was just really struggling and just saw everything that was wrong with those tools and sort of the way that your average person would actually go about creating a website and really thought that there was a way to improve that. And so quickly pivoted from an e-portfolio type application to just a general purpose website creator. And really the core idea was, you know, if you look at those tools, like FrontPage, they were basically completely unimaginative in terms of what the interface could look like. It was just a word document interface. And then that's what used to create a webpage. And the thing is people wouldn't create web pages, they just create online word documents.

David 00:09:14 That was basically the output of those tools unless you got into the code. And so the idea quickly became well, what if you could just actually build a purpose-built interface for creating a webpage, not an online word document. And so just kind of pursued that because it was cool as part of the class ended up just getting super excited about it spent about three weeks, uh, working nonstop on it before, before going that summer into an internship in New York, and then just really kept working on it nights and weekends, um, that summer until it finally took shape and it started to look like it could actually be a business.

Ryan 00:09:46 So amazing. And so in those early periods, I mean, were you, I assume you actually formed a business at a certain point, and then did you have any co-founders and how did you sort of think through all of that? And, and you mentioned being going on an internship for the summer, how hard was it to leave and go do an internship that presumably was not related to your business and therefore having less time to spend on it right. When things were really taking shape?

David 00:10:10 Well, yeah, I mean, by the end of the class, there was a sort of very basic prototype could drag a couple of things on the page. I mean, but it was pretty basic. And then throughout those next three weeks, I luckily had time where all my roommates left and it was just me and the apartment. And so you can imagine in beaver hill, I pretty much just worked nonstop mostly through the night. You know, we'd go and grab Kenyan pizza, walked back to the house and work until I was tired and then sleep until I woke up so eight or 10 hours. And so I ended up working about 16 hours straight and sleeping about 10 hours. That was kind of the natural schedule and did that for about three weeks straight. And by that point in time, it was starting to take much more shape in terms of something that you could recognize as like, Hey, this could actually become a product, not just a demo, but at that point, it was still really early moving off to New York.

David 00:10:55 Luckily as part of the internship, I could find time on nights and weekends around that time, Dan joined as a co-founder, we ended up demoing, I think the first time we done with it publicly was at the New York tech meetup. I mean, New York city that summer then later at the end of the summer, Chris joined as a co-founder. So we hadn't incorporated the business yet. It wasn't a business at all. It was just kind of like a project that we thought was really cool that might become a business that fall. We drove up to Boston interviewed for Y Combinator --

-- got accepted. It was part of joining Y Combinator. That effectively is where we started working on full-time. So packed all of our stuff, servers, you know, literally everything in my car drove cross country on 80 in the winter, which I would definitely not recommend doing got stuck in Wyoming for two days in the snow and finally made it to San Francisco. And that was really the start of when the business was incorporated. And it was actually a company because up until that point, it was just a project.

Ryan 00:11:49 So you mentioned the move to San Francisco first. I'd love to know had you ever been to San Francisco before that trip?

David 00:11:55 I never been to San Francisco. And I'll tell you that view of the bay bridge as you're driving into, you know, it was a sunny day. And just that, that view, that striking view of the city, just with the bay and all the buildings it's just on inspiring and kind of the perfect way to see the city for the first time, especially just that classic story of moving out west to try to do something big.

Ryan 00:12:15 So you're heading out to San Francisco, you've, uh, conveniently left out the part about the fact that you've essentially left Penn state to be able to go and do this. How far along were you in your educational progression at that point?

David 00:12:28 So at that point in time, I had maybe one or two classes left for IST and maybe two classes left in my MIS degree. So I think it was like 12 credits. It wasn't a heavy workload. It was the last semester, my senior year. I basically just drop the MIS degree, finished the IST degree that semester from San Francisco, just kind of emailed the professors and said, look, here's the situation. Like I can't attend class, but I'd be happy to fly back three times, like twice for each midterm. And you know, and then once for the final, like I promise you I'll get, A's just, I can't be there everyday in class. So can we figure something out? And actually, luckily both of them were very accommodating. I ended up graduating on time. My co-founder Dan, he took another class that summer and undergraduate in the summer. And then Chris, it took Chris another couple of years before his mom finally got to him and he finally finished his degree.

