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Abigail Falik

Founder and CEO, Global Citizen Year

When Abigail Falik first conceived of Global Citizen Year—an organization that facilitates a bridge year for youths between high school and college, immersing them in the culture of a developing country—she was a scant eighteen years old. Exhibiting a maturity far beyond her years, she then did what so many of us would not have the patience to do—she waited, allowing the idea to crystalize for more than a decade, during which time she earned two Ivy League master’s, sought out established social entrepreneurs as mentors, and collected real world experience in the international and nonprofit sectors. In other words, she did it the hard way—she worked for it. Perhaps even more importantly, she recognized that the success of any great idea is deeply indebted to timing. When Falik finally launched Global Citizen Year in 2009, America was ripe for the concept. As we stared through the doorway to a new global age, our unpreparedness was and continues to be shocking. Consider this: to date, 50 percent of our congressional leaders do not even hold a passport, only 9 percent of English speaking U.S. citizens know a second language, and just 1 percent of us will ever meet someone living in extreme poverty. Falik envisions a not-too-distant future where these statistics will seem archaic and a year of social service abroad before college will be the norm. High profile partners, such as the Nike Foundation, and an invitation to speak at the Clinton Global Initiative, are just a couple indications that Falik’s gospel already has a devout audience. And according to her, she’s just getting started.

I grew up in the Bay Area, with wonderful, intrepid parents who thought travel was the highest-value education they could imagine for their kids, and they made mighty sacrifices to insure that we had opportunities to do so. Those early experiences following them to far-off locales woke something in me, and gave me a sense of who I was and what it meant to be American in the world.

After high school, I was set to head off to Stanford, but before school I was itching to do something meaningful in the “real world”—something that would push me outside my comfort zone. So I called the Peace Corps. And the Peace Corps said, “Little girl, see you in four years.” I knew that I did not have a lot to give in terms of skills, but I wanted to cut my hands on real work and I had much to learn about why I was going to college in the first place. It was really the frustration of that rejection that set me on this path, which has been about trying to create a rite of passage during

the transition from high school to college. That period is an opportunity to prepare kids for higher education, life, and success in a global world.

I eventually took a year off and went to work in Brazil and Nicaragua. Those experiences grounded my studies when I returned for college, and gave me a sense of purpose. The seed for Global Citizen Year was already planted when I got back from South America. By the time I started grad school at Stanford, I was studying the question, “What’s going on in the international exchange space?” Most kids take a junior year abroad and come back with one year left to cram it all in. They regret that it took until their senior year to really figure out what they were doing there. The trend is for two-thirds of the kids who study abroad to go to Western Europe, studying in English with other Americans. But I felt there was really something missing without full immersion in a new context, which really helps you understand what life is like for very different people. I finally

Abigail Falik at the Global Citizen Year U.S. headquarters in San Francisco, CA, pictured with photographs of the program’s early alumni on the wall behind her.

This interview and this photograph appears in a book: **Everyday Heroes: 50 Americans Changing the World, One Nonprofit at a Time**, by Katrina Fried, with photographs by Paul Mobley, and published by Welcome Books. It is reproduced here as part of a Global Citizen Year media package by permission of the publisher.

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wrote a thesis that became the blueprint. I can look back now and see the concept was very much there then, but 1) I was not ready to build an organization and 2) the world was not ready for the idea.

Fast-forward ten years: I apprenticed myself to other social entrepreneurs, I learned from private-sector travel experience. Then I ended up at Harvard Business School, where I really incubated the idea and developed a business plan. I finished school in the fall of 2008, when the economy was crashing and there was a heightened sense in this country that we'd crossed a threshold and were not living in a unipolar world. It was no longer enough for us to learn only about American history and speak only English. We needed to be fluent in how others see us and speak the languages that will help us communicate, collaborate, and compete internationally. That was the convergence of events and time when the idea really ripened.

I was lucky at Harvard to win first place in Pitch for Change, which is a business pitch competition. It was this moment of feeling, "Whoa, maybe I'm onto something that actually has broader resonance." I had no resources, no staff, and no clue how it was going to get off the ground. But I had grit. I moved back to the Bay Area because I felt it was the right place to ground the organization. I spent about six months asking for funding, being told no, and building a board, all of the classic, early steps that you go through. It was exhausting but left me much more committed. I eventually broke through and started raising early seed money. I hired a couple teammates, and about six months after that, we were launching our first program.

