



Neal Bermas: STREETS International Is Driven By Passion

By Chelsea Gallagher | September, 2022

Neal Bermas is the founder and chairperson of the inspiring social enterprise STREETS International. He shares with BEN the challenges he is contemplating and why he doesn't believe in creating a five-year plan.

STREETS International is an incredible organisation, but how did you choose Hoi An as the location?

Our vision was a self-supporting social enterprise. The final location needed enough tourism to support and generate our anticipated revenue.

During our search, the tourism market and property development landscape were evolving quickly, and we saw similar business models flourishing in Hanoi. After careful market analysis, we decided to focus more on a centrally based location and haven't regretted it for a second.



STREETS began operating pre-pandemic. How did your team handle the lockdown and pivot to remain afloat?

Vietnam quickly locked down in the first year (2020), and we all stayed optimistic that the first wave would pass.

In 2021, the lockdown came back with a vengeance, and we had to act quickly in uncharted territory. Many of our program participants are from orphanages and weren't able to return or leave STREETS dormitories in Hoi An. It was challenging for everyone, but we used our entrepreneurial spirit to respond and navigate unfamiliar territory.

We created application-based emergency financial support for emergency financial support for all our alumni. It would primarily be delegated to help with their necessities. We are still gratified with the over 100K generous contributions in donations. These donations supported our graduates and alumni, and we reached out to similar organisations, including The French Bakery School and Hoa Sua training restaurant in Hanoi. Our financial support included but was not limited to, paying for alumni's childcare, education costs, and other necessities.

Our last graduating class was in July 2021. Until then, our graduates always had a 100% employment rate in hospitality. Even though they experienced unique hurdles, 70% of the 'pandemic' class currently holds full-time employment.

What does that employment statistic mean to you as the Founder of STREETS International?

The statistic means a lot. The STREETS hospitality and culinary education certificates and graduation are life-changing for our trainees and their families. We aren't just trying to teach skills or offer English training. STREETS International provides the tools to allow our graduates to be self-sufficient.

What do the next five years look like for STREETS International?

I don't invest much energy in five-year plans. Especially now, the world is still constantly changing and adapting to the results and effects of the last two years. STREETS averaged 20-25 group tour reservations per week before the pandemic. For May and June 2022, it's been less than ten. We must consider the best strategies for our social enterprise going forward and how tourism's slow recovery impacts those decisions.

The thing that weighs the heaviest on my conscience is the graduates' employment rate. Pre-pandemic, every class had 100% of graduates starting hospitality careers within a month of hospitality careers within a month of I'm reflecting on accepting this statistic and what it means as we move forward with designing a changed model.

Your board of directors is primarily from New York City or other parts of America. What advice do you have for other Business Executive Network members navigating discussions with international board members?

The STREETS International boards are all big-hearted, successful individuals, most have hospitality, education, and finance careers. Regardless of location, one requirement for anyone joining STREETS' board is spending time at STREETS in Vietnam. Some board members joined the project after dining at our restaurant or visiting STREETS during their South East Asia travels. Ensuring a board has all experienced the STREETS mission means we make decisions with first-hand knowledge plus emotional connection. STREETS International's accomplishments speak for themselves. It's been a fantastic journey to watch, interact with and develop our trainees. Living in Vietnam is an essential part of my leadership. I need to connect with my team, which requires being on-site to face the challenges and create plans for the future together.

Can you share with the community challenges you have overcome?

A challenge we all experience living and working in Vietnam is the unpredictable and inconsistent regulations we've all learned to navigate. Another broader challenge is the truth behind the statement, "It's lonely at the top." When you start or lead a new venture, you must understand the strength you'll have to call upon to deal with many tough decisions.

Whatever you do in life, passion and resilience are necessary. They drive me in everyday life and business. I would also like to highlight that the connections I've made through the Business Executive Network remain inspiring. **[C]**