Ryan 00:13:21 So now you headed to San Francisco, you're now based in, um, presumably working in a shared workspace. Talk about those early experiences sort of soon after you arrived and what that work experience was like. I assume it was a lot of grinding.

David 00:13:36 Yeah. I mean, it was, you know, not too dissimilar from the time from those three weeks in beaver hill, but about two years worth of that, there was no workspace. So, I mean, our workspace was our apartment. It was a two bedroom apartment. There was three of us living in there, you know, we were essentially, so in college that didn't bother us one bit, you know, the thing is the apartments in north beach. We just had this amazing view of the bay. And so we would push three desks together. We got rid of our couch and our coffee table and all that in the living room, just push three desks together in the living room and just work nonstop. So again, we'd work until we retired and just kind of operate on a natural cycle. We would typically work until about seven or 8:00 AM when the sun came up and then we'd sleep for about eight or nine hours.

David 00:14:13 And then just wake up and just rinse and repeat. And our only rule was we'd take off Saturdays. So starting Friday night at like 10:00 PM to like Sunday at noon, we were off, there was no work. We self-impose, we were not allowed to do work on Saturday because we feel like, you know, if it was going to be a bit of a marathon, if it was going to be a longer-term thing, we need to make it sustainable. And so at that point, every waking hour was working, you know, again, it was just the three of us in this living room for about two years, just working nonstop.

Ryan 00:14:39 What were some of the early external validations that what you were doing was actually having impact either in your product or in your addressable market that sort of gave you the confidence to continue on?

David 00:14:51 Yeah, I mean, in the very beginning there wasn't great external validation. The reception, I would say was mixed at the New York tech meetup. And the very first time we presented it, the --

-- re was a feeling that anyone who wanted to create a website already could, which obviously in retrospect is just kind of ridiculous, but that was the feeling among technical people among programmers that you need to make it easier to create a website. And, you know, at that point in time, it was also really just the emergence of what you might call web two dot O web applications. Like some of those technologies like Ajax requests had just been introduced in Nebraska and it was kind of like new functionality and it was really creating this whole new wave of, of web applications. And so that was really kind of the frame and the context where we believe was started.

David 00:15:35 I think as soon as it started to take more shape, as soon as you could actually see more of the potential, wasn't just kind of a prototype. Then all of a sudden people really started to notice that there was something exciting here. And so I think through, you know, throughout Y Combinator, increasingly people started to see, it looked really cool as part of our Y Combinator pitch. We took one of the VCs and we just recreate their entire website in front of everyone in five minutes. Right. We typically do that for the pitch. If we'd meet investor for a pitch, their eyes would get big because, you know, they presumably spent a lot of money and a lot of time to have that website be created. And so they really saw the potential, but, you know, it was about, you know, it was a couple of years really before the metrics really started taking off, it was a pretty long grind. You know, if you count the time before we started working on full time, you're talking three or four years before the metrics really were off to the races.

Ryan 00:16:25 It's incredible to think that you're, you were able to actually demonstrate your product. People talk about a demo in live FET format to actually have the demo done in front of investors. That's pretty incredible. It's also pretty high stakes because it could fail right in front of them as well. How did you think through that and, and, um, and plan for, for that success, uh, you know, in live for feedback,

David 00:16:48 I mean, that's what makes it a live demo so exciting, right? It's the potential to fall on your face, but everyone likes live demos because of that, because of that sort of suspense of at all. So sometimes, you know, we would basically have a version of Weebly running in the cloud that we'd access from the web browser. And then there's a lot dependent on what's the wifi going to be like at the coffee shop and you know, all that kind of stuff. And so we would always bring our laptop with a local copy of the app. And so we can always switch to a local copy if need be. And, you know, typically like when we interviewed for YC, we'd actually just hit tech crunch that morning and the servers were, were actively melting. You know, it was like, it was slow. And so, but, but we played it off. We were like, oh, it's not working right now. We, we actually just hit tech crunch this morning. There was a ton of traffic. And like, so the servers are under load, so we'll just switch to the local version. And of course that, that sort of made their, you know, their ears perked up in terms of like, oh shit like, okay, but we try to manage it however best we could

AD 00:17:41 Each spring, Penn state startup week powered by PNC connects students with innovative alumni and pioneers who achieving success in a variety of industries and disciplines throughout the week. Students discover, explore experience and celebrate entrepreneurship ways to get involved, include sponsorship, speaking at an event, judging a startup pitch competition for becoming a mentor to find out how you can get involved, contact us at startupweek.psu.edu.

