

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 62: Sloane Davidson

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. My guest today is Sloane Davidson, CEO and Founder of Hello Neighbor, a mentoring program that supports resettled refugees by matching them with dedicated neighbors.

Whitney: When you were a little girl, what was the plan?

Sloane: (laughs) Um, what was the plan? That's a great question. I always say I was a little kid with big glasses and big dreams (laughs). Um, I always envisioned something bigger, but I don't think that I really had a clear vision of what it was. But I will say that only in becoming an adult and having a very philanthropically focused and cause focused career do I think back to my childhood and remember all these, like, different little ... I mean, you wouldn't call them initiatives when you're 10 or 12 (laughs), but all these little projects that I did that I just came up with that were very community focused, giving back focused. And so I do think about that a lot, I think there is something to your childhood self, uh, that we sometimes lose as we get older. And to be able to go back and rediscover it, or come back to that notion of what really lit us up as a kid, I think, is very interesting.

Whitney: What were some of the projects? Can you remember one of them?

Sloane: (laughs) When I was in the fourth grade, I decided that my school should recycle. And I grew up in Pittsburgh. This is like the '80s. Um, and so that was not really being done yet, and I don't know what I read or saw, but I really ... I was very into this. And so I went to my teacher. I went to my parents. And you know, I think really to the credit of all ... of everyone when I was a kid, I had an idea and people said, "Okay. If you can put it together, do it." So I think I raised money. I got, um ... be bought the trashcans. We put them all around the school. To be honest, I don't even think the city was recycling, so I'm a little uncertain how they ... (laughs) how they actually executed it. I have to go back to the principal and ask. But that was definitely the first ... the first thing that I did in-in the fourth grade.

Then I was walking home from school about ... starting in about second grade, and every day I passed a place called The Children's Institute. And it's a, um, a rehabilitation center for kids, uh, and adults that have been in serious accidents and need recovery. It also has programs for special needs. And I walked by it every single day. And one day in the sixth grade, I don't know what propelled me, I walked inside and I said, "I walk past here every day. What do you do?" (laughs) And you know, they toured me around and they told me. And they had a pool, and I loved to swim. And I ... and I said, "Could I volunteer?" Because kids go in the pool and, um, you know, uh, it really helps a lot with the rehab. And they said, "Well if your parents agree." So sure enough, I went home that night and I sat at the dinner table and I said to my mom and my stepdad, "I wanna start volunteering at the Children's Institute." And I just remember as clear as day them looking at me and being like, how and why? And like, (laughs) not like they didn't think

that I wanted to or they didn't support it, but just the idea that I had walked in off the street by myself at the age of whatever you-you are in sixth grade, 12 or something.

And so I did that every week once a week, I think it was Wednesday nights, through middle school. When I was in ninth grade, I-I was like, well I've done this project for a couple of years. And I was, um, very moved by the Ryan White story. I'm sure, uh, many listeners remember he's the young boy that died from, uh, HIV, contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion. And he had been ... he had been passed away for a few years, but it had stuck with me. And there was a place called The Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force, and I remember they were not such a great neighborhood. And um, uh, I took the-the public bus (laughs) and I showed ... and I said I wanted to start volunteering there. And I ended up becoming their youth chair and volunteering there through high school.

So I just always, like, would get this fixation, this idea of something I wanted to do. And it was always volunteering. It was always giving back. It was always something to do with something that moved me that I felt like I wanted to participate in.

Whitney: So where are you in the birth order in your family? Are you youngest? Oldest? Where are you?

Sloane: You're gonna laugh. This is like my-my question of what's something most people don't know about you. This is legitimately like something that I use all the time. So okay, if you're ready, if everyone's ready, I will give you the birth order. I am the oldest child. I am a youngest child. I am a middle. And I am an only.

Whitney: (laughs) Okay.

Sloane: Yeah. Let that ... Let that sink in for a second. I'm the youngest for my dad. My dad had ... I have three older half-sisters. We all just call each other sisters, but you know, they're technically half-sisters. My dad was married before, married my mom, had me, got divorced, so I'm my mom's oldest. My mom got remarried, had my two little sisters. I'm ... So I'm an only. I'm, you know, an-an ... I'm all of them. I'm all of them. And so what so funny about that question, 'cause I know what you're sort of getting at. Um, but I-I ... When I was a kid, I clearly remember going to, like, sleepovers in middle school and we'd open, like, the Seventeen or YM magazine and it was like, wh-what personality are you based on your birth order? And I would just take the good stuff. (laughs)

Whitney: (laughs)

Sloane: So I'd be like, you know, the oldest is assertive but bossy. And I'd be like, no, I'm just assertive. And the youngest is easy going but lazy, or whatever those, you know, kinda labels were that were applied. Well what's really interesting I think about the birth order is that I do play that part with my family to this day based on the room that I'm in. And I think that it's just, ... I think it's made me very adaptable, very aware of my surroundings. I say I'm very, like, situationally aware, very high index on empathy. You know, I always know when I'm with my older sisters that I'm the baby to them, and sometimes they older sister me. But I'm very protective of my little ones and, um, they're all connected

only because of me 'cause I-I'm sort of the unifier. When I'm around, everyone is around. So it's a very interesting part, I think, of my overall personality.

