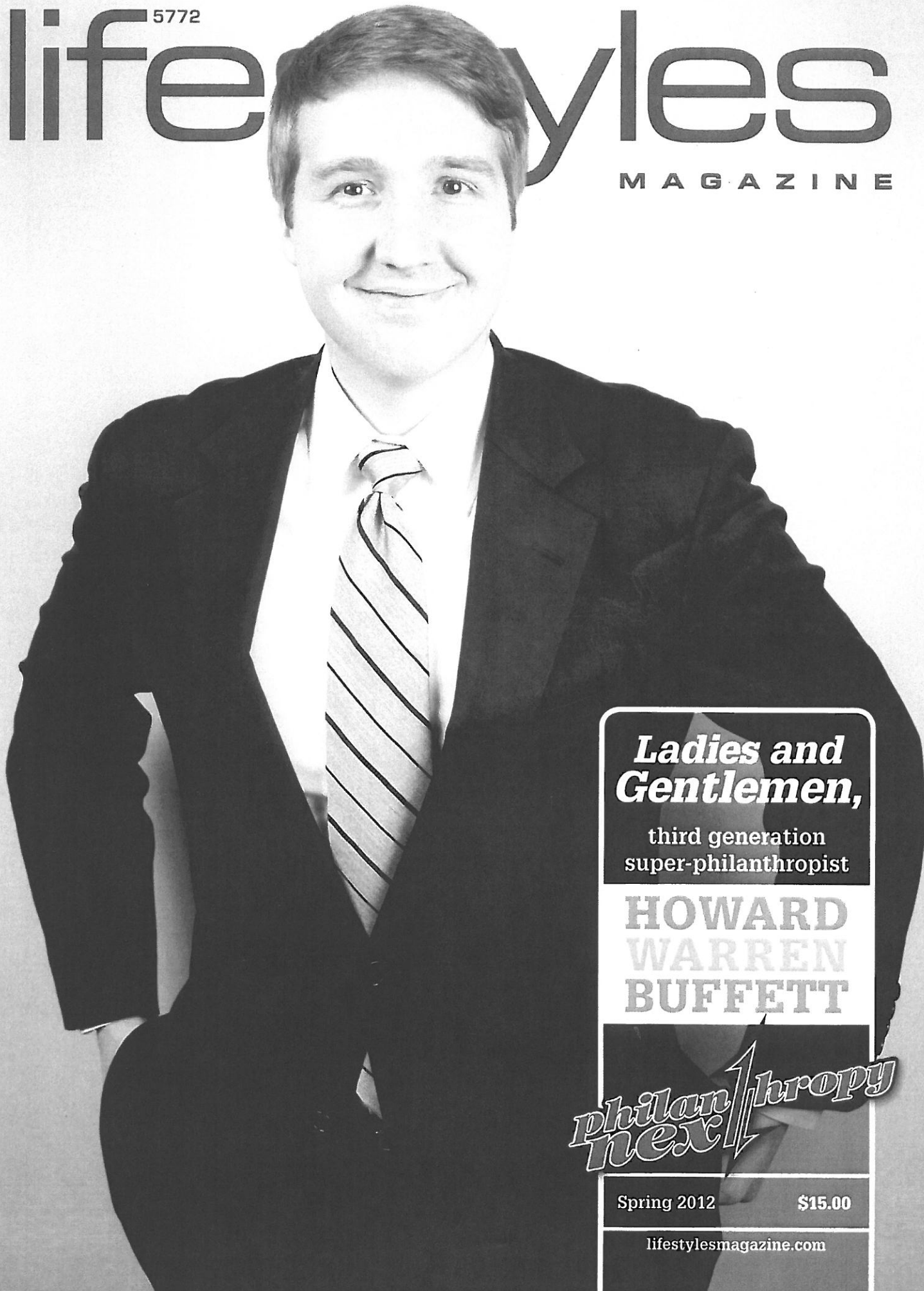


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Gentlemen,***

third generation
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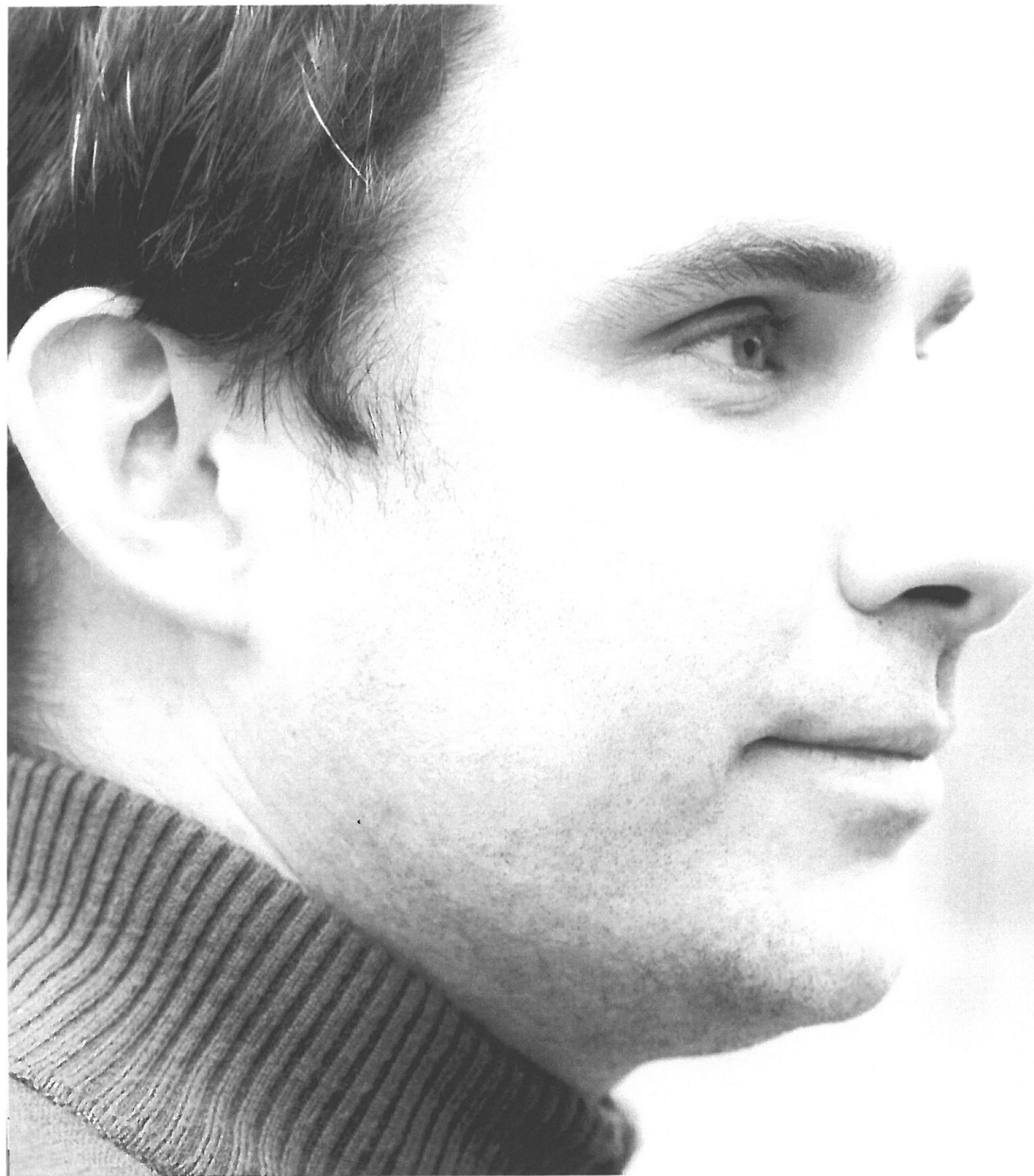
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This is our youth

From texting with President Obama to creating a global youth summit, Jonah Wittkamper is on a search for common ground.