Ryan 00:18:16 So what point did you go from just three folks in a bedroom work? And you mentioned kind of spreading out a little bit in terms of your living space, but how about in terms of scaling the business, both in terms of employees and customers take us through that scaling journey for Weebly?

David 00:18:29 Yeah, so I think it was a while before we hired our first employee Justin. So Justin was a designer. We didn't have any of that talent. You know, I was sort of the closest thing that we had to a designer and a pretty bad one at that. And so he was really the first employee hired. I believe he joined in mid 200 --

-- 8, early 2006 is when I wrote the first line of code at Penn state. That's about two and a half years later. And he actually joined in our apartment. You know, it's kind of a funny story. We kind of knew that he would probably turn us down if he knew we were still working out an apartment. Like we wanted to appear to be like the most legitimate company we could, but like sooner or later is inevitable. So we kind of interviewed him interview and he said, okay, well come to our office.

David 00:19:08 And we gave him our apartment address, which was our office and he showed up and he knocked on the door and he came in and we just whisked him right. To a chair and just like kind of jump straight into the interview, like no time for him to like, be weirded out or ask questions or anything like that. And, but I asked him later, I'm like, dude, like years and years later, I was like, what were you thinking? Like, did you almost walk away? And he's like, oh yeah. He's like, I took a long pause at that front or thinking like, what is going on here? Should I, should I really knock? Is this, is this a safe situation? But you know, luckily for both of us, he did. So that was I think, around, around mid 2008. And I think our second employee drew who, by the way, we still work together. He joined, I think in June of 2008. So that would have been 14 years ago. And so working together. So, so it's been quite some time.

Ryan 00:19:54 It's incredible. And so at this point now you've got a couple employees, obviously your businesses taking shape, take us through the point at which you decided that there was an exit for Weebly that made sense or a partnership with respect to a bigger company.

David 00:20:08 Yeah. Fast forward 12 years. And during that time growth was really just kind of slowly but surely we ended up being about 350 employees, you know, offices in a few different locations, you know, San Francisco, uh, Scottsdale, New York, Toronto, and Berlin. So just to kind of give you a little bit of a picture of what the company was like, you know, what we kind of realized is that, you know, basically the, the online and the in-person worlds were really converging. And we were getting a lot of the feedback from our users that, that were trying to transact online. You know, most of our feedback was sort of how to integrate with their in-person operations and their point of sale and how to make that seamless. And we just kind of knew that that was, you know, we were never going to be able to fully tackle that problem on our own.

David 00:20:51 And, you know, I think concurrently square was more or less having the same realization, uh, square started off very similar type of products, you know, design and visions. And so, you know, I think it just made so much sense to combine the two companies are very similar from a culture perspective, very complimentary. And when we ended up going into announcing the acquisition, depress instill the employee base, I mean, there were no questions. It was just like, yeah, that makes sense. That makes total sense. And so that was in mid 2018 and it's been almost four years since then.

Ryan 00:21:22 That's incredible. And you're still at square. And can you talk about your current role with the businesses?

David 00:21:27 Yeah, so my current role is, is GM for e-commerce and that really encompasses all of our first party e-commerce solutions. Things like square online, which is the sort of online store online ordering page it's things like online checkout, which is a really simple way to just send a payment link for people to pay off their phones. Typically QR code ordering for restaurants and a delivery platform as well, all the way to, um, our photo studio application has a really cool app. You could download on, on your iOS device that lets you take photos of products and, you know, and with some pretty nifty ML, we can remove the background and enhance the image and actually put it in a scene at a shadow and a style and a full 3d scene. So, um, so yeah, there's a variety of things that we work on. But I think again, just with the goal, you know, very, very similar goal to what we're working on with Weebly, which is just really help people expand their businesses online and do so very easily and in a way that can integrate with their entire operations.