Whitney: So I'm trying to connect the dots and I wonder if you've ever done this drive, this need, this in-innate sense of wanting to-to help and to serve and to be kind and to reach out to people around you. Um, I-I have that one question that I'm wondering. And the other thing I was thinking and the reason I asked about the birth order actually is I was thinking that I'm an oldest child and I cannot imagine that my parents would've been like, "Sure, go ahead and try this out and go ahead and do this thing on your own" and um, and just that they were willing to let you really explore. And I think that's-that's fascinating.

Sloane: I think that to some extent, everyone in my family thought that somebody else had it covered. And I don't mean that to be, you know, pessimistic or throw anybody off. But as I got older, I was always like, why did nobody talk to me about this? Or why ... You know, I-I think part of those teenage angst and college-y years, I had ... I was angry about some stuff 'cause I felt like nobody was, like, looking out for me. When I think of it now, yeah, I think I was empowered and I think that everyone just trusted that I'd figure things out. Um, but I also think to some extent that (laughs) the left ... you know, everyone wasn't always right, you know?

Whitney: Right, right, right.

Sloane: And you know, everyone thought someone-someone else was-was covering it. But I do remember my older sisters always said to me, "Act how you wanna act and that's how we'll treat you." And so I never felt like I was really 8 or 10 or 12 or 14 or ... around them. I remember having really serious adult conversations with my older sisters. Uh, I would like read something or learn something in class in, like, middle school history and talk about it in depth. And they just ... I think everyone in my family just treated me how I acted versus, uh, tying an age to it.

Whitney: Yeah. One other thought on that too, it's interesting when you said that you would go and look at the-the Seventeen magazine and be like, okay, this says ... you know, there's the positive and the negative and you would just grab all the positive. I think there's something really intriguing about that because we do tend to lock ourselves ... and I-I kind of just did it to you of like, well, are you the oldest? Are you the youngest? And therefore you're gonna behave like this. And what you're saying to me is you sorta said, well, okay, I've got a smorgasbord. I think I wanna be this today. I'm gonna be this. I wanna be that. And by the way, my birth order says I can be that. And so it allowed you not only to become situationally aware but also to be able to-to pull out the tool that you needed and was going to be most useful to you in any given situation in order to get done what you needed to get done.

Sloane: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. I agree with that. And I often think back to that little self that, you know, that childhood self of mine. And I wonder what enabled me to not hold on to the negatives. I mean, I think I might have had repercussions later, um, around those. But I do remember being a kid and just shooing those off. And I ... and I ... and maybe I just hid it at the right preteen moment, um, before all of, uh, the outside

influences start to come in and, you know, infiltrate the minds of young girls. Maybe I-I just hid it early enough that I was able to grab on to the positive and feel really great about, you know, those things and ignore the rest.

Whitney: Which is pretty wonderful. If at some point you can bottle that secret sauce, I'm sure, you know, it would be very valuable. So here you are. You-you're-you have this strong bent toward, um, serving your community, um, and then you go to college and you major in political science.

Sloane: Political science and economics. Yep.

Whitney: So why political science and economics?

Sloane: You know, when I was in school, there was like, uh, there was an entrepreneurship track but it wasn't as strong. There was kids in engineering and computer science, but frankly, it was all boys and it seemed incredibly hard. I think liberal arts really spoke to me because I felt like I would be well rounded. I felt like I could take all the different classes I wanted to. And I-I think that I-I had taken an economics, um, class my senior year of high school and just, you know, was good at the math but liked the social science part that applied to it and how people think and how they respond, um, to things. So I think that that was really a lot of what it was about.

Whitney: Interesting. So you were fascinated by systems. You found that you were good at math, and certainly applied math. The engineering door wasn't quite open to you either in your head or actually it sounds like it was a little bit of both. Um, you come out of college, and what do you do, uh, into college? And then talk to us about how you ended up founding Farsight Media.

Sloane: I graduated college in 2001. My original path of what I thought I would was very much thrown off by 9/11. Um, you know, I won't get into all of that now, but a-a number ... Everybody sort of has, I think, something to their story, um, as a child, as a young adult, as a professional, that uh, pins them to that moment in time. And that was very much true for me. Um, and so when I-I did get a job-

Whitney: Wait, wait, wait. No, no, no, no, no. We don't want you to gloss over that.

