

Martyn Sibley podcast

Part 2

Martyn 0:00

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Martyn 00:17

Hello, I'm Martyn and I'm here today with Josh Wintersgill and in this episode we will be delving into all sorts of interesting topics around entrepreneurship around disabled founders, around getting funding when you're a disabled founder, and generally how entrepreneurship can be such a powerful way to make the world more inclusive. If you have listened to part one of my episode, welcome back.

Martyn 00:53

I just wanted to touch base a bit on funding, I actually was involved in a podcast earlier about barriers to disabled entrepreneurship and the difficulties of getting funding as a disabled founder. So just a little bit, anything relevant on funding, and also again, knowing a bit of the story, but for others around Stelios Foundation, and Stelios in general, it would just be quite good for those that haven't heard any of that part of your business journey, how that evolved and what value that brought to the business as well.

Josh 1:27

Yeah I mean, funding is always a difficult one, isn't it? I mean, entrepreneurs generally find it hard to get funding into their business and I think when you've got a disability that can be exacerbated by so many other factors. And a lot of those factors for us will be those physical elements, such as having the right support around you in order to grow your business. So, you know, I rely on a PA to help, like do printing, package products, send them off, you know, maybe helping me do some accounts, filing paperwork, traveling to meetings. And without that physical support, you know, being able to run a business would basically be impossible.

Josh 2:05

And so I think there's this aspect of access to work and the need for that to be functioning well, in order to help people make a transition into entrepreneurship. And we do know that that's a massive barrier at the moment access to work for a lot of people. But I can't express enough how fortunate I was, that I had quite a plain sailing experience, getting the support to make that jump from kind of working in full time employment, to going into setting up a business and getting access to work to do that.

Josh 2:38

And for a lot of people now you need quite, you need like a really solid business plan, you need to be earning like more than five or ten thousand pounds a year in the business. And it's like, if you're a startup, you may not even be selling yet, but you want to get your business going. And

in order to get your business going. You need someone to help you. But they're saying, well, we're not going to help you because you aren't earning any money yet. But I need help in order to start earning money. So we're just stuck between a rock and a hard place all the time.

Martyn 3:05

Yeah catch 22.

Josh 3:08

But yeah, the Stelios Philanthropic foundation was started by the founder of Easyjet Stelios Haji-loannou. The charity's mission, or the foundation's mission, is to support a diverse range of charitable activities, particularly across the UK, Greece, Cyprus and Monaco. And one of those activities in the UK in particular is supporting disabled entrepreneurs through cash grants to help them and their businesses and that's how I came across Sir Stelios and the Stelios Philanthropic foundation.

Martyn 3:42

Yeah

Josh 3:43

And I think the reason why I got lucky and this ties back into the Stelios stuff is that when I applied for the UK Disabled Entrepreneurs Award, I fortunately won 30,000 pounds from that. And as part of that I was then able to put that into my business plan and my justification, I had finances and because of that my Access to Work grant basically got approved really, really quickly.

Martyn 4:08

Yeah

Josh 4:08

That was just by pure luck, right. And I know that a lot of people have challenges getting that support. And I think I'm an anomaly is what I'm saying not everyone gets that opportunity. So, yeah, it's a big barrier.

Martyn 4:21

Yeah, I mean there is stuff going on at the moment around, there is a campaign called Access to

Funding, and that's trying to highlight that funding difficulty, which as you say helps to unlock the access to work support on that, on that note, on that point, so yeah there's work going on in that place but it's definitely a big challenge at the moment

Josh 4:45

Do you think that there is this, from a wider investment point of view, do you think that people get concerned or apprehensive about investing in disabled entrepreneurs?

Martyn 5:01

Yeah, one of the things, so I am on the steering committee of the Lilac Review which launched last week, so early Feb, and that's all about disability entrepreneurship and its trying to highlight the challenges and so one is you get through to the final of some kind of pitch competition and the venue is not accessible, so it's those kind of things but yeah a big, big part of it is about when venture capitalists see disability they are worried that there is a higher risk on getting the return on their investment and whether that's overtly said or whether that's subliminal or subconscious but I think statistically there is, I don't have a number but, i know the Lilac Review guys have found that's true that disabled founders struggle to get investment.

