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# THE MAKING OF A BEARZILLA

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**By Sam Arnstein**

*with Michael Arnstein*



*A homeschooled, sixteen-year-old's account of a solo trip  
around the world*

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*This book is dedicated to all the parents  
who make the many sacrifices to raise self-  
sufficient and honorable children.*

—MICHAEL ARNSTEIN



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## FORWARD

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*by Michael Arnstein (Sam's father)*

***“What kind of parent would send their 16-year-old on a trip around the world, alone!?”***

**T**hat was my mother-in-law's first remark when she heard her grandson was suddenly in Mainland China, far, far from home, all alone, on his own, for a homeschooling project.

I'm *that* parent.

How did I become such an unorthodox parent?

Let me start by telling you a bit about how I got started in life. I grew up just outside of New York City in the 1980's. Life and learning was different back then. There were seven or eight TV channels, and maybe one of them interested me. Atari video games got boring real fast and there were no drones or electric skateboards. It was the stone age for kids, literally; I played with sticks and rocks, and when it rained, I puddle jumped. Both my parents worked for themselves in their own businesses. They did okay, but it always seemed like a struggle for them and they worked a lot of hours.

From a young age I learned that if I wanted to get something out of life I would largely have to hustle to make it happen. To make ends meet and keep my candy habit, I figured out early in my business life that scarcity drives price—and no better place to open shop than on a big yellow school bus on the way home from school.

Most kids had books in their backpacks. In my backpack I had boxes of candy. I'd buy in bulk from the small neighborhood corner candy store at a discount, then move up the bus, seat by seat, selling piece by piece all at a premium. The most popular candy was the sour apple Now-and-Later. When this candy entered a 4th grader's mouth, it would slowly melt from a hard plastic block into a blob of super

chewy happiness. (This stuff was a near perfect loose-tooth-remover.) My customers would walk home from the bus stop with a kick in their step and a slimy green smile. And I didn't forget to tip the bus driver with some candy; you gotta grease the wheels and keep everyone happy!

This might have seemed fun and humorous to most people, but this was real world entrepreneur training. My underlying principles of doing business and taking care of myself (and others) were being developed, where the rubber meets the road. The basic concept is to provide a product or a service that your customers value. This is where I learned how to make a living—not in the classroom.

Those were the 80's, a time when seat belts and helmets didn't matter much to anyone... yet we managed to survive.

Both of my grandfathers, and my father and mother created and managed their own businesses. I've embraced that family lifestyle, that vital part of my DNA, and started running my own business. I got married at 22 years of age, had two children by the time I was 24, and the hurricane hustle hasn't stopped since.

For my business, I travel the world in search of rare gemstones in far-out places like Burma, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Tanzania, and sell them through a self-created cloud software platform to customers all over the world. Through the school of hard knocks and resourcefulness, I've created a tech-centric company with 30+ employees with offices in three countries.

The downside? Well my kids don't see their father much at all. They mostly hear about me in stories from their mother. For many years I kept saying, *"I'll spend time with them next week, next month, next year..."* I'd often ask myself, *"Why did I even have kids if I'm not involved with them?"* My wife threatened to divorce me if I didn't improve my effort.

At the time we lived just outside of New York City in suburban Yonkers. I still didn't know how to limit my working hours, so I figured maybe the best way to keep everyone happy was to move somewhere new, somewhere my wife and kids wouldn't miss me so much. So ... we moved to Hawaii. Yup, just like that. I rented out our house in New York, we got on a plane... and left!



This was actually a really good idea, as it allowed me to travel and work as much as I normally did and I didn't hear too many complaints on the home front. But a geographical change was only going to put off the inevitable; they needed my time and guidance.

My son Sam was thirteen and in 8th grade when we moved to Hawaii. He'd gotten through 9th grade of high school, but it wasn't going well. He stayed up too late watching YouTube and slept through most of his classes not interested in biology, math or history. He was pretty lost and I felt horrible, like I was just warehousing him and quite possibly creating a much bigger problem for him and me in the long term.

My wife and I talked about maybe homeschooling Sam, but neither of us were exactly valedictorians of our high schools, far from it. I knew that if I took on the role of teacher, it wasn't going to be the traditional stuff. I had visions of State administrators taking him away, but thankfully, Hawaii is very liberal when it comes to homeschooling.

So we did it. We pulled Sam out of school at 14-years of age, just before his 10th grade year started. We created a Gmail account for Sam, and I got started teaching him Google Docs, Sheets, Calendar, Trello and other software tools that I use to run my business and my life.

Sam had a general daily schedule.

