

**LECTURE**

***Changemakers: Make the Impossible Possible***

February 27, 2008

**SPEAKER**

**Bill Strickland**, President and CEO, Manchester Bidwell Corporation; author, *Make the Impossible Possible: One Man's Crusade to Inspire Others to Dream Bigger and Achieve the Extraordinary*

**MODERATOR**

**Nana Watanabe**, photographer and author, *Changemakers: Social Entrepreneurs are Making a Difference* and *Changemakers II: Working as a Social Entrepreneur*



Bill Strickland describing MCG in Pittsburgh. ©Satoru Ishikawa.

Armed with his trusty slide show and 30 years of experience as a leading social entrepreneur, Bill Strickland shared his inspirational story to a packed house at Japan Society on Wednesday, February 27. The program began with an introduction by noted photographer and author Nana Watanabe, whose serendipitous meeting with a punk rocker-turned-social entrepreneur earlier in her career motivated her to seek out and publicize the efforts made by social entrepreneurs. Inspired by her successful first book, *Changemakers: Social Entrepreneurs are Making the Difference*, Japan Society invited her to photograph participants in the *U.S.-Japan Innovators Network* retreat in San Francisco in June 2006, where she met Bill. Deeply moved and impressed by Bill's work, Nana profiled Bill in her most recent book *Changemakers: Working as a Social Entrepreneur*.

After being introduced and invited to the podium, Bill, a man standing around six feet-five inches tall and whose presence commands attention, began his presentation much like every other presentation he has given: with a joke. He has one presentation and he knows it and openly jokes about it. He says he feels sorry for those who have chosen to listen to it yet again, but deep down you know what he's about to talk about is no joke. It's this disarming and charming attitude that puts an audience at ease and allows his powerful message to reach the hearts and souls of people every day.

Bill began his slide show by describing his organization, the Manchester Bidwell Corporation, and the numerous job training and community arts programs they provide to disadvantaged children and adults. Inspired and, as Bill puts it, "saved" by his high school art teacher, Bill knew from the time he entered the University of Pittsburgh



Bill Strickland and Nana Watanabe fielding questions from the audience. ©Satoru Ishikawa.

as a probationary student that he wanted to transform the lives of the people in his neighborhood. He knew that the first step in achieving his goal was to build a center worthy of the people he wanted to help. It would have to be a beautiful structure with tons of natural light, beautiful displays of artwork, flowers and a huge fountain in front of the building, because according to Bill, “When you put people in a world-class facility, you create world-class people. When you put them in prisons, you get prisoners.” This was his first step in killing the “spiritual cancer” infecting the poor people living in the ghetto. As a result, he had a student of world-renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright design and build his center, which as we all found out, became the scale model for the Pittsburgh Airport.



Bill Strickland signing books after the lecture.  
©Satoru Ishikawa.

The second ingredient of Manchester Bidwell’s recipe for success is the cutting-edge education people receive. Not only are students given a sense of the possibilities, but also a sense of control over their lives through music and arts programs. Additionally adults are learning trades such as pharmacology, culinary arts, and horticulture that can be applied to finding jobs that Manchester Bidwell has smartly identified as hard to fill by corporations in the greater

Pittsburgh area. Connecting music and ceramics with pharmacology might seem like an odd pairing, however Bill’s ability to see opportunities where others might only see obstacles allowed him obtain funding and expand Manchester Bidwell to the point where it is today. His relationship with the late Senator John Heinz brought his center a million dollar kitchen and top-notch culinary arts program, and contacts with Hewlett-Packard birthed a state-of-the-art computer lab and visual arts program.

After expounding Manchester Bidwell’s philosophy of light and beauty as a way to lift people out of poverty, Bill explained his new goal: 100 centers in the United States and 100 around the rest of the globe. Centers have already been built in San Francisco, Cincinnati and Grand Rapids, MI, and new centers in places like Philadelphia and New Orleans are in the planning stages.

Internationally, Bill was recently in Israel and sat down with Jews and Arabs where they discussed a plan for a new center that would target a diverse group of Jewish and Arab children and adults as well as immigrants to Israel from Russia, Ethiopia and around the world. Conversations about building centers have also begun in Ireland, South Africa, San Paulo and Costa Rica.

Bill wants his book *Make the Impossible Possible* to be a source of inspiration and guiding light for people without hope. He wants a number one book for the media attention and financial backing that a best selling book can bring to help him communicate his message all over the world.



Nana Watanabe. ©Satoru Ishikawa.

The lecture was followed by a Q&A session, reception and book signings by Bill and Nana.