

Alex Hart-Upendo – Build-A-Bow

Business Web Address: [www.BuildaBowbyAlex.com](http://www.BuildaBowbyAlex.com)

### Background:

I started my company Build-A-Bow at the age of 9 after being bullied relentlessly for being different, and testing as gifted. I'm on the high functioning end of the spectrum for Autism & was experiencing homelessness it caused me to be isolated and bullied. I was experiencing depression and suicidal thoughts, I felt really low about myself and had a very low self-esteem, When I was wearing bow ties I felt like the world noticed me; when I wasn't I felt like nobody noticed. I wanted to take the negative term nerd and turn it into something positive and fashionable, bowties! It was a way I could speak without speaking. I learned to create and sew bow ties at the age of 5 through art therapy. My mom is a Designer and she had a hard time connecting with me, and the diagnosis of Autism was very new to both of us. We used art & sewing as a way for me to express myself. When I was sewing & designing I would get lost in the colors and fabrics. It made me happy. By the time I turned 9, I got really good at making bow ties and I started sharing my work on social media. It garnered the attention of celebrities and fans worldwide. I realized bow ties didn't only make me happy but they made others happy as well. After my grandfather passed away from cancer, I decided to create an initiative that would bring joy to others battling incurable diseases. Build a bow for a purpose was created. I teach people to design bow ties at my monthly free workshops and after they are done they get sent to different awareness groups. I absorb all the costs and my workshops are completely free. For example September's awareness is Childhood cancer. The bowties designed at that month's workshop go to children battling cancer. Each month is associated with an awareness or cause. That is how I determine where the donated bow ties go. Since the beginning of my company I have donated over \$30k dollars back into the community for bullying, homelessness & youth entrepreneurship efforts.

### Overview:

My company is a custom Bow tie, hair bow & pet bow retailer. I specialize in creating the most fashionable and unique custom handmade Bow ties that you can imagine. I not only just create bows for humans but pets too! I'm a Wisconsin based manufacturer, and I have the only patented bow tie process in the United States. I set myself a part by creating a design process that has allowed me to be able to create any bow imaginable. If you can think it, I can create it in 2d or 3d form. I even design bow ties for people with disabilities. I take bow tie to the next level. I have studied the bow tie thoroughly so I could fix and recreate bows without design flaws for all people. The purpose was to create wearable art through bows to make people happy, and give them a way to express themselves. I'm also an Author. I wrote the book titled "Bullies, Bowties & Brilliant Alex". I do speaking engagements, and work as a motivational speaker and bullying & mental health advocate. I started my company to bring awareness to bullying, Autism & to promote youth entrepreneurship as well as ending the stigma of mental health. I have my community workshop program called Build A Bow for a purpose

where once a month I host workshops teaching patrons to design bow ties that are then given to people battling incurable diseases. I bring fabric so participants can create a bow tie as well as make custom cards to write an inspiring or uplifting note to the recipient. I also have a book bullying initiative where I go to classrooms across the state, sharing my story of entrepreneurship & I host Author readings where I donate books and discuss the effects of bullying. I'm currently on pace to become the youngest to open an entrepreneurship school that will provide a resource for other youth to inspire them to follow their dreams and show the importance of giving back to their communities. I promote my business by using the power of social media, as well as word of mouth. I pride myself on having excellent customer service experience and 5 star ratings. I truly care about my customers and they know that they come first. I listen to the needs and demands of my clients. I have a large social media presence of over 300k. I stay active on many social media platforms by sharing positive stories, feedback and inspiration. I use the power of influencers as well as celebrities and local businesses collaborations. I'm constantly looking at ways to expand my market by teaming up with other local businesses and creating. For example I did a pies and bow ties workshop with Elsie Mae's bakery. We created a space for people to come design their very own bow tie along with a pie for Father's Day. I attend several business mixers. I'm constantly connecting. You can even see some of my billboards around the city of Racine, Madison and Milwaukee.