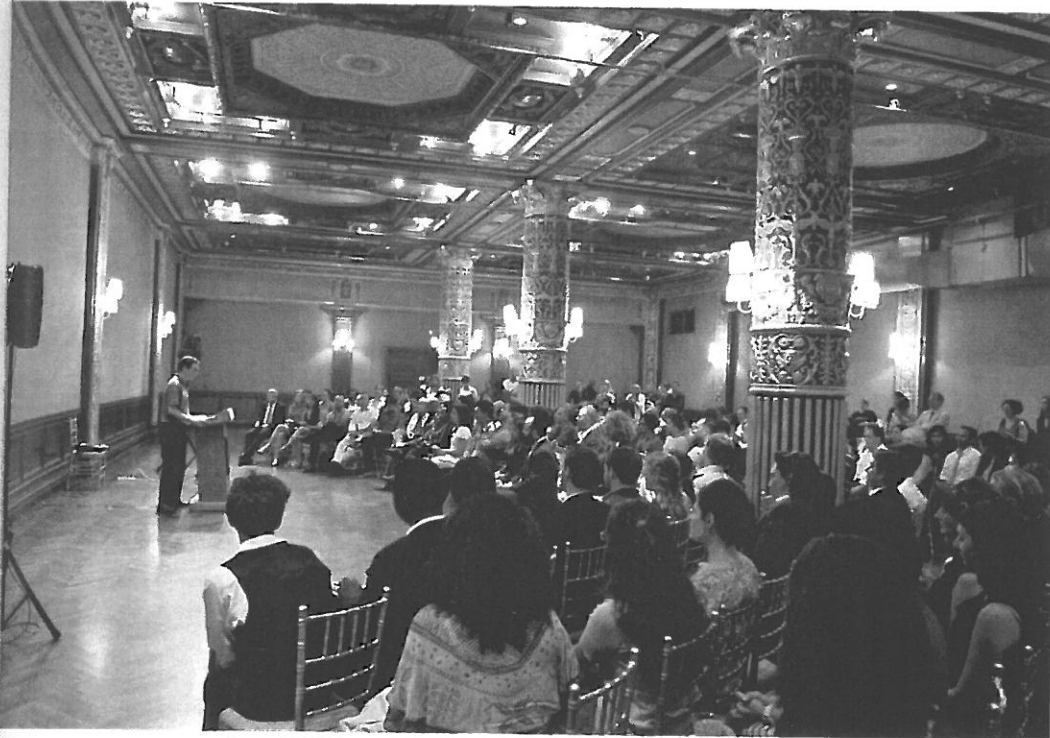
By Marc Weisblott

The job of a successful connector in the digital age generally involves stepping into the foreground. After all, being widely recognized as a positive influencer comes in handy when building even more influence.

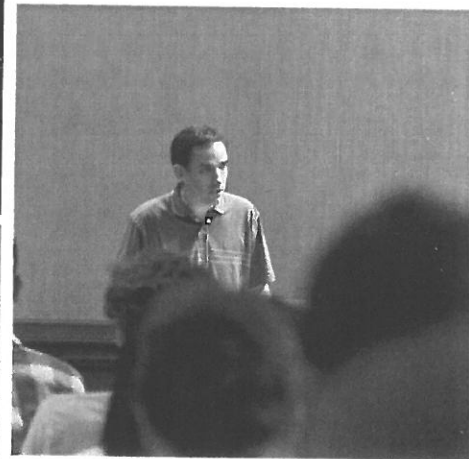
Jonah Wittkamper, the U.S. director of the nongovernmental organization Search for Common Ground, has taken a low-key approach to building his profile. But, after he put together a summit for around 100 young people last July in Manhattan, which covered the subjects of innovative philanthropy and social entrepreneurship, it became harder to avoid the limelight.

The Nexus Global Youth Summit drew a unique crowd—since attendees boasted a combined wealth of over \$50 billion—yet a desire to do constructive things with the money brought everyone together.

Concurrently, the tools that can help promote social change are becoming cheaper each day, if not accessible online for free. Much of the investment once required to relay a message has been replaced by more targeted communication. As a result, money can now generate more action than talk.



WITTKAMPER AT THE
NEXUS YOUTH SUMMIT.



Wittkamper's own career as a charitable catalyst evolved along with the Internet. A personal interest in technology led to the creation of the Global Youth Action Network in 1999, right around the time websites became part of our daily lives (although he wanted those inspired by the organization to talk to one another rather than focus on him).

Just before the Nexus began, however, he shared some biographical details via YouTube, anticipating that more people would want to learn about where he came from, even if he would rather focus on where his efforts with Search for Common Ground were going.

"I believe in the power of humility," explains Wittkamper.

*"I worship humility.
Which might be because I have worked
with many people with famous last names
who want to stay below the radar."*

"I worship humility. Which might be because I have worked with many people with famous last names who want to stay below the radar.

"Research has shown that people who spend lots of time together end up imitating each other's body language. So, maybe this inclination is something that I naturally developed."

And with the example this 37-year-old has set, especially when it comes to networking toward the promotion of global solutions, the template that future influencers seek to follow might increasingly be his own.

Search for Common Ground, founded in 1982 by former State Department diplomat John Marks, set out to transform how the world deals with conflict. Cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, which seemed like a truly elusive relationship at the time, was forged through the NGO to help soothe tensions in the Middle East.

Since then, collaborative problem solving has provided an approach to offset adversarial situations around the globe, largely through promoting the idea that humans are more similar than different. The ensuing dialogues have touched upon a wide variety of issues, including the abortion debate and separation of church and state

in the U.S., the polarization between the French- and Flemish-speaking communities in Belgium, and hostility that impacts daily life in about 30 countries.

Naturally, new media tools have become crucial to spreading messages that can reduce conflict between disparate factions. And when the role of the director of Search for Common Ground's American projects was offered to Wittkamper three years ago, it came on the heels of a large-scale technological accomplishment.

