

Reddit co-founder campaigns for power of Internet

December 5 2013, by Scott Dance

The lanky 18-year-old in a blue mortarboard cap, his shoulders festooned with tassels and other regalia, stepped to the lectern, gave Howard High School's Class of 2001 a nervous snicker and spoke words heard in countless other graduation speeches that year.

"There is no reason why this class shouldn't be a testament to the past thousand years of learning, and the next thousand years," Alexis Ohanian told the crowd at Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia, Md. "Live up to the name 'Class of the Millennium.' The only future we have is that which we make for ourselves."

At the time, Ohanian envisioned becoming a brain surgeon, a scientist curing disease or, perhaps, a lawyer - not one of the creators of Reddit, the so-called "front page of the Internet." But within six years of that high school speech, his role in shaping Reddit into one of the 50 most heavily trafficked websites made him a millionaire.

Now the Columbia native is on a nationwide tour promoting the power of a free and open Internet, hoping to instill in college students and entrepreneurs the same take-a-chance attitude that launched Reddit.

"The Internet, the best and worst thing about it is this is being written right in front of us," Ohanian, 30, told attendees at a recent business breakfast in Baltimore. "We're not just exploring the new frontiers; we're actually building it."

Ohanian knows from firsthand experience. He and University of Virginia classmate Steve Huffman built Reddit from scratch. While Huffman was the technical brain behind it, Ohanian's fingerprints are on everything, from the site's well-known alien mascot to the deal selling it to Conde Nast for millions on Halloween of 2006.

Reddit, an online bulletin board where users post news articles and photos and vote for the ones they like, is perhaps best known for its "Ask Me Anything" forums, which have drawn the likes of President Barack Obama, Bill Gates and Roger Federer - as well as for spreading countless Internet memes of cat photos or animated GIFs. The site has also ignited controversy for hosting discussions sharing photos of underage girls dubbed "jailbait" and for wrongly identifying several people as the Boston Marathon bombers last April.

Ohanian's lesson is an important one for young adults, said Dave Baggett, an entrepreneur and University of Maryland-College Park alumnus who joined him on stage at an event there. It is helping high-achieving students start their own companies rather than aim for jobs at Fortune 500 giants, Baggett said.

"Whereas in the past you would have to have someone approve what you were doing, whether a channel to get published, or to apprentice with someone to become a master at something, there were always gatekeepers," said Baggett, who sold travel data company ITA Software to Google for \$700 million in 2010. "His key message is there are no gatekeepers anymore. I think it's really important for young people to hear that."

Those around Ohanian say the secret to his success is simple: a charming personality and knack for public speaking that is rare in someone who is also so technically gifted. Ohanian traces his accomplishments to experiences from the likes of Ellicott City (Md.) Boy Scout Troop 874, a

CompUSA store and a Howard High science lab.

"It's really difficult to do what he did," said Brian Femiano, one of a group of Ohanian's closest friends; their bond dates to their days at elementary school. "It takes a certain amount of magic and hard work and the right inspiration, and he had all that."

The way Ohanian describes it, none of it would have happened without a complex set of circumstances that led him to a dormitory in Charlottesville, Va., where he met Huffman.

It started with his name. Though he was named after Alexis Arguello, the three-time world champion Nicaraguan boxer, "having a name that's usually given to girls" is a tough way to grow up, Ohanian wrote in his book, "Without Their Permission," published in October. He was overweight and always the tallest in his class to boot, he added.

From an early age, his passion was computers. His parents, Chris and Anke Ohanian, knew little of the budding technology at the time; he was a travel agent and she was a pharmacy technician at Howard County General Hospital. Chris Ohanian recalls spending as much as \$2,500 on a custom-built PC in about 1993, though their only child used it for little more than playing video games like "Doom" and "Quake" until the family sprang for dial-up Internet service a couple of years later.

"He was in seventh heaven," Chris Ohanian said of his son. "This was a huge investment. In hindsight, it was a great move."

In school, Ohanian says, he did "the minimum amount of school work to get the maximum amount of grades." But that was enough to propel him ahead of others his age in the highly rated Howard County schools that had lured the Ohanians from New York City. Meanwhile, activities such as Scouting provided lessons in assertiveness and leadership.

What others found unusual were signs of creativity and entrepreneurship that might have hinted at his future.

As an eighth-grader, Ohanian tackled a group project to design and market a bar of soap in much the same way he would approach Reddit years later. The groups were given nothing more than a list of ingredients, from which they developed what Femiano recalls as an ugly but effective hunk of purple - and Ohanian just remembers it as "terrible."

Still, Ohanian was the only one of his classmates to plan how his soap company would raise capital and go public, Femiano said.

In high school, Ohanian was invited to take an independent study course each year. In one ambitious project, he explored the effects of ethanol on gram-negative bacteria, a category of organisms more resistant to antibiotics.

"He was a leader," recalled Nesbitt Brown, a biochemist who spent 38 years in research and development at Walter Reed Army Medical Center before volunteering with science students at Howard High, including Ohanian. "He was inquisitive, too. He always had questions."

Signs of his natural business sense came out naturally. What might be considered his first startup, well before Reddit, was a business he launched in high school building websites for nonprofits. There were the more typical jobs, too - he practiced upselling as a waiter at Pizza Hut. He was paid to sit for hours in the now-defunct chain CompUSA, periodically running demonstrations of software and hardware, and surfing the Web the rest of the time.

