From Homeless Soccer Participant to Cause Champion: A Narrative Inquiry of a Social Entrepreneur

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Introduction

Although sport-for-development (SFD) research has increased in popularity in recent years, recommendations have been made for unique approaches and longitudinal investigations in an effort to further illuminate the long-term impact of these initiatives on participants (Coalter, 2010; Kidd, 2007). Beyond attempting to identify the impact these programs may have, there is a need to identify and investigate the traits and characteristics of the cause champions (e.g., social entrepreneurs) involved within these endeavors. As Maguire (2009) notes; "athletes are not simply champions of their sport, but also of their local community and nation and sometimes, humanity as a whole" (p. 260).

During a long-term monitor and evaluation collaboration with Street Soccer USA (SSUSA), a non-profit organization using soccer as a means to help the homeless “score goals on the field, and achieve their goals in life” (SSUSA, n.d.), one particular storyline emerged meriting further attention. Lisa Wrightsman, a 32-year-old, white, Sacramento native and a formerly homeless woman, went from star college athlete, to recovering addict, to community activist. Lisa became a cause champion and began to show tendencies of social entrepreneurship as she continued to work within the SSUSA mission to give back to her own community.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the impact of SSUSA on one of its most successful participants, Lisa Wrightsman, in order to understand her experiences, expectations, and motivations towards becoming a cause champion and social entrepreneur and continuing her activism. To guide this study, three research questions were developed: (a) Why did the SSUSA experience resonate to such a great degree with Lisa?; (b) How does Lisa embrace the tenets and characteristics of social entrepreneurship?; and (c) How does Lisa plan to continue advocating for the cause and serve as a cause champion?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In a meta-analysis of social entrepreneurship literature (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010), 37 different definitions were uncovered with the focus on four key factors: (a) the characteristics of individual social entrepreneurs, (b) their operating sector, (c) the processes and resources used by the social entrepreneur, and (d) the primary mission and outcomes associated with the social entrepreneur. As recognized by Shaffie et al. (2012), a traditional entrepreneur is associated with financial gains and business acumen, while social entrepreneurs are often judged by social returns and “profitability remains a goal, but not the main goal” (p. 4). Just as business entrepreneurs transform industries and maximize profits, social entrepreneurs act as change agents and attempt to maximize their outreach. A social entrepreneur can be found in nearly every aspect of society such as health, education, and the economy (Barendsen & Garden, 2004; Okpara & Halkias, 2011; Thompson, Alvy, & Lees, 2000). However, there has been very limited research conducted in the sport context with regards to social entrepreneurs, as most research of this nature has centered upon CSR (Ratten, 2011).

To guide the current study, Austin, Stevenson, and Wei-Skillem’s (2006) framework and definition was utilized; “We define social entrepreneurship as innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sectors” (p. 2). To differentiate social entrepreneurship from commercial entrepreneurship, Austin and colleagues designed the social value proposition (SVP) model, stating: “The distinctive nature and central role of the mission in social enterprises and the multifaceted nature of the social value give the SVP a logical centrality in the framework” (p. 16). Considering the influence and following sport has around the world, the marriage of social entrepreneurship and sport has strong potential if harnessed by philanthropists driven to solve an existing problem and motivated to dedicate their lives towards such a goal.
Methods

For the present study, we adopted a narrative inquiry approach. Within the SFD field, studies often focus on the overarching effects of programs or short-term impact. There are few examples of case studies, ethnographies, or narrative inquiries prevalent in the literature. Rinehart (2005) advocates for these methods within sport management; "reading about and engaging with someone's experience in the field can be an invaluable, efficient way of gaining both knowledge and understanding of a particular area" (p. 507). Specifically, we conducted focus groups, interviews, and made observations at the annual SSUSA Cup in Washington, D.C. in 2010 and 2011 that included Lisa, players she coached, and SSUSA administrators. Additional observations and informal conversations occurred at the Cup in New York City in 2012. Later in the Fall of 2012, we spent three days in Sacramento to observe Lisa coaching and mentoring her players. We also interviewed her, conducted a focus group with eight players she currently coached or used to coach, and interviewed two of her supervisors at her place of employment. Finally, we interviewed the CEO of the SSUSA initiative. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis consisted of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and dependability and credibility were enhanced through establishing intercoder reliability between the authors and by conducting member checks with study participants.

Findings and Discussion

Referencing Austin et al.'s (2006) model of social entrepreneurship, we adapted this model to illustrate what drove Lisa's desires for social entrepreneurship. We found there were three specific background influences steering Lisa towards social entrepreneurship: sport, life, and traumatic experiences. Within that context we recognize the variables of people, opportunity, and capital and how Lisa's interaction with the SSUSA initiative illustrated each of those factors and we note how these three variables intersect and lead towards a SVP or her emergence as a social entrepreneur.

Our findings are in line with previous research and literature suggesting one's context or experience is influential in shaping social entrepreneurship (Austin et al., 2006; Dacin et al., 2010). Within this context, it was seen that Lisa's experience with SSUSA, the people she encountered and the skills she gained were influential towards her next steps of altruism. Once her experience with SSUSA drove her to start her own team, Lisa began to exhibit the characteristics of social entrepreneurship and act as a cause champion, forming objectives that included long-term goals and sustainability. Specifically, Lisa recognized the importance of her background and struggles and how it led her down a path of serving as a cause champion:

"I think one thing that contributes is that [others in a similar situation] can identify with me. . . . I could relate and tell them we have both been at the bottom and they believed me. And they have got to see how that affected my life afterwards."

While there have been many claims about the positive benefits of sport, there have also been numerous critiques on the lack of empirical evidence and calls for stronger monitor and evaluation efforts (Coalter, 2010; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2011). Thus, we believe our efforts to longitudinally investigate a specific narrative in the context of a SFD initiative contributes to the understanding of impact, specifically, of how a participant in an SFD program becomes a cause champion and social entrepreneur.

Not only did Lisa manage to gain employment and cease being homeless, she has become a passionate advocate, recruiter, and fundraiser for SSUSA. By discovering why this initiative had such a strong impact on her future path, the findings can be relayed to other non-profit organizations that hope to achieve similar results. These findings represent a significant contribution to the sport management field, given that it is one of the first efforts to recognize social entrepreneurship within a SFD environment. Considering the constant need for innovation, growth, and economic savvy within the non-profit sector, recognizing the value in finding future social entrepreneurs and champions could be an important step for many SFD organizations to optimize outreach and impact.