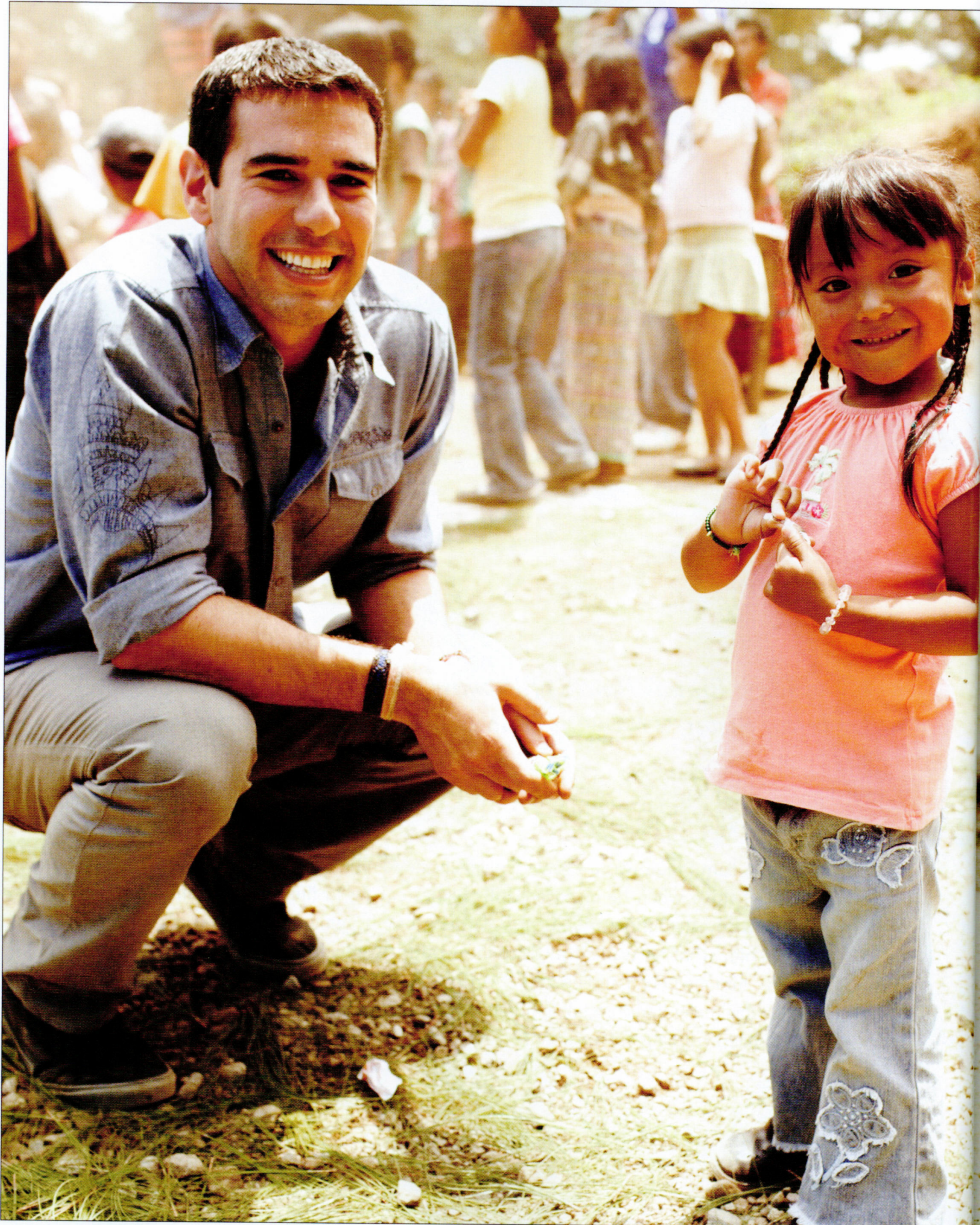


THE write STUFF

Adam Braun's Pencils of Promise, with a little help from Justin Bieber, is bringing education to impoverished children.

WRITTEN BY TROY ANDERSON // PHOTOS BY NICK ONKEN, PENCILS OF PROMISE

Adam Braun was a Brown University student backpacking around the globe when he discovered his higher calling in life. In India, amid devastating poverty, he saw a young boy begging on the street and asked him what he wanted most in the world. "A pencil," the boy replied. "I gave him my pencil and he lit up," Adam says. "He was so excited about it. It was this really transformative moment where I suddenly realized the power of education. It's a great metaphor."





75 MILLION
THE NUMBER OF
CHILDREN WHO
LACK ACCESS TO
EDUCATION

Adam grew up in Greenwich, Conn., an affluent suburb of New York City. Many of his friends' parents worked in the financial industry in New York, and he became fascinated with Wall Street, dreaming of one day becoming an investment banker. "I was really interested in finance and making as much money as possible," Adam says. "I had a lot of early formative experiences at hedge funds, private equities and banks. I just had that kind of entrepreneurial edge. I've created and run small businesses since I was a little kid."

