When it Mattered

Episode 2: Mick Ebeling

Chitra: Hello, and welcome to When it Mattered. I'm your host, Chitra Ragavan. I'm also the founder and CEO of Goodstory consulting, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative.

Chitra: On this weekly podcast we invite leaders from around the world to share one personal story that changed the course of their life and work, and how they lead and deal with adversity. Through these stories we take you behind the scenes to get an inside perspective of some of the most eventful moments of our time.

Chitra: On this episode, we will be talking to Mick Ebeling, founder and CEO of Not Impossible Labs, and author of the book Not Impossible. Mick was most recently named one of Fortune Magazine's world's greatest leaders. He's a recipient of the Muhammad Ali Humanitarian of the Year Award, and he's listed as one of the world's most influential creative people by the Creative 50s.

Chitra: Mick, welcome to the show.

Mick: Thank you so much.

Chitra: Tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Mick: Well, Not Impossible Labs, I think, like a lot of things in this world, was launched on accident. It wasn't something that I had intended to do, and it was a byproduct of my wife and I had a date night, and on date night a friend hijacked our date, and took us to an art benefit, and we were exposed to an incredible artist, graffiti and street artist, named Tony Tempt Quan, that we had never met or heard of before, but we learned at this event had Lou Gehrig's disease.

Mick: He had ALS, and the event was a benefit of his family and friends coming together to support him, and help to pay for his hospital bills, because he didn't have health insurance.

Mick: And it was one of those incredible nights that had this echo effect on my life, essentially, because at the time I ran a production company. We made

television commercials and films. We had just done the James Bond main title sequence, and things were going incredible.

Mick: But then this night happened, and it just left this impression on us, and we found out that this artist was unable to talk, and unable to communicate, except through a piece of paper that had the alphabet on it, and people would run their finger along it, and when peoples' finger would get to a letter, he would blink, and then they would write it down.

Mick: And for us that was just, that was absurd. We didn't, just, that didn't make any sense. And so I said all right, well, that makes no sense. I live in Los Angeles. We have a GMP greater than most developing nations, 13 miles away from where I live in Venice Beach there's a dude who's having to talk through a piece of paper because he doesn't have health insurance.

Mick: And I know, through videos, and commercials, and things that I've read about Steven Hawking, I know that there's a device that people can use where they can move their eyes and talk, but he can't have it because he doesn't have insurance? That's absurd. That doesn't make sense.

Mick: So, using, you know, the muscles that you have and you build as a producer, you assemble teams. And so, I assembled this team of hackers, and makers, and programmers, and geniuses at my house.

Mick: My wife and kids and I moved out, they all moved in, we pushed the tables and chairs against the wall, and two and a half weeks later we had a device called the Eyewriter, which is a cheap pair of sunglasses from the Venice Beach Boardwalk, a coat hangar that we duct taped to the side. We bent it around to the front. We zip tied a web camera to the front of that, and then that web camera would track the pupil, and that pupil essentially was the tip of the pencil, if you will, that allowed him to draw again.

Mick: So, the creation of that allowed him to draw. It was this incredible moment, it was this incredible night, and our plan was we just wanted to help this one guy do this, and then we were going to release it open source so other people have access to it.

Mick: And we did, and the thing just went bonkers. It blew up. We were getting emails from all over the world, and stories of how this had changed people's lives, and I kind of looked around and said wait a second, this is, we just wanted to help this one guy, but this was now helping so many other people. Maybe, maybe we should, maybe I should start focusing my life on this, and stop doing commercials and production.

Mick: And I thought about it, and talked about it, and prayed about it, and meditated on it, and in the end said nah, that's, I'm just going to go back to my day job. I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing with my company.

Mick: And almost at the moment that I made that decision, I got an email from Tempt, and his email is an email that I'll never forget. He said, "That was the first time I'd drawn anything for seven years. I feel like I've been held underwater, and someone finally reached down and pulled my head up so I could take a breath."

Mick: And so, receiving that email at the time that I was contemplating whether or not I should maybe do this or not, that was the moment when I said, all right, I got to do this. And that, essentially, that was the moment that Not Impossible Labs started.

Chitra: And why you, right? What was it about that moment in your life? You clearly were not highly technical at that point, you weren't an expert on Lou Gehrig's, you were a creative soul, but really had no connection to that world. What was it in your life that made you go in that direction?