Josh 5:55

And like yeah, I could naturally believe that, I just think there's this kind of, in the business world you should be judged based on what it is that you're putting forward and its ability to make money. At the end of the day that's what investors are doing, they are there to make money and they want to know that what your business plan or your business model is and whether or not they are going to likely to see a return on investment on that.

Josh 6:20

And it's kind of, judge us based on what we do and what we're saying we are going to do and you know take a risk like any other investor. I mean I was lucky with Stelios. I think he took a punt on me because of I suppose, the attitude and the relationship that he had with air travel. I think as an investor his knowledge in that field directly related to the product and I think that combined that was why I got quite lucky. So I think actually there's also this other element of investors that have a level of awareness and understanding of the businesses that their investing to, I also think is actually probably better that they are more like to invest in you if they can relate to what is it you are trying to do with your disability as well and I think I just got very lucky.

Josh 7:12

Yeah, so yeah, we've we've spoken a bit about my background Martyn, I suppose in terms of my experiences with kind of starting up my business and kind of getting the support around me but you've obviously done a lot with Accomable and then with Disability Horizons and various other ventures and then COVID comes along and you wave, your wave this residuary wand around and meet some wonderful goats and lo and behold, this Purple Goat starts out of nowhere do you want to just explain a little bit about Purple Goat and kind of why it started up around this kind of inclusive marketing aspect and a little bit about where the industry is now in terms of that representation, and maybe your experience in kind of getting that funding and then scaling Purple Goat the way that you've scaled it.

Martyn 8:02

Yeah, sure. So without doing too much backstory, I think it's helpful. The general, almost like the purpose that I've always had around work has been around disability inclusion. And as also even prior to the work situation, I remember growing up thinking I wouldn't work in disability, because that seemed almost like too obvious.

Martyn 8:28

And then after uni, the first job I got was at a disability charity, because there were various elements around that being easier to kind of work out what hours I could do and what challenges I had doing work. So like partly, that was just a pragmatic step on to the career ladder from uni. But then that lit the fire in my belly about the purpose and the passion or disability inclusion. So that's always been the Northstar, like the various projects and businesses and all the things that we gonna get into, they're more like vehicles that I've been able to use for that greater point of disability inclusion.

Martyn 9:12

And that's why every business is almost in a different industry. Because in the end, it's about that inclusion part. So having been at Scope, I started blogging in about 2009. And that was back just as blogging was starting before, like the world now of influencers that just didn't exist. So I think through sharing my personal stories of life with SMA and putting it out in articles and videos, all that kind of stuff. I then got a bit more known. I did quite a lot of media work like writing for The Guardian, presented for BBC. So there was this sort of advocacy ambassadorial stuff going on around disability inclusion.

Martyn 9:56

But what I just kept seeing were two things, that disabled people weren't getting a voice at any of inverted commas, the tables, you know, whether that was the aviation table, or the media table, wherever. So, it was like how to create more like a platform for disabled people to have a voice. That was what Disability Horizons was. And as that became really powerful, for giving, more of a voice to disabled people, the business side of that was a struggle, because it was really hard to monetize, a sort of content disability business, from that Srin and I, with our passion of travel, which obviously very much what we're chatting about today as well. That's what led to Accomable which was looking at the accessible accommodation, how to vet and get more trust around whether a holiday home is accessible or not.

Martyn 10:54

So that had a whole journey of funding and scaling and exiting and technologies, like Srin led more on the tech side and more on the investment side. I was always more kind of marketing and community side at Accomable but it was a phenomenal experience to be involved. And ultimately, Airbnb acquired it.

Martyn 11:18

So I returned back to Disability Horizons and I knew there was something there both around empowering the community as it was almost 10 years earlier when it was founded, but also from the business case, or the business model. And ultimately, we started to offer more like marketing services to brands, rather than selling advertising, which was what the original model was.

