

# Z Fellows Naïveté Speech

Word Count: Approx. 2,000 (minus scene direction/writer's notes)

Speech Length: Approx 14 mins

Hello everyone, before I begin my speech I'd like to poll the room on a super important question - show of hands {raise hand}, who here thinks I could be Mark Zuckerberg's long lost twin? I get it, I actually had to do a genetics test to confirm that we're not related. But we do both have Jewish mothers, which explains a lot about our insatiable drive to make them proud of us.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm the founder of Z Fellows, a one week accelerator for undiscovered talent.

I often reflect on how I have fourteen year old \_\_\_\_\_ to thank for where I find myself today. Whenever I feel stuck, I think, what would fourteen year old me do? Like when I hesitate to make a decision. Or when I don't follow up on something because of my apprehension. {raise hand} Who here, like me, has ever failed to work on something that you were passionate about for fear of failure? And then regretted it?

*{if nobody raises hand - very unlikely}* I'm the only one? I find that hard to believe. In a recent Deloitte survey of 3,000 full-time U.S. workers, across all levels and industries, only 20% said they are truly passionate about their work.\*

\*Source: <https://hbr.org/2019/10/3-reasons-its-so-hard-to-follow-your-passion>

*{if people raise hands - likely}* Thank you for raising your hands. You are not alone. In a recent Deloitte survey of 3,000 full time U.S. workers, across all levels and industries, only 20% said they are truly passionate about their work.

Fourteen year old Cory never thought about failure. At that age, I had an asset that I was totally unaware of: my naïveté. Being naïve meant I didn't overthink things. I didn't talk myself out of my passion projects. I didn't have the desire to play it safe. I simply took action. And each action, whether it succeeded in its goal or not, would help me grow both personally and professionally. If you can just stop yourself from thinking about all of the potential negative outcomes of a project before you start, and just start, you'll be amazed at where your journey will take you.

My naïveté first led me to believe that Twitter and Facebook should hire a middle schooler. My résumé said that I got As and Bs in math and science and a C in Arts & Crafts. After I tried and failed to get a job with them, I did some research, and learned that most tech businesses get started with venture capital. So I cold called and emailed every venture capital firm I could find. You can imagine their surprise when I'd ask in my high-pitched teenage voice, "Um, can I intern for your firm?" At first they were skeptical, but I had an ironclad pitch. I'd say, well, "You invest in technology companies that target teenagers, but don't have any teenagers working in the office." I also promised them I wouldn't call up the FBI to tell them they hired a fourteen year old. So I had a job. I shadowed people at Founders Fund and Union Square Ventures before people really knew what they were. The experiences were invaluable and there's a simple reason why I was hired at all.

It was because I asked, and when I heard no, I didn't stop, I kept going until I heard a yes. Most people dream, but over time, most people will stop asking before they can transform their dreams into reality.

Is there a time in your life where

At fifteen my naïveté also meant that I was not intimidated or deterred by the gravity of what I was asking for— I didn't dwell on the fact that I didn't have any experience, credentials, qualifications, or any business asking for what I wanted— I just did it. For example, when I wouldn't stop pestering him, Union Square Ventures MhcD Albert Wenger told me I could shadow/intern w/him. I told him I couldn't afford to live in NYC, so he said, well you can come and stay in my guest room. When I told my parents that a 45 year old man had invited me, a 15 year old, to live and work with him in New York, what do you think they said? "Hell, to the no." But I didn't give up, and after my parents and I went to meet with Albert and his wife, they realized they were good people, and reluctantly let me go.

After graduating high school, I went to study computer science at the University of Illinois. It was cold, it was hard, and I quickly discovered it was not for me. I wanted to found my own company. So I dropped out, much to the joy of my mom and dad. Any other dropouts here? (raise hand) Don't be shy, there's no judgement in this room, your parents aren't here.

I can thank my naïveté for allowing me to make the critical decision to drop out, because I went to San Francisco and founded my first startup— which is something they make everyone do when you get there. The company was called Afterschool and our goal was to build an alternative and more exclusive version of Facebook that would allow young people to connect around the world - no parents and no teachers allowed. With a pretty small team, we managed to grow the social networking platform to 20 million plus users before being acqui-hired by Ancestry. Though the startup didn't achieve our original goal of becoming the next Insta or Snap... to this day I still rely on the lessons I learned, people I met, and experience I gained from starting the company.

Every one of you in this room has experienced failure of some kind. And that's GREAT. Because failure is a prerequisite to success.