Ryan 00:22:23 So when you think about the early problem you wer --

-- e trying to solve, which was just helping people create a website to what you're doing now with Weebly integrated into square, how has your customer base and their needs and the needs that you are solving changed and evolved over time? And what are your reflections on that evolution?

David 00:22:44 Yeah, I think, you know, in the beginning it was, it was just let's help people create websites. And to be completely honest, we didn't even really know what people were going to do with them. We just thought like, we just thought it'd be cool and people needed to do it. And so there wasn't like some big strategic plan behind that idea. A few years in, I think probably around if I'm remembering like 20 10, 20 11 timeframe, we're like, well, shit, we should probably figure out what people are doing with these websites. Like there's a lot of like millions of people are building them, but like, what are, what, why, why are they building a website? And so we went and looked at that and what we found was the very large majority, like over two thirds of people were do we're, we're creating a web website with some kind of business use case in mind and that made total sense.

David 00:23:29 And so we really refocused the company at that point in time, around that small business, around that entrepreneurs business use case. And then a couple years later ended up focusing even more deeply on e-commerce. And I think when you think about the evolution of this space, you couldn't have gone straight into e-commerce in 2006, because the big challenge in 2006 was just convincing people like, Hey, you probably should have a website. A lot of businesses just didn't really understand why. And then, um, but then, uh, people who wanted to who actually wanted a website convincing them, they could do it themselves. I mean, we spent the first four years of the company just saying, no, like we're not kidding you. You can actually build it yourself. No, no, no, no, no, no. I have to hire a web designer. This has got, gotta be too complicated.

David 00:24:13 Right? And it's like, no, no, the tool is really that easy. Just give it a try. You'll see. And then, and then eventually that market was created and people realized that it was going to be within their capabilities, really, no matter who you were, if you gave it a shot, you'd be able to do it. That sort of changed the mindset. And all of a sudden, a lot more people got experience with these tools. Oh wow. I can create my own website. And then their expectations went from there to, okay, well having a website is cool, but really I should be selling online because that's where, that's where it gets much more significant in terms of helping me grow my business. And so we, we really just, you just helped create that initial market and then continued pushing forward into what the market needed next.

Ryan 00:24:52 Can you talk about what it's like as an entrepreneur now working for a big company? Obviously it's a very vulnerable brand with a tremendous leader at the helm, also running other businesses as well. But can you talk about your experience as somebody that was really in charge of working for yourself to now working and being incorporated into a larger corporate culture?

David 00:25:13 Yeah, no, I, I mean, I get this question a lot kind of asked differently. It's like, what's it like having a boss? And um, you know, I have actually really enjoyed the experience personally, the best way to describe the experience would be a, I get focused on the fun stuff and, you know, be the quality of feedback is just a lot better. You know, a lot of people will oftentimes be very apprehensive about telling the CEO, you know, feedback tends to flow. Okay. Laterally. It doesn't flow very well upstream and, and it flows pretty well downstream. And so one of the things with having a boss is just the quality of feedback. You know, I remember like on my first day I remember this experience of being in a meeting with my new team and kind of raised my hand and made a comment. And then like the look on my boss's face was just like, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Right. And, and I was, I was so excited. I was so excited because, you know, as a CEO, like people will never give you that kind of feedback. And it's that kind of feedback. You know, I'm personally very motivated to be the best version of myself that I could be. And it's hard to do th --

-- at without feedback. And having access to that feedback really helps improve yourself, improve your leadership. So for me, it's been a very positive experience.

Ryan 00:26:21 Well, you're, uh, you've been very philanthropic with your support to Penn state in particular supporting entrepreneurship and, uh, support of the college of IST. Uh, you've done number, number of scholarships that have really had impact on students. What advice do you have for Penn Staters and for students and what is the, or Penn state connection mean now having graduated and, and been away from the university for so many years?

