

Brian Walsh
"Our Story"

We get to see, hear and feel some pretty incredible things from these seats. Like what about our first session keynote speaker Mr. Nick Vuijic, or maybe its feeling the incredible sounds of our national FFA band and chorus. And for many of us, we may get the most thrill from seeing our friends cross that stage to receive some pretty spectacular awards.

We all know that feeling of excitement that comes with being in this arena, but for me, as an FFA member there was always another feeling that came with sitting in these seats.

You see, I still remember the state and national officers, motivational speakers and others who encouraged and challenged us. These incredible people were great role models but, I always noticed one thing about most of these individuals. I felt like they all had a story. Now I'm not referring to the kiss the girl on the playground or picking your nose at the dinner table type stories that made us laugh, but I'm talking about those experiences. Those big events. Those life-altering, defining moments of someones life. Those of tragedy, of failure, of overcoming huge obstacles. Stories that I thought ultimately made them successful.

I was always inspired by those folks but I often left asking myself, how can I stack up to that?? Sure, I had lost my grandpa, my parents were divorced and I had even dropped out of preschool, things that I definitely don't take lightly but I felt as if in order to be a state officer, to stand on that stage, to be famous or successful, or truly inspire someone you had to have proven yourself, you had to have some extraordinary story. And I didn't.

I felt like I was living in the shadows of those extraordinary people, seeking some license that others had already earned but having no idea how to create what they had. But you see, it wasn't about creating what they had, it was about creating what I could have. My story.

I've come to realize that my story may not be of some dramatic experience but that's ok, because success isn't defined by one event.

It kind of reminds me of one of the dumbest things I've ever done, you know, as kids we all do some pretty dumb stuff, you know what I'm talking about! Perhaps, the dumbest of which for me was during my first skiing trip. I was 9 years old and my family was spending a weekend at Snowshoe Mountain. We got up the first morning and quickly got to work tearing up the slopes. My oldest cousin Ryan and I were like the cool cats of our family, we were the oldest guys and thought we were the best skiers, so we set out to show off our skills... on the bunny slopes. We quickly got bored with the bunny slopes though and slowly made our way up the ladder of difficulty until something caught our eye that couldn't be unseen. It was a trick slope. Flying down this slope were these guys dressed head to toe in like sponsored gear, and they were like doing backflips and barrel rolls off of jumps, grinding on rails and I was inspired. I mean these people were like Sean White! After what seemed like forever of staring we turned to each other and simultaneously said "do it!" It was like when your elementary school bestfriend is like I double dog dare you to wink at that cute girl... it's not something you can't do. So we made our way up the mountain, nervous as all get out. The deal was that we would both go off of just one jump, simple enough huh?? But as soon as we got off the lift the first thing I saw was a sign that read "Black diamond course- EXPERTS ONLY". I turned to Ryan and said that maybe this wasn't a good idea. I mean we were standing at the top of the mountain made for experienced experts, in cheap snowsuits, had never been skiing before and literally were asking for a death wish. But then I realized that I could not let myself be one of those people who ride the ski lift down backwards, making it super awkward for everyone else. So I stayed. Ryan and I played rock, paper, scissors to see who would go first, I lost so I inched up to the edge looking down at what I was sure would be death. I went off the edge and quickly picked up speed. As I came up on the jump, my heart was pounding and right as I began to go off the 15 foot jump... I totally chickened out and veered off to the side.

I reached the bottom of the slope just in time to see Ryan start his decent, he came flying down the hill like a mad man and hit the jump at what had to have

been like 75mph and went flying into the air. At first I thought he was attempting to do a backflip and was like “wwwhhhaattt?!?! That’s amazing!!” But quickly realized that Ryan was not trying to do anything. He had completely lost control, did a half of a backflip and literally landed on his head. His skis came off, and came flying down the slope without him. I was about to get my mom when he finally stood up pumping both fists in the air. When he finally reached the bottom, he was like “dude! That was amazing! We gotta do it again!”

I laughed. But throughout the day Ryan went off that same jump multiple times and eventually mastered it.