#### Personal Qualities:

Some fun facts about me. I'm a Guinness world record title holder for tying the fastest bowtie. I was the youngest Male designer in New York fashion week. I've designed a bow tie for Ellen. I'm a published Author of the book titled "Bullies Bowties and Brilliant Alex". I'm a 2019 Emmy award winner for the film I did in partnership with PBS titled "You're Not Alone" to bring awareness to bullying and youth mental health & suicide. My community project was recognized by the state of Wisconsin and Governor Scott Walker. I received a Proclamation and was awarded my very own day for the philanthropy Build-a-Bow has done in Wisconsin. September 30th is known as Alex Hart-Upendo day.

I have won many monumental business awards and pitch competitions. Such as SCORES national small business champion, Project Pitch it award, National 3M Science & technology state merit winner 2018, Wisconsin's YES youth entrepreneur 2018, Racine youth community advocate, National Incredible kid competition, Racine's 2017 humanitarian, Racine Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian award 2019, 2016 Apollo Award recipient for New and innovative business, Chicago's 2017 Humanitarian by Ernst and Young, Recipient of two Senatorial entrepreneurship awards given by Senator Tammy Baldwin and Senator Ron Johnson. I've received recognition and attention from Ellen, Steve Harvey, Harry Connick and NBC Shark Tank. I've participated in several business pitch competitions in adult categories, winning first place as well as being listed as Wisconsin Inno 20 under 25. I've taken college coursework at Gateway technical college from financial literacy to business growth

accelerators. I've taken advantage of almost every program listed by WWBIC including a 12 week business plan course and accelerators. I'm dedicated to every part of my business and the success it has. I am constantly looking at ways to evolve and grow, rather it means educating myself and taking classes or collaborating with city leaders and key stakeholders to gain mentorship. I believe failure is a part of the growth experience. I manage risks by failing forward and TAKING risks. I create risk charts before anything I decide to do. When I write things down, it makes my goals less scary and easier to create a plan of action. My motivation are my parents, my mentors, my peers, my fans, and my clients. I keep going because I know I have people rooting for me, and if I give up I not only give up on myself but I give up on them. My key strengths are tenacity, kindness, heart, drive & hustle. I've made it through some experiences most kids my age and people in general may never experience. I've built myself up from the bottom with the support of family, friends and clients. Everyone that knows me knows that I will outwork anyone to get my goals accomplished. I'm focused on my journey because I know that I'm changing lives and making opportunities available for kids like me. I'm a social entrepreneur; money isn't the only motivator for me. My company is about making impacts in the lives of others as well as awareness. I mix hustle with heart.

### The Future:

I've spoken to thousands of children worldwide. One of the main questions I always get is "How can I be a youth entrepreneur like you". Through the last few years of founding and building my company, I realized that my heart has always been helping others. For the last 2 years I have been creating a plan to answer that number one question as well as create change. I am currently working on franchising Build-A-Bow as a youth entrepreneur subscription service. It allows other youth entrepreneurs to have a tangible product, with great visibility and profitability. I have worked hard making Build-A-Bow a national name. That is just a portion of my current plan. I am in the process of opening an entrepreneurship academy called "Hustle and Heart". I have been building this school alongside my parents and city leaders. I have plans to take at risk youth and give them valuable lessons and experience in business. The school is phase 2 of Build-A-Bow, it's the next level. Many children have amazing ideas and visions far much greater than mine, but have no financial, community or support system. My Academy will serve as that support. Hustle and Heart is a trampoline for at risk youth to catapult and conceptualize noble ideas through art, creativity and innovation. I will help at risk youth become leaders and future key stakeholders for their communities through educational programs, hands on activities and overcoming obstacles. Myself and the team will help them find their why and the power of entrepreneurship. Hustle and Heart will set them apart. Just as it's done for me - the two key traits I believe every successful entrepreneur should have. I'm currently about 30 days out from closing on the location for the center. Winning this competition will help to move the future of Build-A-Bow to other hungry and motivated youth entrepreneurs.