

Proposal The Leadership Project

Speaker: Charles Best, Founder and CEO

Organization: DonorsChoose.org

Proposal Committee:

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Introduction

Charles Best's organization DonorsChoose.org was named one of Fast Company's 50 Most Innovative Companies in the World in 2014 and was once described as the "future of American philanthropy" (Alter, 2007, para. 1). Best has enabled everyday citizens to become philanthropists by creating a platform in which citizens can engage in education reform inspired by classroom teachers at the local level. By bringing Charles Best to Wake Forest University in the spring of 2016, we hope to raise the social consciousness of students by inviting them into important conversations surrounding education and leadership. Conversations about how leadership affects and is affected by ideas such as entrepreneurship and innovation, service and social action, and education and community building are critical when state and local funding for K-12 classrooms cannot meet all the needs of teaching and learning.

Why Wake Forest and Why Now?

Wake Forest University prides itself as a liberal arts university that prepares its students for careers and leadership roles in the 21st century while remaining steadfastly committed to its motto "Pro Humanitate" and empowering its students to live meaningful lives. Through programming such as The Leadership Project, Wake Forest models for its students various styles of leadership, all of which promote personal and professional discovery and are action-based and centered on bettering the world around them. As such, Wake Forest fulfills its vision and mission to create diverse citizens, each of whom is committed to the responsibilities of community and able to engage critically in conversations surrounding national and international issues by linking intellectual curiosity, moral reflection, and commitment to service. Wake Forest aims to develop leaders who are engaged in finding innovative ways to be socially and civically involved both in and beyond the gates of Wake Forest. Never has such a model of leadership been needed as now. In a global age of constantly changing technology, which has led to an exponential increase in online and social media activism, it is imperative that Wake Forest continues to develop students, and future leaders, whose mindsets are innovative, entrepreneurial, and engaged in social responsibility. Such citizenship is vital to a healthy democracy, a topic ripe for discussion in 2016. As an election year, 2016

will provide Wake Forest a prime opportunity to engage students in meaningful dialogue while grappling with and analyzing what democratic citizenship and civic engagement in the 21st century truly means.

Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Charles Best became one of the leaders in market philanthropy at the start of the 21st century. Through the formation of DonorsChoose.org, Best created an innovative form of grant writing that has empowered teachers to create change in their own classrooms and enabled everyday citizens to become philanthropists. In an interview with Skillbridge Magazine (2015), Best described being one of the original pioneers in the field of crowdfunding: “We began in 2000, years and years before crowdfunding was a word and years before social media really took off” (para. 2).

Best describes the company’s small beginnings as the result of an innovative solution to a common need and an entrepreneurial spirit. His commitment to making DonorsChoose.org take off required considerable personal investment (he anonymously funded ten of the first eleven projects to encourage teacher participation). Best describes this commitment and passion as a vital component of entrepreneurship and philanthropy. As he suggests to prospective entrepreneurs, “You should probably put a bigger priority on making your excitement about your offerings tangible...more than coming across as buttoned up and business-like” (Moran, 2014, para. 12).

DonorsChoose.org, which Best calls “half charity, half web company” (Skillbridge Magazine, 2015, para. 4), has remained a leader in the crowdfunding industry, being ranked number nine in Fast Company’s 50 Most Innovative Companies in the World in 2014, the first time a charity had been named in the top ten. In visiting Wake Forest, Charles Best would present a model for innovation and socially-minded entrepreneurship for Wake Forest students through the unique way that DonorsChoose.org has approached the challenges facing public education in the 21st century.

Service and Social Action

Charles Best established his nonprofit with a mission of engaging “the public in public schools by giving people a simple, accountable and personal way to address educational inequity” (DonorsChoose.org, n.d.). Since 2000, 68% of high poverty schools in the United States have had at least one teacher participate in DonorsChoose.org, and 82% of projects funded have come from high poverty schools. In the past year, approximately 87% of completed projects in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools were located in schools where the poverty level was described as high poverty or highest poverty.

