



Be the Change

Chris Aring

Martha's Vineyard Youth Leadership Initiative

For Chris Aring, the island of Martha's Vineyard is home. For the summer people, celebrities, and even presidents, the Vineyard is a beautiful place to spend leisurely time with their families and meet old friends.

But for 16-year-old Chris, this year felt different. It was the first day of the Stone Soup Leadership Institute's Sustainability Summit on Martha's Vineyard. Young people from across the country had gathered together at a large up-island hilltop home overlooking Menemsha Pond. They had all been nominated by their communities to serve as delegates at the Summit, to learn how to become leaders of a more sustainable world.

After their morning ice-breakers, the very first speaker was Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. All the youth were spellbound as he spoke. They'd often heard the phrase "Be the change you want to see in the world," and Arun was the embodiment of this powerful message. As Chris listened to him tell the story of his grandfather, he was transported to a little village in India. "Can you imagine being 12 years old and getting this powerful lesson from your grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi?" he thought. The anecdote Arun told had a very simple message about sustainability embedded in it: it was about the importance of not throwing away a pencil until the very end.

It was the quality of the people Chris met at this week-long intensive Summit that touched him the most. He fondly remembers playing football on the large lawn with Trevor and Elijah. This became the start of a very special friendship. Chris was impressed that the Hawaiian delegates had collected native tea leaves from their homeland to bring 6,000 miles to the Summit. As they taught him how to make Hawaiian leis, they shared stories of their culture, their language, and their world. Thanks to these young people and their aloha spirit, Chris came to understand the concept of sustainability in a whole new light.

At that Summit, Arun Gandhi asked the Institute to bring its transformative educational tools to the young people of India. Curious by nature, and a self-taught techie, Chris offered to help with this ambitious challenge. He had already won many awards, and had designed software and apps. While many of his classmates saw the technology career path as a ticket to a high-paying job, Chris was more intrigued with the idea of being able to use the power of technology for positive social change. His father, a longtime teacher at the Vineyard's high school had always encouraged his son to think outside the box. Now, empowered by what he had learned at the Summit, Chris was inspired to ground his ideals in serving humanity. He wasn't quite sure how this was going to happen, but he was willing to try.

That summer, while tourists and seasonal residents were vacationing, Chris joined the Institute's intergenerational team to dive into this very challenging task. Their goal was to envision a way to transfer 20 years of the Institute's trainings and educational tools to an online platform. First Chris looked at digital courses like Coursera and edX. "Too traditional," he decided. Next the team decided to use the Design Thinking approach, asking themselves the key question "How might we?...." to brainstorm ideas. Then Chris had a thought – last summer he'd attended a Hack-a-Thon, where college-aged students immersed themselves for 24 hours to design innovative tech apps and software. "There's never been a Hack-a-Thon on the Vineyard," Chris said. "Let's do it!"

Chris thought it was a pretty simple idea. Little did he know what he was about to embark on. Reaching out to college students and inviting them to give of their time, and then travel all the way to the Vineyard by car, bus, and ferry took some doing. But they came! They came from Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mt. Holyoke College, and from

the University of Massachusetts in Lowell. Later they said that the idea of responding to Gandhi's grandson's challenge had intrigued them.

Finding a home large enough to house this crew was quite an undertaking. It was now late November, and most large homes on the Vineyard aren't insulated. By luck, perseverance, and ultimately maybe even divine intervention, the owner of a 20-room Victorian mansion, inspired by the Institute's mission, offered her home. Overlooking Inkwell Beach in Oak Bluffs, the Villa Rosa was once owned by Joe Overton, a political organizer and the first head of a labor union in New York City. His home had served as the Summer White House, and leaders and organizers of the Civil Rights movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had stayed here. It was here, looking out over the vast horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, that Dr. King is said to have written his famous "I Have A Dream" speech.

The Design-A-Thon, as it was called, began with a sumptuous feast, with the owner of the house sharing stories about its history. Then everyone jumped into the immersive 24-hour experience. After the Institute's team gave an overview of their vision and goals, the visiting techies interviewed the Institute's youth leaders as well as the facilitators of the Summit to create a "user profile." Then everyone retired to their separate nooks to work on coding. They chose the attic as their hub, and set up the large screen where they could showcase their progress. All through the night they worked, sustained with lots of coffee, pizza, and junk food. It was an exhilarating time. As the youngest person there, Chris loved hanging out with these seasoned techies in the kitchen during their breaks and hearing them talk about user-design, prototypes, beta testing, and the ultimate goal: *user-friendly*.