- 1. I didn't want him being sleep deprived.** When I was a kid I was soooo tired having to wake up early to get to school. It was quite possibly the closest feeling of being dead, yet awake. I didn't want that for Sam, so I pushed him to get up by 10 a.m. Since he now slept a lot, it was immediately a major positive change. It helped him stay mellow and keep him focused. Having more sleep was critically important. He needed this to grow in every way and to stay healthy.
- 2. We cleaned up his diet.** Whole, simple foods. The fewer ingredients, the better. No more school trash lunch foods.

3. **Daily exercise.** We bought gym equipment, weights and a new bicycle. Now he was doing exercise daily. That kid rode his bike all over town each morning and really got in shape!
4. **Of all the things I wanted to teach Sam I wanted him to have real-world skills.** So we hit the road soon after we saw that homeschooling was a great decision. Most importantly, we spent time together!

I travelled for work constantly, and it was wearing on me at this point in life. I had been to Asia so many times the flight attendants recognized me. So I started to take Sam with me on my business trips. Sam brought new life into my work trips. He was now my sidekick; Batman and Robin were in full effect.

With Sam traveling with me, everything felt like it was new again. I could see his eyes opening wide from all the first-time experiences. We talked a lot but mainly Sam would listen. He would really, *really* listen as I told stories of how hard work and resilience often results in success. I also told him about the terrible failures and blunders I didn't want to remember. I tried to explain how he could learn from my mistakes.

Sam loved our long flights together. The hotels and restaurants, once a drag for me, were now exciting and fun for both of us. Sam wasn't just learning about geography, he was *doing* it!

Soon 10th grade was a wrap and Sam was really catching onto the matters of the world. Unlike his experiences in traditional school, Sam was transforming like never before. His interests and the freedom to explore whatever clicked with him most was extraordinary. Our relationship, once near-strangers, had become incredibly close. We were very much father and son, but better, we were also friends.



*The Arnstein's (Sam on far right)*

I saw great potential in my son, but I needed to challenge him more after nearly two years of homeschooling. I was aware that things were becoming a little too easy for him. He needed to suffer, fail, fail again, and hopefully not give up. Grit isn't a subject in any of the schools that I attended. We live in a world where everyone gets a medal just for showing up! Today too many people think that hard work is dangerous for your health. And too many parents are raising their children with a sense of entitlement. Nonsense! Sam needed to *endure* if he was going to build the best real-world, reality-based skills.

So I started pushing him to do more things on his own. I was a bit more demanding, less instructive, more “*just get the job done, no excuses*” type of teacher.

That wasn't easy to do as a parent when he was really stuck at a task, but I pushed myself to let go and see what he could do solo without much instruction or advice on how to get something accomplished. This culminated into a wild idea that came to me while on a long flight from Hong Kong to New York. I thought to myself, “I'll send him on a huge challenge!”

**The Challenge: Travel around the world. Alone. No Schedule. No Help. No Notice. Low Budget. No Excuses!**

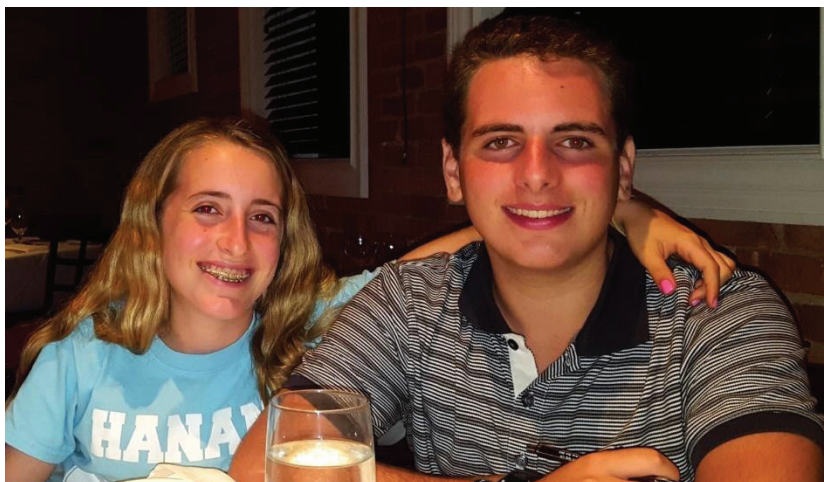
If this kid can learn to have *courage* and *confidence*, then I have succeeded as both his teacher and his father.

So that was how the idea was born.

Next, unknowingly to Sam, I spent 6 weeks pondering routes, challenges and talking to friends about various risks and concerns. Everyone thought it sounded incredibly amazing, but then when they realized he was only 16 years old, they weren't so sure a kid could do something like this. What did my wife think of the idea? Well, she's trusted me for almost 20 years, so she gave me the green light (in full disclosure, she had no idea of the challenges I would give him or how long I would keep him on the road alone.)