Text messaging was still in the early stages of adoption across America when Barack Obama announced his run for the White House. During the course of the 18-month campaign, texting entered the mainstream, but being able to leverage it required being ahead of the curve.

Wittkamper, who helped lead the team that built and managed the technology, approached the role with the understanding that success could go a long way toward establishing a presence in Washington, D.C.

"It was explained to me that my life would become very different if I had some friends in the White House," he says. "There was certainly no candidate as bright as Obama. And he understood the evolution toward this granular organizing trend. But I

wanted to reach out beyond the Democratic Party."

The timing was right, too, because Search for Common Ground was looking to sharpen its focus on reaching out to a new generation of funders. Younger wealth holders, who wanted to pursue strategic philanthropy on a global scale, lacked sources that would provide sufficient inspiration. And with about \$40 trillion estimated for transfer between generations over the next 40 years, it was recognized that the money would be out there to share, even if the guidance of how to donate it to a potentially world-changing cause was not.

Providing inspiration to become a more creative giver essentially became Wittkamper's role. During an era of economic upheaval, the job required recognition of the fact that becoming a true change maker involves more than a donation, especially now that technology makes it easier to fully engage with a cause.

And sometimes that has involved coaxing others to step forward and explain to the world what they want to achieve.

"Everyone has a story to tell," he says. "You just have to tap into the social side of their personality."

A career of connecting other people might have seemed unlikely for

*"The celebration of diversity
is the culture of our generation."*

Wittkamper as he quietly grew up in Brooklyn. That course changed in 1990, at age 15, when he attended Camp Rising Sun, an international youth leadership program known for nurturing teenagers from around the world.

Establishing friendships with young leaders from 35 different countries, in a setting that requires each camper to contribute leadership to their collective experience, was the first step toward being able to come out of his shell.

"I didn't have much confidence and didn't have many friendships," he says. "But it was there that I understood how unity can be achieved through the expression of individuality."

Soon enough, the development of the World Wide Web proved to be another opening—Wittkamper seized the technological opportunity to stay connected with his fellow Rising Sun alumni.

"I could already see how young people would use the Internet to become a political force," he says, "whether through the election of Barack Obama or imagining an event like the Arab Spring."

"I just had to wait for the rest of the world to catch up."

Corporate opportunities were plentiful for a new computer-savvy graduate by 1997, when Wittkamper joined Andersen Consulting as a lead technologist, though he stuck to his belief that these emerging platforms could have a more profound impact.

Global Youth Action Network, which he co-founded in 1999, was initially designed to play a role in the de-

cision-making process. And a merger with a Toronto-based virtual NGO called TakingITGlobal helped pioneer the concept of connecting people online to swap ideas about improving the planet—years before Facebook came along.

Wittkamper also believed that making an impact around the world involved seeing more of it. The opportunity arrived when he relocated to São Paulo, Brazil, in 2001—the same year the country hosted the first annual World Social Forum to focus on issues of global justice as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum in Davos. Soon enough, Wittkamper was at the helm of efforts to build bridges between the two events.

As it moved to the forefront of developing nations, Brazil also became a hub of activity for organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life for all. In fact, Wittkamper's future wife worked for the regional W.K. Kellogg Foundation office on projects dedicated to alleviating youth poverty.

The relocation was also made possible through technology like Skype, which allowed for direct connections with young philanthropists, no matter where they were located. Five years passed before Wittkamper and his new family returned to live around Washington, D.C.

"There was a growing awareness of the fact that existing institutions weren't responding to the needs of young people, whether those needs were political or spiritual," he says of those years in South America. "Now, it's become easier for the change mak-

ers in each community to find others who will make them feel less alone."

Bringing those online links into a physical space still has an advantage, though. The Nexus was specifically designed to close what Wittkamper identified as an "inspiration and awareness deficit." And the initial summit held last July—the first day was symbolically held at the United Nations Headquarters—was aimed at those wealth holders who wanted their future contributions to be well spent.

The Young Donor Network, recently established through Search for Common Ground, now aims to extend the spirit of the Nexus back into a virtual space. A pathway to strategic-giving initiatives is provided in order to connect philanthropists to a cause they want to attach their names and faces to.

Demand for the insights of an experienced catalyst like Wittkamper can only grow as the world continues to feel like a smaller place. Plus, social networks have made it possible for everyone to communicate on the same level—whether they are a presidential candidate or a citizen who wants an outlet for self-expression.

Can we make more social progress through having access to a wider range of viewpoints? Jonah Wittkamper has spent the past two decades seeing this evolve. And he is eager to see what's next.

"I was transformed by being able to share in experiences beyond my own," he says. "The celebration of diversity is the culture of our generation." **LM**