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## Unlocking the moral imagination of young people: Eric Dawson '96

*By Maxwell Surprenant*

*From Eric Dawson's LinkedIn page, we learn that he had odd jobs of bartending, electron microscopy, regional TV commercials, and serving as the driver for the author of Curious George. But the rest of his profile is about his serious commitment to public service, specifically inspiring and empowering young changemakers. He is deeply interested in unlocking the moral imagination of young people to heal a world that is pretty beat up. Dawson (Harvard College 1996, Harvard Graduate School of Education 1998, Harvard Divinity School 2010) serves as the CEO and Founder of RIVET (started July 2021), the first micro- financing platform for young social innovators. The organization works with brands, influencers, and non-government organizations (NGO's) to fund and amplify youth-led social change.*

*Dawson's goal is to raise half a billion dollars to support a million young people and get their ideas off the ground. He explained it like this: "There are 1.8 billion young people (ages 13- 30) on the planet. 85% live in places where they would have no access to funding. So, this will be the largest effort to radically expand who gets to engage in public service. The hope is that we are going to open up all sorts of powerful solutions to the world's most complex problems."*

*Dawson himself was a visionary teen service leader. When he was a freshman at Harvard College in 1993, he started Peace Games as his work-study project through the Phillips Brooks House Association (PBHA). He created a social-emotional learning curriculum for Boston Public Schools. This initiative grew and developed into Peace First, a youth-led global nonprofit that supports young changemakers, across 166 countries, through training, mentorship, a digital online platform and network.*

*As this year marks Peace First's 30th Anniversary, Dawson who served as Executive Director for 30 years, reflected upon the organization's success. "I'm proud of our adaptability, being able to stay connected to what young people need, and that's different in 1993 and now," he said. Young people need to be taken seriously as thoughtful leaders, and I'm proud that we've been able to give a million young people their first or early opportunity to feel powerful in a positive way.*

*Dawson recounted when he first discovered his power to make a difference - he was 14 years old. He attended a big public high school in Ohio. It was during the inclusive movement when students with special needs were being mainstreamed in the classrooms for the first time. While many kids were teasing and bullying these new students, Dawson took action and started a club to raise awareness around people with disabilities. "It changed the culture to think and act differently, more kindly," he said.*

*After high school, Dawson was honored with a scholarship to attend Harvard College, and later earned graduate degrees from Harvard School of Education and Harvard Divinity School. Most recently, he obtained his EdD from NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development in 2023. Dawson is grateful to Harvard for long years of study as an undergraduate and graduate student, plus serving as a tutor for Adams House, he was able to create his "vocational educational experience" combining his learning and service work.*

*"I often joke that I wish I loved something else," Dawson said. "It would have been easier if I wanted to become a lawyer, consultant, or investment banker. These are pathways out of Harvard that are clearly delineated and marked especially in the mid-90's when I was graduating." Dawson also talked about certain expectations and conflicting messages that make it harder for Harvard graduates to choose a career in public service. "I think Harvard has gotten better though, and it can continue to exercise its muscles in this way."*

*At the end of the day, Dawson feels good about his public service journey. "I love the ability to create with other people in ways that have made the world a better, more just, more compassionate place. So, I feel I can go to bed at night knowing my time has been spent in a way that has created opportunities for other people," he said. "To enter my midlife, I can look back and feel like I built something that is worthwhile in the world."*

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