Sloane: Oh.

Whitney: I think that's interesting because, um, I'm-I'm-I'm older than you are, so I remember where I was and what I was doing.

Sloane: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Um, my children were, you know, very, very young. But it didn't necessarily change the trajectory of my life or career. So I think it's fascinating to hear you say you graduated from school in 2001. So could you talk a little bit about what ... how it did influence you in-in some of the career decisions you made as a ... as a consequence of 9/11?

Sloane: Well the big thing was that I was, I was gonna go spend a year in a restaurant. And I was really into restaurants and food service. And I thought I would go work for a year in a resort, um, and you know, then maybe go back to grad school or do something else. And I was supposed to leave for Florida. Uh, I had a job lined up, um, September 15th. And so I was back in Pittsburgh. I had been, um, traveling over the summer, um, in Europe actually. And I'd gotten back and I was packing up and getting ready to go. And of course, when 9/11 happened, nobody was traveling. Flights were canceled. Every ... You know, that-that whole tourism part of the economy really tanked. But also I just didn't wanna leave my-my family.

And I think that I-I come back to a lot of times, even though I ended up living away from Pittsburgh for 16 years when I did leave, um, the year after 9/11, but I always have been, you know, very close with my family. I sheltered in. Like I wanted to be home. I wanted to pick up my sisters from school. I wanted to eat dinner with my family. Um, and I just really felt thrown off from whatever it was that I thought I was doing, even if it wasn't very serious or, you know, a big job. And I contemplated a whole lot of different career paths.

What's interesting is I ended up moving to Boston and, um, without a job. And you know, the best advice I always give young people is, treat finding a job like having a job. And so on my own, I was able to, um, I landed a job at Ernst & Young actually in their marketing department working on the Entrepreneur of the Year program. Um, but what was interesting about that year that I spent in Boston, I was only there for a year, I wasn't volunteering. I wasn't giving back. I was in that post-college phase where you're working a lot of hours. You're, you know, commuting. And I was not happy. I was really unhappy. And I ... It was probably a number of factors, but when I always think back to that, I think that it's just as valuable to have experiences you don't like or bosses that aren't good or any of those types of, you know, not the best situations, if you can remember them and learn from them and not just push them under the rug.

And so I was in a somewhat toxic work environment. I didn't recognize at the time that I wasn't volunteering or giving back or doing anything philanthropic. But I clearly remember telling people for years after that the most alive I felt every day was that I would be running a little late, I'd get off the T, and I would walk so fast across Copley that the front of my shins would burn. And that was the only time I actually felt alive all day.

Whitney: Wow.

Sloane: And so when I ... and I remember my parents, and I love them, but they ... you know, it was the mentality of you stay in that job for a year. I don't know that I-I-I would give that advice to my own child or to any young professional. I think if you know that something's not working, it's okay to go. I admire people so much who can work in big companies and climb corporate ladders and, um, and I think that there's a lot of creativity and entrepreneurship and innovation that happens in that.

But I-I really think back to that first job out of school and I just recognized that something wasn't for me, and really have tried to hold true to that as the years have

gone by, even as maybe opportunities have come up that were really attractive, that were really lucrative, that had all these other things attached to them. But I-I always sort of had to check myself and say, do you remember how you felt (laughs) when you had a job where you took an elevator to the 40th floor, um, and you felt like a cog in the wheel? And I just really have always tried, maybe not always successfully, but I've always tried to respect that-that part of myself.

Whitney: So how did [Farsight Media](#) come about?

Sloane: I spent the next decade or so working in or around nonprofits. That's sort of how I say it. So I was, uh, working directly in nonprofits doing development. I ended up at a tech start up for social good that was focused on helping nonprofits. I sort of found a little bit of my way within that circle. And um, having kind of been on that line of nonprofit to social impact and, you know, it's a blurry line. Um, and-and seeing different partnerships developing, you know, I put together corporate social responsibility at a nonprofit. But then when I was at the startup, we would do a lot of, like, matchmaking between the two. And I just really felt that I, you know, I was very creative. Um, I was able to differently about how partnerships and things could be put together, and-and see things.

And so I always kind of had projects on the side. Now you would call that a side-side hustle, right? (laughs) Like, that's what 20 ... what 20-somethings call a side hustle. There was no word for it. But I was always working on something on the side. And I taught myself how to blog and how to use WordPress and, um, how to do light coding. I would ... I would, like, decide I was gonna learn something and just do it.

