

Ryan Newman (00:00)

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, we are celebrating a special 50th commemorative edition. Rather than having our 51st guest, we will be reflecting on our first 50 episodes, sharing various highlights and lowlights faced by our former guests. When the podcast first aired in 2021,

We never could have imagined how successful it would become. Yet thanks to you, our listeners, we've recorded 50 episodes during the past five years, which have been downloaded over 69,000 times. While we are already gearing up for the next 50 episodes, we didn't want to let this moment pass before reflecting on where we've gone and what we've learned thus far along our shared journey. Over the last several years, we've had the privilege of creating a podcast built around a simple belief.

that Penn State has produced some of the most innovative, purposeful, and extraordinary entrepreneurs in the country, and that their stories deserve to be heard. Dare to Disrupt has become an essential tool used to amplify the stories of Penn State alumni who are founders and leaders across 21 distinct industries, from home remodeling to cardiovascular medicine, from Broadway theater to substance abuse treatment, from nail polish chemistry to machine health monitoring.

I've sat with leaders of major enterprise and with people who started their first business shortly after a stint in prison. I've spoken with a man who walked out of the North Tower on September 11th and a woman who learned to read by the light of a kerosene lamp made from a soup can. In today's episode, we wanted to focus on six interconnected themes that in some ways define the life cycle of a disruptor. I'll share each theme and provide some background on the guests we interviewed. Then you'll hear an impactful sound bite.

from each of their interviews. The themes start with first, identification of a problem in need of solving. Second, there's courage in taking the consequential step of leaving one's comfort zone to pursue the idea in full. Third, the inevitable failure that one faces when they attempt to change the status quo. Fourth, the realization that without a supportive

community such as Penn State, much of what has occurred may not have been possible. Fifth, are the odds that one had to overcome

sometimes at the hand of extreme poverty, predicament more common among those who attend a land-grant university. And sixth, a concept that may have less to do with entrepreneurship, but everything to do with our shared humanity, highlighting those who have literally faced death along their journey. The purpose of this episode is not to do a deep dive into anyone's theme or guests, but rather to glide across the surface, taking in the view from above. If you leave this episode wanting more,

Thankfully, you can listen to any founders individual story, all thoughtfully cataloged chronologically on the dare disrupt website, Apple podcasts, Spotify and YouTube. These six themes are not a checklist and they are certainly not a syllabus. Rather, they are a portrait of what entrepreneurship looks like from the inside, not the polished LinkedIn version, but the version that is honest about where the drive comes from, what it costs and what it ultimately means. That is the story we want to tell today.

So let's get started.

Theme number one, identify a problem in need of solving. Reflecting on this initial theme of identifying a problem in need of solving, what I've often asked myself is what came first in the mind of these entrepreneurs, the problem or the drive to fix it? My conclusion after 50 interviews that these individuals were mostly driven to make a change and have impact first, after which time the problem they set out to solve revealed itself to them. As we will see later,

Sometimes that drive was the result of challenges they faced in their youth. BJ Wurzen, founder and CEO of West Shore Home, one of the largest direct-to-consumer home remodelers in the country, with over 38 locations and revenues exceeding \$750 million at the time of our recording. You may recognize the company and founder as acquirers of the naming rights for Penn State's football field, which is now known as West Shore Home Field at Beaver Stadium. BJ grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

and a family window and door business, the last industry he ever intended to enter.

BJ Werzyn (04:30)

started to formulate this concept of this home remodeling experience is not a great one. Contractors end up being not reliable. They don't return phone calls. There's not a whole lot of transparency into the pricing. They start a project and maybe they show up one day and maybe they don't show up the next. And it always ends up going over time. It always ends up going over budget. But I thought, well, what if I could develop a home remodeling company that could provide this fast, easy, convenient experience for homeowners where it's minimal disruption to their life?

