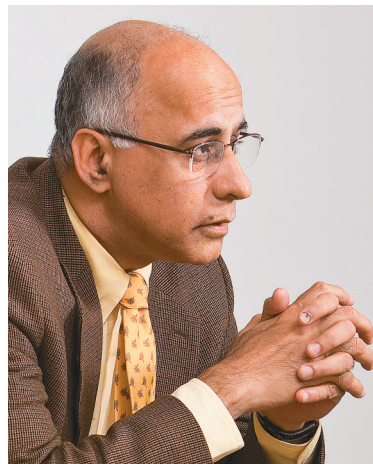


Daddy has Kira to thank



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FORBES INDIA BRIEF

Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs

The world's most democratic storehouse of knowledge really began in a one-room school in Alabama; it took shape in a little girl's hospital bed

by Subroto Bagchi

Jimmy "Jimbo" Wales is the founder of Wikipedia, the most sought-after information source on any subject on the Internet. He pioneered the idea that user-driven content, and not the work of PhDs working with a cave full of parchment, can be relied upon to throw light on every conceivable subject in this world. Wikipedia is a way of life for countless people. There are 75,000 active volunteer contributors, 684 million users, 10 million articles in 260 languages.

What makes the idea revolutionary is that behind Wikipedia are just two dozen people who focus only on providing the technology and looking after site-hosting and other administrative issues. The actual work of putting up the content, of further research, validation and editing are all done voluntarily by thousands of people. It is the ultimate act of volunteering on the Net. It is amazing that the budget for this all-pervasive idea is a mere \$6 million a year. Of this, the Wikipedia Foundation has commitment for only \$4 million for 2009. So, Wales was recently in Bangalore, seeking donations for the shortfall.

While he was here, Rohini Nilekani, chairperson of Arghyam Trust, and her husband, Nandan Nilekani of Infosys, had invited a handful of people from various

walks of life to a dinner at their home to meet Wales and hear him speak about his work.

On meeting the man, you tell yourself that he looks like someone else you know: the mercurial and flamboyant Larry Ellison of Oracle fame. But Wales is disarmingly ordinary; he does not speak with Ellison's messianic fervour. As we stand huddled around him, he quietly, tirelessly evangelises the only thing he owns — but really does not.

Before dinner is served, Rohini introduces Wales and invites him to speak. The man speaks softly, very briefly, explaining how the organisation behind Wikipedia runs and why the folks there need some money. His own work, he says, is *pro bono*. Had he created Wikipedia as an entrepreneurial venture, like Google, he would be worth billions today. But no, he wanted it to be an altruistic venture. He believes that people who seek knowledge care for each other and, left to themselves, would create a beneficial community for everyone. Despite criticisms and shortcomings, Wikipedia seems to be delivering on that vision, for now.

Listening to the man, I am driven back to one of my favourite quests: Are there tipping points in the life of people

NAME

Jimmy "Jimbo" Wales

JOB

Founder, Wikipedia

PASSION

Information for everyone

TURNING POINT

An operation that saved his daughter's life taught him the need to stockpile rare knowledge such as her doctor's



Neville Elder/Corbis (Jimmy Wales); Mallikarjun Katakol (Subroto Bagchi)

like Wales that lead to ideas that become game-changing? For that matter, are there deeply personal experiences that sometimes, lead to the creation of great institutions? I decide to ask him that one question: Tell us about something deeply personal that helped you shape your world view, that has made Wikipedia what it is.

A few seconds of silence follow.

Then, slowly, he recalls how as a child in Huntsville, Alabama, he was home-schooled until his eighth grade. His mother and grandmother ran a one-room school at home where there were four other children. They ran classes for children of different grades all in the same room. So a child could opt to learn whatever — it was not driven by a system, but by a child's quest to know. And of course, the place was full of encyclopaedias of all kinds. So, as a child, Wales built affection for the idea of encyclopaedias. That was the root!

A few more seconds of silence follow. Then Wales clears his throat and says, "I have never told this before, but there is something else deeply personal that impacted me. My daughter Kira, suffered

from a rare condition from birth that would have eventually killed her. She was a newborn baby with very rare lung incapacity with no known cure. A certain doctor in San Diego had found an untested cure that seemed to work on at least some children. But its outcome was not conclusively proven. So, parents who took their children had to make a call. The procedure required the child to be paralysed for a few moments and it was repeated a number of times before the child's lungs began to function normally again. Left with no other options, we agreed to give it a try. We watched as four times she was turned upside down, her entire system stopped and the lungs cleaned. At the end of it, she breathed and, thank God, has become perfectly normal."

He stops. A tear drop. Silence. He wipes it off and begins haltingly.

"At the end of the procedure, I realised how precious the doctor's knowledge was. It occurred to me that no one other than this doctor would ever know about this whole thing. There had to be a way".

And that is how Wikipedia came about.

First as Nupedia, that went nowhere. For three years, it struggled with the concept of a free, Internet-based encyclopaedia with expert review of content, before Wales turned the idea on its head, leaving the choice of editing content to anyone who was willing to. As one looks back, it isn't the story of a young dot-commer who raised venture capital money at eye-popping valuations to become yet another private-jet owner. Even today, Wales comes across as a solitary man, adorned with his share of controversies, two failed marriages and many personal struggles. But the legacy of the idea he has delivered to the world will be one of the most important parts of our lives as Netizens.

There is no dearth of people who want to see change. They believe they have the innate capacity to create the next big thing. They all have the intellect and sometimes, the power of resources but they struggle as their ideas fall below the viral threshold. All game changing ideas need an intense beginning. Great public efforts are often rooted in deeply personal experiences and sometimes very private feelings. ■