I hinted to Sam, "You might be going on a trip soon...just letting you know...."

During April of 2017, I was in New York at my main office. Sam was in Hawaii for Spring Break, spending some down time with his friends. At that time Sam was 16 years, 8 months old.



*16-year old-Sam and his sister Nancy*

By this time I had most of the routes planned for Sam's secret upcoming trip. I wasn't going to buy any flights other than his initial departure (one way) from Hawaii to Hong Kong. I figured he'd have lots of ups and downs, so a more flexible schedule would be better. There was a lot of freestyle from the get go. It was going to be an organic experience for both of us.

I decided that I would send him to Hong Kong first, where one of my most trusted business colleagues, Su Su, would be there at the time. She could help ease him into the adventure. Su Su would meet him at the airport and give him a package from me. The package would contain:

A handwritten letter

A BearZilla T-shirt

A black Sharpie

and a relatively small stack of cash that would have to last a long time....

My letter to Sam was personal, but the T-shirt and Sharpie were to be the guestbook. I told him he should ask people that made impressions on him along the way to sign his shirt.



Sam had to be as strong and fearless as a BearZilla! This is Sam's wearable guestbook. It was to be his good luck charm on his travels.

So, without further ado, here's how it all went down....

# INTRODUCTION

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*by Sam*

**T**his begins the story of a worldwide adventure, a backpacking journey that would help me experience life's biggest lessons. When I was about 16 ½ years old, my father had this idea to send me on a solo trip around the world. I had been homeschooled for the last two years after being totally unhappy and floundering in a traditional school system. My father took me out of school for a variety of reasons, one of which was so we could spend more time together. My dad works a lot of hours running his small jewelry manufacturing business. We never spent much time together since he was always away from our home in Hawaii on business trips or at the main office in New York City.

Homeschooling was a radical change for both of us. I had been on a few business trips with my father when I was younger, so I had had some exposure to being on the road, but *this* trip would be very different. First of all, I would be completely alone with no family members by my side. That's right, a 16-year-old sent off to fly to the other side of the world to learn life lessons that would prepare me for the *rest* of my life.

But it gets even more complicated than simply a vacation to discover new countries. My dad would be sending me to destinations that were completely unknown to me. My dad would email me every two or three days about what my challenges were for that particular day and what to expect for the next couple of days. The emails explained the objectives, where to go, and what I had to do in order to get subsequent instructions to continue on this worldwide mission "to succeed in life." Essentially, I had no warning or knowledge as to what to expect and had to make everything happen all on my own—a young man, alone, in totally foreign countries. It was all up to me

on how to complete each challenge before I could receive further instructions. But one thing was for sure: I couldn't fail. There was no complaining or begging my father to pick something else for me to do. I had to do this, not only to succeed during this trip, but to prove to my father that I could tackle anything he could throw at me.

My dad is training me, "For what?," you may ask. He's training me how to survive and make quick decisions in this ever-progressing world, because in order to get by, you have to be able to work under pressure and figure things out on your own.

And to make things interesting, I would be starting from where I live in Hawaii and going directly to Asia: Japan to Hong Kong, then Mainland China, and continuing around the world. I even had to stop in Nepal and undertake my first hiking trek...up to the 18,500 ft. base of Mount Everest! Eventually I kept going west through the Middle East, Europe, and eventually made my way all the way to London, England, ending the trip in New York City.

In what some would consider a lifetime of Bucket List destinations, I was able to accomplish many tasks and adventures in a 36-day period, independently, never knowing what was going to happen next! The only person that had this trip planned out was my father, and he was sitting comfortably on the other side of the world at his computer like he was playing a video game, where I was the droid and had to survive and accomplish several challenges to succeed..

I still can't believe that I did it, and this is one crazy story most people wouldn't believe if I hadn't taken the time to write this book to explain it all. I have to say, the experiences within this book are the greatest adventures I think I'll ever have in my entire life. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did!



**PART ONE**

**ASIA**

## DAY ONE

---

*April 18th, 2017*

# HAWAII TO HONG KONG

I was at home in Hawaii. My dad was in New York. I thought I was supposed to be getting ready to meet my dad for a business trip to Asia. I'd been on a few business trips with him and just figured this would be another one of those adventures where he would show me all his favorite places in China and teach me secrets of the family business. My dad had been calling it the "Where's Waldo" trip because he told me I might be doing some things alone.

In preparation for this trip, he told me to prepack as he wasn't sure exactly when we might be leaving and he wanted me to be ready. He told me to pack only bare essentials and also gave me a list of things I'd probably need. Some of the items on his list had me a little worried, like hiking boots. He also told me to pack my things in his old yellow trekking backpack. That seemed even more strange, as this is my dad's lucky backpack which he would use to climb mountains, like Mt. Washington in New Hampshire (in the middle of winter!) It was an honor to get to use this backpack for this trip; I knew it had a lot of good karma from his many trips which would serve me well.

