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ZOOM in on america

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*A street canyon in Manhattan, New York
Photo © Bozena Piliat*

In this issue: Entrepreneurship

Zoom in on America

What Does It Take to Create a Successful Business?

Interview with Dr. Sharon Freeman

Sharon T. Freeman, Ph.D., is an American entrepreneur who started her first company in Hong Kong. She has worked in over 120 countries for large corporations and leading institutions including the U.S. State Department, the World Bank, the IFC, UN organizations, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and others. She is President and CEO of Gems of Wisdom Consulting, Inc. As an entrepreneur and business owner, Dr. Freeman has provided consulting services to clients around the world to help them achieve their destined outcomes.

In an exclusive interview for *Zoom in on America*, Dr. Freeman advises young people how to go about starting a successful business. This article has been edited for length and clarity.



Dr. Sharon Freeman, photo Zoom in on America

Zoom: Dr. Freeman, could you tell *Zoom in on America* readers a little about your background, how you developed interest in business... When did you decide to make business/entrepreneurship your career?

Dr. Freeman: Thank you for asking that. My parents were entrepreneurs. My father was born in the year 1900 and he was quite a bit older than my mother – at that time in America, business worlds were separate between African Americans and many immigrants as well. We had a world within a world, and in our world as African Americans, we had many businesses because we were excluded from other businesses. We had our own funeral homes, insurance companies, our own way of banking, our own real estate networks. Everything was its own little micro ecosystem of business, and my parents were fully ensconced

in that. One of the largest businesses my family had was a cosmetics business in which the children were involved in labelling and packaging things, so business was always a part of my life. They always sold all kinds of things, from wedding gowns to food and so forth. It was very vibrant, so I had a very positive impression of business, of the activity, the newness, and the opportunity for fortune. It was always like a bet. So I went on to study a new discipline: cognition, which in essence was about how you solve problems. It turns out that it was the best thing. I studied with Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon at Carnegie Mellon the whole discipline: the beginnings of artificial intelligence. So, what is entrepreneurship? Entrepreneurship is a vision and a creative solution to solving problems. But you have to know what the problem is first; and you have to roll up your sleeves and do the work to figure out how

to solve the problem. So that's been my entire discipline of life. It's applied in business by working for clients, usually on an international scale with the World Bank or U.S. Agency for International Development, the African Development Bank and others to help countries develop strategies for economic development.

Zoom: You mentioned both family and professors who have impacted and influenced you. Would you consider family and great professors the most important influences in people's lives?

Dr. Freeman: Perhaps spouses and children can be included in that as well, but I would say that they are part of the ecosystem of support. The desire and commitment to be an entrepreneur is within the individual and the rest supports that. So, either you have that desire or you don't. Nobody can make you have it. No one can really teach you to have it. They can give you tools of education and academic preparation, but it's the fire burning within you to go out there into the world and see problems and look at them as opportunities for solutions.

Zoom: What is Gems of Wisdom?

Dr. Freeman: Well, I have had my company, multiple companies for over a period of 40 years. If I don't have wisdom now, when am I going to get it? So, I reckon I and some of my colleagues who have joined me in this endeavor have it -- we think we have some gems of wisdom that have been deeply mined by our decades of experience in multiple disciplines. One of my disciplines is economic development,

but it's also trade, the mechanics of trade, the process of exporting, and compliance, more specifically, regulatory compliance. We have a team of experts within Gems of Wisdom Consulting that work together to solve problems for clients.

Zoom: Would you mind explaining the term ecosystem in connection with business?

Dr. Freeman: An ecosystem is a series of connections in which one thing relates to another; it's a kind of perfect circularity of the degree and ways of how these things are connected to accomplish a certain goal. If we look at this in the natural world and talk about flowers, the ecosystem of how they grow has to do with sunlight, irrigation, and the composition of soil--all of these are ingredients of an ecosystem that enable that flower to thrive. Similarly, for an entrepreneur, we have ingredients in the environment such as laws, financing, education, advocacy, incubators, accelerators, state and federal governments, and other inputs that help support us to realize the flowering of our goals and objectives.