And so Farsight Media really came because I had these side projects I was working on, and I landed one big enough where I thought, okay, I can ... I can do this. I can do this full-time. You know, and within that journey, um, I lived in different cities. So I was in Boston. I moved to southern California. I lived in LA for five years. I was in New Orleans for a few years, um, in sort of a post-Katrina environment where I was working pro bono or very close with a few nonprofits that were doing really amazing work. And then I would have a few corporate clients. I always sort of said I had an anchor client that was a bigger client that paid more money that allowed me to do more work with nonprofits. Um, and I really kind of liked that model that I created, and so I stuck with it for-for a number of years. And it was great because I could be working on a great corporate project, but then be doing something, you know, with an international NGO or with a small bootstrap nonprofit. And I really liked that flexibility in being able to change gears and-and apply big thinking to little think- ... you know, big systems to little systems, and vice versa. And just sort of being able to be, I think, really creative, um, and execute really well.

So you know, I talked to a lot of people over the years who maybe wanna do consulting full-time or work for themselves. And I think there's a big reality check there, 'cause there's a big amount of overhead, um, you know, I don't know that people are always charging what they're worth or recognizing how much time goes into signing projects. So that's not what this conversation's about, but I definitely, um, you know, think that I worked really, really hard at figuring out how to make a good living working for myself.

Whitney: So before we move on, I ... you-you said, well, this isn't the subject of this conversation. But I do think that, um, there are a number of people who are listening to you thinking, you know what? I'd like to try to do that. I do want to try to do consulting and see if I can make that work. Do you have any suggestions or learnings or tips that you would give to people who are thinking that they would like to move into that world?

Sloane: Yes. Yes, I do. So, in no particular order, but I think number one, um, is somebody focused and-and good enough at time management? Because you won't have a boss looking over your shoulder, and so all of those pieces. Are you good at handling money? You know, do you ... That-that part is really important. To this day, I set aside a day every month when I might go through invoices or check all of my accounts or credit score, you know, or any of those pieces. But being able to, like, segment my-my head and think about how I spend my time. I think that's really important. Um, are you a closer? A big part of working for yourself is finding projects and selling them in, and closing the deal. So I would definitely if people are interested that they should maybe do a side project. I don't know that I would say so much just up and quit their job and try something new. The ramp up time is pretty heavy.

And-and then on the financial side, it costs a lot of upstart. You probably need a website. You would need to, uh, file to have an LLC and all the tax documents. I think there's a number of ways that people talk about how much you should charge per hour. A really simple one that I think works really well is take your hourly and times it by three, and that's where you should be. Because a third goes to you, a third goes to overhead, and a third goes to taxes. That's very simplified. I'm not a CPA or a bookkeeper and accountant, but um- It's interesting-

Whitney: Just to clarify ... Just to clarify-When you say your hourly-

Sloane: Yeah.

Whitney: What ... where are you getting that number? 'Cause I think that's helpful for people.

Sloane: Sure. So let's say someone wants to charge \$50.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sloane: They ... you know, \$50 an hour. I would say you should charge \$150. Or think about ... think about how much you want for your take home per hour. The clarification would be, what do you think your take home should be per hour? Because I definitely know people who work for themselves who maybe charge ... you know, who charge \$25 or \$50. But that means you're probably getting \$10 to \$15 an hour. That's a minimum, you know, that's a minimum wage rate. If you think about what you're actually getting from it.

Whitney: Got it. Got it. Okay. So your advice would be is, if you're not already good at time management, work on improving your time management skills. Number two is, are you good at managing and handling your money? Um, because you're going to have to do all

the invoicing and ... unless you're gonna hire a bookkeeper, but you're probably still gonna have to do all the invoicing. The third you said was, are you able to close? I think that when you're ... at least from my experience, having been inside of a business, you don't ever have to close anything unless you're in sales.

Sloane: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And most, you know, some people are in sales. But most people aren't. And the ability to close and to negotiate and also to figure out how you should price your services I think is one of the hardest things. And-and so this idea of a side hustle that you just talked about is incredibly valuable to figure out, will someone actually even pay you to do what you think you want to do? And if they'll start to pay you, then you may have a business. If not, then you probably need to tweak.

Sloane: Exactly. It's interesting because one of my-my core phrases that I always say about giving back to people, you know, I spoke and wrote extensively about being philanthropic or finding ... um, there's a phrase I coined called cause-filled living, which is really around bringing cause into your life. And I spoke and wrote extensively on that for years through a blog I had called [The Causemopolitan](#), C-a-u-s-e, um, that was award-winning and wonderful and a really great experience for me. But the core phrase I always said was, start small, start anywhere. And I think that applies with really anything in your life. I mean, it certainly applies to the side hustle concept. But you know, if you think about buying a house or a large purchase ... plan, you might say, "Okay I need to save this much money. I need to improve my credit score. I need to think about pulling back on certain finances." And I think a lot of times in life, for big projects, we are able to see a longer runway. But for other things, for some reason we have these blockages and we think it's this all or nothing calculation.

