Touched by Fire

By Will Laughlin, Head of School

If you want to instantly improve something, give it a French name. An ordinary loaf of bread becomes extraordinary when the label says, "baguette." To make any setting seem sophisticated, call it a milieu. An overpriced snack is totally worth the money if it's an amuse bouche. And of course, if you want to bump the asking price of your house on that dead-end street, say it's located on a quiet cul-de-sac.

Similarly, the word "entrepreneur" conjures images of debonair professionalism, of fanciness, of elegant Frenchitude. But entrepreneur comes from the rather pedestrian word "entreprendre," which means to undertake. So calling someone an entrepreneur is really just a fancy way of saying that they're a doer.

And, actually, that's quite apropos (see what I did there?). Most of the entrepreneurs that I know-and I know some spectacular ones-are not particularly debonair, fancy, or elegant. None of them are French. They tend to be direct, iconoclastic, stubborn, and action oriented. Some are charming, some are not. They possess, of course, an outsized appetite for risk. Some are secretly prone to
anxiety or depression. Others have struggled with substance-use disorders. Several have learning differences, including ADHD, dyslexia, and Asperger Syndrome. Most did not do particularly well in school.

Statistics on entrepreneurs support my personal observations. A 2015 University of California and Stanford University joint study found that 72% of surveyed entrepreneurs suffered from learning differences and/or mental illnesses, compared to only 48% of the control group. They referred to this connection between mental health and creativity as being "touched by fire," or, to Frenchify it, "touché par le feu."

As a long-time special-needs educator (and doer), I feel a deep connection to the notion of entrepreneurship. Like my entrepreneur friends, many of the students I’ve worked with over the years have been direct, iconoclastic, stubborn, and quick to action. Some have been charming, some not so much. Anxiety, depression, and substance use? You bet. Learning differences? That too. And even the most brilliant of these students have tended to chafe at the constraints of formal schooling.

But these adolescents, more than the traditional students I’ve worked with, often show signs of being touched by fire. Without the right support and care, that fire often burns too hot, causing more pain than progress. But with the right support, many of these smart, quirky students find a way to manage that heat, to harness it as power for creating and moving and doing. They learn that to be different they also have to "do" different. Since the normal way just doesn't work for them, they are forced to either give up in frustration or find a different way. Those who do find that different way often exhibit an entrepreneurial approach not only to work, but to all aspects of life. These "life-preneurs" may still struggle, but are more likely to find their own unique and satisfying place in the world.

Working effectively with these students requires the willingness to honestly appraise their differences while also helping to reframe them. The intelligence theorist and scholar, Howard Gardner, asserts that most great leaders possess a strong facility for reframing situations. Think failure versus learning opportunity, lemons versus lemonade, or frustrating versus challenging. Vocabulary is a simple but powerful way to reframe and, in so doing, change both expectations and outcomes. Especially when that vocabulary is
French! Think "underachiever" versus "entrepreneur." Que fantastique!

Perhaps the author of Apple's famous "think different" campaign, who himself was touched by fire in the form of severe dyslexia, should have encouraged us also to "do different." Because it's the doing that makes the difference. It's the doing that can turn a struggling teen into something else. Something really cool.

Like an entrepreneur.

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**M3: Mobile, Media, Music**

*Q&A with Alum and Entrepreneur Sam Terrasson '16*

**Q:** Hi Sam! Can you share with us what you have been doing since graduating from Oliverian?

**A:** Yeah, happy to. I am currently a freshman at Syracuse University majoring in economics in the Maxwell School. Between classes, my friend, Seydouba Kourouma, and I spend most of our time working on our new business venture, M3. Please visit our crowdfunding page for more info, but basically M3 is a smartphone app that gives social media its first and best musical soundtrack. Seydouba and I started working on M3 when I was still in high school at Oliverian. We both have always been passionate about music and we are psyched to find a platform to share it.

**Q:** Wow, sounds like a great idea. How does it work?

**A:** Imagine a media message that you would like to share right now from your phone... a thought, a word, or a picture. Instead of uploading that picture with words or emojis, think of some song or piece of music that captures the vibe and real meaning of that media. In a tap, you have now uploaded media content with music that will
play simultaneously and instantly. Other users can now see your media/music, enjoy, and share!

**Q: What's the status of your startup?**

**A:** We are currently fund raising for the final creation of the app. We have AWS Server space available for purchase and we are waiting on buying our API music license once we finish funding. I have a development team of six that are ready to get this show on the road. With server space, a music license, and a development team, all we need are the funds. We successfully completed our first campaign on IndieGoGo that raised nearly $2,500. We are launching our next campaign. Please visit our crowdfunding page to help us out!

