

Johnny B. Truant: Hey everyone, it is Johnny B Truant at The Badass project, and on the line today is Jon Morrow. Jon is the associate editor of Copyblogger.com, and has a bunch of other accolades and great stories which we will go through here shortly. And perhaps most importantly Jon is one of the original people that inspired me to really get going on this idea that became the badass project and had been incubating in my mind for a while. And, he's the guy that came up with the whole "I'm a badass" t-shirts idea, so credit where credit is due, Jon.

Jon Morrow: Thank you

JBT: Also, I will mention that you don't see me in the lower right as you will on other videos because Jon is in Mexico and the bandwidth down there isn't great. That's a story in itself which I will get to. So without further ado, Jon, welcome and thanks for talking to me.

JM: Thank you, glad to be here

JBT: So lets start by getting a feel for what it is that you have done in your business life. What's the sequence of ventures that you have had leading up to today?

JM: Yeah, I started pretty early. I was one of those kids messing around on the computer. I started programming video games when I was, oh, I was about 12 or 13. And in the beginning it was just volunteering during the weekends and at night, and they would give me free pizza and stuff for working 20 hours a week. I started my first video game company when I was about 16, and did that for a few years working on video games that became the predecessors of World of Warcraft and Everquest. And after that, I decided to get out of gaming because I got a little disgusted with the way that the companies were intentionally addicting people to videogames. They actually had a book called addiction methodology that they passed around.

JBT: Oh, Wow.

JM: You can't buy it but it was like these little notes and articles that people had put together and were games where...you know how they say that cigarettes are a delivery vehicle for nicotine? Well, video games were like a delivery vehicle for addicting people so that they could never quit playing. So, when I got to the top

of that I decided that was kind of bad, especially when I started having people drop out of high school to play the games I created.

And so I decided, well, maybe I can use this whole videogame technology thing to create other kinds of software. So when I was 18, I started a venture-backed company designing language learning software for the US military in a virtual reality environment where people could walk around and they could point at different things and it would tell them what it was in different languages. And that was during the end of the dotcom craze, and everything went well until our venture capitalist went under and they couldn't make our last VC payment and so we had to close the doors like two months before the software was finished. So, then I went back to school.

But the really big one for me, the place where I really had the first big success was real estate. And what happened there was that after college I joined my dad's real estate company and we started doing all of these deals and the ones that I kinda got famous for was I started buying these luxury houses without ever going inside of them. Because I couldn't. I mean, I have ramps and all of these things, but I was having to evaluate maybe 10 or 20 luxury houses a day and then get investors to buy these houses and it was just not really feasible for me to set up ramps and go in and out of 20 houses a day.

So I ended up hiring a guy to do nothing but go to look at these houses, and he had a video camcorder. He would walk around the houses and video everything, and at the end of the day I would have a DVD where I would watch all of the video footage and kind of fast-forward and I could go through 20 houses in like an hour because of the video footage. And I ended up buying I don't know how many millions of dollars of these houses and then fixing them up and selling them.

This really big real estate guru named Larry Goins heard about it and decided to get me to speak at a seminar and I spoke there about how I was making \$10,000 an hour buying and selling luxury homes without ever going inside of them and it became the most requested seminar that he's ever done.

He ended up giving away something like 10 or 20 thousand copies of my speech to people, and at the end of the seminar I gave my email address, so I had all of these people from all over the world - not just the US, but like from Dublin and Japan and all over the place - they were calling me. And they all wanted to partner with me on a real estate deal because I was 22 years old, I couldn't move from the neck down, and yet I was buying all of this real estate and they wanted

to be a part of it. So I ended up expanding on that and raising money for real estate development deals. And before the real estate crash we umm... I think at its height the company was worth about 50 million dollars that I helped build, and a lot of it was me raising money from all of the people that heard about my luxury house story and at the end I think we had like, I think it was getting up close to 3000 acres of land in 3 different states and we were developing it all and I've never even seen most of it, and it just became a really really great story that everyone liked to hear. And I made millions of dollars before losing it all, too, which is another story, all by itself.