A videographer documented the process, and interviewed Chris and youth leaders like Josue Cruz from Vieques, Puerto Rico and Alex Siordia from Hawaii. "This house is the right place to do this," Chris said. "I feel that in some ways what we are doing has a relation to what Dr. King was trying to do. Creating change and inspiring people to challenge the status quo, and how to be leaders. You can feel Dr. King's presence here. That what you are doing has a bigger purpose than just a computer program. I really feel that it can go somewhere."

In just 24 hours, the band of techies had created an impressive "pitch deck" presentation to present to potential funders. When it came time for the Reveal Event, Chris made the presentation to the Island's business and education leaders. He was pretty proud of what everyone had accomplished. "It was a really good feeling," he says. "It was the first time I'd had the experience of having a big idea, and helping to make it actually happen! To this very day, seven years later, every time I drive by that house, I tell the story of this life-changing experience to whomever is in the car."

That fall, as a junior in high school, Chris convinced his advisor that he should get credit to pursue this project as an independent study. Then he joined with the Institute's facilitators, Gia Winsryg-Ulmer and Grace Burton Sundman, to design a leadership course using the Institute's curriculum. Offered to the Martha's Vineyard Youth Leadership Initiative (MVYLI) youth, this 10-week pilot program became the beta site for the Institute's TouchStone Leaders Platform. "I learned that it's best to not sit back and overthink a great idea," Chris says now. "If you have an idea that you think would make a difference in your life, your community's life, or *anyone's* life, you should go through with it and act on it in a timely manner." Chris was convinced that his high school should incorporate this pilot into their leadership class. "We should share it with others so they can have an opportunity to learn the necessary leadership skills for life. This program teaches many skills not found in the classroom."

To continue his exploration into the tech world, Chris was matched with a business leader, John Klein for MVYLI's Job Shadow Day. And the following year, he was matched with virtual reality pioneer Galen Ho. As they explored Galen's state-of-the-art Immersive Worlds, Galen listened to Chris's dreams for his future, and encouraged him to apply to the little-known Olin College of Engineering, just outside of Boston. When Chris received a full scholarship to study there, Chris's father was thrilled. He had attended Northeastern University, but had had to drop out and get a job before he could complete his education. He knew what a difference it would make for his son to graduate debt-free from college.

At the next Summit, Chris was a freshman at Olin College of Engineering. He was thrilled to see Trevor again, who was now a senior in college. Chris especially enjoyed rooming with Trevor and sharing lodgings with the younger male delegates at the Summit. "They were so full of energy, so funny, and eager to hear about my experiences at college," Chris says. "I was happy to be able to be a true mentor to these high school youth. It was a good feeling."

For the past few years Trevor had worked with the Institute to design strategies to bring sustainability education to public school students. He was also searching for ways to use technology to help youth get jobs in the emerging field of sustainability. Chris was happy to help Trevor with this new challenge. Along with the Institute's tech advisor, Chris and Trevor once again dived into the question "How might we...?" "Let's create a new site," Chris said. He quickly searched for available ones. "Sustainability is Fun is available," he said, "Shall we grab it? What a great name - kids will love it!"

Throughout the following year, Chris worked virtually with Trevor and the Institute's team to create the new site so that it could be tested with youth at the next Summit. Then he brought his college roommate, Ilya, to the next summit, which was held in Newport, Rhode Island. With Trevor as their guide, they envisioned an online ecosystem that connects youth, educators, and companies to build sustainable economies.

They'd also made plans to create a Design-A-Thon to be held just before the Summit. This time it was with business, education, and government leaders of the Blue Economy in southern New England. They designed surveys, gathered data, and facilitated an engaging user-design experience with these industry leaders. With Trevor as their guide for the week-long event, they drilled down on the data and designed a presentation for the Summit about the Sustainable Workforce Development Network: SustainWDN™.

"It was truly a pleasure to meet our next generation of leaders at the Design-A-Thon," says Robert Rak, of Bristol Community College's Blue Center. "It was inspiring to see these young people actively engaging in the development of meaningful communication with business leaders. They were not only seeking information for themselves, but also for the youth of today as a whole. Bringing together the many players in this emerging Blue Economy is very important so that we can work together, as a team, to bring a bright future to our region and the nation as a whole."

Just before Chris graduated from college, his beloved father passed. He had been so proud of his son, and his own passion for teaching had inspired all his students: he brought out the brightness in everyone. One day, Chris hopes to follow in his father's footsteps and become a teacher. Inspired by Gandhi's grandson, and standing on Dr. King's shoulders, Chris is grateful for the opportunity to help pass their legacy on through this platform so that other young people can work together to truly make the world a better place.

We must be the change we want to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

Call to Action: Learn about how Chris' idea is changing lives: check out the Institute's SustainabilityisFun.net and SustainWDN.com

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