

Episode 50  
 Encore! Encore! Leaving Wall Street For The Non-Profit World  
 (8/26/2019)

Who	Audio Segment
Russell Abbott	<p>There's a serious misconception among what we call, I call as Wall Street types, that were gonna just kind of waltz into a nonprofit and say, "I'm here to fix everything." And then all of a sudden you realize very, very quickly that that kind of an approach is never ever gonna be effective. As you make a transition into the nonprofit world, there's a whole lot of things that have to come before that, including learning a huge measure of humility and the ability to recognize that you need to be the one who changes your approach because it's very unlikely that the nonprofit is gonna change its approach for you.</p>
<p>INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW</p>	
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine.</p> <p>Today, we're going to speak with Russell Abbott, a sixty-seven year old man who spent most of his career on Wall Street. About two years ago, he transitioned to working for a non-profit based in Brooklyn, New York called Extreme Kids and Crew. And as you'll hear, he's a whole lot happier in the new job.</p> <p>Russell was first introduced to Extreme Kids and Crew via the Encore Fellowship Program. Run by a group called Encore.org, it's essentially a matchmaking service that connects senior corporate executives with non-profit organizations looking for experienced talent.</p> <p>We'll tell you more about the Encore Fellowship Program. But let's start with Russell and a better understanding of his first act.</p>
<p>FADE MUSIC</p>	
Andy	<p>So I wanna start at the beginning. Where did you grow up, education? Tell us a little about your background.</p>
Russell	<p>Sure. So I was very fortunate to have been born and grown up in Concord, Massachusetts. There was a point in which Concord was literary capital of the world with Louisa May Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Daniel Hawthorne are alive at the same time. So needless to say, reading and books played a big part in my life.</p>
Andy	<p>Great part in American history too.</p>
Russell	<p>A big part of American history. You know, and my parents who were terrific, neither of whom went to college, they weren't particularly savvy when it came to investing in real estate or in stocks and bonds, but they sure did recognize the value of education. And I was very fortunate that they really stretched, and scrimped, and saved to send me to private schools. And then I got to go to the University of Pennsylvania where, of course, I had to major in English.</p>

Andy	Russell went on to get his MBA from Boston University. And that led him to a career in finance.
Andy	I know you have had a long professional career on Wall Street. You've worked for some really big companies, Citibank, Credit Suisse, and you've also served as a hedge fund manager for a number of several different organizations. Can you just tell us a little about, you know, sort of act one and your career on Wall Street?
Russell	<p>Sure. You know, I was fortunate enough to come into the financial services world when it was a really interesting time. There was a lot of interest rate volatility, and I was a fixed income trader.</p> <p>They actually paid you quite well. But as you know, it's also more of a young person's game than it is an older person's game. And there reached a point where a combination of factors, mainly having to do with the fact that it was the level of intensity and pressure that was ongoing and unrelenting that it really does kind of take a toll after a while. And I decided I did want to do something else, and that actually led to my migration to the hedge fund world.</p>
Andy	As I was prepping for this interview, I found the following quote about hedge funds and hedge fund managers. I just wanna share with you and see if this is accurate from your experience and from your role. "Hedge funds have an extremely bottom-line orientation, and your portfolio is marked to market every day. This leads to unrelenting pressure to perform, meet performance expectations, then you get to stay in business. If not, then you're gone." Is that an accurate description, and did you find your time as a hedge fund manager or in the hedge fund business to be a stressful period?
Russell	It's a great quote and it's totally spot on. It's very similar in a way to trading bonds, or to fixed income trading, or any kind of trading for that matter in the sense that it is very bottom-line oriented. And if you're not performing, you're going to lose your job. Or, in the case of a hedge fund, you'll find that all your investors take their money and place it elsewhere and then you go out of business.
Andy	Okay. So if you had to put a date on your departure from Wall Street, what time period is that?
Russell	<p>That would probably be around 2008, and that's not really an accident because 2008 was when we had the financial meltdown. It hit hedge funds particularly hard. There were a lot of different things going on. But basically, I think the main thing that occurred was that in the hedge fund world, positions had been over-leveraged, meaning that people borrowed money in order to buy whatever it is that they put into their hedge fund portfolio.</p> <p>And then all of a sudden as prices began to fall, you really couldn't sell what you had in the portfolio quickly enough to keep up with the margin calls and all of the things that were coming along. It became a very, very, very difficult time for hedge funds in general.</p>