Adam had a great girlfriend and great friends, made good grades, played varsity basketball and looked forward to living the life he always wanted. But that little boy's answer in India — "a pencil" — would be course-altering.

Following his trip to India, Adam spent five years backpacking through more than 50 countries, handing out thousands of pencils across six continents and talking with the local children and their parents. Their stories made it clear there was a need for an international charity that could help the tens of millions of children in the world who don't have access to an education, and Adam began to envision an organization that could build schools based on a model of community ownership and empowerment.

Adam came back to the U.S. a man on fire, wanting to help these people gain access to the quality of education he had growing up. His father, Ervin, says he and his wife saw the writing on the wall when Adam told them how astonished he was at the level of poverty and lack of education throughout the world. "He almost couldn't understand why he was so blessed to have this opportunity when so many millions don't," Ervin says.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Adam's desire to bring global attention to the issue of education in the developing world is an issue close to his family's heart — an ideal first emphasized by his grandmother, Eva Braun. She grew up in a small village in Hungary and attended a one-room school with one teacher, an experience that impressed upon her the importance of a good education. At age 14, the Nazis sent her and her family to the Auschwitz concentration camp, but she's the only one who made it out. "There were a hundred miracles that helped me survive," says Eva, now 81. After the Allies liberated the concentration camps in 1945, Eva returned to Hungary and eventually married and escaped with her husband to the United States during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Her husband studied dentistry in Hungary, and so he became a dental technician in the U.S. They stressed the importance of a good education to their two children, both of whom grew up to also become dentists and even marry other dentists.

"My husband and I thought education was the most important thing," Eva says. "To help people get an education, that helps the whole society — the kids and everybody. We came to this country and sent our children to college. The most important thing to us was their educations."

Adam, who graduated from Brown magna cum laude, made it his mission to spread his grandmother's — and his own — confidence in the power of education to the far corners of the world. Following his extensive worldwide travels, he landed a job at consulting firm Bain & Company, where he soaked up as much knowledge as he could.



Combining the skills he learned at B&C with the information he gained from talking to the directors of nonprofits worldwide, Adam finally made his philanthropic dream a reality in October 2008 with the founding of his organization, the appropriately named Pencils of Promise (PoP). The initial investment? \$25.

"Adam was a brilliant student throughout his academic career," Ervin says. "He was just very gifted in numbers, economics and finance. When he said he wanted to pursue a career in philanthropy, we were a little concerned. I said to Adam, 'Why don't you combine your instincts in finance with your burning desire to create good in the world. Instead of building a couple of schools, why don't you become successful in building a whole education system in the developing world?'"

To raise money for PoP, Adam threw a birthday party, asking friends to give \$20 at the door. About 400 people came, raising \$8,000. He later hosted a masquerade party and asked people to donate \$60 each. He threw another party for New Year's Eve and soon had enough money to build his first school in Laos. "By the time I got home [from



Laos], four months later, we had a school built, there was a movement following us online, mainly on Facebook, and I started to build leadership and volunteer teams," Adam says.

In the beginning, the 20-something volunteers met after work from their corporate jobs. Then PoP built three schools, established a presence in more than 20 cities and brought on more than 100 individuals as

core members. In its first two years, 98 percent of the donations were for amounts of \$100 or less, about half of which came from members of the Millennial generation and other socially conscious youth. Today, more than 400,000 people follow PoP on Facebook or Twitter, or are part of its email and donor database. "We have the largest social media following of any nonprofit started in the last four years," Adam says.

SUPERSTAR SUPPORT

Since its founding, PoP has built or broken ground on more than 50 schools in Laos, Nicaragua and Guatemala and raised more than \$3 million. And its unique approach to establishing schools — which has been applauded by Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Barbara Walters and Katie Couric — involves an impressive amount of generous support, as well as on-site research and development.

To build a school, PoP first meets with the education ministry to get a list of the villages with the greatest educational needs. “The way the model works is very different than most,” Adam says. “We don’t just come in and say, ‘We want to build a school here,’ show up with a bunch of Westerners, build a full school and leave a village with this big, beautiful structure left there.”

Next, PoP staff members visit the villages to gain an understanding of the culture and learn how to best help create a sustainable school system for the area. A community is required to provide 20 percent of the

“By giving \$1 per ticket, what he’s actually done is turn hundreds of thousands of fans into a new generation of philanthropists,” Adam says.

funding and must agree to train and provide a teacher for each classroom. “They don’t have to put up the actual dollars,” Adam explains, “but what they do is make it up by collecting the raw materials and actually performing the labor.” Once constructed, thanks to the dedicated work of village volunteers and local laborers, the school is provided supplies via PoP and its Sanitation, Hygiene, Identity, Nutrition and Environment (SHINE) program to ensure long-term student and school success.