Ryan Newman (05:01)

Mario Siavera, founder and CEO of Quantum Metric, a digital analytics platform now used by over 45 % of the world's internet users to make company websites easier to manage and navigate. Quantum Metric provides real-time feedback to companies, allowing them to improve the experience their customers may have when navigating the websites to complete everyday transactions, such as booking a flight or completing a banking transaction.

Mario grew up outside of Philadelphia, the youngest of six kids with immigrant parents and built his company from Colorado after Penn State. He also served as my initial inspiration for the idea behind the podcast.

Mario Ciabarra (05:41)

On digital, it's really hard to see where people are hitting friction points. Imagine someone comes to your website and you can understand them like you would in a physical store. ~ They can't reach the products on the top shelf. And so you get a ladder out and you pull the top shelf product out and you get the problem that we've now removed this physical understanding and interaction. And we've added a massive scale to it. And I said, Hey, I think we can do that. And I think we can do it even better.

so you can observe them.

Give it to the customer. How do we handle?

Ryan Newman (06:09)

Theme number two, having the courage to leave. Reflecting on the second theme of having the courage to leave, we find many instances of individuals who have an idea or problem they want to solve, but find the greatest challenge to be taking that leap of faith to actually start something new. For this reason, when interviewing guests, we always try to hone in on that pivotal moment when the entrepreneur executed on their vision and burned the boats as Hernan Cortez famously did upon landing in Mexico.

to conquer the Aztec empire in the 1500s, signaling to his troops that from this point forward, there was no turning back. Sean Griffey and Ryan Williamson, co-founders of Industry Drive, a digital media company acquired by Informa in 2022, after growing to over 14 million North American users. Before Industry Dive, Sean and Ryan worked together at another company. Sean was Ryan's boss. Ryan liked working for Sean until one day, Ryan tried to quit. Here's Sean's side of the story.

Sean Griffey (07:11)

Ryan came to me one day and resigned and was going to go take a job somewhere else. And he was the revenue sales guy, right? But I realized Brian is the best person I work with day in and day out. I need to put on my sales shoes right now. And I convinced him that actually I was thinking that we would start something. So instead of him going somewhere else and being part of a founding team, I said, why don't we do it together?

Ryan Newman (07:36)

And now for Ryan's side of the story.

Ryan Willumson (07:40)

I loved working for Sean. loved working in fierce markets, but it had been six or seven years there and I had been promoted and I didn't really see a higher level I could go. And as we said, we're owned by private equity. So it's not like they're handing over pieces of the

business to employees. And I wanted to work, go into an office and make a bet on myself. And that was kind of the reason that that happened. That said, I like taking risks, bet on myself. And this was even a bigger risk. And Sean was a much

more known quantity and I thought we could do it.

Ryan Newman (08:13)

Matt Berzina, Penn State's first prominent entrepreneur in residence, co-founder of Zobny, which attracted Microsoft as a potential acquirer and later co-founder of Sincerely. Matt dropped out of a PhD program at Maryland to start his first company with a near stranger he met on Craigslist looking for roommates. Matt, rightfully so, was also Dare to Disrupt's first podcast guest, as no one has arguably done more to support entrepreneurship at Penn State than Matt.

Matt Brezina (08:43)

I found out it wasn't the best path to starting a company. They there in my program with me, we're an entrepreneur, so I kind of felt different and I eventually started my first company to a PhD what actually drop out to start.

Ryan Newman

Peter Cacoziello, founder, chairman, and CEO of Advanced Realty Investors, one of the most active commercial real estate development firms in the Northeast, having developed over 20 million square feet. Peter grew up in a coal mining town in southwestern Pennsylvania on public assistance and built his way into banking before a chance conversation changed everything.

Peter Cacoziello (09:31)

Putting. Not place. foundation walls on top of it. Got the news. That we had to tear everything out. So he looked and said, look, you're about ready to leave.

Via job, why don't you come and build this building? So I thought about it probably for 30

So, 30 seconds and said, I'm in.