	<p>And I was at that time doing marketing, and they had actually created an office right here in New York just for me. And they said, "You know what, it's gonna be a while before we're able to resurrect our institutional marketing effort." And they wound up closing the New York office. And then that was the point at which I finally said, "You know what, goodbye financial services. It's been a good run."</p>
Andy	<p>Russell left Wall Street with a strong interest in getting into the not-for-profit sector. He actually helped create a start-up that aimed to connect young professionals to non-profit board opportunities.</p> <p>But eventually he became aware of the Encore Fellowship Program. It's run by a terrific organization called Encore.org. Here's Marci Alboher who is a Vice President with Encore.</p>
Marci	<p>So the Encore Fellowships program is, the basic model is a one-year experience for people who are leaving their mid-life careers and want to move into what we call an Encore Chapter of Work that combines social purpose, personal meaning, and social impact. And the reason we started this program is we know that millions of Americans between the ages of, <del>you know</del>, mid-40s and 70s are craving this kind of high impact chapter of new work. And many nonprofits and other social purpose-oriented organizations are really struggling to reach the talent they need to fulfill their missions. So the program, from our perspective, was a way to deal with both of those issues, the people needing these transitions and these organizations who are really hungry for experienced talent.</p>
Andy	<p>So this program is now in its 10th year. Can you give me some idea the impact that it's had with the different nonprofits that have been utilizing it?</p>
Marci	<p>So we've matched more than 2,000 Fellows all over the US in more than 50 cities. So that looks like two million hours of service, and really, the value to the nonprofits we serve is roughly around \$200 million. But the other kind of impact, I'd like to say, is that we're also trying to popularize a new story of what our later careers can look like and what collaboration across the generations can look like.</p>
Andy	<p>So Russell applied to become an Encore Fellow in 2017. And one of the nonprofits that he interviewed with was an organization called Extreme Kids and Crew.</p>
Russell	<p>The first thing I should point out is that I had no particular calling to the mission of Extreme Kids &amp; Crew before I joined them. It was, as I said, more because of the size of the organization. It was very small, and I would be able to work really closely with the executive director.</p> <p>Extreme Kids &amp; Crew is an organization that provides a safe place space for children with disabilities and their families to come and just be, as we like to say. There's not an attempt to assess.</p>

	<p>It's just an attempt to provide a community where people in many instances who are very frustrated by the bureaucracy, and they don't feel as though they are very well listened to, and they've got families with issues. So it's a place where we can bring together these children and their families, and they know that they're not gonna be judged. They can potentially communicate with other folks who are in at least somewhat similar positions.</p>
Andy	<p>I got to speak with the Executive Director of Extreme Kids and Crew, Caitlin Cassaro.</p>
Andy	<p>Do you remember your first meeting with Russell Abbott?</p>
Caitlin	<p>I do. We were looking at lots of people on paper. And what really interested me about Russell is that he had been working at a startup and I knew that a startup would be very similar to a nonprofit, and that he would be bringing over some skills already without even knowing it, and when I met him in person that was apparent, he was really someone who could hustle and wanted to and wanted to really know and understand how nonprofit works and how he could help us. And that's what really attracted me was his skill set. And also his willingness to dive in and do whatever it took.</p>
Andy	<p>So Russell began his Encore Fellowship late in 2017. I asked him what the first few weeks were like for him.</p>
Russell (18:39)	<p>I was just trying to get a feel for what the culture of the organization was. I had my fingers crossed that my vibe about Caitlin in the sense that she would be as open to ideas and encouraging people to really contribute as I had hoped that they would be. And it turned out that if anything, I probably underestimated her willingness to share new ideas to engage everyone on the staff to try to help make Extreme Kids &amp; Crew a better place and make the experience for our families better and better.</p> <p>And I was struck initially and every day since by the real level of respect and caring that the staff really shows toward those children and toward their families, and, in return, how much love that is shown by those parents for those children. I've very little experience of my own with the children with disabilities and the disability community and the language that goes on around that and the challenges and struggles. But it has certainly been a revelation to me to get to see that level of respect, caring, and love that is shown. And it's, you know, definitely been transformative personally for me just to see that. So I feel, you know, as I tell Caitlin, honored. I'm honored to be part of that group.</p>
Andy	<p>When you described your entrance into the nonprofit world a little bit earlier, you used the word humility. And just for our listeners, just take us a little deeper on that and describe that transition and the role that humility played in beginning your work in nonprofit work.</p>

