

## **My Journey**

My namesake is Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. His story taught me a foundational lesson: you don't build trust by shouting down, you gain it by having the courage to look people in the eye and understand them. This belief, that understanding must always precede action, has been my compass.

Growing up the son of an English literature professor and a librarian, the walls of our home were peppered with books full of wondrous stories and characters much like Max. These books served as windows beyond our quaint English village (renowned only for its extensive collection of grey skies) to a bright multitude of perspectives. Forged between cultures as a dual US/UK citizen, my identity was also never rooted just in one place. These twin influences instilled in me a deep-seated curiosity to not just observe other worlds, but to learn the nuanced stories and motivations that drive the people within them.

As a Dialogue Facilitator at NYU Abu Dhabi – a place I chose for its unparalleled student diversity and cross-cultural immersion – I learned a fundamental principle: true support isn't about answers, but questions. This experience shaped my *modus operandi*: glean key information through active listening and strategic questioning.

The principles of dialogue and understanding I learned were rigorously tested in the Peace Corps in Guinea. Arriving with university-honed theories, I was soon humbled by the reality of a new culture and language. Adapting to a Francophone environment, I discovered that correctly conjugating the verb “être” would be the least of my worries: I had to entirely learn how to engage at all. Furthermore, my earnest attempts to 'help' through traditional teaching methods, such as my grandiose plans for workshops were met with polite indifference. This experience led me to a critical realization: my top-down approach simply didn't work.

Consequently I adopted the guiding principle: show, don't tell. My breakthrough moment came after a chance meeting with a local beekeeper who became my most valued counterpart. I focused entirely on supporting him while he made his own hives a visible success. It was a quiet strategy of demonstration. The community's engagement wasn't won in a meeting; it was earned when the first farmer approached us with the question, "How can I do that, too?" For me this lesson formed the backbone of my professional philosophy: people support what they help create.

I carried this approach into my work at the public affairs firm CliffordMoss, where I helped build engagement plans for everything from local ballot measures to U.S. House races. Whether in a Guinean village or a California campaign, the challenge was the same: moving people from being passive recipients of a message to being active co-creators of a movement.

At the end of the story, Max sailed home, but the lesson was never in leaving; it was in the transformation that happened on the island. I believe that my work is about creating those spaces for transformation, to start a 'wild rumpus' of engagement, not by being the loudest voice, but by proving that we are all part of the same shared purpose. Great organisations understand that the most powerful message is not one you broadcast, but the one you build with the community you serve. My diverse experiences, from international development to political campaigns, have prepared me to contribute to a mission-driven organization dedicated to building bridges and fostering positive impact.