Ryan Newman (09:45)

Theme three, learning from failures. Learning from one's failure is something that we observe at various points in the entrepreneur's life cycle. Usually the founder will have experienced some type of hardship in their youth, which required immense effort and skill to overcome. Lessons learned early often serve as the foundation for how the entrepreneurs punch through the challenges they encounter when starting or growing a business. Given the exceedingly high failure rate of new ventures, without great resilience and adaptability,

most founders will find themselves closing the doors in their dreams before too long. Susan Robinson, in addition to serving as president of the Penn State Alumni Association, Susan is a speaker, consultant, and leadership expert whose TED Talk, quote, how I fail at being disabled, end quote, has over 1.5 million views. Susan graduated from Penn State in 1994 with a degree in health policy and administration and has spent 25 years working with Fortune 500 companies

leading universities in the United Nations. She grew up in a small town in Northeastern Pennsylvania wanting to be an orthopedic surgeon.

Susan Robinson (10:53)

I was diagnosed with what's called Stargardt's disease or the adolescent onset of macular degeneration. And my retina specialist at the time of diagnosis said, you know, you're going to have to think about a career because you can't be like a fighter pilot. And I was thinking, not a problem. Wasn't really thinking on that one anyway. So no harm, no foul. And then I said, you I can't be an orthopedic surgeon, right? He said, no, you can't be an orthopedic surgeon. I just sort of sat back as any, you know,

committed, ambitious Penn Stater at the age of 19 would say. And I said, if I can't operate in a hospital, I'll just operate the entire hospital.

Ryan Newman (11:31)

Doug Wilbur, CEO of Denim Social, a social media management platform for regulated industries. A former Penn State cross country and track athlete, Doug brought the same discipline of a three sport collegiate athlete into his entrepreneurial life.

Doug Wilber (11:48)

there's a perception that growth is that it kind of continues to tick up a little bit at a time, right up until the reality is it's like up and down. As you go backwards, the line is and you know, running a startup is very emotionally exhausting. If you can stay your true north of like what you're trying to accomplish, then you can ride your way through those ups and downs each and every day. sort of linear. like much more squib and straight anchor

Ryan Newman (12:17)

Theme four, the value of a community such as Penn State. The role of community is widely reported as an important component to anyone's level of overall wellbeing. In this fourth theme, we find the role of the Penn State community in particular to serve as a welcoming environment for the growth of the individual, where new ideas can be explored and foundational support is established. All of which will be called upon when the founders begin their new venture. Bill Seibel, serial entrepreneur, who's been involved in 14 startups, five as a founder, five as a CEO. He grew up in a two-bedroom company home outside Pittsburgh, the son of a steelworker.

Bill Seibel (12:57)

But I think the difference at Penn State is that it's there after you leave. It never leaves. That we are feeling stays with you forever. It pervades the entire state. I remember once at a football game, I was invited to a tailgate. Guy didn't know. I came there and he had a mobile home, the biggest I've ever seen. It took eight parking spaces. I said, what do you use it for? And he said, I just use it to come to football games. And I said, well, how many do you come to? And he said, oh, I've come to every home and away game and every bowl game for the last 35 years.

And I said, wow, what a big fan you are. When did you graduate? He looked at me said, I never went to school there.

Ryan Newman (13:35)

Mo Bende, co-founder and CEO of Carrot, which crossed unicorn status shortly prior to our interview. After Penn State, Mo went on to earn a Gates Cambridge scholarship, worked on the Xbox at Microsoft, and built one of the most innovative hiring platforms in the world.

Mo Bhende (13:53)

When I applied to colleges, I did all of, I guess, you would claim to be the right things in high school, right? And I applied to 13 colleges and Penn State was the only one that took me, right? So I got 12 thin envelopes, one by one. I remember, this is back by the way, when we used to still receive envelopes and mail on where you went to college and not emails. And I just remember my dad kind of really coaching me and saying, doesn't matter.

