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Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Adrienne Papp

EDITOR'S NOTE: Profile Editor Adrienne Papp is a socially proactive businesswoman based in Los Angeles, and works with entrepreneurs, inspirational figures and celebrities worldwide. Here she shares a story of survival and purpose that is an inspiration to all, after she got to know Alex Kaufman through the Aspen Institute in Colorado, which he actively supports. Do you have a story that forwards pro-social action? It can be a PSA, video, article or photo essay -- we encourage members to [submit content ideas](#) that help fuel people's passion to make a difference.



Alex Kaufman today. Courtesy A. Papp

There have been many stories about heroes and survivors who inspired us with their courage during history's darkest hours. And there have been many stories that tell a life beginning in poverty yet ending in material success - the proverbial 'rags to riches'. But there are no stories that combine these two as dramatically as the life of Alex Kaufman.

Kaufman is a Holocaust survivor who became one of America's wealthiest men through his personal vision and sheer hard work. He is now a philanthropic, Harley-riding, bon vivant who is preparing for the most rewarding part of his life -- establishing a program for young entrepreneurs at the Aspen Institute of Colorado, using his life lessons as a guide to fulfilling their dreams under the most demanding of circumstances.

A LIVING NIGHTMARE

Alex Kaufman had it all as a young man. He was born into a professional, well-to-do family in Lwow, Poland, and had the advantages of an educated, cultured environment. However, their city came under both Soviet and Nazi rule during World War II, and in 1941, the entire family was taken to a concentration camp in Poland, where they were all separated and Kaufman experienced what no child should ever go through: He was never to see his family members again or gain any closure on what had happened to them besides learning they were all killed.

As a strong young man of 17, Kaufman was put to work pounding spikes on tracks for new railroads. Alone and isolated, he witnessed what grown ups of any age could never bear, let alone a child can ever understand: the massacre of humans that can never be explained, much less justified. Inheriting a quick mind and an educated intelligence he concluded that the only escape from this man made hell was *Escape*.

He jumped on a slow moving train that rolled through the area. He survived being shot by the Nazi's in the foot only to enter another nightmare of spending the next four years hiding in a dense forest. Occasionally working for local farmers to earn enough food to survive and frequently sleeping in snow banks in the bitter winter cold, it was a miracle he survived all by himself.

"People ask me how I survived those brutal winters all alone in the forest," Kaufman says. "It was a combination of my desire to prove the Nazi's wrong, the desire to see my family again (unbeknownst to him at the time they were all killed), and my basic will to live. I had to learn to ignore pain."

MOVING BEYOND THE PAIN TO CREATE HIS OWN FUTURE

After the war ended, Kaufman began to search for his family. Unable to find any trace or record of them, he realized that he was now completely on his own. "I was alone, but alive," Kaufman says, "and I decided I needed to create a future for myself, rather than live in the past."

Taking advantage of a free education policy offered in Germany after the war, Kaufman got a degree in chemistry from Stuttgart University, and made plans to create a future for himself in America. He got his papers together and booked passage on a boat headed for New York, arriving in February of 1950 with a single quarter hidden in his shoe. In short order, he began cleaning lab ware for a company called Hatco Chemical, where he was quickly promoted to lab technician. He learned the business, worked hard, and quickly moved up through the ranks. His plans were always built around the Big Picture. "I always had a dream of being successful, but you have to start with a vision for yourself. I was determined to get to a point where I could run things my way," Kaufman says.

In 1959, Hatco was sold to W.R. Grace, and Kaufman formed a friendship with Peter Grace, the CEO of the ownership company, who also became his mentor. "If there is one person in my life who inspired me, it is Peter Grace. He taught me the business and allowed me to realize what I could achieve if I set my mind to it," Kaufman says.

ENTREPRENEURIAL COURAGE, DARING AND A VISION OF SUCCESS

In 1962 Kaufman was promoted to president of the Hatco division. In 12 years he had gone from dishwasher to running the company. He then began acquiring other companies who he partnered with using common sense and business instincts, expanding Hatco from a small local company to a multi-million dollar, global operation.



Products of Kaufman Holdings
Photo: Adrienne Papp

Eventually Kaufman made an offer to raise enough money to buy Hatco from the parent company. With that move, the Kaufman Holding Corporation was born. Over the next few years, Hatco, which expanded to 300 employees, developed innovative specialty products and chemicals for the food, cosmetic, medical, aviation, and industrial markets utilizing the genius of Kaufman.

"As proud as I was of our success in the market, it was also very important to me that I was able to create jobs for people and help their children get through college," he says. "Education was always very important to me," says Kaufman remembering his European background. At Hatco, he had hit upon a winning formula: creating a team of employees who were loyal to the company and proud of their work, as well as innovating products that greatly enhanced a new generation of consumer and industrial novelties and products. Kaufman became the supplier of engine lubrication to 750 airlines worldwide, invented NutraSweet, acquired Jones of New York, a famous fashion house, and expanded his business into many other creative products and services.

Named Entrepreneur of the Year for the state of New Jersey in 1998, Alex had risen quickly, and was successful beyond his own expectations. But he also believed in giving back, feeling a debt to the country that had taken him in. "I believe in being generous and trying to make the world a better place," he says. "I initially got involved with an organization called [Seeds of Peace](#), which brings in children from various regions in conflict to a camp in Maine to learn how to resolve conflicts." He also became involved at the political level, assisting with various charities, the state of Israel, and was present when Yassar Arafat shook hands with Yitzhak Rabin in Washington DC. His political involvement expanded to include relationships with the White House, former President Bill Clinton and the honorable Queen Noor of Jordan.