Mick: I think it was just the resonance that I saw, from this disparate group of people, just normal humans who said you know what? We're not going to just sit back and let this, essentially a social injustice, take place, which is there was devices and technology that existed, but because he couldn't afford it, he couldn't get it, and that was absurd.

Mick: So, the ability for me, as a producer, to assemble teams, that's a ... that's like breathing for me. So, to bring this incredible team together to attack this problem was something that happened fairly naturally. And then watching the beauty, and the innovation, and the number of lives that were affected after this thing, I mean, that really, that grounds everything we do at Not Impossible now, you know?

Mick: Our mission here is, and it's absolutely stemmed from that initial Eyewriter process and discovery, is to change the world through technology and story. So, we will create technology, and we call the technology we create technology for the sake of humanity. And we'll create that, and then we'll tell the story around the person that we've created it for, and hopefully, through that storytelling, which is what I did as a producer, that can lend to more people finding out about it, and more people being helped.

Chitra: So, that alone is an incredible story, but then your life took an even more dramatic turn, and as you say in the opening chapter of your book by the same name, Not Impossible, you find yourself in a city in Sudan in the middle of a terrible civil war, in the middle of crazy stuff happening, and you are there on a

new mission. Tell us about what that mission was, and how you found yourself in Sudan.

Mick: After the Eyewriter, and I started Not Impossible Labs, I was kind of winding down my production company at the same time, figuring out how the heck we were going to figure out how to make Not Impossible Labs a self sustaining entity, I was [inaudible 00:07:37] with a friend and he said, "Hey, I know you're so passionate about Not Impossible Labs, it's all you talk about, you got to read this story about this doctor named Doctor Tom. He is this missionary doctor over in the Nuba Mountains," which is this, we had to look up where the Nuba Mountains was, but it's this region between Sudan and South Sudan, and he said, "You're going to love the story."

Mick: So, I went home and researched him, and what I discovered was this incredible doctor who was out there helping people in this war torn area, and he was having to do everything from deliver babies, inoculations, anything that was medical, he had to do.

Mick: And he talked about this one particular case of a young boy who was out tending his family's goats and cows, and the bombers would come every day. The current reigning president, he's now been ousted, but at that time the current reigning president was Omar Bashir, and he would bomb the people of the Nuba Mountains in their markets, schools, churches, bazaars, and like, you know, very civilian, non militaristic targets.

Mick: He would bomb them every day, and because of that, the one thing that Doctor Tom hated to do was to perform amputations. Well, the reason he was performing amputations was because the bombs were coming all the time.

Mick: Well, part of the story was this young boy named Daniel, who was out tending his family's goats and cows in this open field. The bombers came, as they came every day, and this boy had, he lost both of his arms. He became a double amputee, and Doctor Tom had to stitch him up.

Mick: And I remember the night I read the story, and reading that, and seeing the picture of Daniel was gut wrenching, but the thing that got me is when this, when Daniel woke up, and he realized he was a double amputee. Now, keep in mind, it's hard enough to stay alive in Sudan with your arms, you know? With given the circumstances. Now he lost both of them. The first thing he said was, "If I could die, I would, because now I'm going to be such a burden to my family."

Mick: And to me, that was just gut wrenching, and having sons, you know, I had a 12 year old at the time, and Daniel was 12. I said, all right, this is ridiculous.

Mick: So, that was one of these things, we have a bunch of mantras at Not Impossible, but one of them is commit, and then figure it out. And so, when I saw the Tempt story, I said, I don't know how I'm going to do something, but I got to do something. It's commit, then figure it out. And this was kind of the same thing again, where I saw this story and I said, I got to do something.

Mick: And so, I woke up the next day and my wife said, "Are we moving out of the house again?" And I said, "Yeah, I think so." So, same thing, it took me a while to put a team together. We moved out. A bunch of team came in, and we hacked, and programmed, and we came up with a solution.

Mick: And just for the sake of the podcast, I won't go into all the failures and problems that we ran into, but eventually, through brilliant collaborators and minds that really came to the rescue to help us, we ended up crafting a solution, and that solution ended up being a 3D printed prosthetic for Daniel that, at the time, this was 2013, and we went over to Sudan, and went, flew in to the refugee camp.

Mick: First we flew in to the capital, which was where, you know, part of my team got thrown in jail. Then we got them out of jail. Then we flew into the refugee camp, which, of course, was we were late by four days because planes were canceled, and it's just an unruly environment.