Right? All it takes is one was his philosophy to me that it only takes one partner, one institution, one school to change your life. It's honestly still the hallmark of my leadership philosophy today. No, you just need one. Yes. And Penn State for me, Ryan, I mean, it was that yes. And so I entered Penn State, I think both with a fire in the belly, because I think my dad had really coached me on, okay, great. So you got into this amazing institution. What are you now going to do with that? but also with gratitude because I think Penn State gave me a shot.

Ryan Newman (14:55)

Theme five, starting with nothing. While perhaps not unique to Penn State alumni, we do find that many of our guests in the podcast have stories of great hardship and limited means during their youth, which often contributed to their drive to succeed later in life. This fifth theme of starting with nothing is far from an overstatement when you reflect on the path of guests such as those like Vivian Valenti, founder and president of VB Cosmetics, creator of Dazzle Dry Nail Polish.

Holder of nine patents, Vivian recently returned to State College to launch three Penn State themed Dazzle Dry colors. Vivian earned her PhD in organic chemistry at Penn State.

Vivian Valenty (15:37)

So I was born in the Philippines in a one room hut with a top roof, no running water, no electricity. Our only source of light at night was a kerosene lamp, which is, know, if you could picture a can of soup, an empty can of soup with a hole on the top where we fill it with kerosene and then insert a rag, a piece of rag to serve as the wick.

That was our source of light at night. so at four years old was when I learned how to write my name with that light and started reading using that light.

Ryan Newman (16:19)

Patrick Kinney, CEO of Keystone Agency Partners, the nation's first broker network, following a 38 career at Travelers Insurance where he rose to executive vice president. Patrick grew up in Kensington, one of the toughest neighborhoods in North Philadelphia, the first in his family to go to college.

Patrick Kinney (16:37)

Got a call from Travers June 29th, 1983 asking me if I could be in Hartford, Connecticut the next day. And if I could, they would interview me. They did not offer me any means to get there. I had no car. I still didn't know how to drive. I went over to see my father who was a disabled Philadelphia police officer at the time, now working as a bartender. It was nine o'clock in the morning and I started telling my dad that I needed a plane ticket or some way to get to...

Hartford by the next day and he said, hitchhike and like that I'll never make it is 230 miles. I don't think I can do it. And sit next to me listening to as a family friend, Johnny use who's who was a local bookie and he asked me how much money I needed. So I called us air had never been on a plane, never been at the airport. They said \$280. He said he would loan me 300 and if I paid it back by the following Thursday, I would only own 350. took the money.

I didn't have a choice. I went to the airport, took the first flight I'd ever taken. Didn't realize that Hartford was not a metropolitan area. There was no transportation from the airport to the hotel they put me in. It was about a 13 mile hitchhiker walk. I ended up probably walking 80 % of it. I got to the hotel where travelers had put me up and I ran into another

problem. I have no ID, I have no credit card, I have no money. It's 1030 at night and they won't.

let me into the hotel. There's no cell phone or anything at that point where you can call somebody or text them. So took me about a half an hour and I talked my way into the hotel with no ID, no credit card. They just said I couldn't eat anything or charge anything. I got up in the morning and I went around to the travelers and the HR lady said to me, I'm really surprised you're here. When I talked to you yesterday, I didn't know if you were going to make it. I'm like, no, I'm here. She started to explain to me that, just want you to know that

When you get home, within about two or three weeks, we'll reimburse you for your flight and send you your money. And I'm like, no, that's not gonna work. We went around and around about 10 minutes in this conference room, me trying to find a nice way to ask her to pay me before I left. Eventually I couldn't get her there, so I had to tell her. I said, ma'am, when you called me yesterday, did it look like I had any money? And she said, no. I said, well, I borrowed the money from a bookie.

And if I don't pay him back by next Thursday, I own 350. I didn't have 300 to start and I clearly don't have 350. Pretty clear that the HR world had never experienced this happening to her. And the woman got up, walked out and left me in the conference room. And I started looking around like any good kid from Kensington and the hood and tried to figure out what I could steal that was worth 300 bucks. I clearly wasn't getting the job.

