

Young Social Impact Heroes: Why and How Evan Sharma Decided To Change Our World



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We must touch the hearts of people with important messages. Sometimes science can be dry and unemotional. But we must use data wrapped in color and art to move people into action. These artistic right brain concepts can be

used to ignite the hearts of people to truly have global impact.

As part of my series about young people who are making an important social impact”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Evan Sharma.

Evan Sharma is a neo-expressionist artist who first received acclaim when, at 12, he was accepted into Canada’s largest juried art fair. Now 16, Evan’s work explores thinking about important global issues from the perspective of both art and science, some of which is based on his own experience as an award-winning environmental researcher. Evan has been called Canada’s most talented young artist by NUVO magazine, and one of Toronto’s most exciting artists. He has presented his thoughts on creativity on a number of stages, having given talks at C2, HATCH and Tedx. Evan’s work is now being acquired by collectors from NYC, LA, Toronto and Dubai. He has appeared in a number of documentaries, including those by CBC Art, CTV and Shopify Studios. Evan’s RBLB_(Right Brain Left Brain) fashion line explores the idea that to maximize your potential, you have to use both your artistic and logical brain. To date, sales of Evan’s art have raised over \$50,000 for various charities, including hospital foundations, art education for under-resourced communities, the Canadian Olympic team and the United Way. Evan is creating a new series of paintings to help raise funds for COVID-19. One hundred percent of proceeds will go to charity.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit. Can you tell us a bit how you grew up?

I grew up in Kingston Ontario, Canada. Perhaps the most important influence for my artistic direction has been nature. Since I was very young, I have been an avid skier and most of my winters have been spent alpine ski racing. In the summer I love to be on the water either sailing or fishing for bass and pike. I believe that being in

nature has nurtured my creative abilities. Because I feel so passionately about the environment, I have also done research in the area. I have explored new methods of lowering bovine methane levels through enzymatic and microbial manipulation.

You are currently leading a social impact organization. Can you tell us a bit about what you and your organization are trying to change in our world today?

I am an artist and the creative director behind the emerging brand, RBLB (Right Brain Left Brain). Conceptually both my art and clothing explore the intersection between art and science. For me I am trying to raise awareness of the concept of the importance of being a polymath. That is using both your creative or right brain in conjunction with your left or analytical side to solve big problems. I am most interested in using this philosophy to help with climate change and COVID19. I also am very interested in using my art to raise funds for these and other important causes. Right now, I am currently working on a new art series to help raise funds for COVID19 and emerging infectious diseases.

Can you tell us the backstory about what inspired you to originally feel passionate about this cause?

I've always been very interested in philanthropy and giving back to the community. As my parents are doctors I am able to get an up-close look into this pandemic, and its devastating wake. This inspired me to start brainstorming ways I could help with the COVID-19 relief effort. I decided to combine my artistic career and philanthropic passion to help raise funds for this cause.

Many of us have ideas, dreams, and passions, but never manifest it. They don't get up and just do it. But you did. Was there an "Aha Moment" that made you decide that you were actually going to step up and do it? What was that final trigger?

For me, the moment when I realized that I wanted to commit and pursue my artistic passion was over the course of the summer of grade 6 when I visited the MoMA and Louvre. The main trigger there was just witnessing the impact that these curated paintings had on people of a variety of backgrounds. Seeing this inspired me to paint pieces that were vessels for my own ideas in hopes of having an impact on as many people as possible. I realize how fortunate I have been to be able to identify, and

pursue my passion for creativity at an early age. But others are not as fortunate. To me, to be able to help those who are economically, medically or socially disadvantaged is a necessary requirement to advancing society forward in a fair direction.

Many young people don't know the steps to take to start a new organization. But you did. What are some of the things or steps you took to get your project started?

One of the main steps on the art side was allowing myself to take a risk without fear of failure. With this mindset I applied to an art show in Canada called the Artist's Project. Being 12 at the time, I had no real expectations, but the risk I took paid off. I would say the first step in achieving your vision or goal is just taking a big risk even if you are not sure it will work out, because it just might. The second important thing is figuring out how to reach others who are willing to support your ideas. These people can be everything from customers if you are selling a product or service, collaborators or workers or suppliers of services that you can hire to help in areas that are important to your organization.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company or organization?

I would say the most interesting thing that has happened over my career was when I applied to The Artist Project, which is Canada's largest juried art show — without saying my age. I submitted my work and forgot about it. A number of months later I received my acceptance letter and the fine print mentioned that you had to be 19 years or older to attend the opening night. When we contacted the organization, they said that because it was a juried selection, I was able to attend, but I had to be chaperoned by my parents.

When I arrived at my booth, I was quite intimidated, because I had never done anything like this before. The artists in the booths around me were unbelievably helpful and lent me tools to hang my art. I ran to the local furniture store because I realized I needed a table and chairs. I also looked at everyone's prices and realized that mine were not in line with those of other artists. So, I convinced my father that we had to raise my prices to be consistent with those of the other artists. We then went to the local printing store and created new pricing cards.

The morning of the show I ended up being on Canada's largest national AM news program which was an amazing experience. Shortly after the show opened, there was an insane number of people at my booth. People started to buy my paintings! I then looked at my email, and noticed that I had over 100 email requests to buy my work. I then decided to remove my price cards for a few pieces to give an opportunity to others who could not attend the show. At that point people on the floor started bidding against each other to purchase the pieces!

It certainly was a weekend in which I learned a number of new skills, the importance of supply and demand and the realities of selling art.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson or take away you learned from that?