According to Empson (2014), Charles Best and DonorsChoose.org is attempting to use data from crowdfunding to demonstrate geographic pockets of educational inequity in our country, which could help respond to questions such as “How much taxpayer money going to education is actually, directly helping students? And if it’s not helping students or getting to classrooms, why not and where’s the disconnect?” (para. 10). Specifically, Best is spreading an innovative approach to education reform that requires empowering key stakeholders (i.e., teachers, parents, students, citizens) to work from the bottom up rather than through the usual bureaucratic channels of systematic change that come from the top down. Best’s vision is “to harness the uncontrolled...power of the crowd to create sustained political pressure that will

force systemic improvements. ‘We want to use our site to galvanize people to give,’ Best says, ‘but also to take important steps toward real change’” (Tyre, 2014, para. 5).

In the spirit of Pro Humanitate, Wake Forest students have worked for years to impact their local community by participating in educational service and social action projects, including tutoring through El Buen Pastor, literacy and enrichment programs through the Department of Education, outreach programs through Volunteer Service Corps, and many other service learning projects established by faculty members across campus. With a growing number of students enrolling in the Department of Education’s new minor in Schools, Education, and Society, connecting philanthropy and entrepreneurship with service and social action through the lens of education reform would provide Wake Forest students with a new understanding of the role of public education and its impact on the public good.

Education and Community Building

The importance of public education in the United States cannot be overstated and yet per-pupil funding for K-12 students in many states across the country is lower than before the 2007-2009 recession (Leachman & Mai, 2014). Leachman & Mai (2014) have reported that although many states increased general school funding per student in 2015, North Carolina ranked second to last in percent change (-4.7%) in per student funding when comparing the 2014-2015 fiscal years. Furthermore, they found that North Carolina was seventh from the bottom in percent change in spending per student at -14.5% from 2008 to 2015 when adjusting for inflation, which estimates at approximately -\$855 per student.

Without a doubt, funding public education and providing resources for teachers to support the teaching and learning of *all* students has become a critical topic of conversation in school systems across the nation. DonorsChoose.org has become one of the most powerful tools for educators at a time when many classroom resources and instructional opportunities have been removed due to budget constraints at the state and local level. However, Althoff and Leskovec (2015) have detailed one of the critiques of DonorsChoose.org, and most other crowdfunding platforms, which is that “74% of [DonorsChoose.org] donors make exactly one donation and never return, [only] 14% return for a second donation, and only 1% of all donors make five donations (over a five year period)” (p. 3). This attrition rate is important if the premise of bringing Charles Best to Wake Forest University is to create dialogue that promotes sustainable change that can impact our local schools, and thereby our local community, for years to come. Our hope is that Wake Forest students will rally around this topic and provide new ideas and innovative solutions to benefit not only our local schools but also the mission of DonorsChoose.org.

As a result of this event, every dollar allocated to Charles Best’s speaker fee will be returned to classrooms in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools through DonorsChoose.org gift cards, which would provide a unique opportunity for Wake Forest University to partner with Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools as well as local foundations, nonprofits, businesses, and media outlets to examine, support, and advocate for improved learning conditions in K-12 schools. Ideally, successful projects funded through gift cards for this event would align with one or more of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools’ long-term goals and priorities, all of which will soon be supported by newly established teacher and leadership academies within the school district. The school system’s primary goals include improving

K-3 literacy, raising high school graduation rates, and closing the achievement gap between subgroups while increasing the performance of all subgroups in the school system.

As concerned citizens, registered voters, and future parents, Wake Forest students would have the opportunity to see and hear Charles Best interact with local education officials, university personnel, and their Wake Forest peers in considering the professional challenges, social pressures, and political ramifications of providing every student in this community as well as across the nation with “the tools and experiences needed for an excellent education” (DonorsChoose.org, n.d.).

For more information on this proposal, see the project page created by former Wake Forest University graduate students in the Department of Education at <http://wfudonorschoose.weebly.com/>.

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