JBT: Right, Well that's the fun side. And we have that in common, - that whole real estate through the tubes thing. And at what point in all of this selling, you're talking to investors, you're talking to banks. I mean, let's spell it out, if people are listening to the audio version of this - correct me if I'm wrong - you have spinal muscular atrophy, correct?

JM: That's correct.

JBT: You can't move from the neck down, you use a wheelchair. At what point do any of the people that you're talking to, bankers, investors, other people in the real estate world, become aware of that, and what was their reaction?

JM: Yeah, well, the bankers in particular used to have a big problem with it. They gave me what I used to call the constipated look. Because, they would uh...you know, I'm sitting here and I'm asking them for all this money. The largest loan I ever got was 10 million dollars, and they'd look at me and I was 22 years old and here I am sitting in a wheelchair and I have these investors from all over the world. And the deal, the deals were good, but they'd look at me and they would get really uncomfortable.

Because, they knew that I was the guy running most of this stuff, and that if anything happened to me... And I here I am with this disease that kills like everybody that has it. So it's like, if you walked into a bank and you said, you know, I want to borrow 10 million dollars, but I could die at any minute, and if I do die, then nobody is ever going to pay you back.

In the beginning it made bankers really uncomfortable, because they would look at me, but at the same time they don't want to tell you no it's because you're disabled, because that sounds really prejudiced, you know? So they would get this really uncomfortable look on their face and then I would get this, you know, a

The Badass Project Transcript

rejection usually in the beginning without any explanation whatsoever as to why they were rejecting the deal. But investors loved it. Because most investors - back in the real estate craze - for one, they figured they couldn't lose money. For two, everyone that I was working with was making tons of money and I had a packet of letters from investors, all saying how much money they had made, and in every case it was more than 100% return per year. And in one case a guy had said he'd made like \$7 million dollars, and they all had their phone numbers on all of those these letters so it was like this big testimonial packet I would give to people. People would hear the story and they would come to meet me and if they were doing a deal with my father they would meet my dad, and we would bring them in in groups, and when they saw everything they just thought it was so awesome. We actually had a 100% close ratio: I never had an investor come to meet with me or my dad that did not invest. Not a single one. So they loved the story. But yeah, with bankers it was a problem.

JBT: Now, what... the thing that I'm asking everyone about in this project is the audacity that you badasses have to do the things that are, like, that you are quote unquote not supposed to do in the eyes of society. So my question for you, and let me phrase it this way is: I was reading a book the other day and it was talking about these tribespeople in Africa and Mexico and so forth who live kinda isolated and they have these guys that run like hundreds of miles into their 80s and 90s and the reason that they said that these people were able to do it at an advanced age like that was because no one had ever told them that they couldn't; like nobody imposed upon them that once you reach this age you're supposed to do this, or if you're this type of person you have to do this. Do you think it was like that for you, because for a lot of people it is kind of audacious to say that...a guy that can't enter buildings shouldn't be flipping them, right?

JM: Yeah, and I think that comes down to a couple of things. One, I was really lucky to have two incredible parents. It's one of the reasons why I've survived this disease. But it's also one of the reasons why I'm able to do these things. When I was a kid (I don't think I've ever told you this), when I was a kid my mother never told me I was disabled. I didn't find out until I went to kindergarten. That I was...even what that was. And I remember that we had this conversation. Because - I don't remember if it was a kid of a teacher or what - told me in kindergarten that I was disabled. I had no idea what it meant, so I came home and I asked my mom. And she thought about it for a little while, and she says, "well, it means that you can't do something that someone else can do." And she said, "but it goes both ways: you can't walk, but there are a lot of people that can't think. And that makes *them* disabled." And it gave me this whole frame that

ok, I'm disabled but so is everyone else. You know, everyone has something that they can't do as well as someone else. And it enabled me to kinda go forward as if I was no different than anyone else.

The second thing is that my disability is a gift, in a way, because it has a tendency to make things crystal clear. When you're laying in a bed and you're dying of pneumonia, which is what almost everyone with my disease dies from, things become crystal clear. You have two choices: you can fight, or you can die. And a lot of people choose to die. They just get tired, and they give up. Or they don't have enough support, and they get depressed, or whatever the situation is. And what no one realizes is that, even if you're not laying in a hospital bed dying of pneumonia, those are still the only two choices you have. You can either fight and do big things, or you can lay there and wait to die. And most people are, without even realizing it, sitting there, just...