She came back 10 minutes later and sometimes in your life, Providence, something steps in, rewards you for doing something that 99 % of the world wouldn't have tried. Guy comes in and it's a man with her. I thought he was security. I'd feel like, oh shit, they're gonna throw me out. And his name was Bill Bannon. Luckily for me, Bill Bannon's from Alany. So he said to me, son, Jeanette has told me this crazy story that you borrowed the money from a hookie hitchhiked here in the airport. And I'm like, yep, that's correct. He said,

Where are you from? And I said, well, I'm from Philadelphia. I said, no, no, no, no. What part of Philly are you from? And I said, oh, well, I'm from seventh and Allegheny, the

Kensington section. The guy looked at her and said, yeah, kids not lying. He borrowed the money from the book. He'd pay him.

Ryan Newman (20:18)

Gary Gilliam. Gary grew up in poverty so acute that his mother, in an act of desperate love, drove him to the Milton Hershey School at age eight to provide a level of education he couldn't receive in their impoverished neighborhood.

Garry Gilliam (20:33)

Mom and I pull up to this big white dome called Founders Hall, right in the middle of campus. And it's marble inside and there's chandeliers and gold everywhere, a lot different than what I was used to seeing there in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. So we pull up, mom and I go in, collect some information, and then we leave. And we pull up to this mansion. And there's a playground, there's kids playing. So mom's like, hey, Junior, go play up on the swings.

I'm gonna go inside here, grab some things and we'll head home. Right? So mom goes in and I'm playing on the swings and she comes back out and I go to get in the car and she's like, no, junior, you know, keep playing on the swings. I left a few things at Founders Hall. I got to go grab them and I'll be right back to get you. So, you know, mom leaves and I'm like, all right, you know, I have no reason to think otherwise. I'm having a good time. And, you know, it starts getting darker and darker and darker. And his random dude comes out of the student home and he's like, Hey, Gary, it's time for you to come in and shower and get ready for bed.

And I'm like, you where's my mom? Who are you? Stranger danger talking about showers and beds. Like I'm out. Right. So I hopped off the swing and start chucking to where mom said she was going to be at. You know, and this guy's running after me like, no, Gary, you know, this is your home. Where your family, your mom signed you over to us. Right. And I'm eight years old at the time. I have no idea. Mom didn't get me prepped or anything. ~ So very traumatic feelings of abandonment.

You know, the first two years being at the school, know, cried myself to sleep every single night, just trying to figure out, know, do I get to see my mom again? Do I get to see my brother again? Do I get to see my family? Like, I do something wrong? Did I do something right? Like, why, why am I here? Right? Lots of questions that I eventually started to figure out.

Ryan Newman (22:18)

Theme six, facing mortality. While this theme may have the least to do explicitly with entrepreneurship, it has everything to do with our shared humanity. For those founders who have faced their own mortality, their mission seems all the more intentional. Ryan Owen, co-founder of Wicket, a facial authentication company reshaping identity verification at live events, and Cast Iron Media, a sports and entertainment solutions firm.

Ryan had a successful career on Wall Street as a trader before the morning of September 11th, 2001 changed everything.

Ryan Owen (22:54)

I was in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11th, which was the first tower to get hit. I had just gotten off the Port Authority train and I was on the escalator up the stairs when the first plane hit. And so as I got to the top of the stairs, all I saw were about 500 people screaming and running straight at me. Hit and it knocked through the other side of the building. They saw the debris falling, but no one knew what had happened. So they were running right back towards the middle of the building, which is where the escalators were the plane.

Ryan Owen (23:24)

there was a J.Crew right at the top of the escalator. So I immediately ran into the J.Crew because my plan was to go out their back door. And I soon found that there are no back doors to any store inside the World Trade Center. So my moment advantage of moving quickly was quickly destroyed. And I looked up and the size of the impact on the building was so big that I knew it could not be just a little plane. ran into the American Stock Exchange, which was just a block away.