David 00:26:46 Yeah, I think, you know, the Penn state connection is still very strong in terms of advice for students. My best advice would just be, you know, give it a shot, give it a try because a lot of times people, sometimes I feel a bit disappointed when, when you hear someone that's so bright that has so much potential that maybe just doesn't quite have the confidence to start working on their idea. And then, you know, oh, I'm going to go work for consulting for our more, I'm going to go work for a financial firm. And those are fantastic jobs. And it's not to say anything about any one of those companies, but I think a lot of people really overestimate how risky the path is. I think if you have an idea, if you kind of think that maybe entrepreneurship is for you, there's really no downside to just giving a shot.

David 00:27:32 And the typical failure mode for a student is just to overthink it, to think that they can't do it to think that they need something that they don't have. Maybe they need a technical co-founder. Maybe they need to hire a consulting firm. Maybe they need money so they can pay the consulting firm to build the idea. Um, but I think if you just grab the bull by the horns and you just give it a shot, just start working on it, just figure it out. I like to say the worst case scenario, the absolute worst case scenario, if you, you know, start working on idea, start working on a company and it fails. The absolute worst case scenario is that you've accumulated the best resume experience ever, right. That job will still be there for you. You'll still be able to go get that full-time job, except you'll probably get a better job because someone's going to look and say, holy shit, this was some amazing experience. And this person's now even more qualified than they were as a student coming out of school. So I really think there's very little downside in, in, you know, to at least trying it out. It won't always be successful, but you'll always gain some very incredible experience that will be just formative in terms of how it helps you in your career, down the road.

Ryan 00:28:36 Well, I want to thank you David, for taking time today to share your entrepreneurial journey with us. I now have to hand things over to our current Penn state student who's in the midst of her own entrepreneurial journey and is very active within the Penn state entrepreneurial ecosystem. Sydney Guibert is a junior at Penn state studying biomedical engineering and pre-medicine her nonprofit girls code. The world provides resources, role models and opportunities for girls ages eight to 12 by offering stem educational programming sessions and mentorship Sydney. I'll now hand things over to you.

Sydney 00:29:11 Yeah. Thank you so much, Ryan. And hello, David. So great to speak with you today and definitely get some answers to some questions that I, a smaller scale entrepreneur would really benefit from hearing your perspective on. So maybe just to start it off, I think you mentioned earlier that creating a business was kind of like sitting in front of a fire hose as far as like the amount of knowledge and information you'll learn and have to manage one of the biggest things that invent Penn state and the Penn state resources as a whole has really helped me with is closing logistical knowledge gaps that we have to run a business such as like filing taxes and finding legal services and what to keep in mind when you're maintaining a budget. So how did you kind of manage your own knowledge deficits and who did you ask for help?

David 00:29:57 Yeah, that's a great question. I think, you know, going back to kind of two different experiences, because we could kind of compare and contrast, I think with the company I started in high school, I was very focused on just, --

-- you know, starting or running a business just seems so intimidating. And there's all this stuff that you think about when you haven't done it before. Like, oh my God, how am I going to do taxes? How am I going to, you know, you know, build financial statements, how am I going to rent office space if need be? Or like, how am I gonna do all these things that just seem so intimidating. And I, and I spent a lot of time focusing on that and with Weebly, what actually we spent all of our time and energy focusing on was really just the product. And I think what a lot of people don't necessarily.

David 00:30:36 And I certainly didn't understand at that point in time was that all these things that we sort of think about is like the business activities. They're just the documentation, the real business is the value you're providing to your customers. Right? And so I think that, you know, ultimately it should be a kind of freeing realization in that you don't actually really need to focus on as much of that stuff as you think you need to. And when it comes time to do that, you know, there's tools, there's support. But I think really the key, like the most important thing is understanding what's your product. What's the value because, because really all businesses do is, is, you know, they business in general is just, you provide a service or a good to someone that values it and they pay you more money than it costs you to provide it to them. Right? So you're adding that value into their lives. That is the core of what a business does. And if you want your business to be more successful and to grow, it's really focusing on improving that core business value prop and spending most of your energy on that. And again, the good news is you don't actually have to spend that much energy on the other stuff, which it turns out is actually kind of boring.