I'd go on to found and invest in a number of other ventures, until a seminal experience changed the trajectory of my career and caused me to truly understand and appreciate the value of my naïveté. I had flown back to Houston for Thanksgiving to visit my parents. I was talking to my old roommate from San Francisco - someone who I still consider one of the most capable people I've ever met— super high IQ, super high EQ. He was working at Google and his plan had been to work there for 1 year and then start his own company. But 1 year turned into 2 years, then 3 - 4 years. The money was good and he'd gotten so comfortable that he just couldn't step away. But he was miserable. Every day he'd complain about working there. So I asked him, how many vacation days do you have? He told me he had many months. I said, why not take those vacation days and work on your side projects. If you like it amazing, quit Google, if you don't, fine then you can go right back. He agreed, took a staycation, assembled a team, built a prototype, and he never went back to Google.

My friend's trepidation, lack of naïveté, and his overly comfortable position were keeping him back from doing what he loved. All he needed to do was act, and deep down in his soul he knew this, but for over 4 years he sat in purgatory. Imagine what his 14 year old self would think if he knew that ten years later he'd be sitting in an office, with his brain atrophying, settling for a job he very much wasn't intellectually challenged by? So often we get bogged down in our own heads, we let the fear guide us as opposed to just doing it. Our precautionary brains take over, telling us, oh it'll never work, I should play it safe, how can I possibly achieve the same level of success that these other brilliant minds have achieved?

But the truth is you don't have to be a genius to start a company. You just have to stop THINKING about it and act. One of my favorite things Steve Jobs said is: "Everything around that you call life was made up by people who were not smarter than you."

The largest car company in the world...Uber owns no vehicles, The largest media network... Facebook creates no content, the largest marketplace Alibaba has no inventory, and Airbnb owns no real estate. The people that founded these companies had little to no background in the fields they chose to pursue, but that did not deter them. For example, I recently met with the founder of YouTube, Jawed Karim. When he was working at Paypal he remembered founder Peter Thiel once being asked by an employee, "What do we do about chargebacks?" His response? "What's a chargeback?" If Thiel DID have a background in banking he probably never would have started Paypal because he would have been able to foresee just how damn hard it would be.

As a young woman, Vera Wang had dedicated her entire life to figure skating and was devastated when she didn't qualify for the 1968 Olympics.\* Did she despair? No, she would change tack and get hired as an editor at Vogue for 17 years, leave to join Ralph Lauren, and then resign two years later to become an independent bridal wear designer. In 2021, Forbes estimated her net worth at \$500 million.\*\*

\*source: <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/vera-wang-talks-about-her-olympics-ambitions>

\*\*source: <https://www.forbes.com/profile/vera-wang/>

Who would have anticipated that a young boy from Austria would become one of the greatest action movie stars in American history, and then transition to become the 38th Governor of California? All with a heavy Austrian accent. George Foreman could have retired after boxing, but instead he attached his name to a grill that made him far more money than his boxing career ever did. Anybody here have the Foreman grill? Who knew that would be his legacy?

What connects all of these individuals is that they all shared a naïve notion that they could commit themselves to something they believed in, despite their lack of expertise or qualifications, and somehow pull it off. They all had an idea they refused to give up on coupled with an insane bias to action. And that's the reason they find themselves where they are today.

The same can be said about the individuals who've joined Z Fellows and grown tremendously. When the founders of Whop came onboard, they were committed to an idea that it should be easier for people to buy and sell software online. What about Patreon or eBay or Gumroad or Amazon? They would go on to raise capital from Z Fellows, Peter Thiel, the founder of Tinder, and others. And this coming year alone over \$1b in transactions will occur on Whop w/millions of users. The founder of Nucleus Genomics, Kian Sadeghi, couldn't believe there weren't more companies using genomics to help people live healthier and longer lives. So he dropped out of UPenn, committed to his vision, and has so far raised over \$20 million dollars, including investments from Redditt Cofounder Alexis Ohanian. And is now trying to buy 23 & me as a 20-something year-old.

In all of the cases I've observed, naïveté and action played a crucial role in their success. I had no reason to think founding Z Fellows would work and btw we are just getting started. I had no reason to expect people wanting to give me money so I could give talented young people \$10,000 each to kickstart their passion projects for 1 week. I had no reason to think that when I put this idea on Twitter, it would go viral. I had no reason to think that the founder of Netflix, Eventbrite, Figma, Doordash, and so many others, would sign on to mentor the talent. But

imagine, if I had spent all this time worrying about all these roadblocks before I started, if I had let the fear constrain me, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you today.

Ask yourself, what would your 14 year old self say about what you're currently doing today? What would you build if you could begin right now? What is keeping you from doing that thing? It's never too late to start. Now is the time to stop second guessing. Be naive, be fearless, and take action. Your billion dollar idea will never be worth anything if you're the only one who ever knows about it.

Tap into that naive wonderment you had when you were 14 years old, when the world was full of endless possibilities. If I'm saying anything here, it's that the most important factor to success is just starting. And if there's one thing I'm certain of, once you start, no matter what happens, you will not regret it.

Thank you.