

Everyday Humanitarians

with Travis Hellstrom

Featuring



The Startup Success of Watsi

with Chase Adam

Before the age of 21, Chase Adam traveled, worked and studied in more than 20 countries around the world. Chase is an entrepreneur, investor, speaker, author, former Peace Corps Volunteer and founder of the nonprofit, [Watsi](#).

Travis: Today we're sitting down with Chase, who started an incredible organization called Watsi, who just became the first non-profit to ever be sponsored by the Y Combinator, which is really exciting. He was also a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica and we're really excited to have him here with us talking about his incredible organization and ways that people can get involved. Thanks so much, Chase, for sitting down with us.

Chase: Yeah, thanks for having me on your chat.

Travis: First, could you tell us a little bit about your organization and how it got started?

Chase: Yeah, so I actually remember the day, December 3, 2010 I was serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica, and I was riding on a bus actually

coming back from the capital, San José. A woman got on the bus and started asking the passengers for donations. Almost everyone on the bus contributed and I wasn't really sure what she was raising money for, but it turned out that she actually was holding her son's medical record and she'd been raising money from the people on the bus to pay for his medical treatment.

At that moment, I was working personally with kiva.org and I thought it'd be really cool if there was a kiva.org for healthcare or essentially a way to connect this woman with a global community of supporters that could help fund medical treatment for her son.

Travis: Nice. How did the process go from going in from Peace Corps into starting the organization and now you have the website, and there are just so many great things that you're doing. What was that process like coming out of Peace Corps?

Chase: Yeah, it was a long process, but I spent essentially the last six months in the Peace Corps. At first, I recruited two of my best friends from the Peace Corps to jump on as co-founders, and then the three of us spent the final six months of our Peace Corps service really working on the business plan and thinking through essentially the entire evolution of the organization.

We returned to The States after our close of service. We brought on our fourth and final co-founder, Jesse Cook, who's technical. He does all the website development, essentially built our app. Together we worked just nights and weekends for about a year. Nights and weekends with all full-time jobs. We just did Watsi on the side to really build the organization. Like I mentioned before, it's a crowdfunding platform for healthcare. So a lot like Kiva for healthcare. A website where anyone can directly fund medical treatments for people in need.

We worked on Watsi for about a year. We then launched sort of a private data version of the site, so just, for instance, [inaudible 02:41]. We funded our first three medical treatments, and then after we sort of closed the loop with those first three meds, everything went well. The site didn't go down. We felt pretty confident.

We launched to the public on August 23rd of 2012. We put non-hacker hangers, which is a pretty popular form for Y Combinator. Basically, it's a place where all techies hang out. Once we launched Watsi, it kind of went viral, so it went—we had about 20,000 people visit the site the very first day it was public, funding every single medical treatment almost instantly. Right after that, we all quit our jobs and decided to work on it full-time.

Travis: Wow! That's so incredible and now—so Y Combinator definitely took an interest. They're really excited and I think one of the quotes from one of the founders was that he was incredibly excited to be able to bring you on as the first non-profit that they had ever worked with. What's that been like?

Chase: It's been amazing. I mean we're incredibly humbled to be a part of Y Combinator. It's really the smartest, most talented, most driven people I've ever met in my life. It's been a fantastic experience.

One thing I think that's really occurred a lot to me is we are a startup, so I think there's a bit of a distinction between the traditional non-profit organization and a startup. It was so great that—I mean we really took the lean startup methodology with launching Watsi. We didn't raise a lot of money. We didn't go after grants. We didn't do any fundraising. We wanted to operate with complete autonomy and really just do things the way that we wanted—we thought that things should be done.

Y Combinator took an interest in that and now they're making it possible for us to sort of continue down that path, so it's been a fantastic experience.

Travis: You're doing a lot of things that I think are really phenomenal. In the case of your transparency document, which I thought was really progressive. How did your team decide to have something like that which is really putting everything out there for people to see in a Google document that you're constantly updating? Can you tell us more about what the transparency document is, how you thought of that idea, and how your team supports that?

Chase: Yeah. I was actually, to be honest, after the Peace Corps, a little bit jaded. I had worked with a lot of non-profits and I was ready to come back to The States, and I actually was a little frustrated, which is sort of a lot of [inaudible]

04:52] experiences I had in the past. I felt like a lot of organizations say they're transparent, but not a lot are truly transparent. I told everyone on Watsi that the only way I was going to start a non-profit is if we built a non-profit that I personally would feel comfortable giving to. That's sort of always been the motivation for the organization. If I was a donor, what type of organization would I want to support? That's always sort of been the ethos or the guiding sort of—so it's been guiding the evolution of our organization since the beginning.