Mick: Finally got there, and then we took a nine hour ride through enemy controlled territory, but the corridor that we had was protected by the SPLA, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, and we had arranged safe passage from them. So, under the cover of night we kind of had safe passage through this corridor up to Doctor Tom, into the Nuba Mountains, where his hospital was based.

Mick: And we got there, you know, kind of planes, trains, automobiles, we finally got there, and over the course of the next days we set up the world's first 3D printing prosthetic lab. And not just created, we didn't just create something that allowed Daniel to feed himself, but we actually taught the village how they could continue to make arms once we left.

Chitra: And it wasn't an easy task. Among other things, your 3D printer got jammed with all the dust in the area, so it was-

Mick: We had every, every problem you can imagine, from the 3D printers malfunctioning, to overheating, to being dive bombed by bugs, you know, and jamming up the 3D printer. Like, you name it, it was, we had, it was a parade of horribles to finally get us to that final outcome.

Chitra: It just seems incredible that you were even able to find this boy, Daniel, in this refugee camp. How did you even find him? What was the hope that you would find him, and then to find him?

Mick: Well, you know, again, as a producer, and coming from this mentality, you just, by any means necessary, you do it. And back to one of our mantras is help one, help many, and if you create something, and you focus all your energy on solving for one person, and solving powerfully for that one person, then, once you finish that solution, and tell the story of that solution, you can help many people.

Mick: So, Daniel was our one, and he became our beacon, our lighthouse for us to focus on the creation of this solution. And once we were able to do that, and do that powerfully, then other people were able to be helped after that.

Chitra: What was his reaction when you first put the arms on him? And you also talk about his younger brother, who had to take on his physical care, because Daniel didn't have arms. So, I'm sure it was a relief even for his younger brother, but for Daniel that must have been something to have that first spoon of food on his own.

Mick: That image, and I am very blessed that I get to go and speak about the work of Not Impossible, so I get to see that video every time I go onstage, and the video of him feeding himself for the first time, and that just shit-eating grin that he gets on his face when he realizes he has that self independence and autonomy, it's incredible. It's an amazing thing.

Chitra: And what's interesting about the technologies you build is that they are kind of jerry rigged from ordinary things-

Mick: Absolutely.

Chitra: ... it's not this, and in fact you found that when larger organizations wanted to come and help, and be part of the process, often they would gum it up.

Mick: Yeah. We believe that Not Impossible is what we call a movement of the proletariat, right? That we are not this big, bureaucratic organization with this predefined set of criteria of how something should happen.

Mick: We approach everything with naivete. We do not, we call it beautiful innocent naivete, and we approach it from the standpoint of okay, this has to be solved, not oh, we already know how we're going to do it, or we've got a, you know, this tool set, or database, or whatever to do it. We just say, all right, has to be solved, what's the best solution?

Mick: And then the underpinning to that is how do you make it accessible, because we don't want to create high falutin super expensive solutions for people. We want to create accessible solutions for people. So, inevitably, it's jerry rigged, and duct taped, and zip tied at the prototype phase before we take it to the larger scale.

Chitra: Well, want to talk about two things. One is, there are some who would argue, and you talk about this in your book, too, and I'm sure people have asked you this, you're expending an enormous amount of time, energy, resources putting a global team together to help one person, whether it's Tempt, or in this case, Daniel, and you describe in your book this philosophy of not trying to do everything for everyone, but to start with that one person. Do you find that it's worth it to do it that way, and do the results actually go outward to the larger world?

Mick: Yeah, that's the help one, help many mantra that we live by, and it's, I don't think we have a choice. I mean, and I think that's part of the message of Not Impossible is a message of accessibility for people, is that if you're listening to this podcast right now and you don't have a bunch of initials behind your name, or you don't have a massive checkbook that you can just cut checks to people, or a bunch of hands on experience into doing this, you don't have all those things, but you have a reason, you have a passionate, emotional reason to solve something, I'll take that any day of the week, because that person is going to be more driven to accomplish that than someone with all the tools and access in the world.

