

Jon Wainwright: Hi, and welcome to another episode in Policy Change in Practice. I'm Jon Wainwright, and today we're going to be talking about how you go about starting a non-profit, and to talk about that, we're talking with someone who recently started one of their own - Aaron Brieno. Thank you so much for joining us, Aaron.

Aaron Brieno: Thank you, Jon, for having me. I love listening to your guys' discussions. They're very insightful.

JW: Thank you.

AB: Glad to be on here today.

JW: So let's go ahead and get started. Go ahead and tell us about your non-profit. What is it? What's the name? What do you guys do?

AB: Currently I'm in the process of developing a 501 (c) 3 non-profit with the state of California. Primarily, the purpose of the program is to really enhance and promote a college-ready, or college going culture, within the Central Valley - the California Central Valley.

The name of the program is Inspire California. It was initially started last year as a community-based organization, and now we're looking transition to official recognition from the State as a 501 (c) 3 non-profit for a whole host of reasons I'm sure we'll get into shortly.

But essentially, I was prompted to found this organization after reading a 2014 article in my hometown paper. That year I was a third year law school student here at McGeorge and I happened to be home during the weekend. I remember looking at the article, and it was on the front page of our local paper. And it highlighted the fact that the Central Valley, that specific region there, was on a top ten list for the least educated regions in the entire nation.

JW: Oof.

AB: Yeah. I was really shocked by that fact because, in knowing what I did know about California - us having the seventh largest global economy; having a whole host really lucrative sectors, like the tech sector; and a whole host of other really booming industries - I was really surprised that any region in California would make that list.

So I thought about that for a little while. As you can imagine, your third year of law school you're really focused on finalizing your outstanding units. I was trying to get a whole host of legal clinic experience that was taking a lot of my time. I was interning with, actually, a non-profit at the time. And I was getting ready to transition to bar study. So at that time I really couldn't take the necessary steps I would need or allocate a lot of time to that endeavor.

JW: For sure.

AB: So I put it on the back burner. But I never forgot that article. That was something that stuck with me for quite some time. And just remembering that I was part of that public school system and remembering kids back in that region that I found were probably come across some of the same barriers that I did.

So fast forward to my time in the Legislature, now currently working in the California Legislature in the State Senate. There I handle education issues for my State Senator and a whole host of those issues come up again. And again, I was looking at data that showed that the Central Valley, and other parts of the state - not just the Central Valley - I work for State Senator Ben Hueso, who's Chair of the Legislative Latino Caucus. Within his district, in Imperial County, that is a region that has made the list in the past. So some of the same issues we face in the Central Valley I noticed were apparent in his district.

So, as I started again to think about that and just how troubling that really was, I actually, mentally had mentioned to myself, "Wow, somebody should do this."

When you just hear your own internal voice, "Somebody should do something about this," and then I was thinking, well, maybe I should do something about this.

So I started looking into initial steps - what would it take to start working in this space? And initially it was just an interest of mine that I started allocating time in the evenings and on the weekends to really look into this issue. So I started researching...

JW: And where would folks go to start looking at that? When you're switching from the idea phase, the "Ok, how do I go and make this thing happen?" Where did you start looking when you were researching these things? Where do you start looking when you want to start a non-profit?

AB: Well, essentially, I never anticipated starting a non-profit, I just thought of doing work myself. I thought, "Well, how can I make an impact, and make a difference myself?"

And when I started working in this area, I started researching; I started noticing there was a whole host of things really missing in the Central Valley. Unfortunately, the results showed that being one of the least educated regions in the nation, there was a tremendously low number of individuals who have a Bachelor's Degree, or have a Master's degree in that region.

And primarily, a lot of times, if you go through the public school system and you eventually go to college, you go to the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Sacramento. Generally, a lot of those college graduates stay in those regions. They don't return back. Immediately I noticed there's a need for mentorship opportunities, there's a need for that one-on-one mentoring with young college educated professionals.

I started developing these sort of issues, like what are the issues we can tackle to help? I started noticing these issues are going to require a much larger network and more resources than I initially thought. At that phase I started thinking maybe this is a bigger task, or bigger goal, and I might need to look at forming some sort of organization.

At that stage, I just did a Google search, and as such, we live in such an amazing time. You can Google almost anything. So I Googled the steps and I started realizing, maybe a non-profit designation or status is something that would be beneficial to my endeavors.