Of course, PoP admits the success in funding these schools could not be achieved without the support of many individuals, businesses, organizations and very generous high-profile celebrities — international

“pop” superstar Justin Bieber, to name one.

Bieber — whose talent manager, Scott “Scooter” Braun, is Adam’s brother — graciously donated \$1 per ticket from the second leg of his North American tour to PoP, and has earmarked a portion of profits from his concerts, fragrance and new album (*Under the Mistletoe*) to PoP and other charities. “By giving \$1 per ticket, what he’s actually done is turn hundreds of thousands of fans into a new generation of philanthropists,” Adam says. “From the start, we’ve always cared about creating a movement and training a new generation of young leaders who take action at home and abroad. Justin is the perfect person to represent that for a new generation.”



Pictured left to right: Usher, with Justin Bieber, who is a major supporter of Pencils of Promise, and Jaden Smith.

10 PERCENT

THE INCREASE IN WAGES A CHILD WILL EARN AS AN ADULT WITH A SINGLE YEAR OF PRIMARY SCHOOL



The 17-year-old international recording superstar is a spokesperson for the organization and one of its biggest supporters. He often encourages his 14 million Twitter followers and other fans to do whatever they can to make the world a better place, whether it is through volunteering, donating to PoP and other nonprofits, or as he urges in his song "Pray," praying for healing or divine assistance.

"Growing up, I never really had a lot," Bieber told the crowd at a recent jam-packed fundraising gala, which raised more than \$1 million for PoP. "I grew up with my mom. My mom raised me. She did an amazing job, but we didn't have a lot of money. We lived in low-income housing. She was doing everything she could to make sure I was taken care of. My grandparents helped us a lot. They were always coming over with groceries."

Ervin explains, "What people don't know about Justin is that he's just a regular kid with a giant heart. He loves children and is so caring for others. Scooter introduced him to what Adam is doing and they just all felt it was a good thing to do. The thought of being able to help these young kids around the world was a natural for him."

A MILLENNIAL MOVEMENT

Adam says the Millennial generation, teens and 20-somethings, is one of collaborators who are collectively achieving the mission of making a positive contribution to the world. He believes this generation wants to have lives filled with meaning and depth, much like he did when founding PoP.

"I think there is a shift in consciousness among the emerging generation," Adam says. "We realize that through digital platforms and other tools, every person can create good, and it's not limited to a select few. You feel better about the way you're spending your time and the meaning and purpose of your life when you are giving back and helping others make a change."

Adam hopes PoP will become the Millennial generation's first great "for-purpose" organization to make a significant impact on the world. "We're part of the Millennial generation that is starting to come of age and we feel we can do something great," he says.

The work PoP is doing couldn't be more in line with this generation's vision to make a positive contribution. Today, one in five adults, or 862 million people, in the developing world can't read or write. Illiteracy is one of the strongest predictors of poverty. Women's illiteracy rates exceed 70 percent in more than 20 developing nations.

For millions of children, the future is bleak: 125 million primary school-aged children, two-thirds of whom are girls, are not in school. Approximately 150 million children do not complete primary school, and another 200 million suffer in poor learning environments, according to CARE, a humanitarian organization fighting global poverty.

"Education is the key to unlocking the potential in any individual," Adam says. "And just because somebody isn't born into a life that starts in the states — Iowa, New York City or Los Angeles — doesn't make them any less qualified or any less capable of creating an impact in the world versus someone who was born in Laos, Nicaragua or Ghana."

Education is at the heart of social and economic development. Education reduces poverty and crime, lowers child mortality rates and promotes economic growth, social cohesion and good governance. Educated mothers are more likely to have healthier children and higher incomes, and studies show that education contributes to the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Research has found that every year of schooling increases individual wages for both men and women by 10 percent.

At the fundraising gala, Adam shared his plans for the upcoming year and shared a story about a recent two-week trip he and Bieber took to Africa. The experience made an impact on both of them and provided a clear direction on where they, and PoP, could next facilitate positive change.

"We were driving through Mozambique and Justin was looking at all these slums," Adam recalls. "I think it was his first time in the developing world and he just looked at me, and I swear, he was like, 'I feel like I'm going to cry. Can't you do something about it?' And I'm proud to announce we are going to Africa. We are going to be in Ghana by July 1."

PoP hopes to have broken ground on 100 schools in Asia, Latin America and Africa by the end of 2012. And it will continue to focus on building schools mostly in rural locations, where the average family income is \$300 to \$500 per year, and children lack not only access to an education, but even the most basic education-related resources, such as paper, books and writing supplies.

"A pencil holds 45,000 words on average," Adam says. "And so with that one small act [of giving a pencil], you can unlock a child's true promise — which is why we call it Pencils of Promise."

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT POP AND HOW TO GET INVOLVED, VISIT PENCILSOF PROMISE.ORG