I think there's a concept that entrepreneurial insights come in a flash or an epiphany. For me it was very much a slow cook. There was a long period when I kept a file on my computer called My Master Plan. I didn't even really know what that meant, but it was where I would put everything that somehow felt relevant to what I was trying to do. There are definitely moments when I have felt deflated, but those are fleeting. This vision has been compelling me for so long and I have committed so much of my life force to it. I know so much about this narrow field that I'm a part of, that I am absolutely, utterly convinced that what I'm imagining, in its most ambitious expression, can happen. I know it can.

Anybody can apply to Global Citizen Year as long as they are at a

U.S. high school and intending to go to an American college. Ours is a selective program, so it's not remedial training or a catchall. Our Fellows come through a fairly extensive selection process, where we're looking for kids who have that kernel of leadership potential. That potential may or may not have been expressed in traditional ways in high school: we have kids who were former gang members from rough urban schools, who might not originally have been on a college track; and then we've got kids who grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, and are heading to Harvard. What's common among them is that they are able to take initiative, they are persuasive among their peers, and they're optimists and role models. Initiative plus optimism is the recipe.

Once they're accepted into the program, they can give us their preferences about where they want to go, but similar to a Peace Corps process, we're less about choosing a country from the catalog and more about placing kids where their skills are needed. We're in Ecuador, Brazil, and Senegal, and we're looking to bring China, India, and eventually the Middle East into the mix in the next few years. If this is going to be a new type of American education, we should expose young people to big emerging economies so they experience what life feels like in parts of the world that have a significant relation to our country.

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The arc of the experience follows the school year. Fellows have to raise \$2,500 and have a hundred people signed on to their social-media blogs before they leave. Then they come together for a boot-camp training

session at Stanford, which focuses on entrepreneurial leadership and global development. Once they get to their countries, there's a month of immersion in local language and culture before they move out to their placements in rural communities. They live with a host family and they work on a local project: teaching English, coaching and mentoring young people, or working on technology projects. Relatively speaking, any eighteen-year-old in this country is pretty tech savvy. Effective storytelling is a strong emphasis for us, especially how they can use their experiences to inform and influence others at home, who may not have opportunities to travel. Whether they're monitoring or evaluating or providing technical training, it's really about figuring out what skills are needed and how to focus them in a way that's impactful. The students come together every month for a training seminar while they are in-country and then the whole crew comes back together at the end for a reentry program. Once they're home, they make presentations at schools, join our alumni ranks, and get ready for college.

All but one of our Fellows have gone straight into college, so we like to use the term *bridge year* instead of *gap year*. Our training is very much around helping kids transition more effectively from high school to college, and not fall into a "gap" or hole. Most of our kids were admitted to college before they joined us. Schools are delighted to grant that deferral because if they want you now, they'll want you even more after this experience. Our kids get to college with a road map and an intention for their studies. They've formed a set of questions they're trying to answer over the next four years, as opposed to just getting requirements out of the way. It's a total reversal of how most kids approach school now.

We're really, really committed to rigorous evaluation. From the moment kids apply, we're already entering information into a database. Our sample set is very small right now; our kids are only two years out, at the most. But what we have learned is that 100 percent of our kids feel much better prepared than their peers in school; 94 percent speak a second language proficiently; and 66 percent are designing their own majors. They get to school with a clear idea of what they want to do and if it doesn't fit into something that exists, they design it themselves.

We have a large number of kids in international development studies, and everybody's continuing to take the language they studied or

a new language, which is key in working effectively internationally. Many are interested in international relations and emerging economies. I suspect most of them will travel again during college because they feel that's a foundational part of their education. Our hope is that over time they'll all engage internationally in working toward social improvements, and that they will have an entrepreneurial and global approach to leadership.

It's about awakening potential, but it's really about helping kids see their own limits through an experience that tests everything they've got. They emerge confident, resilient, and fired up about what is possible. When they come back and ask what they can possibly do to stay a part of what we're building, that's my food.

"I imagine a day when employers will look at job applications and say, 'What do you mean, you went straight from high school to college?'"

My role has evolved from doing everything to becoming the external face of Global Citizen Year. I'm most energized by talking to press, working on partnerships, raising money, and building the board. I still work crazy hours, but I do now have an extraordinary team of sixteen, and will be adding about ten people in the next six months, between our San Francisco and international offices.

By the end of this academic year, we'll have a hundred alums from our first three years, fifty-six of whom are in the field right now. Our target is to double that number next year and continue doubling from there with ten thousand Fellows ten years from now. I don't see any reason why a year of public service can't become the new norm for how kids are prepared for college and a career. The endgame is that our program would be one piece of a broader cultural shift toward that requirement. I imagine a day when employers will look at job applications and say, "What do you mean, you went straight from high school to college?"