The Press Office of the Global Campus of Human Rights had the opportunity to ask Andrew Leon Hanna about his contribution to our Podcast series “To the Righthouse”.

Interview with Andrew Leon Hanna
Could you tell us more about your background as a lawyer, international human rights advocate, entrepreneur and author: what motivated you to pursue such a combination of interests and skills?

The heart of my life’s work is to support and honor communities of people that are disadvantaged and underrepresented – so that their creativity, power, and equal dignity can shine in their communities. The different roles I play are all means toward that end. For example, as an entrepreneur, this has meant helping immigrant, refugee, and first-gen-led small businesses across America secure zero-interest loans, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an author, it has meant amplifying the brave and inspiring voices of refugee entrepreneurs from Syria and many other nations around the world. And as a lawyer and advocate, it has meant advocating for the equal treatment of children facing deportation, low-income people accused of crimes, and so on.

I view law as a way to ensure people are treated with equal dignity, storytelling as a way to ensure people are portrayed with equal dignity, and entrepreneurship as a way to ensure people are provided meaningful economic opportunity.

You are the author of “25 Million Sparks: The Untold Story of Refugee Entrepreneurs”, a Financial Times Best Book of the Year. Please share with us more in detail about the initial 'spark' that inspired you to write such a book and how it relates to your current work.

I was watching the news in 2018 – particularly coverage of Central American asylum seekers fleeing to the U.S. border – and was struck by the portrayal of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants more broadly in the media. They are too-often portrayed one-dimensionally: either as “villains” or as “victims.” Either they are coming to take our jobs and commit crimes, or they are helpless and without their own agency.

Having worked with many refugees in their communities – and having also grown up with my wonderful parents, who are immigrants from Egypt and made a huge impact on my home community – I knew that the story being told in the media and by many politicians about migrants was inaccurate. I wanted to tell a story that reflects the full, equal dignity of migrant communities, focusing especially on refugees and asylum seekers by using the lens of entrepreneurship. My hope was to tell a story of refugees’ immense economic, spiritual, social, and community value – but much more importantly a human story of refugees’ equality, dignity, and beauty as human beings, even aside from their contributions.

How can we amplify human stories and give voices to unknown heroes? Could education - and human rights education in particular - give a contribution to this?

Human rights education can play a significant role. Storytelling is central to ensuring people around the world are provided equal human rights. If people who are traditionally mistreated are written about, filmed, and
talked about in a light that represents them as who they truly are – beautiful, equal, creative human beings – then it prompts our communities to ask the logical follow-up of “why are they not treated equally and provided equal opportunity?” It often starts with the heart – reminding people of our equal humanity – and then moves to the head – reminding people about the immense economic and community impact that can be made if we provide more opportunity to disadvantaged communities. If storytelling can help elucidate the moral reasons for ensuring people are treated with equal rights, and then supplement those with the policy reasons, it can go a long way toward people on the ground pushing for the establishment of laws, policies, and practices that protect and foster equal humanity.

You recently participated in our podcast “To the Righthouse” to talk about the importance to find common grounds of hope rather than divisive narratives. What would be your advice to those who are still sceptic towards positive human rights achievements?

I would just say that, in my experience, most people in our communities truly desire to unite and support those who are being mistreated. Despite the divisive narratives we hear, there is a common sense of humanity in everyone that can be tapped into. If you can drive hearts and minds in your community toward recognizing, celebrating, and advancing equal rights – whether through storytelling, social entrepreneurship, non-profits, legal work, or any other outlet – you are making a major human rights achievement in your own right.

Could you please leave a message to the students, professors, alumni, staff and partners of the Global Campus of Human Rights?

Every human being is powerful, creative, beautiful, and fundamentally equal. With that in mind, think about what topic makes you “come alive,” in the words of Howard Thurman, and then pursue it using whatever talents you are blessed with. It isn’t always easy, but when you act with genuine conviction and are on the side of justice and equality, people will be attracted to your message!

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