Like, one of the problems here in Mexico, one of the things that, I love the weather and the beach and everything where I am here, but one of the things that amazes me is all of the retired folks who come here, and they just sit here and they do nothing every day. And I've started calling it the waiting room for the funeral parlor. Because that's what it is. It's the prettiest waiting room you could possibly imagine. They're coming here waiting, they're basically waiting for the next ten years....to die. And they're doing it as comfortably as they can.

And it that really disturbs me when I see people doing that, because I don't even think they're aware that they are making that choice. But they are. And for me, it was always, you know, do I want to go do what I want to do, or do I want to lay there and die. And the choice has always been I want to do what I want to do. And the consequences of that...to me nothing is worse than death. I mean, when you die it's over. So and the whole idea of going bankrupt or whatever, it's all better than the alternative. Whatever bad thing happens as a result of me doing something can't possibly be worse than sitting there and doing nothing and laying down and going to a nursing home and getting shot up with morphine every day until I finally just kind of slip away. To me, that is the only unacceptable scenario.

JBT: So in case anybody listening or watching this hasn't already figured it out, Jon and I have talked extensively before, so I know some things, and I'm going to kind of probe around the edges of them. You have a serious rebellious streak in you, I have learned. And it's one of the things that really sort of defines everything that you've just described, but it's also an augmentation of what you

were saying earlier about if somebody tells you you can't do something - is it correct to say it's almost like a challenge of "oh really, let's find out"?

JM: Yeah it is. And it always has been. To me, it's like a game. I'm kind of addicted to doing things that people say can't be done. I mean, I graduated high school at 16. I'd started 3 businesses by the time I was 18. I graduated magna cum laude with a like a 3.9-something average from college when I was - I think I was 22...21? And every time I did one of those things, I noticed that people would kind of say "that's amazing."

When I graduated from college, I went to a big school, it had 30,000 students at the time, so there were like 600 kids graduating and 4 or 5 thousand people there for the graduation. And it was in the school basketball stadium. And when I graduated, the entire stadium got up and cheered. Even the chancellor had to shake my hand. Because they just didn't see many people that were in wheelchairs and that were dying cross the stage and do something like that. So after getting that feeling so many times, now I do it habitually. Anything that people say can't be done, I get a kick out of it.

Part of the reason, you know I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that part of the reason that I'm here in Mexico is because it's one of those things that everyone talks about and never does, and also nobody thought I could do it. Everyone thought that...you know, they think that ok, the medical care in the US is unsurpassed, and it's safe in the US, and you have your support systems in the US. And to me, all of that kind of got a little bit boring. And it was expensive, too.

But I came down here because I wanted to do one of those incredible things. So I managed to drive...I talked my mother into driving down here with me. We drove 3000 miles all by ourselves, crossed the border. We had the hospital bed strapped to the top of the van, so we looked like the Clampetts, you know. And we're coming down here with no support network, no anything, and yet we made the whole thing work.

And now, everyone is amazed. Everyone that I run into down here. There's like nobody in a power wheelchair down here. Most people have never seen one that live here. It's funny their version of handicap accessible: if we call and ask them if like a restaurant is handicap accessible, it's accessible if four guys can come and pick up your wheelchair and carry you inside. That's their version of handicap accessible.

JBT: Do you know Zach Anner, do you know that name?

JM: No.

JBT: Ok, he's got cerebral palsy and I saw videos. People know him because Oprah did a challenge where people can like...you can get your own show, you know? So he's got a bunch of YouTube videos. You should look him up, he's hilarious. And he's got this one segment where he climbs (air quotes), he climbs this mountain in Austin because he's got his brother (I think it's his brother) carrying him. And so he's got this line where he goes "mount whatever is totally handicap accessible if you've got a guy willing to carry you over his shoulder in 95 degree heat." So awesome.