"I can't tell you how many demos I gave to no one," Ohanian wrote in his book. "But damn if that wasn't a fabulous way to start public speaking."

He did well enough to get a job offer from a customer who apparently didn't know Ohanian was just 14 at the time.

He also absorbed business lessons from his father, who gradually saw his travel agent commissions decline so steadily that when one of the last blows came, he responded with a fax laden with expletives written with a marker. Ohanian saw the disruptions that forced his father to adapt his business, and he learned how powerful they could be.

"I knew I wanted to be a disrupter," Ohanian wrote.

Still, Ohanian didn't see himself as a future entrepreneur, even when he started at Virginia.

"There were definitely kids who had these kinds of ambitions, or at least more explicitly had these ambitions, that I just did not have back then," he said in an interview.

It was Huffman who helped spur the entrepreneurial bug, bringing Ohanian along one spring break to hear a presentation by Paul Graham, a British computer programmer who co-founded Y Combinator, a Boston business incubator and venture capital investor.

Reddit wasn't their first project, though. Their big idea was My Mobile Menu (aptly known as MMM), which college students could use to order take-out food via cellphones (before the days of smartphones). They pitched their idea to Graham, and he rejected it - but ended up inviting them to join Y Combinator in Boston after they graduated.

The basis for Reddit came from Graham, who suggested they create something that could be "the front page of the Internet." The pair ran with the idea.

While Huffman wrote code and put out technical fires, Ohanian was emailing users, sweet-talking reporters and slapping Reddit stickers all over the Boston area. When multiple offers came in to acquire the site, it was Ohanian who handled the negotiations.

"Would Reddit have worked without him? I often wonder about that, and I don't think so," Huffman said. "It's hard to nail down what exactly was his influence on Reddit, but it's all over the place."

Friends wondered and worried as Ohanian slept on a mattress on the floor of an apartment in Medford, Mass., toiling to build the site. Amid all the work, his mother was diagnosed with brain cancer and told she had little time. That Ohanian nonetheless pressed on with Reddit was not a surprise, though he spent time away from the venture when her condition worsened, after the sale.

"For a lot of people, they will pursue an idea to a point and if there is too much resistance or fear of rejection of an idea, they will back off," said Jonathan Swyers, another of Ohanian's childhood friends. "With Alexis, there is none of that."

Still, Femiano was shocked to learn that Ohanian, then barely 23, had brokered the multimillion-dollar sale to Conde Nast a year and a half after his graduation from Virginia. The sale price was never disclosed, but friends noticed a difference in his clothes and the way he carried himself right away. He upgraded his father's Washington Redskins season tickets at FedEx Field, soon bought his first car, a Volkswagen Golf, and in 2011, purchased a million-dollar condo in Brooklyn Heights with riverfront views of Lower Manhattan.

His parents, meanwhile, knew their son was capable of as much, if not more, Chris Ohanian said. "It didn't matter what it was, he would apply himself and run with it."

Anke Ohanian survived to see her son's success, though she spent much of her final months mostly paralyzed and unable to speak. She died in March 2008 and remains an inspiration to her son.

In dedicating his book to his parents, Ohanian wrote: "I wish you were here to read this, Mom. May this book, my life, and my persistent smile all honor you."

Now, Ohanian's mission is to motivate the Internet entrepreneurs of the future. He spent much of 2011 campaigning against a pair of anti-piracy proposals in Congress that would have limited Internet free speech. The advocacy earned him the title "Mayor of the Internet," according to Forbes.

He is on a nationwide tour to promote his book and the idea that nobody needs permission to use the Internet to solve problems, or, as Ohanian puts it, "make the world suck less." It included stops at the Baltimore entrepreneur event; at the University of Maryland-College Park in November; and at Johns Hopkins University earlier this week.

During football season, Ohanian is back in Maryland at least eight times, for Washington Redskins home games. Otherwise, his focus is on other startups - Hipmunk, a travel site designed to take the "agony" out of long trips; Breadpig, a resource for entrepreneurs; and 80 others he has invested in. He stopped working for Reddit in 2010 but still serves on the company's board.

A Forbes report published six years to the day after the Conde Nast sale pegs Reddit's value at \$240 million, which, according to media estimates, could be nearly 50 times what Ohanian, Huffman and their investors were paid for it. The site now draws about 80 million users. But Ohanian says that doesn't cause him regret.

"Steve & I absolutely would have done things differently with the benefit of hindsight, but I don't own a time machine (yet), so I don't spend time dwelling on what I could've done," Ohanian wrote in an email. "I've got stuff to do today."

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ALEXIS OHANIAN, REDDIT CO-FOUNDER:

-Age: 30

-Residence: Brooklyn, N.Y.

-Occupations: Startup founder, investor, business adviser, including serving on Reddit's board of directors

-Smartphone of choice: Samsung Galaxy Note 3. "My thumbs are just giant sausages so it's easier to type with a bigger smartphone, and the battery life is amazing," he said.

-Homepage apps: Evernote, Gmail, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, ESPN Scorecenter, Couple (a messaging app he uses to chat with his girlfriend), Waze, TripIt, Google Maps, Google Drive. (Ohanian is an investor in Evernote and Couple.) "I have to install 'Candy Crush' on here," he added.

-Web browser homepage: "I'm 99 percent sure it's Gmail. It should be Reddit, but I'm trying to get stuff done."

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