A great resource, and this is what I used. I just went to Barnes & Noble and picked up Nolo's most recent edition of How to Form a Non-Profit in California. And it's a phenomenal resource guide. And I coupled that with my own legal training as well as a whole host of resources available on Google that you can easily access.

So I started, just slowly but surely - again on my free time - just going about the steps that you need to take. Essentially, I filed paperwork with the California Secretary of State's office. A great place to start is the California Secretary of State's website. They have a really useful and helpful steps for individuals who are interested in possibly forming a non-profit.

So the first step I took was I went to the Secretary of State's website and I submitted paperwork to see if anybody had registered or used my name. I also did a quick search via Google, again, to see if anybody had the name Inspire California. And then I did a quick search on the Secretary of State's website to see if anybody had registered that name, and nobody had, so I filed initial paperwork to register that name.

Also, concurrently, I reached out to an intellectual property attorney and I began the steps with him to see if I could secure that name for all future use. So that was another concurrent step.

JW: So to trademark it, or just to?

AB: Yeah, I initially started discussions with him. And initially, his initial recommendation was maybe it was too early in the process. But I definitely got everything I needed with him squared away so in the event we start to grow and start to move we can file that paperwork when necessary.

I knew at that point that if I was going to need to devote a lot of time and resources into this type endeavor, I wanted to ensure that I had everything, all my I's dotted and T's crossed as far as moving forward. Specifically when it came to intellectual property or trademark I wanted established.

The next step is not necessarily a legal step. I started reaching out, looking for individuals who did website design as well as graphic and logo design so our non-profit could develop a logo, and looked into...

JW: Branding...

AB: Yeah. Printing and also brochures and materials.

JW: Looking if your domain name has been purchased by someone else.

AB: Exactly. So as you can already start to assume, there's quite a lot of work you need to do, essentially. But again, it's relatively easy because so much of it is easily accessible online. Or there's a YouTube video on almost everything. So that was the initial groundwork that I started to develop.

JW: Okay. Were there any resources? Obviously, we've talked about the Secretary of State's website, Google search, books at Barnes and Noble. What other resources are out there that helped you, or that other folks could turn to to help themselves along that process, going from all this initial set up work to getting something that's implemented and rolling?

AB: Well another great resource, another self-help type of resource available, is on the California Association of Nonprofits website. They have a really good checklist, and a really good overview of some of the steps you'll need to take if you're interested in actually establishing a non-profit in California.

Also, there's always a whole host of legal professionals who are available to help. And I initially looked into that possibility but then, seeing that so many individuals had developed their own organizations on their own. And especially since I had gone to law school, I figured, "Well this is probably something I can do myself. And if I get to a point where I'm going to need legal expertise, I'll reach out to specialists."

The case in point, when I decided to reach out to intellectual property specialists, at least for an initial consultation.

JW: Okay. So, now you've got this going. What are some of the ongoing steps that you have to go through to keep that non-profit status?

AB: So, definitely ... and initially too, there's a lot of internal weighing and balancing you have to go as an individual who is thinking about moving your organization or informal association to that non-profit designation. You have to really weigh the pros and cons. One of the biggest pros that come with having that designation is that you have IRS tax benefits. That's obviously something that, I think, really drives most people to officially register with the Secretary of State, and then the IRS. You're going to have that special non-profit designation for tax reporting reasons.

But then there's also a whole host of paperwork you're going to need to fill out and you're going to have to routinely re-evaluate. So some of those issues, or some of things you really need to be cognizant about are: One - you're going to have to file with the Secretary of State's office and you'll have to pay a yearly fee. Two...

JW: Is that a sizeable amount, or is it?

AB: You know, it's relatively it's not too bad when weighing the benefits you get, it's really not. I think it's probably a good investment for most people that will pay dividends and returns. Especially when you start hosting charitable events or you start asking for donations and sponsorships. It's really something that's going to be quite beneficial for you in the long run.

And then there's reporting. Generally, non-profits in almost every state have to develop a Board of Directors and then you'll have to record your minutes and you'll have to do a couple other things that sometimes people find that's not quite worth their time because they're not at that stage yet in their development of their group or their association. A lot of times, some of those barriers are things that dissuade people from taking that next step.

