

CHASING THE FUTURE: Wrangler community's rising star

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Ryan Kastuba sky driving. Photo courtesy of Ryan Kastuba.

Bridging the generations: Popular Tempe coffee shop provides an ideal setting for traveling entrepreneurship

By Barbi Walker-Walsh



Ryan Bastuba working on his mobile work station — his laptop — at Steve's espresso. Photo by Andrew Lwowski

Sitting in the corner by the window of the local coffee shop with his laptop open and working both his phone and keyboard, Ryan Bastuba almost doesn't stand out against the other locals doing the same that morning at Steve's Espresso in Tempe. Almost.

Bastuba isn't your average college student. The 22-year-old ASU senior isn't ditching class or scrolling through ego-deflating social media feeds. He's working and working hard. The uber-focused young entrepreneur, dressed in the typical collegiate uniform — a university tee and casual sweats, is looking for an operations manager to run his day-to-day business, Varify, a water testing kit that he sells on Amazon.

He is also a world traveler, a philanthropist, and a lifelong learner. He has a curiosity and an open-mindedness that make him great at working with people of all ages and backgrounds. Bastuba's journey to entrepreneurship started when he was a high school student in Coronado, Calif., a San Diego suburb. He admits that he was a bit of a troublemaker in his first two years.

"I was just, like, very ADHD: rambunctious, kind of causing problems in the neighborhood," he said, adding that he caused problems for his mom, too. But then COVID hit, and everything changed. He found out about Amazon's FBA (Fulfillment by Amazon) business model online and decided to give it a try. He did extensive research and study and found a

viable product with high demand but low competition. He launched Varify in December 2019 and has been expanding on various products ever since. Bastuba has a knack for seizing opportunities, whether learned or natural.

His mom, Teresa Bastuba, said Ryan always had a quiet kind of confidence. That and an entrepreneurial spirit. When he was young, she said he did a lemonade sale and made quite a bit of money, even though that wasn't his goal. He just picked a lucrative location.



Ryan's roommate Finn joins him during a hike to Delta Lake in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

"He set it up in a spot where a lot of runners and cyclists would pass by, and they were just so thirsty," Teresa said. He was also very friendly, which helped him attract customers, she said. His mother is right—he is friendly and easy to talk with, yet he has clear and firm boundaries around his time. He is serious, but he is also very curious. And it is that curiosity that Bastuba credits with his success.

"It's not even like, 'Oh, I want to make a quick buck,'" he said. He is just really fascinated with how to sell to customers. "I kind of got into it backwards," he said. "Most people start a business, 'Oh, this is the problem. I'm going to solve it and give it to the customer.'" "The FBA model is just looking at a product that is already selling out there and trying to find ways to make it stand out."

Bastuba did just that with Varify, a water purification system that he partnered with Water for Good, a non-profit organization based in Indiana, that aims to provide everyone in the Central African Republic access to safe and clean water. "Our missions and purpose align," he said. He also used the partnership as a marketing aspect. "While the partnership was initially seen as a mutually beneficial marketing campaign; I have now gained a deeper interest and care for Water For Good."



Exploring the Saharan desert in Morocco with local buddy Said

In June of this year, he plans to visit Africa and see the impact of his work firsthand. He is excited to take his dad with him and is proud to say that Varify is supporting his trip. He hopes to grow the partnership throughout the rest of the year. “I believe that this donor trip will give me further inspiration on how we can collaborate,” he said. Curiosity was a vital element Bastuba’s curiosity and open-mindedness also extend to his education and personal life.





White water rafting with his dad Martin at McKinley Park, Alaska

He graduated from Coronado High School in 2020, during the height of the pandemic. He used his time wisely and received the Coronado Chamber of Commerce Aspire Business Scholarship. He was accepted into Barrett, The Honors College at Arizona State University, and is majoring in Technological Entrepreneurship and Management. He also studied for a semester in Spain, where he learned about the culture and the language. He thinks every young person should do that, as it left an indelible mark on him. Traveling, meeting new people and connecting with others are important to him. He enjoys being around people so much that he prefers working in coffee shops.

And, with his laptop, he can run his business from anywhere in the world as long as he has a working wi-fi connection. An eye-opening experience Ryan's affection for travel and learning about others and different locations led him to go roadtrippin' with his aunt and grandmother. He met them in Albuquerque, N.M., and they drove to the Grand Canyon, then on to Zion National Park. Not only was Zion amazing, he said, but it provided a cool opportunity to get to hang out with his aunt and grandma more—to get to know them better, especially since he doesn't see them often.



Taking a jump break during a kayak trip along the coast of Nerja, Spain

“It seemed spontaneous, adventurous and fun,” he said. Bastuba said his grandma is really enjoyable to be with, and she never has a bad word for anybody—qualities he has adopted as central to his own approach to life. “I personally aspire to respect and connect with anyone,” he said. Spontaneity is another quality he admires. Bastuba says he prefers to dive head-first into most things. He doesn’t mind failing in trying to figure something out. He points back to the FBA, saying that, on YouTube, you’ll find some guru guy saying how much money you can make if you take his course. But you can learn all that stuff for free.

“You’ll learn more by, like, picking around and taking your own path to learning than someone’s course because the course is how they think,” Bastuba said. Work to learn from others He recognizes that he’s also blessed by not having to worry about food or rent while in high school while researching his business goals. But everyone, not just his generation, has similar capabilities at their fingertips. Technology allows people to connect with so many others, and that’s the positive side of social media. If social media is used correctly, he said, there are more pros than cons.

“Stuff is so digital now you don’t need to have a bunch of money to make money, with less money upfront as long as you are innovative and ambitious,” he said. Unfortunately, it’s not always that way, and he worries that people can be so self-focused that they focus too much on themselves. He thinks the best way to bridge the gap between people is having a desire to learn from each other.

“The biggest bridge I have towards connecting with others is learning,” he said. He loves learning, in fact, and said it opens him up to talk with anyone with experiences they can share with him and vice versa. “I think that the desire to learn is a powerful tool in bridging the gap between generations.”

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