

InnerCity Weightlifting: Case Synopsis

This place is my life--it means everything to me. If I am not doing this, I am on the streets, on drugs, there are people trying to kill me, or I am probably going to try to kill people. Before I came here, I had only had one goal in my life, and that was to stay out of jail.

—Joe, a student at InnerCity Weightlifting

Babson MBA Jon Feinman founded Boston's InnerCity Weightlifting (ICW) with a clear mission:

We reduce violence by getting our students off the streets and into the gym, and we empower them with confidence and the positive community they need to be able to say *no* to violence, and *yes* to opportunity.

Jon created ICW with a specific population in mind: the young men¹ on the Boston PACT² List, who were considered by social workers and law enforcement to be the youth “most likely to be killed or to kill someone” in the city of Boston. A former competitive weightlifter, Jon believed InnerCity Weightlifting could meaningfully impact gang-related violence and crime in Boston. In three years, Jon had grown ICW from four to over a hundred students, and was convinced his approach could both succeed locally and grow to scale.

During college, Jon volunteered with Americorps at the Don McKay school in East Boston, and met a young man named Elexson Hercules who, at the age of twelve, was already being actively recruited into one of Boston's most violent gangs. Jon started weight training with Elexson in his basement, and wondered if lifting could have a real impact on troubled youth like Elexson and his friends.

After graduating from college, Jon worked as a high-end personal trainer in downtown Boston, but he never forgot Elexson or his dream of opening a gym for young people like him. At the urging of one of his clients, international strategy consultant Anne Morriss, Jon applied to the Babson MBA program. By the fall of 2009, he was at Babson, creating a business plan, gathering advisors, and looking for funding for ICW. When Jon returned to East Boston to pitch his idea, he was overjoyed to run into Elexson—who had just been released from jail. Jon quickly convinced Elexson to become InnerCity Weightlifting's first official student.

For the first few months, Jon ran ICW out of Revolution Fitness in East Boston. He hoped to open a location in Boston's South End, but the proposed site was met with fierce opposition by neighbors and local politicians. After a real estate deal fell through, Jon and his team abandoned South Boston for the more diverse and open-minded neighborhood of Dorchester. The setback was eye opening for Jon: he realized from that experience that “the community perception piece is really critical to our success.”

Once ICW had a permanent home in Dorchester, Jon could focus on increasing—and paying—his staff. Reggie Talbert, a longtime volunteer, was hired as General Manager, and Jon's older

¹ While the PACT list is almost exclusively male, ICW has no restrictions based on gender and has also worked with young women,

² PACT, Partners Advancing Communities Together, is a initiative of the United States Attorneys Office, District of Massachusetts. <http://www.justice.gov/usao/ma/violentcrime/pact.html> 10/15/ 2013

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brother, Josh, who had been volunteering since the founding, made the transition to salaried Program Director. Ken Lima, a former strategic planner and development expert in both the nonprofit and profit sector, came on board as COO. Jon also began to build out his board, which, along with Anne Morriss, was comprised of friends who were deeply committed to ICW's mission.

In June of 2012, Elexson Hercules was 19 years old and had just celebrated 5 years out of the judicial system. He had a steady job and was the very involved father of baby girl. Late one night, Jon received a devastating phone call: Elexson had been attacked by rivals of his former gang while walking home from work, and he had been stabbed to death. His murder is officially unsolved by the Boston Police Department³.

Elexson's death became a constant reminder to Jon and his entire team of the vital importance of ICW's mission. Jon often found himself explaining to potential funders, social workers, or the media why—unlike other programs—ICW did not have formal benchmarks of success such as grades, a graduation, or even a specified endpoint for students. Jon knew that outside of police and social workers, few people understood the circumstances in which his students lived:

Change really isn't as easy as people think it is when you're talking about this very extreme end of the spectrum of at-risk youth. That is why there are not enough services for our students, because if something is too strictly structured, they can't adhere to it.

Jon and his team developed metrics around student engagement starting from first contact, assessing their commitment to the gym, their involvement level, and their pro-activeness with networking and seeking help. By compiling data on student outcomes—most importantly, on reduced recidivism—Jon and his team could present hard evidence of ICW's impact to potential philanthropic supporters, the community, law enforcement, and the media. In 2013, Jon hired Julia Gittelman, an expert metrics consultant, to help clearly define the social impact of ICW.

Jon's vision went beyond providing a safe haven from the streets: the young people also needed opportunity to enact sustainable, long-term change. At ICW, students who were interested in personal training as a career could work toward national certification and start building up clientele through ICW's network of supporters. Along with generating revenue, the training enabled students to develop a professional and personal network outside of Boston's troubled urban core. In January 2012, ICW student trainers started training employees twice a week at Microsoft in Cambridge. The experience was transformative for students. Trey, a student trainer at ICW, realized he now had exposure to a world that set him apart even from some of his close friends:

Before coming here, it was like we had our own little world. Now, sometimes when I go visit my friends, I start to notice the little world that they are in....I can put myself back into their mindset, and think, this is *why* they think like this. I can see, this is why they think like this, but I don't think like that *anymore*. I know better now; they don't know any better.

³ *The Boston Globe*, June 23, 2012

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In September 2013, ICW suddenly entered the national spotlight after ESPN aired an “Outside the Lines” segment about the gym. A few weeks later, CBS Evening News filmed a segment to be aired at a future date. Jon was soon inundated with emails and phone calls from around the country.

In 2010, the year of launch, ICW raised \$75,000, in 2011, \$258,000, and in 2012, close to \$550,000, with funds coming primarily from grants or foundations. As word got out that ICW was finding a way to truly transform lives and impact urban crime, Jon was finding that—unlike for most nonprofit leaders—raising funds and bringing attention to the cause was not his most pressing challenge. Instead, he needed to figure out how to navigate the enormous opportunities coming his way without compromising his pivotal role at ICW—which was still a very young organization. Many of the students and staff thought the time was right for Jon to expand within Boston, but several of Jon’s advisors saw greater potential in troubled small cities such as Lawrence or Springfield. At least one board member saw an opportunity to expand nationally. COO Ken Lima was not sure he supported immediate expansion at all, and in November, went on a personal sabbatical, with plans to return in a different role. In September of 2013, Boston College graduate and star athlete Blake Bolden was hired as Operations Coordinator.

Back at the gym, Jon’s immediate concerns included fielding requests from rival gang members clamoring to join—he couldn’t accommodate them all safely in one location. Urban leaders from around the country were asking him how they could start a place like ICW. The board was pushing Jon think about some more key hires. And despite all of this, Jon had to be in the gym every single day for the young men who relied on him.

This synopsis of Babson teaching case InnerCity Weightlifting was developed by Professor Mary Gale and written by Casewriter Jesseca P. Timmons. Funding was provided by The Lewis Institute at Babson College. Copyright by Babson College, 2013.

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