You know looking back I have to laugh at us but in all honesty I kind of regret not going off of that jump. You see, that sign that stood at the top of the hill was this obstacle. I felt like in order to ski that slope, you had to have a lot of experience, you had to be an expert, and I definitely wasn’t.

Now hear me out, I’m definitely not telling you to go out and do stupid things like jump a ski slope, but what I am saying is that at some point or another we have all faced a similar sign in our life. Whether that is sitting in these seats feeling like our “Story” is unimportant, us standing in the shadow of an older siblings accomplishments or a teammates incredible talent, or it’s feeling unworthy because of a comparison to others experiences, we all know that feeling.

Ryan knew he didn’t have to have some experience in order for him to be successful that day and I think it proves a valuable point- that success isn’t defined by some crazy situation but our willingness to create a story of our own.

I mean just look at the greatest examples of people with extraordinary experiences, Michael Jordan getting cut from his basketball team, Steve Jobs getting fired from the company he started, Walt Disney being told he wasn’t creative enough- Although it doesn’t seem like it sometimes, none of these people were successful or were defined by that experience, they were successful because of what they did with it.

So how ridiculous is it that we are almost subconsciously seeking some defining moment that, quite frankly no one should wish upon anyone, and how ridiculous is it that we are sitting idly with a life that honestly others would do anything for.

In the same way that I ask myself, why I needed an experience for me to make that jump, Why does it take that so-called dramatic experience to take action??? Why does it have to take a life-changing or defining moment to truly be that inspiration to others??

I mean really. Why do we need to fail a test, to teach us that we should study harder for the next one? Why do we need to get cut from a sports team, to give us motivation to work harder? Why do we need to lose someone close to us in order to value the life we have been given?

What if we ignored the signs that are telling us that we need an experience like Ryan?? What if we used other's titles not as a barrier to our own success but a symbol of what success for us could be??? What if we used this stage as a symbol of what could be achieved in that CDE or proficiency area??? What if we used other's stories as fuel to create our own story???

That's when we truly start to succeed because success is not defined by an experience.

We spend so much time making excuses as to why we can't be like those people that stand on this stage, or those who "have it all" or those who have that empowering experience, that we miss out on what truly defines the incredible person we are. Our story.

This past April I got to hang out in the beautiful state of South Dakota!! Whattup?!? On the last day of their convention this girl came up to me and told me she was quitting FFA. I was like wow, wow, wow, now, girl you are trippin. She proceeded to tell me that for the longest time she felt left in the shadows of her older sister's accomplishments or her older sister's stories. She felt her story would never measure up to that of her sister's and that she hated only being known as someone else's sister. She felt like she wasn't as smart or gifted or talented, couldn't achieve as much, she felt like her efforts were never noticed.

So I asked her one simple question, “what do you have that they don’t have?” she slowly lit up as she started spewing all these things out, Personality! Will power! Emotional Strength! Confidence! She was excited because in all honesty she had defined her story right there, she realized that really she was just making excuses as to why she wasn’t worthy, she had realized what make’s her her, she now knows that although she may not accomplish as much as her sisters, if she owns the person she was made to be, people will see that and love it. She now believes that she has an important story and more importantly knows what it is. It’s a story of strength, of crazy amounts of humor, of will power and a killer personality. And just ask her, that realization has kept her in FFA and that realization has brought her to this convention.

Just like Martina we have all lived in the shadow of someone else’s story. Whether that be the player on our team that got the start over us, the guy or gal that won that award over us, that friend that has an amazing experience that seems to get all the attention. In reality all we are doing are making excuses for why we aren’t as good or qualified or inspiring. We all say but... he got elected over me, but... I don’t have an experience like that, but... he is funnier than me. Or you finish the sentence.

Excuses only make us feel better about not doing something. And only when we stop making them do we begin to be proud of the story that we have. Our story.

I am completely guilty of making those excuses but through Martina I come to be proud of my story.