And so what I mean when I apply it to giving back is I would say, you know, think about, do you wanna give your time? Do you wanna give money? Do you have something in kind, uh, an expertise that you have that you can offer? But a lot of people would say they wanna wait 'til they have a million dollars. They wanna wait 'til they have all the time in the world. They ... You know, people kind of put this big expectation on philanthropy and the word philanthropy and what it sort of imbues. And I think the same thing could be said for careers or, you know, this concept. I think a lot of people have a dream of something that they wanna do. They wanna move to an island and sell pina coladas out of a coconut. There are ways that you can start to put it together piece by piece, step by step to get there. But I think I've always been pretty good at planning out, intentionally or not, to be able to get to the places that I wanna get to.

Whitney: I wanna take that phrase, that, um, catch phrase of yours. Start small, start anywhere, and have you tell us how you applied that to your current, uh, initiative of being the founder and CEO of Hello Neighbor in Pittsburgh.

Sloane: So [Hello Neighbor](#) is a mentorship program for refugees. It's similar to a Big Brother Big Sister, any other type of traditional style mentoring program, except we apply the model to recently resettled refugees. And we focus on refugees who have been in the US between six months and about seven years. We don't necessarily have an expiration

on it, but that's about the sweet spot that we're seeing. And we're just about to turn the corner into our second year, so we're still very much in the pilot.

But the mentorship program itself is, um, a four month initial commitment. We have, uh, on the mentor side, it's individuals, it's couples, it's families. So we welcome ... and the entire family unit to participate. And we have a lot of families with young kids, middle school, high school kids that are spending time with their families doing this volunteer work. And-and it's been a great success. I mean, the refugees come right now from seven different countries. So we have people from ... that originally are from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Bhutan, the Congo, and Rwanda. And that really matches the Pittsburgh demographics of refugees. So you know, all cities are sort of different of where they come from.

So that's the overview of Hello Neighbor and sort of what we've been up to. But how I got there in terms of the start small, start anywhere, I will say. So over the course of Farsight Media and different full-time jobs I had, but always having that consulting on the side, I really worked hard at having projects that had an international focus and where, if possible, I could go and do implementation work on the ground. So I would have a project that was based in the Congo, and then I went there and I spend two and a half months. Or um, in Ghana or in Guatemala or Haiti, or I spent seven months in the Philippines, um, being a [Kiva fellow](#) in microfinance. And so I'd had all this international experience. Um, and I think that that's a very special skill. I've sat in villages where I don't really speak the language and I'm working through a project or I'm helping a-an international NGO do something on the ground. But me myself would be, you know, uncomfortable in the sense that I maybe don't speak the language or it's a brand new place for me.

And when my husband and I moved back to Pittsburgh, so where I'm originally from, you know, I'd lived away for 16 years. I was pregnant with my son. And we were really wanting to come back and have the support system, have the family, um, be in the city that was going through this incredible resurgence. And I just felt that I wanted to be here and be a part of it. And I thought about, how can I apply this international work I've done to living in Pittsburgh? I'm not gonna get on a plane and go away for weeks on end having ... leaving a baby at home. It's just not gonna happen.

And I started to look around and look at the refugees and immigrant populations and think about the fact that they left their entire support system behind. And it just really struck me. It was a very interesting crossroads where here I was starting my own family and thinking about all this international work I had done, and-and how, um, family-oriented and community-focused other, you know, parts of the world are, and what happens when they come here.

And so I really started to dive into the refugee experience, and I think that's one of my biggest pieces of advice for anyone. If you're interested in something, talk to as many people as you can who do that thing. Research as much as you can. I spent countless hours talking, researching, writing, really thinking about this refugee space and learning as becoming an expert. You know, not an expert working in it, but an expert in terms of all of the things that I could possibly know and learn. What I really found was that the

first three months of a refugee's experience are pretty set because that's when the majority of your federal support is and it's called the reception and placement period. You have a case manager. You get a social security number because you're gonna pay taxes. And they help you get a job and an apartment and, um, signed up for ESL classes if kids are in school. But after that 90th day, there's a big drop off.

And when I thought about my first three months in a new job or apartment or relationship or job, it's a whirlwind. And so the idea that after that they were sort of on their own really stuck with me and I started to explore what that post-resettlement phase looked like. And I tested it out myself. I think you're your best test market for something. And so, um, there's a Syrian family I found that lived in my neighborhood. I had them over for a Thanksgiving dinner. I got to know them. They came to my husband's birthday and our holiday party and my son's birthday party and I spent time with them. And as that relationship developed, I started talking about it more. And other people were saying, "I would like to do something similar to that." And that was really the nexus around Hello Neighbor. It came from this-this place inside me where I thought, what am I good at? What have I always enjoyed doing? Moving back to Pittsburgh gave me a bit of a clean slate in that I felt like I have no excuses not to do the thing that I think I've always been supposed to do.