Laughing

JM: Yeah, and you know, you have to be willing to do some of that stuff. And it is scary, and it is dangerous. You know, the border at Mexico is not the safest place in the world, and for a guy in a wheelchair and his 50 year old mother to be going alone with all of their worldly possessions across the border into Mexico isn't the sanest thing to do. But it was *fun*. And it comes back to the point I made earlier. Actually, my grandmother was so worried, that the day I left she drove - my 80-something year old grandmother got in the car and drove for two hours - to try to talk me out of coming to Mexico. And she was so worried that something was going to happen to me. And she said "what if something happens to you and you get killed?" And I said, "that's ok." And she absolutely couldn't understand it. And to me, if I'm living the life I want to live, if I'm doing what I want to do, and I die, you know, obviously I don't want that to happen, but I would rather die doing what I want to do than die in a nursing home bed somewhere watching TV for 15 hours a day surrounded by other people who are just waiting to die. To me, that is the scariest thing imaginable.

If I ever want to scare the hell out of myself, all I have to think about is laying there in a hospital bed at night and screaming because I'm in pain and no one is coming to help me. That scares the hell out of me. And to me, the whole idea of getting shot at the border in Mexico is, like, an improvement. So I'm not doing anything to deliberately try to die, but at the same time I'm not going to let anything at all - there's absolutely nothing - that can stop me from doing what I want to do, because nothing is more scary than that nursing home scenario for me.

The Badass Project Transcript

JBT: Warren MacDonald said that his personal version of scary and hell was that they were going to put him in a factory stuffing soft toys. (Jon laughs) That was going to be his fate. So let's talk about the other side of this Mexico story, too. We've talked about this before when we talked for Question the Rules, so that was a non-conformity based course, but it's appropriate here, too. The reason that you moved, in part, correct me if I'm wrong here, was because under the given set of circumstances you were...handicapped, but not in the way you think, by the fact that the system was weighed against you and it was costing you so much money that you opted to change the rules, right?

JM: Yeah. I think...one of my favorite quotes...I have it written down on my computer as my screen saver; is "If you can't win the game, change the rules." And so what I did is...everything was so expensive in the US, and I was spending tons of money. Every dollar I had was going toward medical expenses, and it still wasn't enough. And I had insurance, but the insurance had all of these income requirements and everything, and they were always in my business, and finally I just decided that it's going to be impossible for me to ever make enough money to take care of myself the way I need to take care of myself.

And so...you know, a lot of people when they see that they give up and they say "well ok, well I can't win so I'll stop trying" and they just go into the system. But what I did is I started thinking "well, I just need to get outside of the system." So I started looking at Mexico and other countries to see how realistic would it be for me to be making money on the internet, making US dollars, living in Mexico where everything is Mexican prices, and paying for it. And as it turned out, it was very realistic.

So I figured out how to do it. And you know, now I'm still making about the same amount of money on the internet, but a nurse in the US is \$50000 a year, or more depending on where you live. Down here a nurse is \$4 an hour, and that's an excellent wage; like, people line up for that money. So I have nursing care now. Where before it was costing me something like \$7000-8000 a month, now it costs me like I think I'm paying \$1200 a month, something like that down here. And I don't even have insurance. I got a little bit of a sinus infection about a month ago, and I went to the doctor and the price of the doctor visit was \$3.50. To go to the doctor.

JBT: I've gotta move down there.

The Badass Project Transcript

JM: Yeah. It's so incredibly cheap. And you know, I live on the beach. I wanted to do this video outside on the balcony, but my cheap little webcam wouldn't let me do it. The place that I live in, if it was in the US, would cost you about 20 grand a month. That's how nice the place is where I'm living. I live in a resort right on the ocean. I live on the 8th floor, the private beach is right down there with the islands out there. They have a concierge staff and a dedicated restaurant for the people that live here and a little grocery store exclusively for the people that live here. And it's absolutely awesome.

It would cost you millions of dollars to buy one of these condos in the US, but I'm renting it for \$1500 a month down here in Mexico. So every day my nurse comes in and helps me get up in the morning and then I go out to my office, which is my balcony, and I sit on my laptop all day and work on the computer sitting next to the ocean and watching the seagulls fly by.