**Q: How can people track your progress, support your work, and eventually buy your app?**

**A:** Well, as I mentioned, we have our crowdfunding page available for people who are interested in our project and would like to contribute. People can also track the progress of M3 through our personal email list that we send out to funders. Our app will eventually be available for download on the Google, Android, and App Store. There will be a free download available for 30 days, and then an in-app purchase option of $9.99 per year. On our app, you can save the music you listen to and listen to other music as well. Other companies charge $9.99 per month; we charge that per year. Anyone who donates now will receive a promo code so they can enjoy the app for free.

**Q: What would you say to other Oliverian students who dream of starting a company?**

**A:** I would say that you’re in the right place right now and you should make the most of the time that Oliverian gives you to explore your passion. There is a tremendous amount of support there. They tested me and assigned me time to work on my project, especially when they knew it would push me out of my comfort zone. M3 was my senior project and I presented my very first pitch to the school during community meeting. I talked to my counselor, to my Oli friends, to the head of the school, and to the teachers all about the same thing... my passion. The support there was unbelievable.

There is a lot you learn about yourself when creating a business and there is a lot you learn about yourself while at Oliverian. If you can link the two, you'll enjoy some of the most precious days of your life.
I encourage any Oli students to reach out to me so I can share some of the support that the Oliverian community has shown me. I wouldn’t be where I am today without Oliverian!

Q: Any last thoughts you want to share with us?
A: Thank you for your time. Any and all donations are much appreciated! If you are interested in M3, please make a donation today. If you cannot contribute, no worries, please share this idea with your friends! If you have a phone, listen to music, post media, and want to share your music with your media.... you are going to love M3! Thanks again.

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**Brain Butter**  
*By Jonathan Pines '18*

Last school year, I took a marketing class at Oliverian which led me to Will Laughlin's house for a guest lecture on branding. The lecture turned into an exciting meeting which would be the impetus for a student-run startup. Brain Butter is a tasty food made from walnuts, almonds, coconut, turmeric and lots of other brain boosting ingredients! With Will as our faculty advisor, I have been meeting with a group of students throughout the year to work on getting this product out to the public. We are hoping to take all proceeds from Brain Butter and use them toward Oliverian scholarships for students in need.

Working on this project has taught me a lot about the many successes and failures that come with business startups. I have seen the randomness of how people become interested with our product, how fast a fan base can be built, and how to run with that momentum.
Currently, we are producing more Brain Butter to sell to the public, and we are working on getting our name out there! We are taking orders by phone: 603-989-5100, and by email: olibrainbutter@gmail.com.

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**The Original Oli-preneur**

*Barclay Mackinnon shares what it took to get Oliverian off the ground 14 years ago. Many might have labeled Barclay's early attention and focus traits as disabilities, but Barclay shares how these "defects" actually fueled his more entrepreneurial efforts.*

Q: **How long have you been an educator and what kinds of schools have you worked in?**
A: Hard to believe, but I have been an educator for over 37 years! I started out my career in the traditional boarding school world which consisted of highly academic private schools. As I developed my career, I found my calling in the alternative school world.

Q: **Where have you felt the most at home?**
A: There's absolutely no comparison! While I loved working in the traditional independent school world, I didn't feel I was following my true calling until I joined Oliverian 17 years ago. At Oliverian, I am able to really be who I am.

Q: **As founding head of Oliverian, you had some real entrepreneurial influence on this place. Tell me what personal qualities helped you be effective.**
A: I am best with overall vision, not the specific details. I can create passion and excitement even if the "thing" isn't there yet. That was important during startup when I was marketing a school that didn't even exist! My energy for this work was often labeled "attention and focus problems" when I was in school. But I think in many ways what society calls a challenge has actually become a strength for me. I'm
real big on energy and passion, sometimes at the expense of certain details. I also have the capacity to be comfortable with a certain amount of open-endedness with projects, which is important when starting or running an organization.

**Q: What are some of the misunderstood qualities of an entrepreneur that you see in Oli students?**

**A: The whole energy, excitement, and passion piece. A lot of times this goes along with ADD, ADHD, or executive functioning differences. Those challenges can become strengths as an adult, or at least can be overcome in a professional setting, where one can specialize and focus on strengths. The other thing I see is the willingness to operate outside of the box. Even if they don’t come to us viewing themselves as creative, most Oliverians can’t help but think outside the box. We see that a lot with our successful alums.**

**Q: What advice do you have for students leaving Oliverian and entering the world?**

**A: So often they’re told not to trust what they know from a meta-cognitive, or intuitive, perspective. But our students are often so intuitive, and their instincts about themselves and how they operate best are often right. We work to get students in touch with that inner confidence and begin to trust that meta-cognitive wisdom— that ability to become aware of and in tune with their own unique ways of perceiving, learning, and thinking.**

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