Zoom: What does your position as an Advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and U.S. Trade Advisor involve?

Dr. Freeman: According to the Trade Act of 1974, which was enacted to say that for each major sector of our economy, such as aerospace, health, IT, etc., there would be at least 30 advisers from the private sector to review trade agreements, to ascertain the potential impact(s) of proposed trade agreements. We are appointed and those



Photo © AP Images.

appointments, for many of us, have been renewed over the years. I've been in the program since 1991, and I have been reappointed as a Trade Advisor representing the points of view of small and minority businesses. This is called the Industry Technical Advisory Committee. I'm on the ITech 9 Committee, which is the only committee that looks across all sectors. We jointly advise the Secretary of Commerce, who is over the Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee, which involves 19 federal agencies involved in trade. The Secretary looks at the unified budget and what everyone is doing to promote trade. This is done jointly with the U.S. Trade Representative. Separately, I'm also an adviser to the U.S. Trade Representative on the Trade Advisory Committee on Africa (TACA), and I've been the chairman of that committee since its creation. I was probably selected because I have a lot of experience in Africa; I've worked in 49 of the 54 countries. I've worked almost everywhere in the world, including every major country over my 40 years of being in business. Therefore, I know about a lot of countries and how they do business.

Zoom: You have traveled a lot with the State Department talking about entrepreneurship and SMEs (Small & Medium Enterprises). Are there certain places better suited for entrepreneurship?

Dr. Freeman: I work a lot with development and diplomatic institutions. I'm working with the U.S. State Department now to share wisdom about entrepreneurship and the role of entrepreneurship in promoting economic growth, which

is a huge topic for me. This is a question everywhere, including in the U.S. We have successes, but there are many small minority immigrant-owned businesses that also wonder how to thrive. Wherever that question is being asked, which is all over the world, then I'm sometimes lucky enough to be one of the people called upon to look at that question and solve the equation about how we can grow. So, I'm here in Poland talking about the topic of entrepreneurship, explaining how there is an ecosystem, and emphasizing what we think are the main pillars of support for startups and small businesses. I have written a book called "U.S. Ecosystem of Startup and SME Support". I wrote the book because I was going to many countries around Europe, primarily with the State Department, talking about the parts of our system in the U.S. that could be modeled in other countries that are trying to promote and support startups and SMEs. The book explains, what we say, are the 10 main pillars of our ecosystem, and within those 10 pillars, each one has sub-pillars; collectively, there are 33 sub-pillars that I focus on. I discuss the main pillars of support and the sub-pillars within those pillars which help explain why Silicon Valley was able to grow so well.

Zoom: Which is the best age to start thinking about your future in terms of entrepreneurship or business?

Dr. Freeman: Instead of using the word "thinking", I would use the word "preparing". You prepare yourself by designing yourself to be a person who's ready to seize op-



Iron Ox CEO Brandon Alexander looks out at his robotic indoor farm in San Carlos, California. Photo © AP Images.

portunities. Discovery is the result of the acquisition and understanding of knowledge. What does that mean? That means you have to research, and you have to have concentration and discipline in order to do that research. As a result of having researched, you can then see and understand what problems there are to be solved. Acquiring, analyzing, and understanding information is key. A lot of people think that coming up with a business idea is magic. It is not magic. It is the tail end of the process. What I would say to young people is: I know you're interested in gaming and being on the Internet, but you have to pause and make sure that despite that interest, you're still designing yourself as somebody who can be quiet for an hour at a time, take a walk without listening to anything except for birds, and reflect on everything that comes into your head. If you keep putting things in there without taking time to reflect and understand what you have put in there, then all of this information is passing through your brain, but not being captured by your brain. I have seen many people in the past who were playing games on the computer all the time, and I thought, "Oh maybe they know more than other people because look at that they are exposing themselves to", but you go back 30 years later and they're not successful because they didn't actually create any new information; they were just looking at somebody else's, never analyzed it, and never stopped to think: "how could I create something like that or what does it take to create something like that?" I don't think constantly being in motion is the answer. You need reflective time, you need to study to academically prepare yourself, and you need a tool set to help dissect your learning. Just because you heard some-

thing doesn't mean that you understand it. So what helps us to understand things? Basically, that's always reference points, not just a high IQ. It has to actually be anchored in some type of knowledge base where you can discern the meaning of things.