Martyn 11:44

And I had a coaching session at Cambridge uni. The business school were really kind just to give me a sort of free coaching session. And the guys said what about if you work with influencers, because that was like 2019 and it was becoming more of a thing, essentially, Instagram content creators with, you know, reasonable followers, what if you would work with lots of influencers, rather than trying to get brands to spend marketing budget on one media platform, you have almost like a campaign of lots of disabled content creators, so the light bulb went on.

Martyn 12:23

But I'd never, never done that before, never worked with influencers. Sort of done my own version of it, but I wasn't an Instagramer, I was more like we said earlier, advocacy and using social media around that. So how to bring that more to a brand marketing business model was all quite new. So I looked on LinkedIn for an influencer marketing agency, I found the Goat agency who were quite early on the point in their journey in innovating influencer marketing as a way of brands spending budget on social media, as opposed to only TV or radio or print and all the other marketing media spends.

Martyn 13:08

And so we did a couple of meetings and I did some sort of lunch and learns at their office and just kind of got to know each other. And then about four years ago, almost to the day, actually, I had a chat with Arron, one of the founders. And the concept was like, well, let's do a disability version of Goat, and we called it Purple Goat, obviously, purple is the colour of disability. Lots of questions of 'why is it purple', and no one really knows. But purple is the colour attributed to disability. And 'goat' they were called Goat, obviously, because of Greatest Of All Time, GOAT. So yeah, Purple Goat was born about four years ago.

Josh 13:49

And then what's the kind of, you touched base on this kind of industry now starting to realise the benefits and the spends that the disability community has. So how's, now you've been running with Purple Goat for a couple of years now, how have you found managing kind of the scale-up of going sort of like from just you and Arron in the team to then having Dom, and now having sort of, you know, 10,15, 20 people plus. Kind of how have you managed that personally, as someone with SMA, we've had various conversations before about like our energy levels and how that impacts our condition. And I think you saw a correlation of the harder you are working, the more you found it affecting deterioration or just general energy level. So maybe just explain a little bit about how you found that.

Martyn 14:40

Yeah, so the first year, year and a half, I was just laser focused, it was all marketing and sales and bringing more clients in. And then that just naturally, was we knew that we then need more people to come in the business to resource it. And that was all just quite like, just head down, get it done.

Martyn 15:01

And then late 2021 I, yeah, I was sort of starting to just run out of steam because I just hadn't stopped for 18 months, there was more and more things to like, hold in my head. And I started to feel like wow, this is growing. It's a lot of responsibility, employing more people, you know, still keeping that disability inclusion values as part of it, not just it becoming only about the business results and that kind of narrative, but then also working with huge global brands.

Martyn 15:35

So yeah, I definitely kind of early 2022 needed a bit of time out just to get my health back on track. I lost a really good friend who had SMA, who was one of the first employees called Chris, he passed away around that Christmas time. So it was a really really dark time around Chris passing away, my health, it was still a crucial part for the business. But having, I would say geeked out a lot of my life on you know entrepreneurial biographies and biopics and that all the stuff that I'd read about was very like intellectually, like yeah that makes sense. And suddenly it was like, Oh, that makes sense. And by that one of the examples I give, is hire talent and get out of the way.

Martyn 16:23

So I definitely at that point was still trying to be everywhere and doing everything. And that was a pivotal point for me to learn to trust and delegate and let other people do elements of the business without me. And so that that was the big lesson was no business is worth my health going down the pan for, health is paramount. And also that you can still be a founder and, you know, start up in a scale up business, while not having to be everywhere and, and doing everything as well. But that had a cost, at that time to learn those lessons as well.

Josh 17:03

It's really interesting, isn't it, because on the one hand, we're very good at giving orders in a not in a not in like, a bad way, but we're so used to telling people what we want when we need it and how to do it. And but that's all okay, doing it in your personal like private life, but then actually doing that in the business world. And then trusting people in that space is a totally different thing again, and actually being able to feel comfortable giving other people stuff for you to do to the standard and the quality and the speed that you want and need is actually a really hard thing to master.

Josh 17:41

And we've had, I remember having a conversation with you before about this, because I'm in a similar position where, you know, there's a lot going on. But in order to achieve the things you want to do, there comes a point where you have to recognise you can't be responsible for all of it. And you do need to allow other people to help you on that journey. As long as they share the same beliefs and values, you'll get there. And it's just having that faith and the right people around you to help kind of get on that, that journey going.