And so I really had to think about what do I wanna do with this next part of my life and my career? And it came back to making an impact locally and doing something that made me feel really good about going to work every day because it helped ... because it was in the breadth of helping others. It was in service to others.

Whitney: Oh, there's so much here, Sloane. One-one thing that I-I think is interesting and will be helpful for people as they're hearing your story is, uh, just to-to our listeners, I've known Sloane for about four or five years, and so have had an opportunity to touch base with her every once in a while and to hear her talk through her discovery-driven process once she did move back to Pittsburgh. And Sloane, I think it's probably accurate to say that you didn't arrive in Pittsburgh and say, "I'm home. I'm gonna do refugees." It was really discovery-driven. You had lots of different iterations of, "Hmm, it looks like this might be a problem that needs to be solved and this could be a problem." And you were iterating around that until you finally hit on something. And I-I ... my guess is it was three, four, maybe five iterations of trying to find a problem that needed to be solved, as well as a problem that you felt you were uniquely, um, positioned and qualified to solve. Is that accurate?

Sloane: Absolutely. I would say, yeah. I'm not a spring chicken. (laughs) I've been around the block. I, for some reason, am willing to fail or to be uncomfortable in not knowing, and able to push myself through the sticky points to keep going. And that didn't always lead me to the exact thing where I'm doing right now. Kind of ... picture like a tributary or, you know, they always say water finds a way. It has a mind of its own. And I think about that, that that's probably like me. So you know, there've been a lot of different issues that I've been really passionate about. Even when I talked about my childhood, I talked about, you know, recycling and, um, and helping kids, and working in HIV/AIDS. But that has ... You know, I've always been issue-focused in thinking about things. But yeah, it's definitely not always been easy. But I've kept going.

Whitney: Yeah. And I-I just think that's really powerful. Because right now, as-as people are listening and as I'm listening, I hear such conviction and certainty and power in your voice around what you're trying to accomplish. And I think it's helpful for people to know that when you first arrived back in Pittsburgh, you were looking at, uh, lots of different things. And you've ... But as you said, as you were willing to lean into make a decision, have it work or not work, and then continue to iterate. You've now hit on something where you feel like you can really, um, be of service and, um, instead of having just 10 minutes a day where your shins burn and you feel alive, you now feel alive 23 hours a day, or 24 hours a day I should say.

Sloane: I do have a lot of conviction around what I'm doing now, I definitely wanna be really honest in saying that when I was first starting and talking to people about this idea ... and I hate ... I almost hate to say it, but I think I was looking for someone to give me an excuse or a reason not to do it. And I hate to say it, but I think that I was waiting for someone to give me a reason not to. And it didn't happen. And so eventually I had to (laughs) I had to really embrace what I felt the universe was telling me, which was I should do this thing.

Whitney: All right. So can you share one story of something that's happened, um, as you have launched Hello Neighbor? I know you're still only a year in, but just one story that's really ... interaction, experience, that had you say, this is exactly what I need to be doing.

Sloane: Yes. I have so many anecdotal stories of things that have come up. So I'm now spending ... I sort of say, if you're the ... you know, I ... If you're the boss, you get to make hard decisions, but you also get to put your foot down around things that matter. And so the things that matter for me with the families are that whenever there's a baby born, I'm always in the hospital within the first day. Whenever someone has surgery or something else medical, I'm always there. Whenever there's, um, a celebration, a birthday party ... I get invited to a lot of kids' birthday parties. Or um, you know, other graduations, other celebrations. To me, I wanna be a-amongst them. So I don't just wanna be, you know, working on refugee issues from a desk. I wanna be out there in the community, and so every week I am.

Um, but one story that really sticks out is there is a really lovely, amazing Congolese family that was in our program. And their oldest son was graduating from high school, and um, he, uh, got accepted to a local community college and had a plan to go for, you know, a couple years and then transfer somewhere else. Now his high school did not do a good job of talking to him about being the first in his family to go to college and, um, and all those complications. So his parents, you know, they both work hard, two jobs, you know, trying to make it work here. But they don't have that US college experience.

