

Social-Conscious Capitali\$m

Grad puts entrepreneurship to work for non-profits

by Stacey McLachlan



SOME ROMANCES are love-at-first sight stories. Others are a slow burn. For Jeff Hemmett, BCom '13, his relationship with the business world falls firmly into the latter category: a spark that didn't light until he was more than three-quarters of the way through his business degree. But today, thriving in his role as chief revenue officer for busy Vancouver start-up Keela, it's clearly a passion that was worth the wait.

"Playing intramural hockey was more important to me than exams," laughs Hemmett, thinking back on his BCom days. "Just ask my operations management prof how much time we spent in office hours making sure I got through the course." It wasn't until three years into his studies that it all finally clicked for him. "Social enterprises, capitalism 2.0, whatever you want to call it...that was really what caught my interest. I didn't enjoy business school until corporate social responsibility and sustainability came into play."

His interest truly piqued, he joined the entrepreneurship track and signed up for an exchange to Turkey. "I found my groove in that international co-op and fell in love with the work I was doing. Having the flexibility to follow a developing interest in those final years was key." While in Istanbul, he took the reins of a non-profit, building a women's entrepreneurship incubator. What was supposed to be just a semester turned into nearly a year-long stay, thanks to the support of Gustavson.

It was that time on the front lines of a non-profit that wound up setting the stage for Hemmett's career in tech. "Much like start-ups, non-profits are completely under-resourced, fighting week after week to achieve sustainability," says Hemmett. "There's a commonality in managing and thriving in uncertainty." It's the sort of challenging environment where Hemmett feels right at home, so when he graduated in 2013 he began "crashing and banging" his way through Vancouver's tech scene, eventually landing an internship-turned-job at Thinkific, where he had his first growth role. He then moved on to work with a fellow Gustavson graduate, Kim Cope, at her entrepreneurship education start-up, Early Entrepreneurs (which has since evolved into Startup Skool).

When Early Entrepreneurs was accepted into a start-up incubator at Hootsuite, Hemmett began working part-time with Hootsuite's sales team on data clean-up and data entry. As Early Entrepreneurs pivoted its business model to a summer-camp focus, a full-time opportunity came up on Hootsuite's strategic sales team, so Hemmett dove in, learning how the go-to-market machine works and scales for a tech company, and flexing his entrepreneurial muscles. "Start-up life is about hacking your way through without a structure, just using elbow grease," he says.

Despite helping Hootsuite get its B-corp status, Hemmett

Photo: John Fong

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was keen to further use his business powers for good. "I've really tried to dedicate my career to building a better way in the business world," he says. So he moved on to a social-enterprise incubator called Spring, as director of business development for a short period, until one of its funded ventures caught his attention: Keela.

The company was offering a cloud-based suite of tools that helped non-profits consolidate several tasks: fundraising, project and program and people management, a specialized database and CRM, all in one.

Hemmett connected deeply with Keela's do-good philosophy, and came on board as chief revenue officer in early 2017. In this role, he supports the go-to-market team: marketing, sales and customer success—though as with any start-up, the specifics are always changing. When he started at Keela last year, there were just five staffers and six customers on a beta version. But the investments and business awards began stacking up, as Keela has helped non-profits like the Vancouver Metropolitan Orchestra, Ladies in Heels and more maximize their output. Today, there are hundreds of customers and 25 staffers—all galvanized to make change. "It's very value-based, very human, and I'm just really proud of what we've taken to market," Hemmett explains. "The team all comes to work energized."

And as that team grows, Hemmett is interested in finding the people who are truly making their degrees mean something, just like he did in those pivotal last years of his BCom program. "There are tens of thousands of business students across Canada who are going to graduate this year—what are you going to do to stand out?" he says. "My best hires right out of school are engaged and creative people in business school, not the people just going through the motions and getting B-pluses. They're the ones founding non-profits, starting clubs, building products, acting on ideas—the creatives, the people doing things differently. Do good work, be patient, and the rest will follow." ■