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Voice, Mind, Choice Business Plan

With little knowledge on the subject of business, the task at hand was one rather unfamiliar, requiring some research of the processes involved in starting a business. Now, creating a business with a group of individuals whom you have known for less than a week, is immensely challenging. Luckily, the similarities, in addition to the driven goals each member displayed, made the task easier to handle.

Identifying an opportunity to base the project on was a challenge within itself. With each group member sharing different interests, finding a commonality to focus our business on was not an easy task. However, we all shared the passion for creating a platform where our voices, and everyone's voices, could be heard. Ideas surrounding equality, perseverance, and resilience, is what we aimed our business project to reflect. As we live in a time where youth activism is at its peak, especially on American University's campus, we wanted our business to capture the essence of student determination and passion for equality and hope for our future. Because of our missions' complexity coining a name was very trying; we came up with various other names such as: Generation Z, Shirts Open Minds, Power Up!, Power to the Voice, Flame, Alive, and Hope. We decided Voice, Mind, Choice encompassed the vision of our venture much better than our other ideas. We came up with the idea of selling black shirts with powerful phrases printed in stylistic-white letters. Often, students expressed how they would rather have the shirts in

different colors, but that would defeat the purpose of what we set out to accomplish. The simplicity behind the black and white disposition is to give emphasis on the words. When we see a shirt we become distracted by the ambient colors and give less focus on the capturing prints. However, we intended to change this. We have the phrases printed in white to symbolize the hope in our often dark world, which is why the words are the main focus on our shirts.

Due to the limit of prints available, as a group, we focused on identifying phrases which many students could relate to, and be motivated by. Thus, enlightened by leaders, such as Michelle Obama, Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt and many other world changers, we chose phrases such as, “When they go low, we go high”, “Be the change you wish to see in the world”, “Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people”, and a variety of others. We used a hybrid business model which is a nonprofit with a profit earning arm. This model proved efficient because we were able to raise funds in order to purchase materials for the business while being able to donate 10 percent of our earnings from each t-shirt to a charity fighting against hunger.

Business is tricky, no matter what road we decided to take it is always full of twists, turns, and bumps; and our T-shirt startup was no different. From the beginning, our business faced many challenges from resources to advertising methods, however, with every problem that presented itself, we tackled it with grit and grace. Our biggest challenge that we had to face from the very beginning was relying on campus resources to produce our final product. To print our t-shirts, we went to the Design and Build Lab, which was our first mistake. Not only were we relying on the lab for the machinery to print our designs and heat-pressing them onto the shirt, but we also relied on the lab to provide white vinyl to print our shirts’ designs. Relying on the lab

for all the resources and materials limited us in expanding our business, especially when the lab ran out of white vinyl and the lab policies prohibited us from using their vinyl furthermore for our business. Although we were able to continue to print our t-shirts at the lab we had to purchase the vinyl on our own, but there were many unanticipated challenges to come. There were many delays with the vinyl company, and we weren't able to receive our vinyl until two weeks later—right before Thanksgiving break. As a result, we were not able to print t-shirts for three weeks. Beyond the challenges we had with the resources and materials we were using to produce our final product, we had difficulties with marketing and advertising as well. Despite, printing flyers and posting them all around the residence halls and campus there was still a lack of responses. Instead of practicing the traditional methods of advertisement, we tried digital marketing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to target the young demographic of our customers. Making posts on our personal social media—with semi-large followings—we were only able to gather a few engagements from our friends and followers, but there were still no purchases made. Another method of advertisement we used was through the AUCI newsletter, but we were still not getting the sales we wanted.

Overcoming our challenges was not easy, but with a full team effort and collaborative force, we were able to make ends meet. We were able to find money in our budget to buy our vinyl and use the machinery at the Design and Build Lab on campus to print our t-shirts. Although we had to contact the company many times to check on the status of the delivery, we figured out there was a problem with the address that was causing the delays. Although we could not control when the vinyl was delivered, we were able to change our ways of advertising our products. Instead of pushing our graphic flyers and writing posts on social media, we spoke to

our classmates and the residents on each floor of Anderson, Letts, and Centennial Hall. We discovered that it was through face-to-face contact were we able to get our start-up business name out. Sharing our business mission and explaining where our proceeds were going to resonated with people; not only did that allow us to build our business's image but it also increased the sales of our business.

We began our business with the idea in mind of creating a social venture that combined empowerment and activism in the form of a cultural necessity. Our initial goal was to sell 20 shirts by the time we closed our venture on November 19, 2018. We made this goal to coincide with the social aspect of our venture which was to donate 10 percent of the cost of each shirt to the Rise Against Hunger organization in Washington, D.C. As a result of our initiative, we did not meet our quota by our deadline. We missed our goal quota by six shirts, which was due in part to our lack of advertising, outreach communication, and delays in the vinyl delivery on behalf of our brand. We were focused too much on the total revenue goal, instead of being focused on building our brand name recognition. A key part in creating a successful venture is establishing brand recognition within your targeted audience. By focusing little to no resources in this area, our venture resulted in little sales. Because of this, our total revenue landed below our projections.

We were initially given \$100 of seed money to pay for the start up expenses and to get our business off the ground. Our expenses included \$53 spent on 25 shirts, \$35 spent on the white vinyl, \$50 spent on the URL for our website and \$15 on the donation to *Rise Against Hunger*; these expenses totaled \$153. After subtracting the total costs to manufacture and promote our shirts and the donation to the Rise Against Hunger organization our profit totalled

\$82. While this was not what we had hoped for in the planning stages of our venture, it does not take away from the social contribution that motivated our venture from the beginning.

Our revenue was solely based on the making and selling of black and white t-shirts; each shirt had their own unique quote or saying that was meant to empower customers to idealize impact and change. We made it accessible to purchase the shirts by creating a website that we tried to push out to the general public. Customers could use either cash or credit card to pay for their orders, in order to increase potential sales. To complete our efforts, we advertised our product by posting flyers around campus, emailing students through the AUCI newsletter, and utilizing our personal social media accounts to reach as many potential customers as possible. None of this, however, would have been possible without the enthusiasm of our team to work together to create change.

When beginning this venture, we did not know one another well. However, through the constant communication, work, and dedication, we were able to develop the necessary trust needed to run a semi-successful business. Whether it was through hosting weekly business meetings or working together to fulfill our necessary sales, teamwork became a crucial and embedded aspect of our venture. As a group of five, we gained a better understanding of listening and valuing different opinions. Overall, we excelled in avoiding conflict amongst our group members, which could have further hindered the success of our business. As a result of this experience, we learned how to ensure the equal contribution from every member in the group towards running the business. In addition, every member played a role in maintaining the morale and motivation in our venture. As college students, we often fall into the overwhelming stress of having other responsibilities and classes. However, we realized that in order for our

business to remain effective in achieving our goals, we had to master the art of balancing the many aspects of our lives as adults. Together our challenges, successes, and experiences made this venture a crucial learning point on more than just the basics of business, but on how to become successful and inspiring adults.

Coming in with different levels of knowledge and experience in the entrepreneurial field, this project broadened our views of business and forced us to take risks. The idea of creating a business seemed daunting at first, but the process of executing our business turned out to be challenging, yet very rewarding. We took away lessons from the process of creating this venture that far exceeded the boundaries of the business world. From this project we have learned that regardless of what career field we are going into, business is everywhere we go. Whether we are going into healthcare or foreign service, everything we do is an exchange—a form of business among society. We also expanded our skills and knowledge in how to work best in a team with people with different life experiences, inspirations and goals. Uniting our differences, were not only able to create a business, but a friendship that will last far beyond the walls of V.M.C.