Russell	<p>There's a serious misconception among what we call, I call as Wall Street types, that were gonna just kind of waltz into a nonprofit and say, "I'm here to fix everything." And then all of a sudden you realize very, very quickly that that kind of an approach is never ever gonna be effective. As you make a transition into the nonprofit world, there's a whole lot of things that have to come before that, including learning a huge measure of humility and the ability to recognize that you need to be the one who changes your approach because it's very unlikely that the nonprofit is gonna change its approach for you.</p> <p>You learn to take out the trash. You learn nobody's there to answer your phone. Somebody calls and leaves a message, you take it. There's no task that's below anyone to perform.</p>
Andy	<p>You mentioned that when you took the Encore Fellowship, you selected a part-time route, I think three days a week. Is that correct?</p>
Russell	<p>Well, it was really two and a half. So there's usually two days there and then half a day that I would work.</p>
Andy	<p>Was that a welcome change from fulltime work?</p>
Russell	<p>Well, yeah, it was a hugely welcome change. You and I started our conversation today offline about fitness and how important it is for both of us. And you know, I was always a little bit of a gym rat, but then this enabled me to get to the gym five days a week if that's what I wanted you to do.</p> <p>I had mentioned that I had been an English major, and there was a point in my life when I'd referred to myself as a reasonably well-read person. I was not a reasonably well-read person any longer. So I was able to start to, you know, catch up on some of the reading, and I'm talking now more about, you know, getting to read works of fiction as opposed to the Wall Street Journal.</p> <p>So things like travel, things that I like to do, you know, other things that I like to embrace and learn about, all of a sudden those things were wide open to me in terms of having that additional time.</p>
Andy	<p>At the end of Russell's one-year fellowship, he was offered a continuing position with Extreme Kids and Crew.</p>
Russell	<p>When it came time for my fellowship to wind down at the end of 2018, that's when Caitlin and I started to talk about whether or not we could work something out where I would be able to stay on and continue to serve in some capacity.</p> <p>And that's when we came up with the chief administrative officer with functional responsibilities, primarily in operations and finance, but one that would also enable me to work three days a week and adjust the salary accordingly. And that was fine with me.</p>

Andy	Can you contrast your life today versus during your first act, and particularly your work as a hedge fund manager? I'm, sort of, getting at, are you happier today in what you're doing than you were on Wall Street?
Russell	So much happier. Because you mentioned, you didn't think that there was likely to be a lot of purpose in the financial services world, and that is so true. You don't really...it's basically all about trying to make money for the firm you work for. And when in the nonprofit world, what you're really trying to do is improve things for the people that you serve. So, I mean, already you're talking about profit on the one hand, service on the other. I mean, that's an immediate contrast. So I would say that I wake up now feeling way, way better about what I do. Maybe it's a function of where I am in life. I don't know. But I know that, even if I could, I wouldn't wanna go back to the financial services world.
Andy	And that's a great lead into my final question, which is, what advice would you give to someone considering a second act?
Russell	<p>I've thought a lot about this one. The first thing I would say is plan. Plan ahead, and start to think about it even before the end of that first phase of your career is gonna come to a close and try to envision how that second half might look.</p> <p>I think engaging as much support for that, and I'm talking mainly about family, for some of the realizations that go along with that in terms of the likelihood that the pay isn't gonna be the same. You're gonna be around more. There's gonna be a lot of things that are likely to change. I also think it's really important to do a really, you know, stark assessment of your own psychological makeup in the sense of, as I had mentioned, the importance of humility.</p> <p>Make sure that you're going into that next phase for many of the right reasons and, more importantly, with the right mindset. Because if you don't have a good matchup between what you think you're gonna be able to bring and what you're actually able to bring, you're not gonna wind up having a successful experience.</p> <p>And, I think, finally, the other thing I would say is, you know, enjoy that ride. It's fun, man. Just take advantage of the fact that you're gonna get to have some more flexibility in time to do some of the things that either you love to do or that you always have wanted to do and haven't had the time for. No more excuses. No more excuses not to get to the gym, take better care of yourself. Celebrate it and embrace it.</p>
	OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION

Andy	<p>Today's episode is chock-full of great lessons and takeaways. There were three things that really stood out to me in my discussion with Russell:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Humility...When you transition to a second act in any new profession, you need to switch gears to a learning mode. You're no longer the CEO or the Vice President. You're essentially the intern – just really old intern. As Russell suggests, you've got to have a new mindset and be willing to adapt.</li><li>2) The Power of Purpose...Russell switched from a job that paid a large salary but had no intrinsic purpose. His new job with Extreme Kids and Crew has a direct impact on disabled children and their families. That's a life brimming with purpose. And he is so much happier today.</li><li>3) The Encore Fellowship Program...If you are thinking of a transition from a corporate position to the non-profit sector, take a close look at this program. You can start by powering up your computer and going to <a href="http://Encore.org/Fellowships">Encore.org/Fellowships</a>. It's a terrific program that has helped over 2,000 people find a new path.</li></ol> <p>Thank you to everyone that I interviewed for today's episode: Caitlin Cassaro, Executive Director of Extreme Kids and Crew, Marci Alboher, Vice President with <a href="http://Encore.org">Encore.org</a> and especially Russell Abbott who couldn't have been more open about his Second Act.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>
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