Zoom: So you think that personal reflection, a positive family background and professors are assets...

Dr. Freeman: I don't want to put too much emphasis on that because there are too many successful people in the world that didn't have good professors or have any family support, so I don't want to suggest that those are criteria. It's good if you have it, but it's not totally necessary. I think the most important ingredients are yourself, how you've designed yourself to concentrate, be curious, be a learner and use your motivation to develop your own self to apply this learning. In other words, you have to be productive, and that is an orientation that begins early in life. Simply knowing something is not enough. I have met people who can recite all kinds of things, like the Bible, for instance. That's wonderful for priests to be able to recite all of that, but for the lay person, your biggest test is applying all the knowledge you have acquired to real life. I think the question is how you develop yourself. I actually just read the most interesting article, which said: "How can you be witty?" It's not an interesting question, but the answer is similar to what I'm saying. What they said is that witty people make connections between similar and dissimilar things and show you how they could be connected; they take people by surprise and do it quicker than other people,



The facade of the New York Stock Exchange. Photo © AP Images.

which is like an ecosystem in a way. It's connecting one thing to another, while also developing new skills. It's not about what you know, but how you apply what you know.

Zoom: How do you think a successful businessman or entrepreneur can benefit their community? Can you give some examples?

Dr. Freeman: The business world has a very rich history of philanthropy, which leaves a good impression on society. Beyond that, it's a matter of being able to look at the good that is being done by other people and choosing to support that, which doesn't only consist of giving grants and money. Bill Gates is a wonderful example of this. He looked at what the Khan Academy was doing and knew that it would help children learn. So, it's not only giving money away, but also being able to surveil the global environment to find who's doing something great, and identify ways the business world can support the need.

Zoom: Now we must read your book to learn more about the 10 main pillars and 33 sub-pillars of the U.S. ecosystem.

Dr. Freeman: Thank you. I do want to make the comment that this book turned out to be a micro-history of America. I didn't plan that it would be, but in order to tell the story of what these pillars are and how they came to be, you really have to understand the foundations of American society starting with the U.S. Constitution and the framework it has laid for all laws in America. Everything you read in this book shows you what it took to get to this point. It's a micro-history of America from a business perspective, and in that regard, I love it because I love history.

Zoom: Thank you so much.



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ACTIVITY PAGE

October-November
2018
TRIVIA QUESTION

What does SME stand for?

Send the answer
(with your home address) to:
KrakowAIRC@state.gov

The 4th, 8th and 14th
correct answer will be
awarded with a book prize

Deadline: December 15,
2018

September 2018

The answer to the Trivia
Question was: 1,776.

The winners are:
Tomasz from Szczecin, Ewa
from Wroclaw and Joanna
from Szczecin

CONGRATULATIONS!!!
The prize will be sent to you
by mail.



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Exercise 1. Reading Comprehension

Read the interview on pp. 2-6 and answer the comprehension questions below:

1. What is the title of Dr. Freeman's latest book?
2. How many African countries did Dr. Freeman work in?
3. What is important for young people before they choose their future career?
4. What is the main objective of the Khan Academy?
5. Who invested in it?
6. What is philanthropy?
7. What is the role of a Trade Advisor?
8. What is Gems of Wisdom?
9. When is a good time to start your own business?
10. What did Dr. Freeman study at Carnegie Mellon?

Exercise 2. Vocabulary. What character features are good to have if you want to become an entrepreneur or a business person?

Look at the adjectives below and say why you think they are or aren't useful in this career:

resourceful
generous
passionate
pessimistic
persistent
hasty
pretty/handsome
impatient
creative
stingy
astute

Exercise 3. Vocabulary.

Look at the adjectives below and find their antonyms in Exercise 2.

intermittent
unimaginative
patient
apathetic
slow
optimistic
stingy
ugly
unimaginative
generous
stupid



Annual Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony on Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2018, in New York. Photo © Brent N. Clarke/Invision/AP