ALUMNI INTERVIEW

Turning Passion into Business

Olga Batty, Alumni Relations Manager, talks to Srin Madipalli, (SPC 2012, MBA), entrepreneur, coder, commercial lawyer, writer, traveller and CEO and co-founder of Accomable.

How did Accomable come about?
Accomable is our startup. It is a hotel and accommodation booking platform for people who are disabled or have any kind of mobility problem, or who are elderly. At the moment, it’s really hard to find services that are accessible, and it’s difficult to know whether a property or a vacation rental is suitable. Even if you are just booking a hotel, you often struggle to find all the necessary information online. At Accomable, we find really good adapted listings and our team vets them so that our users can book accessible travel via our website.

Today, we are a team of eight, and we now list more than 1,100 properties in 60 countries and have customers all over the world.

How did you come up with this business idea?
I have a condition called Spinal Muscular Atrophy so I have been a wheelchair user pretty much all my life. I hadn’t travelled much, but towards the end of 2010 I took some time off work (I used to be a lawyer) to go travelling. The countries and the people were all incredible but I didn’t easy to organise anything: a lot of the times I would turn up in places that were listed as accessible to find out they weren’t anything like what they were supposed to be. It was very frustrating. It was at that time when my friend and I started a travel blog which became rather popular with more than 40,000 regular readers.

What did you write about?
I shared my experiences, the resources I used, where I had been. We had lots of really good feedback and engagement with people who visited the same places and had the same issues. When I went back to work as a lawyer, I had to travel a lot for work and, again, that was really hard. So when I left law to go to Oxford, I had been looking for an idea I could get really passionate about, really get stuck into, so I focused on travel and helping other people with disabilities to travel more. We thought about what we could do to solve this problem. Rather than an aha! moment, it was something I had been thinking about for a while, and I gradually came to a point when I was ready to create something new.

Did you decide to go for an MBA hoping it would help you develop your start-up?
Yes, when I left Law I did have an open mind as to what I would do. I wanted to be somewhere where people are really motivated, smart and proactive, so when I started my MBA course at Said Business School, I attended various careers events and spoke to different professionals and organisations. I had some rough ideas of what I was interested in and my aim was to meet people with a similar mindset. Being in that environment was incredibly stimulating.
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What was your first impression of St Peter’s?
I loved it. As it happened, I left an environment I was very unhappy in. It was very corporate, quite cold sometimes and just very business-like, whereas at St Peter’s you feel more like you are part of a community. Because it’s a small college, everybody is very engaged, friendly and really passionate about what they do. For me, it was very stimulating. People around the college were always talking about something interesting they were working on. It’s an environment that just gets you going again as a person. And it hits you immediately, within days of being there. I guess it was a bit strange being there as a mature student, for want of a better phrase. Coming back to University after you’ve been in the world of work for several years is a very strange but exciting feeling. And I would actually say that going back to University after a career is a much better experience than being an undergraduate student. I did absolutely love it.

As an alumnus, you often come back to speak at University events. Why do you think it’s important to share your experiences with current students?
I believe when you go to University you usually gain a lot of experience, so you do feel duty-bound to give back later on. When an institution has engaged alumni who want to give back, it enhances the experiences for current students. When I was at Oxford, just hearing what people have done after they graduated gave me some ideas, new food for thought. For me, if you have gained an experience, you have an obligation to pass it on to the next generation of students. Most recently, I took part in Oxford Inspires, which is the University’s main entrepreneurship conference. Essentially, it involves a lot of alumni talking about their start-ups and giving practical advice.

It is obvious that your business ideas are fuelled by your love of travel. You have visited many places and done some adventures of a more extreme kind. Can you give some examples? Sure. On my time off a few years ago I went diving in Bali. I found a special adapted diving centre and we did wreck dives at a sunken US WW2 ship. It was a unique experience. I also went out on a camping safari in South Africa. I found this company that had accessible tents and equipment. We were in the wilderness and it was very exciting. I have also done lots of trekking in the mountains. I love the outdoors.

Have you ever been in trouble during your travels?
Oh, plenty of times. Once I landed in Sydney and discovered that my wheelchair had been smashed to pieces. I was stranded. Luckily, the airline was able to source a back-up wheelchair from a local shop. It wasn’t anything like mine, it was terrible, but things like this happen. Generally, there have been plenty of situations where services like taxis, hotels, and so on have not turned out to be as they were advertised. You just have to think on the spot and find a way to get yourself back to where you need to be.

Last year, you were invited to speak at the International Paralympic Committee Inclusion Summit in Rio. Can you tell me more about it?
It was a fascinating experience. We started the company in the summer of 2015, so getting an invite from the IPC within a year of launching was an honour. There was an article about us in the Evening Standard and somebody from the IPC got in touch and said they were organising this event during the Paralympic Games.

Did you get the chance to see the Games?
Yes, as I was there as a guest of the IPC. I could go and watch any event. I spent a couple of days going around the park, watched some swimming, cycling, athletics, tennis. And I spent a day going around Rio as well, so I got to see the Christ the Redeemer statue. It was quite funny, actually, because there is no lift to get to the top, just an escalator. I had really wanted to see it so we had to perform a bit of an Evel Knievel stunt: you drive your wheelchair up to the escalator, then the escalator gets switched off. A bunch of people hold on to you for dear life, then they switch the escalator back on and it brings all of you up.

How many friends did it take?
It took three people and it was very funny. I posted the video on YouTube and my mum saw it and she was not happy! The view from the top was absolutely worth the effort.

In your interviews you always say that you like to get out of your comfort zone. What is the next challenge?
Every year, I try and do one big thing. When I started Accomable, learning to code was the biggest challenge. I started learning at the college actually, and I built the first version of the website. Last year, I did a public speaking course and an impromptu comedy club and I had my first public performance. This year, I have just applied to learn to drive and I’m still working out the logistics. There will be a heavily-adapted vehicle with a joystick and a lot of technology in it, so I’d quite like for it to be the next big project.