As I did that, that's when we saw the second tower get hit. The towers fell. And at that point it was very crowded and people were in full panic. And so we decided to put water on our trading jackets, wrap them around our head. And back then you had to stand all day as a trader. And so I wore sneakers. We ran all the way to the Brooklyn bridge from the AmEx, which was basically sprinted amidst all this debris. To this day, I wear sneakers every day.

because of that experience, pretty much in any circumstance. Obviously a lot of people had it worse than I did, but scarring enough where certain things took a while to get through. And so I decided that I needed to do something completely different because of the emotional experience of it. And my brother had just started a technology company in Chicago. So I said to my wife, let's move out to Chicago and give this a go.

Ryan Newman (24:49)

Doug Leach, founder and CEO of Ascension Recovery Services, one of the fastest growing healthcare companies in the country, and a national leader in behavioral health consulting. Doug graduated from Penn State in 2005 with a degree in accounting. He came from a good family in Morgantown, West Virginia, good grades, active in sports, but underneath all of it, in the time he was a young child was a severe and undiagnosed anxiety that he never spoke about to anyone. And when he got to Penn State, it got worse.

Doug Leech (25:20)

Second semester freshman year, it was getting pretty bad. I was having trouble sleeping. I was constantly anxious, even to the point of having panic attacks in class. I would go sit down in class at Penn State and it would just rush over me this fear that I'm not gonna be able to get out of this classroom, almost like a claustrophobia type thing. So I'd have to sit by the door in every class that I went to, constantly worrying about things. It got to the point that if you were

in a class and the teacher was going around the room, starting at one side and coming to the other side of the room and everybody was giving feedback on something. I would just sit there and watch that, you know, kind of weave through the class and was getting closer to me and almost blackout. And I didn't know what was going on. The one thing that I did

know is it wasn't normal. And I did not want to tell anybody. I was so embarrassed to tell people, hey, I go to class and I'm going to sit by a door because I might have to get out of there. You know, it's like

I was just afraid, well, if I say that somebody, they're going to think I'm absolutely insane. I was just treading water in middle of the ocean. You know, so I was pretty unhappy, but I just kept going through the motions.

Ryan Newman (26:29)

After graduation, Doug went to Ernst & Young. He transitioned from alcohol to opioids as it relieved his anxiety, but he was still able to function until the collapse.

Doug Leech (26:40)

So at this point in 2010, I was thinking about suicide almost daily. You know, I just looked at my life and thought I was a good kid, good person. So I thought now I'm believing that I'm not a good person. I've hurt so many different people, family, people worried about me. I'm failing at jobs. I mean, I just felt like a total and complete failure. I would have killed myself if not for my family. You know, I just thought

I can't do this to them. They still seem to love me. I don't know why. If not for them, I'm sure that I would have done it. Eventually I got arrested and the arrest is truly what saved my life.

Ryan Newman (27:25)

Norm Potter, co-founder of Allegiance Transportation and Griswold Home Care and former head of wealth management at BB & T. In the spring of 2021, Norm was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer that had spread to his liver. He was given two years to live. He has since had 13 operations and over 2,200 hours of chemotherapy.

Norm Potter (27:47)

rather than sit at my infusion chair, I would just grab my pole with my chemo on it and I'd walk around, we have 30 nurses. I'd go meet them, I'd talk to patients and my nurses have become family to me. So when I said, I do this as a volunteer? They looked at me and said, well, yes. And so I get to spend shifts up there where I have 90 patients.

They can't go anywhere because they're in their chairs getting chemo. And I go around and I talk to them. And it might be all they need is a blanket or a drink, or they need to have a deep spiritual conversation about death because maybe they're close to that. You know, I've had four of my patients die in the last month that, you know, I was very close with, but helping them through very difficult times, it's just been highly rewarding to me.

It's where I know I'm supposed to be. I never thought that that would be the case, but it's where I know I'm supposed to be.