JBT: Right, well let's not forget that, too. You told the real estate story extensively, but now you are associate editor of Copyblogger, which is one of the largest blogs on the net, you have several of your own business ventures, you just did your guest blogging course, you're a partner in Lateral Action. What has been the effect of the internet on your ability to work and earn? You know, I say I can carry my business in my pocket. I would think you could take it one step further. All you really need is your brain and your voice, right?

JM: Yeah, exactly. That was part of what got me into this business. When the real estate market did crash, and I lost all of my money and everyone else I knew lost all of their money, I had basically a year of living expenses left, and I had to figure out what I was going to do. And I thought, "well, ok, let's see what kinds of skills we've got to work with here: I can think, and I can talk. That's about it. So what sort of other careers could I go into that require thinking and talking and require nothing else?" And it was a short list. So I decided to start a blog, and it became ridiculously popular ridiculously fast, and Brian kind of took notice of me.

JBT: Brian is Brian Clark of Copyblogger.

JM: Yeah, Brian of Copyblogger. And so I started writing for Copyblogger, and a lot of my articles were huge hits, and so then this huge blog – and by the way, it's not like a lot of the other blogs out there; this is a blog where it's not just one guy sitting in a basement somewhere blogging. Copyblogger has like dozens of writers that contribute, it makes like over 5 million dollars a year; it's a huge project and company. It's like 3 million page views a month. So after I'd written

The Badass Project Transcript

those articles, Brian invited me to become the associate editor and to become his business partner. And all of this happened within one year, before my money ran out from real estate, and I was making a full time living online teaching people about business and blogging and all of the other stuff I'm doing now.

JBT: How important do you think it is, both to your success and to people's success in general, to boldly put yourself in a situation where it's do or die. So like you said, you had a year – now I don't think that was intentionally putting yourself in a situation, but Mexico is, and you said that your disease is a gift because that sort of motivates you – how important is that?

JM: Yeah. It's the metaphorical gun to the head. My disease is a gift and all of these other tragedies are a gift, because they put you in that do or die mode to where you have to do it. And people give me way too much credit for being disciplined and getting a lot of stuff done, when the fact is: I have to. If I didn't have all of the circumstances that I have, I wouldn't do anything. I would be laying down by the ocean. If I were completely able-bodied and completely healthy and had \$20 million in the bank and everything was perfect in my life, I actually don't think I'd be working a tenth as hard as I am right now. I don't think anybody is naturally that self-disciplined. The key to getting a lot done is getting those guns to your head, and even manufacturing them.

I've been lucky that I've made pretty good money on the web over the past few years, so one of the things I've started doing is looking for ways to create those guns to my head. I did a course on guest blogging, which is a technique to get more traffic and readers to your blog. And what I did with that course was I sold it as a class that I would be teaching live, and what that means is that it wasn't created yet. So I was creating a product, people were giving me the money, in advance, and then I taught the class. What that did is that forced me to do the class. It made it to where I had to. They'd already given me the money. I wasn't going to give the money back, so I had to actually go finish the course.

And successful businesspeople do a lot of that. They put themselves in situations where they have to do it, or some really horrible things happen that they don't want to happen. And then they make sure that they work really hard to make sure that doesn't happen. In my experience, that's a much bigger motivator for most people than anything that they want or any goals that they have; it is to set up horrible consequences for not taking action.

The Badass Project Transcript

JBT: Yeah, we've talked before. The year that I got the most productivity out of my business and the most success – I built a six-figure business from nothing, literally nothing, in a year - was when I was in a really bad financial situation (again, thanks to real estate). And so just like you said that you've got a gift, in a totally different way I feel that that experience was a gift for me because it was a gun to the head and I had to work hard. It's like you don't have to have discipline when you've got that - it's do or die.

JM: Yeah, and what was amazing to me when I was in the upper echelons of real estate, you would see billionaires that have that exact same mindset. They really felt like if they didn't pull the deal off – and it's like some 4 billion dollar deal – that they were going to die. And they kept themselves in that state of mind perpetually. That never ends. So yeah, I think the key is learning how to manufacture those guns to your head.