Martyn 18:12

Yeah.

Josh 18:12

And I think, yeah, it's not, it's not an easy thing to master. Because sometimes when you do give other people things to do, and it's not at the standard you want, you've then got to go back and do all of those things yourself in that I should have just done it myself in the first place.

Martyn 18:26

Yes.

Josh 18:26

So there's, you've always got this constant contradiction as well going on. But it's it's really hard to master.

Martyn 18:31

Yeah, and I totally agree with that, I'd say the partnership with the Goat agency, just meant there was always people to call on when we didn't know answers. And then the team has always been well, in the long run, everyone is a Purple Goat employee, there's not Goat employees working at Purple Goat, there's two separate agencies. But yeah, having that backup, and that knowledge sharing was was invaluable.

Martyn 18:57

And then definitely having the amazing people that have joined Purple Goat, it's been really cool. And I'd also say that kind of SMA or no SMA, I learned a lot over time that I'm more the kind of CEO that is externally looking at, you know, talking about the mission, you know, networking, meeting clients, getting to sort of strike strategic partnerships, that kind of thing. But it's been really important that we brought someone in last summer full time, that's now become COO, the chief ops officer, because they're much more, almost sort of like the skill sets of organised and processes and the HR elements.

Martyn 19:44

And I, you know, I could do them and figure them out, but they're not my natural strengths. So there's something about self awareness of what you're better at and what you're not as good at, and leaning into what you're better at. Like, you get different advice from different places. And I'm not even trying to give advice here. It's just my opinion or my experience. But sometimes we can try and fix what we think is almost wrong or a weakness in ourselves so much and we spend so much energy on that when someone else is far more naturally talented and able to do that thing. And we lean into the thing that we're great at. So of course, it's good to like fill in your gaps and learn and grow and all those sorts of things. But in the end, it's about having the right people in the right roles as well.

Josh 20:33

Yeah. Changing subject ever slightly, I'm conscious we could go on on this one. But can you give us an example, maybe a good example and a bad example of either with clients that you've worked with or just things you've seen in general, around good, inclusive marketing that has accurate representation or an example where a company has tried to get it right and they failed it so badly?

Martyn 21:00

Yeah, the general sort of negative or problem side is the fact that of all of the brand advertising that goes on in the world, there was a stat and it's a little bit older, and we're keen to try and update it, but 0.06% of ads feature disabled people, whereas we know sort of 20% of the population have a disability. So that's like the macro problem, that Purple Goat is trying to solve, but I am trying to think off the top of my head of like, where a brand did something and it went wrong and I can't think of a particular brand. But we all know it when we see it that they, you just know they've not spoken to disabled people. And it's just off, it's not authentic. It's just cringe and all that sort of stuff, so you get the gist of what bad inclusive marketing could look like.

Martyn 21:56

On the positive side. It's almost a bit oversited now, but the Malteser ad from quite a few years ago, had that sort of cheekiness and humour within the disability narrative. So that TV ad was was quite a positive one. But I mean, the benefit of influencer marketing is that you can work with multiple people that have all different disabilities. And so you're not having one creative that goes out on one TV ad for six months, you use social media to talk about lots of different experiences. And that's why we're doing it the way we're doing it.

Martyn 22:35

I mean, just an example, we worked with Currys last summer, so we activated a group of disabled influences, talking about the kind of products that Currys sold, and it wasn't disability products, it was mainstream products, but then obviously, the influencers spoke to their personal background and experience with those products. And so that yeah, we got, you know, millions of impressions and lots of engagements, but we ended up winning an award with Currys for that campaign. And so that's the point there is you've got that authenticity, it's got disability baked in from the beginning. It's not an afterthought, and it just doesn't have any cringe factor, because it's real disabled people.