Ryan Newman (28:48)

Hopefully you found value in the anecdotes shared across these six themes of identifying a problem in need of solving, having the courage to leave, learning from failures, the value of the support of Penn State community, starting with nothing and facing mortality. For me personally, I've used these stories to encourage others in my own life. For instance, when a role model of mine was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer in 2023, I wanted to send him words of encouragement, but I was searching for the right message.

I found those words expressed so eloquently by a story that Gary Gilliam shared during his podcast interview. It's October 2nd, 2010. Gary is starting tight end at Penn State. He has his own fan section called Gilliam's Island. And then playing against Iowa, his knee hyper extends. He tears his ACL, his MCL and his meniscus. Between surgeries, he develops a staph infection in his bone marrow. His football career is in jeopardy. So is his life.

He ends up on the sidelines for two years. Five surgeries later, on strong pharmaceuticals for the pain, his grades begin to slip. He stops going to class. He starts to wonder whether any of it was worth it. So he picks up the phone and calls back to the Milton Hershey School. He calls Mrs. Debbie Ainsworth, the leader of the religious programs, the wife of

the athletic director, the woman he describes as his second mom, and he tells her he wants to quit. He doesn't want to do this anymore.

Garry Gilliam (30:12)

He said, God gives the hardest battles to the strongest soldiers and what you're currently going through has nothing to do with you. It'll be a testimony though for the soldiers you lead one day. So have faith in that. Control what you can control, your mindset and your efforts show up every day and you let God take care of the rest. You have an anointing upon you, be a vessel for something far beyond your wildest imagination.

Ryan Newman (30:37)

didn't quit. came back, changed positions his final year gained 40 pounds in two months, made the NFL and eventually walked away from the NFL with the Super Bowl ring to build the bridge eco village to answer in the most concrete possible way. The question he cried in the dark at age eight. Why am I here? Now he knows why I was unsure how religious my role model may have been in that moment. I felt anyone would find solace in Gary's words of encouragement. One final thought to leave you with today.

We are hearing so much about the advent of artificial intelligence and the level of displacement it may cause. While it's true, the tools we have in our hands today are more advanced than at any time in history. In my case, using AI to scan through the 427,000 words which appear in these 50 podcast transcripts and pulling out the most appropriate direct quotes from the text verbatim was immensely helpful in supporting the story we wish to share here today.

Yet I'm reminded of the groundbreaking work by Angus Fletcher. Angus holds a PhD in literature from Yale and is currently a professor in the Department of English at Ohio State. He recently published a book entitled *Primal Intelligence, You Are Smarter Than You Know*, which posits that human intelligence is often misunderstood, focusing too much on logic and data while overlooking powerful innate ability to use intuition, imagination, emotion, and common sense.

It is only in our ability to improve creativity, adaptability and problem solving, according to Fletcher, all expressed via storytelling that humans will have an edge over AI. He goes on to state that we are so busy teaching humans how to think like computers, putting an emphasis on one's ability to process data and solve problems with logic, that we are inadvertently de-emphasizing one's story to do precisely that which computers cannot, to speak and think in story.

It is for this reason that Fletcher's academic appointment is Professor of Story Science at Ohio State's Project Narrative, the world's leading academic think tank for the study of how stories work. Thus, to the extent we are seeking ways to differentiate, add value, or make a difference, perhaps the answer lies in the stories we choose to tell. And for those of us in a position to educate the next generation, it's incumbent upon us to develop the storytelling skills of our future leaders.

I used to think raconteur was just a funny sounding SAT word, but perhaps it holds the secret skill to that which we should all aspire. I hope the lessons and anecdotes of a remarkable collection of 50 Penn State alumni disruptors that I've shared here today only reinforces your belief in the power of storytelling.

That was a special 50th commemorative edition of Dare to Disrupt. This episode was produced and edited by our executive producer, Katie DeFiori. And another word on Katie, while her voice may not be the one you hear from directly each month, I would not be able to do this podcast without her incredible support and effort on all things behind the scenes. So on behalf of not only me, but all the listeners and guests who have benefited from her efforts over the past five years, thank you, Katie.

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