The big revelation for me was the movie fight club, where Tyler Durden is standing over the guy that wants to be a veterinarian, and he gets his address and everything and puts a gun to his head and said tomorrow morning, you gotta go start working to become a veterinarian, or whatever it was – 6 months from now - I'm going to hunt you down and come kill you. And the friend that was (Ed Norton) kind of tagging along said "you know, that's horrible." And he said, "well, you know, tomorrow is going to be the best day of his life, because that's going to be the day when he's actually going to go do it." And that's a really extreme example, but it occurred to me when I saw that movie, whenever it came out, what was it, like '99-2000?

JBT: Something like that.

JM: I actually wished that I had somebody that would actually do that to me, that would come put a gun to my head. And you know, that's kind of a sick thing to wish, but that's what got me thinking. You know, what can I do – all of the other things I'd ever done I'd had a gun to my head that was forcing me to do it – so I started to look for ways to manufacture those. And even if you're not disabled, I think you can always find a way to force yourself to do things.

Every entrepreneur you'll ever talk to, they always quit their job, and they were in debt, and they were about to go bankrupt, and they had to make the business work or they were going to lose everything. That's like the story you hear, over and over and over again. You hardly ever hear the story of "you know, I was working a good nice job, and I started making great money on the side, and it just

The Badass Project Transcript

made sense to quit my job and move over to this other thing.” You rarely ever hear that, because most people just aren’t that disciplined. They have to quit their jobs. They have to put themselves in a scary situation. So if you want to go forward in your life, if you’re not getting the results you expect, rather than trying to make yourself be more disciplined, or telling yourself “I’ll do it once I get A or B out of the way.” Put yourself in a situation where you have to.

And you know, it won’t always work out. The average millionaire, I think the statistic was that they’ve gone bankrupt two times in their life, so you know, sometimes you lose. But the good thing is it’s never over, even if you put yourself in that horrible situation and you lose. You’re going to learn so much from it, and the most important thing you’re going to learn from it is: you’re still alive.

You know, after you lose all of that money – after I lost 3 million dollars in real estate – when I woke up the next morning, the sun was still shining, the birds were still tweeting, people were walking around as if nothing had happened. And it’s because on the grand scheme of things, nothing had happened. So I just went on and kept moving forward and accepted that failure isn’t quite as big of a deal as I’d thought it was. And I think the same is true for everyone.

JBT: So to tie it up then, what would you say to people who say that they can’t do something? I’m sure we both hear it all the time. Somebody says “I can’t start a side venture right now because I have 3 kids and two jobs,” or “I can’t do this because I’m too old/too young/the wrong color.” They have some reason as moderate or as extreme as you can imagine – what do you say to somebody who says that?

JM: I think what you have to do is to figure out whether you can’t do something or you really don’t want to. I think that there are a lot of people who kind of want to be rich, or kind of want to be an entrepreneur, or they kind of want to write a book, but not really bad enough to do it. And I think that’s fine.

There are things in life that I want – I would love to be thin, but it’s really not that important to me. I would rather have the food. And I went ahead and accepted a long time ago that I’m always going to be a little bit chubby, and I’m totally ok with that, because I’ve consciously made the choice to trade the food for being a little bit overweight.

I think you need to figure out what’s really going through your head. Because you can *do* almost anything, but the trick is finding out what’s important to you, what’s

really important to you. There are things in this life that I would die for. And then there are things in this life that I just kinda want. And I think it's important to know what those things are that you would trade everything for. If you can figure out what those things are, then put yourself in a situation where you have to do it.

But if you find out that hey, I'd like to do it but it's really not that important to me – like, for me, another thing is, that I'd love to be a billionaire. But it's really not that important to me. And because I've seen what billionaires do to become billionaires, I know what it takes, and I'm really not interested in doing that. I'm not willing to pay the price.

So you need to decide if it's a price you're willing to pay or not. And if it's not, then stop saying you "can't," and start saying "I don't want to." Get that straight in your head, to where you know what you want to do and what you don't want to do and you stop using abstract phrases like "I can't" that just confuse you.

JBT: Great. Great. Excellent, Jon, this has been a great interview. I knew it would be. Thank you very much for coming on and being our inaugural badass. And yeah, just thanks.

JM: Any time, man. Glad to be here

JBT: Alright everybody, this is Johnny B. Truant, here with Jon Morrow, signing off.