The items below were in the list my dad told me to prepare. Of course I added other stuff I can't live without, like my iPod and headphones.

- ✓ *Warm jacket*
- ✓ *Hoodie*
- ✓ *Hat (cold knit type of hat, not baseball cap)*
- ✓ *Gloves*
- ✓ *Comfortable walking shoes*
- ✓ *Hiking boots*
- ✓ *Sunglasses*

- ✓ *Electric lighter*
- ✓ *Sleeping pad (a thin air mattress)*
- ✓ *Sleeping bag*
- ✓ *Water bottle*
- ✓ *Pants*
- ✓ *Five pairs of socks*
- ✓ *Five changes of underwear*
- ✓ *Shirts*
- ✓ *Small lock*
- ✓ *Laptop*
- ✓ *iPod*
- ✓ *iPad and keyboard*
- ✓ *GPS tracker*
- ✓ *Google Pixel phone (with Project Fi and VPN access)*
- ✓ *Portable Bluetooth speakers*
- ✓ *Headphones*
- ✓ *Portable power bank to charge my phone*
- ✓ *Charge cords for all of my electronics*
- ✓ *Wallet*
- ✓ *Duct tape*
- ✓ *Wrist watch*
- ✓ *Hammock*

Why did he tell me to pack the hammock? Your guess is as good as mine. And when it came to toiletries, that would be something I would need to grab on the go.

My dad woke me up with a phone call at 7 a.m. I normally sleep until about 9 a.m., then work out. But my dad called and said that I had to check my email right away!

Here's the first email that my dad sent announcing the start of the trip. Remember, I had no idea at all that I would be going on an extended trip, *alone*.

---

**EMAIL 1:** Received April 18, 2017 at about 7a.m.

*Sam, change of plans.*

*The trip we were going on to Asia is cancelled. Well, at least for me. You see, it was never going to be another trip we take together. I've had this idea on how to really prepare you for the real world.*

*So, you're going on this trip solo!*

*I think it's time to fast-track your education because in just a few short years, you're going to turn 18 and be an adult. It's time to get you ready and to start taking on more responsibilities.*

*So, saddle up, you're now on notice. Life is about to move a bit faster for you. Here we go!*

*First thing: This is not a joke! I thought I was going to give you 2 full hours to get ready this morning before your departure flight, but I messed up remembering your departure time. You don't have 2 hours to get ready, you legit have max 30 minutes to get out of bed, throw your stuff in your backpack and get to the airport. Your flight to Tokyo LEAVES IN 2 HOURS. You MUST make this flight. Mom will take you to the airport. Now GO!*

—Dad

Yea, crazy right? I don't even have time to ask him questions, he just says, "Go!" My first flight would be taking me to Tokyo for a layover, then eventually to Hong Kong, China. Apparently, I was going on this trip alone and now my flight was leaving in just 2 hours! I immediately jumped out of bed and began rushing to get his yellow backpack to put in all the things I needed. I took another small backpack for all my electronics. I tried to stay calm. All in all, it took me only about 20 minutes to get everything packed and ready to go. I got in the car at 7:30 a.m. for my mom to take me to the airport, but of course to make things more stressful, I had to wait for my kid sister to get in the car as we still had to take her to school. Luckily, her school was on the way to the airport. This must have been a foreshadowing of the adrenaline-filled trip to come.

I was off to a great start, even if it was a bit unexpected. If this trip had a theme, it would be "Expect the Unexpected." My mom drove me to the airport with an hour to spare. (Well, an hour to spare before an international flight leaves is probably not sparing much.) I checked in, ran to the gate and boarded the plane. It felt

good to complete my first challenge, rushing to the airport and actually making the flight.

I liked the rush of adrenaline that helped me get that task done. To me, it's all about getting a task out of the way so you don't get stressed thinking about it. Once it's done, you feel relief. I felt relief, although I knew there would be a lot more to come. I was excited and nervous at the same time, contemplating all of the next challenges. I could only imagine that they would be harder and longer to complete, that they wouldn't be as easy as just getting to the airport and hopping on a plane, but I wanted to complete these tasks to get that feeling of relief afterwards., the satisfaction of completion.

My flight from Hawaii to my connection in Tokyo was a long eight hours. During the flight I tried to catch up on some sleep. And when I couldn't sleep any longer, I took the time to read a few comics I had brought with me, watched a few inflight movies and listened to some of my favorite music on my iPod. (I also enjoy making my own music—EDM = electronic dance music—because it allows me to be creative and also helps calm my nerves.)



*Arriving in Japan*