With regard to transparency, I always sort of—when I donated to very large organizations, I always felt like my money, to a certain extent, was going in a little bit of a black hole. I knew that they operated efficiently. I knew they were doing amazing work, but almost selfishly I wished that I had known more about how my money was being spent.

With Watsi, we dedicated ourselves to being 100% transparent and we really mean that when we say that. If you go on our website, we do have a transparency document. It's just a shared Google document. It's essentially all the financials of our organization. On that document, you can see every single patient that's ever been featured on our site. You can see their privacy waiver that's giving us permission to feature their—promote their information. You can see the doctor that worked with them, the medical partner that identified them. You can even go so far to see a screenshot of the funds transfer of the money leaving our bank account and going to the partner's bank account.

We do this just because we employ 100% model, so on Watsi, 100% of every single donation goes directly to the patient. We even pay the credit card processing fees, and we raise money separately from basically private individuals, foundations, appropriations to cover our overhead. But despite doing that, we even post our personal financials, our overhead financial is online too so we just export it in QuickBooks, and you can really see everything about the organization on our transparency doc.

Travis: It's amazing. I think that's incredible and I think that's definitely the side of things that history is going to be on your side because that's the thing that organizations are trying to do now, and I know it's really hard with big

organizations, but it's incredible that you've done that right from the beginning.

Chase: I think it's scary. I mean I'll be honest with you. There are people—I had to drag a few people on our team kicking and screaming to do this transparency because it is scary. I mean it's scary if you're the one responsible, say, for the financials and then those are going to the public. What if you made a mistake? Or what if someone doesn't like that we spent \$20 on a marketing this month? They think we should have spent more. They think we should have spent less.

I think what we're finding is that we can trust the general public just like we would trust our team. We always sort of—every single decision we're making in the best interest of the patients and of our partners. As long as we continue to do that, to be transparent is actually in our own best interest.

I mean there have actually been a few examples of people that have looked on our transparency document and they've seen a mistake, and they reach out to us and they say, "I saw you funded this patient profile and I don't see that being on the document." We'll look into it and we'll say, "You're right. We totally forgot!" It's actually being transparent has been a huge asset to our organization. It's actually sort of increased the quality of our internal metrics, numbers, and operations.

Travis: That's wonderful. I think it's neat because it taps into kind of the crowdsourcing idea or getting a lot of people's input and support. I don't know a lot about Y Combinator, but that's the impression I get, that they're all about collaboration and support, so you're tapping into a really large altruistic, I think, group of people all over the world who are excited about what you're doing.

Chase: Yeah, that's actually a really good point. My comment earlier about leveraging the power of the crowd and we really take advantage of that at Watsi. The hope is that we can do that even better. I mean I think right now we're doing, I think, a really good job on the crowdfunding side, so most of the donations made on Watsi are pretty small. Median donation size is about \$20. Average donation size is about \$46.

But on the crowdsourcing side, we'd like to do a lot better and that's what we're working towards. Right now, obviously, we're crowdsourcing information just by putting—making everything public at once, even the [inaudible 08:43] to think through. Really everything in our organization. But we really want to give those people a voice.

What we're going to do in the future is essentially build a community around Watsi where people can give us their input in a really structured and public way. Kiva had an affiliated Kiva sort of Kiva blog and we kind of want to do a similar thing for Watsi to really get the crowd involved and really sort of tap into that collective wisdom and knowledge.

Travis: Nice. You're already so available. What are the best ways for people to get in touch with you now? Is it through Facebook and Twitter, things like that? Or what would be the best way for people to tell you how excited they are or to offer support or volunteer? Are there ways for people to get involved?

Chase: Yeah, we love—I mean, obviously, we want everyone and anyone involved with Watsi. The best way to get involved is I mean feel free to email me personally at chase@watsi.org. We also have it on our website. It's just connect@watsi.org sort of gets you the general bucket. We always answer emails within a day.

But then online, I mean we've just been so humbled by the support people have shown us on social media. I mean people don't think that posting on Facebook or sharing on Twitter matters, but it actually has a huge impact. Facebook and Twitter have been the #1 drivers of traffic to our website, and they are literally resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations for patients in need.

Really just getting involved is helping us promote Watsi and then also if you're interested in volunteering, reaching out and we'd love to find a way to sort of match our needs with each individual person's skillset.

Travis: Amazing! That sounds incredible. Chase, I really appreciate you being so open to this interview and to people in general. I think it's incredible that you're willing to share your email address and your entire organization, and it's

incredible. I'm really inspired by what you're doing and I know there are a lot of people all over the world who feel the same way.

Chase: Thanks. Yeah, I really appreciate it.

Travis: We look forward to seeing all the incredible things your organization continues to do and thanks, again, for sitting down with us to talk.

Chase: Thank you. Yeah, it was great to chat. I really appreciate you taking the time to hear our new and humble story, but we're excited for what's to come.