(Dan Ambrosio): Hello everyone! My name is Dan Ambrosio and today on voices of social change Dr. Michael Schenck will be talking about using skills in a career path. Michael is a dedicated Marine who has served in 25 States, and 30 Countries, including multiple combat tours. Michael works with the Marine reserves linked-military capabilities and pre-deployment training with civilian relocation of a town in Alaska. Michael will be talking explaining more about his research and findings in the video. Michael is also an author, a high school history teacher, a coach, and a counselor.

Whether you are an academic scholar or a business professional, Michael will present valuable information on confronting challenges in your organization or community, and how it can impact your research. Let’s hear Michael’s story.

(Dr. Michael Schenck): Good evening! Next slide please. This is a photo that I took from a Blackhawk helicopter, and it shows the entire village – well, what is left of the entire village of Newtok. The relocation of this village to a new location on firm bedrock is the basis of my social entrepreneurial research. All research has to be built around a problem involving something that is currently not known. To the aspiring researcher I must say: do not be intimidated or discouraged by that. A pessimist sees a difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty. My problem here dealt with the lack of both policy and knowledge regarding slow-onset climate-induced relocations in western Alaska. Currently no single agency is responsible for those relocations. However, 186 out of 213 – that’s 86.4% of existing Yup’ik villages – are impacted by flooding and erosion. That links the goal to the problem. Flooding and erosion concerns are severe, and knowledge pertaining to
adaptation theory is lacking in regards to relocation. If no solution is developed, relocation will no longer be possible once a village passes a tipping point.

I got to point out here that this relocation is not financially motivated. Knowledge gained within adaptation theory may be considered social entrepreneurial research now, but I see it as fiscally essential in the near future. Climate change does not respect orders, it does not respect who you are, and it does not respect where you live. This may be a Yup’ik problem now, but I see it as a global challenge which will eventually require globally solidarity.

On the next slide, I’m going to trace the path that my research took. As someone who completed exactly one research project, I do want to be careful that I reflect rather than prescribe. The core idea behind social entrepreneurial research is the idea of making something better for non-economic, or at least not exclusively economic reasons. One reason I was successful was that I cared; the sample population cared, and we both knew it. Nobody knows about what you know, until they know that you care.

In regards to identifying an emerging topic, I will point out the opportunity might be right where you’re at. Your research could be a catalyst that leads to a larger population, and this is really important: real change occurs from the bottom up; I believe all change starts small. The big picture is too unwieldy, complex, incomprehensible, and quite frankly it’s immovable. What you want to do is find something individual and personalizable, then your perspective can shift to one.

The search for meaning, while uniquely individual and therefore beyond my circle of control, might still be within my circle of influence in regards to suggestive tips. One of my very favorite sayings of all time is “the supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and pleasure.” While this presentation itself did require some preparation and doesn’t offer any fiscal compensation, I didn’t even consider it work because I believe in it and I have an affinity for this subject.
Each of these descriptors that I listed on the bottom bullet requires a combination of personal skills and attributes. Experience is valuable in enhancing both these skills and attributes. That’s one reason that I had to use my work as a source for an emerging topic. My research made me better at my job, and my job made me better at my research. I want to take just a quick second to recognize persistence. Persistence has to be the most important attribute to make. It’s the catalyst for manifestation of the other attributes. It also allows those deficient in other areas to still achieve. In the confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins. It’s not due to instantaneous competitive advantage, but rather cumulative persistence.

On my last slide, I would like to talk about the methodological and theoretical impact on the Yup’ik community. Newtok was an absolute unique window into the social, economic and cultural impact of this relocation. To be completely honest, I can’t believe more people aren’t looking into this incredible topic of settlement relocations. From the methodological perspective, the finding from this research that community involvement is an essential component of relocation has implications on the way scholars view theoretical frameworks of adaptation. Nearly every bit of existing theoretical literature that I had regarding adaptation, centered around the victim of the event being assisted and the governmental agency being responsible for successful execution.

This research, however, indicates the victims of the event are central to success. Despite 186 Yup’ik villages being impacted by flooding and erosion, only Newtok was approved to actually be relocated. Community involvement was identified in my research as an explanation. For example, the Newtok traditional council has been leading the relocation efforts. Older residents have been involved since the 1980’s. Theoretical impacts include adding western Alaska to the rational adaptation framework, and community involvement was found to be a precursor to effective strategic planning. The relocation did improve sustainability; there are a lot of different forms of sustainability including knowledge-based sustainability. Without an understanding of relocation as an adaptation to slow-onset climate-induced environmentally
based events, the combination of passing a tipping point and severe environmental conditions would result in disaster relief operations and subsequent assimilation of the Yup’ik culture.

This research represents a very modest first of many steps that could lead to the ultimate preservation rather than destruction of coastal western Alaskan villages. The goal of preserving much of Yup’ik culture and way of life is not yet realized. There’s also fiscal sustainability that’s closely linked to logistics. To that end the new village of Mertarvik has infrastructure such as a barge landing site, a pioneer air strip; we’ve built them an improved road and an evacuation shelter. In the event of an environmental event in the future, we wouldn’t have to relocate the entire village.

This research highlighted the need for more research. A phenomenological study of the experiences of village residences is definitely needed. Transferability of findings in this research is not possible until the Yup’ik intentions are better known. A follow-up case study on this village wouldn’t be bad either. This next point I’m going to make is somewhat controversial, but I believe it to be a fact. Climate change is a crucial variable in initiating relocation; and that’s coming from the villagers themselves. Relocation is likely to be desired again, and the impact of confirming climate change in Newtok justifies my finding that a national framework is needed.

Let me wrap this up here. Social entrepreneurship allows for self-actualization. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs provides an interesting case for social entrepreneurial research. Whereas fiscally motivated research would provide for physiological needs, social entrepreneurial research can enable one to self-actualize and grow. We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. To all the participants out there I wish you the best of luck as you find your opportunities and prepare yourselves to make the world a better place.

Thank you.
(Dan Ambrosio): As Michael mentioned, research can make you better at your job, and your job can make you better at your research. A healthy combination of academics and practical skills will you to impact social change in your own community.

I’m Dan Ambrosio with Walden Career Services, and thank you so much for watching!