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Thomas Heath

An Entrepreneurial Drive To Change the World

I have been tweeting on Twitter (my call sign is "addedvalueth") for the past two weeks, wondering why a grown-up would share mundane parts of his personal life ("heading to sleep") with complete strangers on the other end of a computer or handheld.

The most substantive discussion I have had on this social networking site centered on the merits of Chicago-style deep dish pizza vs. flat, greasy New York pizza.

I wondered what the possible business applications of Twitter could be. While I was wondering, I got a pitch from entrepreneur Scott Beale, who used Twitter, Facebook,

Craigslist and a bunch of other Web sites to win \$100,000 from online contests to fund his District start-up.

The start-up is a nonprofit. Don't press the snooze button yet. Beale approached the project as if he were building the next Google.

The 33-year-old Georgetown graduate and former State Department employee quit his \$42,000-a-year Foggy Bottom job three years ago and, using the same Web strategy that President Obama used to raise campaign funds, built what he calls a "Peace Corps in reverse."

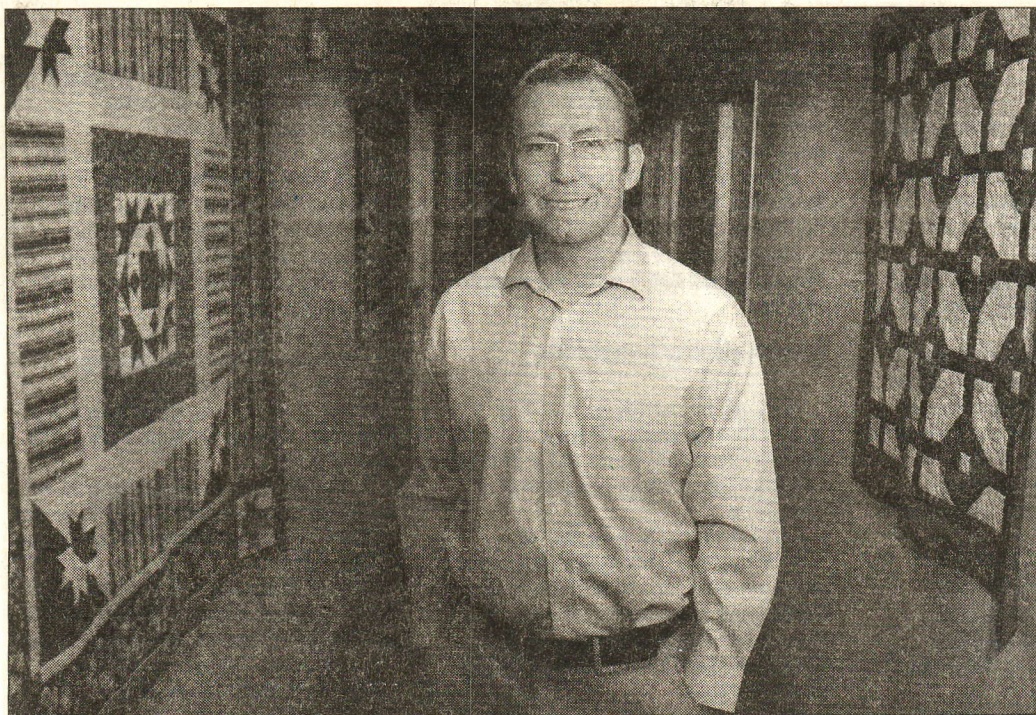
His creation is Atlas Corps (www.atlascorps.org), which

brings highly skilled nonprofit decision-makers from India and Colombia to the United States for a year, running Sept. 1 to Aug. 30.

He concentrates on India and Colombia because he speaks some Spanish and has worked in India. They also have highly developed nonprofit sectors, not to mention a high opinion of the United States, Beale said.

He finds U.S. nonprofit organizations willing to pay \$26,000 to sponsor a visitor. The idea is to help the volunteers learn U.S. nonprofit management skills. The nonprofits hope to learn

See VALUE ADDED, Page D3



BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

Scott Beale runs Atlas Corps, which brings nonprofit decision-makers to the United States for fellowships.