Sydney 00:31:41 Yeah, definitely. And I think, um, you bring up a really good point as far as like having pride in your product and what you're actually delivering to customers and everything, and the story of how you scale your company is very interesting to me, especially in how you transitioned to having employees under you, that, you know, in turn represented the brand of Weebly and your overarching product. And at my own nonprofit girls code the world, it's very important to us that our branded educational programs are continually delivered at a high level. And we are having some problems where we're very hesitant to have other people delivering our curriculum. Um, but it's definitely a necessary step to scaling your business. So did you kind of face a similar hesitancy to having other people represent and innovate your product and how have you overcome that?

David 00:32:31 Yes. Um, I think everyone does, as they, as they get started, it's a very normal, um, feeling. Some people actually never, never managed to get past that feeling. Right. And typically their businesses don't scale very large. I think there's so much of when you start a business, it almost feels like an extension of yourself. And so from that perspective, it can feel scary to feel like you're giving up control over making sure that things are done in a, in a, in a good way, or, you know, or having a high quality, you know, we can also feel like you don't want to give up a piece of your business. Right. And, um, and, and maybe the financial or control dynamics that comes with that. But at the end of the day, you know, anything, anything that has scale has more than one or two or three people involved with it.

David 00:33:20 Right. And so I think that, you know, ultimately learning to release, let go a little bit of that control, and it's not so much about just saying like, Hey, I'm going to hand this off to you and then you totally screw it up. It was more so like learning how to delegate and learning how to hand off tasks in a way that you can still have confidence that they'll get done and they'll get done in a really good way. Um, it's kind of like thinking of, you know, what does that system look like to help you do that? And so it's a learning process. It's, it's tricky and it's difficult, but I think if you ever want your business to grow, it's, it's inevitable. And then there's other things obviously, you know, adding a first employee is just so stressful in terms of, well, holy shit, now we gotta make payroll. Right. And that comes with a whole nother stress as --

-- well. But at the end of day, these are kind of like growing pains and it's normal to feel that way, but, you know, working through them really will help your business grow in scale faster and larger.

Sydney 00:34:15 Yeah, definitely. And I think, um, another thing that I found really interested in just the conversations about entrepreneurship as a whole and startups is definitely the difference in having a startup in high school or college versus having a startup, you know, once you've graduated and the difference in that type of experience. And it was really interesting to hear how your own entrepreneurial pursuits were a financial contributor to how you got through college. But you also talked about how you spent, you know, 16 hour days managing the responsibilities you had for school and for your internship, along with the work for your startups. So did you have moments throughout the startup phase where you felt like it wasn't worth it anymore and kind of what was your motivation to keep going despite all those responsibilities all at once?

David 00:35:01 Yeah. I mean, it's a good question. So the 16 hour days were typically when I was only focused on the startup, so that, that was sort of the three weeks where I had no class. And before my internship started, like even, even in the fall, when we were going to class and we're still working on the idea the fall of my senior year, we're able to manage and juggle it. I think just fine. I think if you're actually judicious about your time, it turns out there's plenty of time to do a lot of things. Right. And so I wouldn't say that, um, that it kind of cut into either my schoolwork or my social time or anything like that. You know, I still had plenty of time for all those things, but you definitely optimize. Right. I think there's lots of different ways to optimize your time so that you can still work on your business and meet your commitments for school and social life. I think all three of those things are possible.

Sydney 00:35:46 Yeah. Well, I think a lot of the things you said are very relatable and I really thank you for all of your insights and sharing your experience as a founder. Um, I think that it's very invaluable to hear what other founders say, because, you know, even if our companies and businesses are so different, we all have similar challenges and similar obstacles to kind of get over. But it was definitely an honor to speak with you. Um, I'll turn it back over to Ryan to end it off.

Ryan 00:36:13 Great.

Ryan 00:36:22 That was David Rusenko founder of Weebly. If you haven't already be sure to subscribe, to dare, to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.

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