Mick: So, that is how we approach things is that we approach things of, like, why it must happen, not oh, how it must happen, and first we must, how happens as a byproduct of why, and that focus is what leads us to being able to scale these things. Because telling the story about one person, and solving it powerfully for that one person, makes it so that you have an ability, as a listener or a watcher, to say oh, my God, I relate, I have a son, or I have a brother, or just the humanity has a chance to connect, as opposed to if I said to you, hey, all you listeners, who here wants to solve the accessible prosthetic problem in the world? You know, there's a way for you to kind of fade out and check your text messages while you're listening.

Mick: But if I said hey, all you listeners, there's a young boy named Daniel who lost both of his arms in a bombing accident. He does not want to be a burden to his family, that this family needs him to be able to help to support them. He is a vibrant, happy, talented, brilliant young man who is now in a situation where he might not survive because of this circumstance. Who here wants to help me help Daniel?

Mick: Do you see that emotion difference? Like, you can feel that emotional difference between this large, undefined problem, and the problem of one. And so, that's what we really focus on, because that gives people the ability to have this awakening, this ignition, this fire start to burn within them to then take that solution for one and try to figure out okay, how can we give it to someone else? Or how can I expand upon it? You know, whatever it might be, just to try to help more people.

Chitra: What impact has it had on you as a leader, and also in how you handle adversity looking at how these people deal with adversity, and they're dealing with some of the highest levels of adversity you could imagine?

Mick: I think our philosophy of leading at Not Impossible Labs is we're very much a meritocracy, and we don't necessarily believe that someone who's young or old, someone that is male or female, someone that has degrees or doesn't have degrees, has any particular expertise that supersedes someone else's drive or passion.

Mick: We believe, very much so, that everybody has the potential to solve a problem, so we try to live at Not Impossible by that philosophy that everybody's contribution is a valuable contribution, and their drive and stamina of pushing something over the line is far more important than any type of experience or intelligence that they may or may not have.

Chitra: Awesome. Well, thank you so much. This has been an incredible conversation. Do you have any closing thoughts? And where can people learn more about you, and about Not Impossible Labs?

Mick: You can go to NotImpossible.com and see all the crazy things that we're up to. We have a book, as you've mentioned, and we also have a podcast called, if you're listening to a podcast, you might like podcasts, but it's Not Impossible Podcast, Podcast Not Impossible.

Mick: And I think the closing thought would just be to really take away the fact that the change that will take place on this planet is not going to happen by institutions, or bureaucracies, or large scale nonprofits, is that the change that will happen on this planet is going to happen by the human beings that make up those institutions, and once we realize that, we realize that every single person listening right now has the ability to change the absurdities that they see in their life.

Mick: They just have to focus on solving it for one before they can start to solve it for many. And if you focus on that one, that is the spark that will lead to the smoulder, that will lead to the fire, that eventually takes over and changes the world.

Chitra: And I had a quick follow up question. What became of Tempt, and what became of Daniel?

Mick: So, Tempt, right now, we see probably once a week. He is still a thriving, fully paralyzed ALS patient in downtown LA, but we see him all the time. We just got him a new machine that we're inputting into a MyTobii machine, which is a commercial device, to allow him to have better and easier access to typing and talking.

Mick: And Daniel, his brother, and his friend, in the end we ended up smuggling out of Sudan, and we smuggled them into Kenya, and he's completing, now, I think his third year of school in a private school in Kenya, and he's excelling so much, and he's participating in sports, and writing music, and he's just a ... he's a thriving and incredible human being.

Chitra: And you stay in touch with him?

Mick: Oh, all the time, yeah. We take care of, you know, we oversee all of that. We are the ones that got him out, we are the ones that make sure he's going to school, that's part of the continuation of Project Daniel is to continue with him, and his brother, and his friend to continue to grow and learn.

Chitra: And is Tempt drawing?

Mick: His eyes have lost a lot of, I guess, muscle ability, so the drawing part is not as, you have to be able to really steer your eyes and blink, and blink very definitively. And so, if you can't blink definitively, it makes it hard to pick up and put down the stylus, or the pencil. So, he doesn't draw so much anymore.

Mick: But, he's very much able to art direct, and think, and he comes up with some of the most brilliant ideas in the world. We just have to figure out other ways to execute them.

Chitra: Awesome. Thank you so much.

Mick: Thank you.

Chitra: Mick Ebeling is founder and CEO of Not Impossible Labs, and author of the book Not Impossible.

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Chitra: When it Mattered is produced by Jeremy Corr, CEO and founder of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Come back next week for another episode of When it Mattered. I'll see you then.