So lo and behold, he gets accepted, he pays the security deposit. Um, he goes for the first ... the first day of classes to register for classes. Now you and I both know that you would register for classes over the summer. You know, there's all this, like, prep work before college starts. So let's put that aside, that he didn't know that. He shows up literally the first day of classes to sign up for classes. And there was a hold on his account because of a-an error that honestly he made where he didn't realize that

something had to be paid. And just was ... had no idea. And no one had helped him figure it out. So he tells his parents. His parents called a mentor. The mentor calls me. They always know that they can elevate, you know, escalate things to me and we problem solve and work things through together. Um, and we decide that we're gonna help this family figure it out.

So I say, we have to all go down in person as a united front to this registrar's office at the community college and figure this out. We get down there and there's one registrar window-window open first, you know, first day. And it's the dad now. It's the son. It's the mentor. It's me. And we're waiting in the line. And we get to the front of the line and we figure out what the situation is and why it is. And I try and do a little, you know, sweet talking to see what other options we might have. We're just, you know, being nice. I don't think it's this woman's fault that the hold is there, but it's complicated and it's-it's multilayered and it's ... it sucks, to be honest. It's just a horrible sucky situation.

And so we, um, are trying to figure this out. And there's a few people behind us in line and, um, the two girls back, she sort of starts huffing and she's like stomping her feet and she's like, come on, like, get ... you know, get your act together, figure this out. And she's sort of like muttering under her breath. And I'm not really someone who's gonna turn around and, like, yell at, you know, someone or anything. But I-I turn around and I'm like, "You know, this child ... this kid is the first in his family to go to college. We're all trying to work through a really difficult situation. I think they should have another window open. I do. If you could just have a little bit of patience, we're trying to figure this out." And so we're there. And this son, would you believe, he pulls out of his pocket, like, a wad of cash that he had saved up from working a summer job this summer and he had gone to the bank and taken it out. And the dad, you know, um, starts thinking about how much he can put in and how much I can put in.

So we start, like, cash and swiping a few different cards just to get this kid to zero so that he can register for classes, because I know how important this first week of school is. And I-I don't want him to have to miss it. And I don't think we should leave the campus without figuring this out. And as we're working through it, I turn around and, you know, the girl who was frustrated has left the line. Somebody else has left the line. And this woman, would you believe, who was watching this entire situation happen, and she can't be more than, you know, 20, 25 herself. She reaches her arm through us with such force and she puts her card down. And she says, "I'm gonna take care of the rest of this for you."

I get so emotional just talking about this story. And I ... We look at her and we're like, "What are you talking about?" And she goes, "I've sat here. I've listened to you. I'm watching you go through this. And I wanna ... you know, I can't imagine the stress of this poor kid and what he must be going through. And I wanna ... I wanna ... I wanna do it." And we're like thanking her and um, she wouldn't ... she didn't even give us her name at first. And we're like, "Can we send you a thank you? Can we do something?" And she's like, "No. No. No." I mean, talk about just like a good Samaritan move. And so we get it all figured out. We get it cleared. We-we step aside and we walk ... you know, we go over to the office to have this kid be able to sign up for classes to start school.

But what I think about in that moment, it-it's really ... it wasn't about the money. It was about the idea that anybody can step up and like help somebody else. And that here we are. We have the mentee family that's trying to do right by themselves. We have the mentor, who signed up for our program. She's already in. She's already like emotionally invested in this family. (laughs) You know, she's committed. But this stranger, this completely other person who doesn't know Hello Neighbor, not in the program, doesn't really care a whole ton about the historical pieces of it, but she just sees that somebody needed help and chose, in that moment, to participate in what we were doing. And it's just such a powerful story and memory of mine because I think that's what I'm trying to do. I'm-I'm trying to help people find the goodness within them amidst and amongst so much noise and negativity in the world and the media and the political system and everything that we're facing right now. And I-I try and say it's not ... you know, I don't pay attention to all of that negative noise. I think about the day to day and the impact that you can make just going through your life and helping people.

Whitney: Thank you for sharing that. I-I'm crying too. Um, so probably we won't be the only ones crying, um.

Sloane: (laughs)

Whitney: If people want to support Hello Neighbor, how can they do it?

Sloane: What I would say is that there's so many organizations that people can help, and I know that. And for anyone listening, if your thing is animal rescue, get involved with animal rescue. If you're into trees, get involved with (laughs) something to do with conservation. I think that there's room for us to be involved with a lot of different things. I like grassroots. I like things that are startup. Every dollar, every little bit helps us. It goes directly to helping us grow and build programs. And if that's interesting to you, you can go to helloneighbor.io and we have lots of information about us. You can make a donation directly. You can certainly sign up for our newsletter or our social media. Some of it is Pitt- ... is Pittsburgh focused, but not all of it. We do have plans to expand to other cities.

Whitney: Oh, what cities? Do you ... Can you tell?

Sloane: Um, so you know. Well, I don't ... No, actually I can't.

Whitney: You're figuring it out.