Josh 23:21

Yeah, it's really interesting. And I, this isn't quite influencer marketing stuff that you're doing, but ties back to the air industry actually. There's a really nice advert from Virgin Atlantic, where they've got a range of people from lots of different diverse backgrounds of age, race, gender, disability, and it was just kind of a really nice advert that kind of depicted the culture at Virgin and the types of people that they kind of help travel around the world. And that, you know, everyone is different, and that Virgin Atlantic can cater for that, and that they're open. You know, it was just a really nice warming advert of

Martyn 24:03

Yeah I remember that one

Josh 24:03

What good can look like. And it's just nice that that's come from the aviation industry.

Martyn 24:08

Yeah. And obviously, our topic today, we are just as a general point, working with some tourism, travel brands, and we're helping them listen to disabled consumers, within sites, like roundtables and surveys, we're helping train their staff and consult on what needs to be done better. And then we're activating influencers to showcase what they're already doing well, so it's that 360 service, it's that sort of cycle of listen, change, and then tell, and then doing that forevermore, because, as we noted, disabled or not, consumers need change, and products and service and technology changes. So it's sort of that wheel is really, really important.

Josh 24:54

Yeah, yeah, I agree. And that's the cycle that all industries need to be following,

Martyn 24:59

Yeah exactly

Josh 24:59

Not just the not just travel and tourism.

Martyn 25:01

Yep.

Josh 25:02

Right. I mean, we've covered a lot there. I mean, in terms of like, the future, Martyn, in terms of where we're going and other projects, I mean, are there other any bits that you're kind of doing that maybe fall outside of Purple Goat that you're excited about? Or things that you've picked up that you're kind of working on?

Martyn 25:21

Yeah, I mean the main focus at the moment is Purple Goat, we're still growing, there's a lot more to do a lot more brands to help. There's a lot going on. So that's the main focus, really, but then there's definitely other things bubbling up the last year around entrepreneurship. So I mentioned I'm on the steering committee of the Lilac review, I'm on the board of CREO, which is founders' forum of motability, also trying to support disabled entrepreneurship. I'm a scout for a venture capital company looking for a more diverse portfolio. And I'm actually lecturing on a disability entrepreneurship course with Leicester University. So there's a sort of bucket that's grown out without me planning and chasing it, that's that's bubbling around, that's quite interesting. But yeah, as I said earlier, the big vision is an inclusive world for everyone. And that's going to take me to all sorts of places, I think.

Josh 26:20

Yeah, and it's funny, isn't it, the harder you work, the more doors you seem to knock on, the more start to open and the luckier you seem to get, and it all of a sudden starts kind of unraveling in front of you. And you're like, Oh, my God, it's now starting to make sense. And it's all starting to fall into place. And I think when you have that kind of high level, goal, or objective or aim, or mission, whatever you want to describe it.

Martyn 26:45

It's the why, they why you talked about earlier, isn't it?

Josh 26:48

Yeah, the why. I think from my side. I mean, there's loads it's it's continuing with the business, building out this new product in Canada, which is like really, really exciting. We've obviously got the continuation of trying to empower better rights for passengers with disabilities in air travel. There's wider stuff going on what I'm working on, in terms of this one's actually quite interesting. This is kind of improving public footpath rights of ways and trying to make that more accessible, and trying to help people access the great outdoors.

Josh 27:18

I think that's a really big barrier. So that's getting a bit of my time this year, in terms of focus on the outdoor side of things. So yeah, there's there's lots going on. And that's kind of going to be my focus kind of for the next six months to a year. And then see what happens next year.

Martyn 27:34

Yeah. Excited to see what you do next mate.

Josh 27:37

Yeah, I've no idea. Sometimes it's best just not to know what you're going to do next. And just, you know, let it happen like yours is happening, because I think sometimes the more you plan, it's good, like you said, it's good to have the why and kind of give yourself that scope and breathing space to figure out where you're going. And then all of a sudden, once things start coming in, then you can start channeling everything back in. But I think if you're too focused, you don't give yourself enough room to breathe and you know, let everything come in. So yeah, just let it happen.

Martyn 28:08

Yeah, onwards and upwards.

Martyn 28:14

If you enjoyed this part of the episode, part one covers Josh and I chatting about our travel adventures, the good, the bad, and the ugly of our adventures, and our general passion for tourism. Thanks everyone for listening.