AN INSPIRATION TO YOUTH AND ENLIGHTENED LEADERS

More recently, Alex Kaufman has divested himself of much of his corporate holdings and now resides in Aspen, where he is an active contributor to the [Aspen Institute](#), an international nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering enlightened leadership and open-minded dialogues. He also established [The Kaufman Theater](#), home of aspiring, young artists, and recently donated a large sum of money to medical research.

In a booklet titled "A Letter to my Grandchildren" he describes his life and lists some of the principles he has learned:

- **Developing a good name through honesty.**

It lifted me from washing lab dishes in America to running a great company.

- **Education.**

Combining a good education with hard work is the path to success.

- **Entrepreneurship.**

Learn what you can from others, and then strike out on your own.

- **Support Your Country.**

Help keep America great by supporting good people who run for office. Tell them when they are right. More importantly, tell them when they are wrong.

- **Have fun.**

Hard work needs balance.

Good advice from a man who has a passion for tennis and skiing, an eye for beauty, rides Harleys in his eighties, and has a warm, ever youthful, mischievous twinkle in his eyes with a smile that lights up the room.



Alex Kaufman Skiing in Aspen, CO.
Courtesy A. Papp

"It's important to me now to pass along what I have learned," says Kaufman. "My life is a testimony to the fact that if you believe it, you can achieve it. I have come through some of the worst circumstances that a person can live through, but I was able to do it by keeping a strong will first to survive and then to succeed. I always had a vision of what my life could be." That life imagined in the fast lane is what Alex Kaufman has earned to live. And he did that by having nobody else but himself to rely on in the direst of circumstances. And, when it comes to the matters of the heart: complete emotional fulfillment comes to those who can give and receive love and caring equally. Well known by those practicing it. Well known by Alex Kaufman.

Devoting his efforts to helping others through the Aspen Institute, his hope is that as many people as possible can learn to be successful through hard work and belief in themselves. Alex Kaufman wakes up every morning at his home excited by the view of the mountains outside his window. They represent accomplishments, opportunities and a mysterious simplicity. Now, with his burgeoning institute for entrepreneurs taking shape, his plan is that, as he says in his message to his grandchildren, he can "live long enough to see all of us succeed in this wonderful country of endless opportunities."

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More Resources



The Aspen Institute mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues.

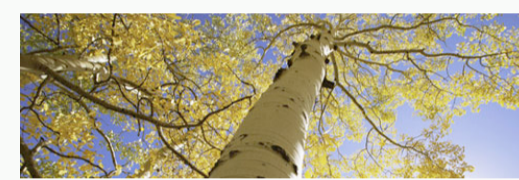
The Aspen Institute achieves this through:

> **Seminars**, which help participants reflect on what they think makes a good society, thereby deepening knowledge, broadening perspectives and enhancing their capacity to solve the problems leaders face.

> **Young-leader fellowships** around the globe, which bring a selected class of proven leaders together for an intense multi-year program and commitment. The fellows become better leaders and apply their skills to significant challenges.

> **Policy programs**, which serve as nonpartisan forums for analysis, consensus building, and problem solving on a wide variety of issues.

> **Public conferences and events**, which provide a commons for people to share ideas in areas such as Arts, Environment, Health and Cultural Diplomacy.



The Aspen Institute has locations in Colorado, New York, Washington DC and Maryland. You can attend an event, donate to their programs or browse their bookstore online. For more information, and list of events and locations, go to www.aspeninstitute.org.

Learn More



Seeds of Peace is doing what no government can. It is sowing the seeds of peace among the next generation of leaders. It is educating them to develop empathy, respect and confidence. It is equipping them with communication and negotiation skills. It is enabling them to see the human face of their enemies. By empowering them to emerge as tomorrow's leaders, Seeds of Peace is working to forge the personal relationships so critical to peacemaking and reconciliation.

What began in 1993 as a camp program with 46 Israeli, Palestinian and Egyptian teenagers has expanded into a global operation with offices in over ten cities around the world. The organization still focuses on the Middle East but has expanded its programming to include young leaders from South Asia, Cyprus and the Balkans.

There are nearly 4,000 young Seeds of Peace leaders making a positive difference in some of the most difficult conflict regions of the world. Due to its proven impact and success in the Middle East, Seeds of Peace has earned international recognition as an effective model for resolving conflict worldwide.



Bolstered by a range of International Board Members including U.S. President George H.W. Bush, U.S. President William Jefferson Clinton, Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan, and Israeli President Shimon Peres, the majority of support for Seeds of Peace programs still comes from individual supporters like you. Find out more about their programs at www.seedsofpeace.org and learn how you can [get involved](#).

Volunteer Member Profile

Adrienne Papp is a writer, editor, internationally-known journalist and the principal behind New York-based [Atlantic Publicity](#), which specializes in the promotion of personalities and new ideas. Her expertise ranges from covering high profile entertainment events like the Academy Awards, and the Sundance, Cannes and Hungarian Film Festivals, to an involvement with socially proactive organizations like [The Aspen Institute](#) (where she met Alex Kaufman at a forum), the [Christian Children's Fund](#) and the [World Wildlife Foundation](#), to name a few of the organizations she supports.

Adrienne is very active in issues involving health, fitness, wildlife, green energy and world hunger, and has received acclaim for her work profiling a range of socially-concerned personalities, from Kathy Ireland to Angelina Jolie to the Dalai Lama. She has an MBA in Economics, and is currently working on a post graduate degree in advertising, marketing and journalism at UCLA.

Some of Adrienne's other favorite organizations and sites are: [National Resources Defense Council](#), [The Animal Rescue Site](#), [We Can Solve the Climate Crisis](#), [Energy Transport Technologies](#), [The Secret](#), [Turtle Island](#)