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Nonprofit Entrepreneur Puts Social Change Ahead of Big Paydays

VALUE ADDED, *From D1*

something from the volunteers as well.

"I'm using entrepreneurial business skills to make a difference in the social sector, which isn't any different from using business skills to make money in the for-profit sector," Beale said.

Atlas keeps \$4,000 of the \$26,000 to cover its rent and administrative costs. It gives the rest to the Atlas "fellow," which covers a stipend for housing, food and transportation. Atlas covers health care, too (at a student rate of \$800).

Chief executive Beale and his company live on the cheap. He has five staffers and sublets a tiny, windowless office space near Dupont Circle. (For its first two years, staffers worked out of their own apartments.) Beale collects a salary in the "low \$40s," and his five staffers split \$120,000 a year. He travels to New York on \$25-each-way buses, entertains over coffee and bagels, and uses free space at Synergos, another nonprofit (sponsored by a Rockefeller heiress) that works in the developing world.

The group has 12 fellows in the program, including nine in the Washington area. Atlas also has helped send three Americans to Colombia. When they are finished with the fellowship, participants must return to a nonprofit in their

home country.

In addition to the fee Beale collects from host organizations, he has come up with another source of revenue.

This second stream reminds me of a movie from 2005 called "The Prize Winner of Defiance, Ohio," about a 1960s woman who supported her family by winning jingle contests. Beale has entered and won a series of online contests, such as AOL mogul Steve Case's America's Giving Challenge and IdeaBlob, which brought in more than \$100,000 last year.

The goals of the contests vary, but they typically involve amassing the most donations of a certain size or encouraging people to register at a specific site.

To win, Beale contacts old friends from Georgetown and elsewhere, asking them to become captains and contact other friends. The viral network is just like political bundling, where every person you contact in turn contacts five others, and they contact five others, et cetera. To beat the big colleges at the contests, Beale timed his big push for the Christmas break, when students were home relaxing. He asked for money on a YouTube commercial he made featuring his 3-year-old nephew.

"During one contest, we had 800 people donate in the last 48 hours. It's just like running a

campaign," said Beale, who is working on another \$10,000 contest now.

Beale said the inspiration for his company came from his time in India working for the State Department. He had an idea whereby people from places like India would come to the United States.

The key hurdle was visas, which allow foreigners to work in the United States but are difficult to get. Beale figured that if he could get certified by the State Department to bring nonprofit workers into this country under a visa program, he would have a competitive advantage over rivals.

To find people who knew the ins and outs of visas, he advertised for employees on Web sites such as Idealist.org and Craigslist.org, listing the job qualifications.

Nonprofit fundraising came easy to Beale. He is an extrovert who would routinely throw parties to raise money for charities at his Adams Morgan apartment after graduation. He further developed the nonprofit bug while working with Ashoka, a group that sponsors social entrepreneurs. His time in the Clinton White House, where he worked as a liaison with U.S. governors, and for the State Department in India, whetted his appetite for using business skills to reach social objectives instead of just to turn profits.

In 2006, a lawyer friend helped him file the papers with the Internal Revenue Service to create a nonprofit. Cost: \$500.

To find board members and nonprofit sponsors, he tapped a

long list of contacts in the nonprofit world and from the federal government. Ashoka signed up to pay \$17,000 for a fellow the first year.

At the time, Beale had a long commute. Without a job, he was living in Bogota, where his wife worked at the U.S. embassy.

He wooed prospective donors in Washington, where he slept on friends' couches and knocked on doors of nonprofit groups. It was a crazy lifestyle. He took his phone calls, whether he was in Bogota or the District, on a 202 telephone link through Vonage.

But the craziness paid off. Beale got \$80,000 from eBay founder Pierre Omidyar and \$20,000 from DuPont to get off the ground.

"I am just like a business entrepreneur, but instead of making a big paycheck, I try to make a big impact," he said.

His competitive advantage lies in his certification from the State Department, allowing him to bring in experienced nonprofit managers.

At last check, 500 people were applying for this year's 12 positions.