Sloane: I can't. Not because I'm not telling you, but we're sort of working through ... I'm working through that system now of how to grow and expand. Yeah, exactly. I'm figuring it out. But you know, what I would say is just that, you know, if what we're doing is ... speaks to you and is inspiring to you, you can, you know, just sign up to get more information to learn more about it. You can [make a donation](#). But frankly, even if it's not us, even if you're just listening and you're like, "Oh, I really wish I was involved in something." Just take that minute of emotion and find somewhere to apply it. It doesn't have to be with us. I just think that people, you know, you have that moment of, like, wanting to do

something, and then you get distracted by your life and your day and you move on and you lose it. And I would just say like, hold onto that emotion for just a minute longer and make a \$5 donation. Sign up for a newsletter. Make \$100 ... You know, whatever that might be to you, use it. Because, um, you know, I hate the idea of passion unrequited, or, you know, not taking advantage of that emotion...yeah that's...

Whitney: I think that's right. And so I'm gonna actually commit right now to, um, donate \$100. And I would love it if everybody who's listening would [go on the website](#) and donate \$5 right now. \$5. It would be so, so wonderful if you would do that. And this was not planned, but I was just so moved by the story. I want to invite everybody to do that.

So last question for you, Sloane.

Sloane: Yes?

Whitney: You have a son that's two years old now. What is your hope for him when it comes to the good that he can do in the world?

Sloane: That is heavy. I was terrified at having a (laughs) a son 'cause I thought, oh no, another white male in the world. (laughs) Um, and I ... You know, I come from all sisters. And so just having a son, I was like terrified. And then I thought about it and I was like, wait a second. What a great opportunity that I can take this kid and encourage him to feel emotion and, you know, not do all of the ... to do all of the things that I- that I think make people great regardless of gender or race or socioeconomic background. And so my real hope for him is that I can help him figure out who he is and what he wants to do. And um, and you know, that can be within the lines or that can be coloring out of the lines. I don't wanna apply, you know, any of that to him. But if we all come alive doing the thing that we're supposed to do, like, wouldn't the world be a-a great place. And so that's really what I want for him.

My slight bias on that is, yeah, I want him to be empathetic and I want him to be able to have a global view, and I don't want him to think that his world is the only world that exists. And um, and so I think we'll be working really hard at that. But he accompanies me to so (laughs) so ... uh, we always say he's like the most popular baby in Pittsburgh because every time I walk into a refugee's house, they say, "Where is Felix?" (laughs) So I'm not even the most ... you know, I'm not even the most popular one. So I'm hoping that just through my day to day that he'll get enough exposure to realize that there's so many different types of people and types of existences in the world. And whatever that means to him, um, that he will keep that with him.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's wonderful. Well Sloane, thank you so much for spending this hour ... well, I don't know if it's an hour, but spending this time with me to, um, share your story and to share your journey and to share what matters so much to you in the world, and for the good that you're trying to do. And I'm so glad that that 11 year old girl, uh, grew up still wanting to make a difference.

Sloane: Thank you. Thank you so much. It's been ... It's really ... It's really fun to kind of talk about all of this, so um, it's been really enjoyable and inspiration just to me that (laughs) as well. So thank you so much for giving of the time, um, and asking such thoughtful and wonderful questions. I really enjoyed it.

In those moments when you wonder how your life that currently seems to be a jumble of pieces that will never fit together, keep in mind Sloane Davidson and how her disparate pieces have prepared her for the work she's doing--closeness to her unusual and sprawling family, wanting to serve others, and wanting to make a difference in her neighborhood. And her story about a lady in line paying a boy's college tuition. This is the best of humanity. What a privilege for Sloane, and now for us, to have been a part of this. I've just donated to Hello Neighbor; I hope you will too. Do more if you want, but even \$5. It's our micro-actions that add up to who we want to be.

Practical tip:

You know what I'm going to say. [Donate to Hello Neighbor now](#). C.S. Lewis once said, if our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, we have not given enough.

Thank you to Gene A. for leaving our review of the week on Amazon. He said -

Whether a first-time manager or seasoned executive, Whitney Johnson provides exceptional direction and workable tools on real individual and organizational development. It provides an excellent model for understanding and planning career disruptions, both your own and as you build your "A" team. A must-read for any leader!

Thank you so much, Gene! If you'll send us an email at wj@whitneyjohnson.com, we'll send you \$25 Amazon gift card to purchase a book of your choice, since you were already kind enough to purchase *Build an A Team* and leave that review. For those of you that would like to learn more about Build an A Team, my book with Harvard Business Review Press, download the first chapter at whitneyjohnson.com/ateam.

Thank you again to Sloane Davidson for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Heather Hunt, Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson

And this is Disrupt Yourself.