I was invited to speak and tell my story to 2000+ people at C2 (as part of their "6 Under 16" program). This was an incredible opportunity as it is an international conference that exists at the intersection of creativity and business. In the past when I gave talks at regional and national science fairs I meticulously created posters to cue my presentations. But since this was a short, 5 minute talk, I just thought that I would talk about a couple of stories and just "wing it." In the weeks before the conference, when my parents asked me how the talk was coming along (including the night before), I said, "Don't worry, I got this!"

A few hours before the presentation, we met the AV person and they went over all the details about the talk. When I casually asked him what would happen if I went over the allotted time, he flatly said that they would, "kill the mic after 30 seconds."

Now I was panicked!

My dad, sensing my concern, took me to the corner of the room where we found a quiet spot, and I delivered my presentation to him for the first time. The first time it was rushed, but it came in at 4:49. I did it a few more times until I was comfortable with its cadence and rhythm.

When I was called to the stage, the material was fresh in my head and it went great! But looking back on that experience, I thought to myself that I never wanted to feel

like that again. So now when I show up for meetings or give a presentation, I always do my best to be thoroughly prepared.

None of us can be successful without some help along the way. Did you have mentors or cheerleaders who helped you to succeed? Can you tell us a story about their influence?

I have been incredibly lucky to have had a number of important people influence me.

Harley Finkelstein: I met Harley, the COO of Shopify, in the green room of C2, just after my presentation. He was unbelievably gracious and we bonded over our mutual love of sneakers, street culture and fashion. Over the past couple years, he has been generous with his time and he has given me some great advice surrounding entrepreneurship.

Rob Kingyens: Rob is the CEO of Yellowbrick, the educational company focusing on fashion and streetwear. We crossed paths when I painted live at one of their events. Rob has been very helpful as I have navigated the fashion industry over the past year.

Jeff Staple: I had listened to Jeff's and Complex's podcast, *The Business of Hype*, over the past 2 years. This past fall I had a chance to meet him in his New York office. Jeff has been very helpful in giving me career advice as he is a veteran in the industry.

Yarrow Kraner: Yarrow is Founder of the HATCH organization which is an amazing not-for-profit. He invited me to present in Montana, and we have kept in touch. He has given me great advice on how to use creativity for social causes. I am looking forward to partnering with HATCH on future projects.

Blake Wynn: Blake and I met at Sneakercon in Toronto a while back. Blake is a very successful young entrepreneur who runs a marketing agency called B Wynn Sports. Over the past 6 months Blake has helped me with strategy and various projects including the one that I'm currently working on to raise funds for COVID19. He's been super helpful in giving me advice on navigating the industry at a young age.

Can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your cause?

A couple years ago I was at Sun Peaks in British Columbia for a ski racing camp. While I was skiing in the glades I had the spontaneous idea to paint on the top of the mountain. After a few days of running through logistics with the risk management officials from the resort, we were granted permission to make a short documentary about it. A month or so after I finished the painting, the Canadian Olympic team heard the story of how I completed the piece, and wanted me to help raise funds for an athlete. I donated the painting, which raised enough to fully fund one sailor to attend the upcoming Olympics.

Are there three things the community/society/politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?

The philosophy that I am promoting is adopting polymath thinking to solve important problems like climate change, COVID19 and other emerging infectious diseases. So here are things that we need to collectively start doing:

1. We must embrace science. Data are clear on the big problems. We must listen to the scientists. The risk of rising global temperatures and the risk of spreading SARS CoV2 are clear. We simply cannot deny these facts.
2. We must touch the hearts of people with important messages. Sometimes science can be dry and unemotional. But we must use data wrapped in color and art to move people into action. These artistic right brain concepts can be used to ignite the hearts of people to truly have global impact.
3. Society and politicians must allow young people to be involved in the decision-making process. In the end, it is the youth who are going to inherit the problems that are now accelerating in an exponential fashion. We should have a say in the direction the world is now moving.

What are your “5 things I wish someone told me when I first started” and why. Please share a story or example for each.

1. You need to understand core business principles just as much as the creative side (art, fashion, public engagement). In the beginning, I was solely focused on creating art, but as I progressed I realized that you must be business-minded as

well. This led me to develop my entrepreneurial side, which has helped in spreading and building my vision.

2. You must take advice from a variety of people and sources. If you take advice from solely one person you are only seeing a fraction of the large picture that you are developing. In order to truly understand the space you are in, you must see it from a variety of perspectives.
3. Never compromise your vision- You need to stay true to yourself because if you don't, you blend in with the crowd, instead of paving a path for yourself. And no matter who tells you to do something, if you don't believe in it, don't do it.
4. Building a business or organization takes patience and hard work. Most people think that you can become an overnight sensation, and it may look like that. But in reality, it takes lots of hard work. As well, even the most successful people take losses, and a large part of being successful is dealing with those losses and learning from them.
5. There will always be people who don't like what you do. The important thing is to focus on what you want to do; what you truly feel passionate about. What pulls you out of bed at 5 in the morning? By doing that, a portion of people will respond to it and rally behind you. Be part of, and build part of that community, and forget the haters.

If you could tell other young people one thing about why they should consider making a positive impact on our environment or society, like you, what would you tell them?

I would say that you can't wait for someone else to make a change or else it won't happen. The way I look at it is: you can either be part of the problem or part of the solution. I personally prefer to be part of the solution.

Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

If there is one person I could meet it would be Pharrell Williams. To me he would be ideal because while he is known as an amazing singer and producer, he is very

passionate about art and has done collaborations with Takashi Murakami and Jacob Arabo. But what I really like is that he is very cause-oriented and has started a charity called FOHTA to help with S.T.E.A.M.M. — which promotes balance in science, technology, engineering, arts, math and motivation. To me he is a true polymath and is someone who represents the ideals of RBLB.

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This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success on your great work!