But that is something that you'll have to do on a yearly basis. You'll have to meet and record your minutes and then, essentially, keep those safely in case you're audited or what have you.

JW: Okay. It sounds like for the most part you've gotten Inspire California up and running. And you've done a couple of events so far. So what do you do at the events that you run with Inspire California?

AB: Yeah, that's obviously where the bulk of my time is. Initially laying that groundwork was very, very time consuming. Again, I had a mission objective, and that was to really help high school-aged students in the Central Valley, California's Central Valley, primarily we really service a specific region of the state, right in the heart there - my hometown, Hanford, California.

We have held past events, and we actually have an event this weekend, December 10th, that I've been working on in my free time, that's something that has definitely been at the forefront of my mind recently. Generally though, as you continue to lay that groundwork for your organization or your association prior to getting to that non-profit status, there's a lot of stuff that you need to do depending on your objective and depending on what kind of outcomes you want to see.

For our organization we had very big aspirations, and I think that really goes to the organization and the people we have as part of it. At the initial stage of our planning, another time consuming endeavor was I reached out to a whole host of college educated young professionals who are also Central Valley natives, and that was

probably one of the most time consuming aspects of our program - speaking with those individuals on a one-to-one basis.

So, if I was in Los Angeles already, I was trying to meet with people who are former graduates from the Central Valley and now have very interesting careers. If I was in the Bay Area, I was doing the same thing. So that took months, as you can imagine, because I wanted to personally meet with these individuals and talk to them about the benefits of the program and the benefits of their involvement.

At the conclusion of that, really, I think, a very time consuming period of time in our organization's history, we were able to recruit 15 college educated young professionals who were willing to volunteer their time to either come back as a special speaker for one of our programs, to serve as a mentor for high school aged students, or to serve in some other capacity from a whole host of capacities. Individuals have been there to proofread college essays and personal statements, even from the Bay Area or Los Angeles, we have students email those materials and they'll take the time to proofread someone's statement. Even meeting on calls with students from wherever they may be at.

That was very time consuming, but it paid dividends when we had our first summer college workshop which was last summer. We had a week-long program. It entailed a whole host of special speakers who came down to the Central Valley, and it was really the focus I wanted to highlight because a lot times, I think, the Central Valley is neglected and forgotten.

If you were born and raised, in say the Sacramento region, there's a whole host of organizations or programs you can participate in as a high school aged student. When I was in the Central Valley and I was a student, there wasn't a lot of opportunities for internships or really meaningful work experience. A lot of times I was working in the mall or I was either volunteering at my local Congressional or State representative's office. But other than that there wasn't really a lot of meaningful experiences I could have over my summer vacation. We tried to bring those experiences to the Valley.

This summer was a perfect example. We had a week-long program in July that consisted of Monday-Friday programming, 9:30 until roughly 2:30 each day. Each day we tried to have 3 or 4 special speakers come in, and that's where the mentors had a really large role. A lot of the mentors came down and spoke to the students for 30 minutes, and then opened up the table for conversation and dialogue, so students could ask them questions.

A good example is my little sister. She served as a mentor and she came down to serve one day. She's a registered nurse at Stanford Children's Hospital. She took a day and half off, she drove down, she spoke to the students about her career. She spoke to the students about exactly what it takes to be an RN and the experiences she's had, and then always, again, highlighting the fact that she could never have had that experience

if she didn't have a college education. The students were very interested in some of the things that she had done.

And she's truly lived a really interesting life. At one point she served for 8 months as a missionary in Africa as a nurse. So she was able to show PowerPoint slides of her in Africa and serving a lot of these remote villages and the kids were just really enthralled and they had so many questions for her. At the end of the week, we had a program evaluation and by far she was one of the most interesting speakers in their opinion. That's a good example.

We had also had our local representative, Assembly Member Rudy Salas come in and speak to the students about civic engagement and the opportunities they have. He talked to them about his personal experience growing up in Bakersfield.

At the conclusion of our program we took a tour of the Fresno State campus and had Dr. Joseph Castro speak to the students for an hour, roughly. He could really appreciate the program's impact because he himself came from the Central Valley, as a native of Hanford himself. He was able to talk to the students about his journey. So, roughly, that's what our summer program looked like.