You know, my story is nothing extraordinary, it’s not gonna make you laugh, and it’s definitely not going to make you cry, in fact, it is very simple. Sure, it’s not perfect and has included some bumps and bruises but my story is of a guy that has grown from some shy boy who was just living life as an average person into the person that I am today. A guy that is simple, that loves getting haircuts, stargazing and sneezing, but a guy who loves listening, who loves being around family and friends, a guy who loves feeling and making others feel welcome. A guy that has been blessed with an amazing family, some cool opportunities, and 610,000 friends to share his story with.

Looking back it's kind of sad that it took me so long to realize it, Just like Martina, as an FFA member I too was sitting in those seats, making excuses as to why I couldn't be that successful, waiting for that defining moment that I failed to define me for me.

My friends, regardless of the ridiculous excuses that we tell ourselves everyday, we all have a story, a story that matters. And maybe that story is made up of some crazy hardships and some tough times or maybe it's not. Regardless though, there is no room for excuses in this world, we must define who we are and what we have to offer, our story. Cause our story is just as important, our story matters.

In fact just ask my friend Katie. She's that person that always knows exactly what I am thinking, that can be totally honest with me and can always be counted on for advice. Yea, we all know that friend. We joke all the time and in fact I can probably count the number of really serious conversations we have had on one hand. A series of which I distinctly remember...

I can remember it started when I got a call early one morning and as usual I answered by saying "whattup punk?" but the response from the other side was not normal. In fact, before she could even get two words in, she started sobbing. I had no idea what was going on so I asked are you ok? Whats going on? Finally she mustered up the words, "I'm driving to Pennsylvania" and she stopped again. I was thinking to myself, I personally love Pennsylvania... I didn't think going there would make someone cry. So I said "ok..." from the other end she finally mustered up the ability to say, "my cousin Meagan was killed in a car accident" – the conversation suddenly shifted gears as I realized that she was reaching out to me to help ease her mind and give her some sort of peace. I started racking my brain for some inspiring quote, or bible verse, some story or experience that I could use to help give her that peace, but I had nothing. A few weeks later I got a phone call telling me her brother was hospitalized, later that summer her dog had to be put down, it seemed like it was one thing after another. Everytime we would talk, I kept searching for the words, the experience that I could use to relate to her or something that I could do to make it all better, but I had nothing.

At times, I was literally making up quotes and trying to sound all philosophical and deep in the hopes that something would help. I didn't have that motivational story that was gonna change it all around for her, I didn't have that experience that was going to prove it would all be ok. I felt like I didn't have the story to help.

One day though, in the midst of me stumbling for the right words or motivational stories, she cut me off and said Brian! Stop! Please! I have turned to you these last few months because we are friends. I didn't come to you to inspire me or make it all better. I came to you because I was looking for the same goofy, weird, listener I have always known.

Her words hit me like a freight train. You see, Katie hadn't reached out to me for some great deep, thought-provoking story, that would instantly make it all better, she reached out to me because she needed me and my big ears to listen. She needed my story, not some made up one. My story was perfect but I failed to realize that.

I have been guilty of it time and time again but I've come to realize that the people who leave the biggest impact on this world are not the people who have the most dramatic stories but that recognize the power of the story they do have and use it.

How often do we appreciate the power of our story?? How often do we not compare, doubt, or question the impact that our story can have?? My friends, we have a story, a story that matters, that is powerful.

When I take myself back to those seats, I realize that my doubt in ME and my excuses were plain dumb. I now know that when we realize success isn't determined by an incident or crazy experience and stop making excuses for why our story isn't important, we give ourselves permission to live who we are. And it's powerful.

Even just this week we have been surrounded by some incredible stories. Many of which have been told on this stage. But no matter what, those experiences are a challenge to get to using our story now.

It's time to use others experiences as fuel to act in our own ways. It's time to realize that it doesn't take a near death experience, epic failure or life disaster to motivate, encourage and inspire the world. Its time to realize that excuses are only a way to make us feel better about not doing it. Its time to realize that we don't have to wait for some crazy moment, we can act now.

We have the only story we need, it's a story of great power. It's a story of tremendous potential. It's a story of a changed world. It's our story. And it matters.