We also offered a whole host of programming related to, actually the college application process. We had Fresno State's admissions officers and recruiters come down and speak to the students, as well as University of the Pacific's. And they were able to answer questions that students had about the application process, about financial aid, as well as scholarships available to students.

It was really very comprehensive. And it gave the students a lot of different perspectives and career perspectives. I spoke obviously myself about working in the Legislature. We had other speakers who spoke about working in journalism, local news companies, what have you.

We have a speaker coming up Sunday, December 10th, who is also a Valley native, Amanda Renteria. She grew up in the Central Valley in a small migrant community, Woodlake, and she rose to really become a pioneer in politics. She was the first Latina Chief of Staff in the U.S. Congress and then she served as Hillary Clinton's national policy director for her Presidential campaign. So we're really excited she's going to be participating in this weekend program.

That's taken up a lot of my time, the slots, using up vacation days to go down to Hanford, and I spoke on the campus of many of the high schools and spoke the government classes, AP Government, as well as touched base with every single career counselor in the district to ensure that there was ample knowledge about the program.

JW: Fantastic. Sounds like you're doing a lot of great work.

AB: Yeah. Thank you.

JW: If people want to learn more about Inspire California, where can they find you?

AB: So, that's our next step and I'm glad you brought that to our attention. Definitely our next step and when the next phase is, we definitely want to start emphasizing the social media presence as well as an online presence.

That's what we're currently working to develop. Right now we're in the stage where we're about to get a website up and ready. We've had to hesitate a little bit because we're trying to get a lot of background information on the mentors, professional headshots for the mentors, as well as a really thorough, and I think, concise biography of them. A lot of that takes a lot of time as far as back and forth between the mentors who are a part of our network now as well as, then again, wanted to get more student participation.

In fact, for our social media campaign, at the conclusion of our summer program we had several students sign up to be Inspire California High School Ambassadors. Again, we wanted to offer them meaningful experiences, so we have one of our High School Ambassadors spearheading our social media campaign.

JW: Very cool.

AB: Yeah, so as you can imagine, we've really slowed down the pace so that we can make it a comfortable experience for a high school student. I told her, the last thing I want you to do is to be stressing about your responsibilities and duties with our organization. I've had her working to help promote this upcoming event and at the conclusion of this event, and the conclusion of her finals and college applications, then we're going to transition and get her some meaningful experience behind operating and running this social media account that she can have meaningful experience to put on her college resume.

So when she gets to college, she'll have some really practical and hands-on experiences in some of these areas that she's interested in. We've really tried to tailor the student's experience to the interests and passions that they have. So this is something, I think that, and we spoke - last time she and I spoke, she asked me, "When I graduate, can I still participate in the program?"

I was like, "Of course, we'd love to have you participate in the program." Actually, one of her school's that she's really interested in is University of Pacific in Stockton. One of the programs there is really high on her list. Definitely, in that sense, we want to continue to have our graduated students come back and continue to speak to the program.

So again, right now we're slowly transitioning, but that's going to be the focus point going forward. We want to have a strong social media presence, Instagram, Facebook, and then an actual website where any individual can go to register online. But again, that's something we really want to focus on and have students lead and drive.

So, again, it's taking a little bit slower than we would like, but I think it's going to offer a really rich and meaningful experience for those students. And once those students are now participating and enabled to share with their friends, add their friends on Instagram via our account. You know, disseminate information, I think it's going to be a much more effective method of direct to our demographic group we're trying to touch. And specifically, that's high school aged students in the Central Valley. I think that's going to be more impactful than, as opposed to myself trying to run that. They're much more tech savvy, and they're much more hip to how to best disseminate information like that.

JW: For sure. Thank you so much for taking the time to come and talk to us, Aaron.

AB: Again, I really enjoy your guys' programming. I like to listen to it on my commute. I find it meaningful and enlightening. Because there's so many issues that you guys touch on, that even as a staffer in the Legislature, you don't have the opportunity to read every report or look at every issue. But it's really nice to have a concise, you know 30 minute or 20 minute discussion on that topic and you feel much more informed about that issue.

JW: Well, thank you very much. And for those of you listening, there you have it. In roughly 20 minutes or so, if you want to start a non-profit you've got the steps here. So thank you very much. And again, this has been a Policy Change in Practice edition of CAP-impact. Thank you so much for listening.