Joe Nail:
And then they were calling my name as I'm going through, and I'm still again wearing the same sweaty shirt and backpack from the 112-mile run. Had to ask people to cut in the TSA line and then I ended up making it to my flight 11 or 12 minutes before it started. It was a 10 PM flight, cross country to Raleigh, Durham. I wake up the next morning. I didn't even really get to sleep. I woke up at 7:30 AM in North Carolina. My knees were both sprained. I had poison oak on my arm. I was completely sunburned and I was totally euphoric. I'm Joe Nail. I'm a member of the 2023 Cohort and a first year student in the MBA and Master's in International Policy programs. I imagine a world where faith, family, and courage are our guiding values and where all Americans are bound together through service.

Taylor Goss:
Welcome to the Imagine a World Podcast from Knight-Hennessy Scholars. We're here to give you a glimpse into the Knight-Hennessy Scholar community of graduate students spanning all seven Stanford schools, including business, education, engineering, humanities, law, medicine, and sustainability. In each episode, we talk with scholars about the world they imagine and what they're doing to bring it to life.

Willie Thompson:
Today you'll be hearing from Joe Nail, a first year joint MBA MIP student. During our conversation, you'll hear Joe's experience emulating service exhibited by his parents, leading as an introvert, discovering his entrepreneurial spirit, launching a new initiative for US military veterans and so much more.

Hey, what's up you all? Welcome to another episode of the Imagine a World Podcast. I am one of your co-hosts, Willie Thompson, at the Business School right now. Will be at the Ed School next year, and I'm joined, as always, by my amazing co-host, Taylor Goss.

Taylor Goss:
What's up, Willie? Coming to you from the Music Department doing Music Science and Tech master's degree and a Master's of Arts and Public Policy as well. I'm excited to be here. Good to see you again, Willie.

Willie Thompson:
Good to see you too.

Taylor Goss:
We see each other with some frequency.

Willie Thompson:
I know.

Taylor Goss:
It makes me very happy.

Willie Thompson:
To folks who are listening, Taylor and I just got back from the Knight-Hennessy retreat in Sierra Camp, which was great. Nice little weekend there.
Taylor Goss:
There was a lot of natural beauty and outdoorsmanship-

Willie Thompson:
There was.

Taylor Goss:
... which is something that will be a part of this episode for sure.

Willie Thompson:
I believe it will be. I imagine if our guest today was with us at Sierra Camp, he'd probably be doing some trail running-

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
... some marathon or some mountains.

Joe Nail:
100%.

Willie Thompson:
I imagine so. For folks who don't know, our guest is the amazing, Joe Nail. Welcome to the pod, Joe. How you doing?

Joe Nail:
Doing great. Honored to be here and I got two very handsome interviewers in front of me, so a little nervous, but we'll do all right.

Taylor Goss:
Nah, no nervousness. Flatterous. Flattery will get you nowhere on this podcast.

Joe Nail:
Shoot, all that media trainings gone out the window already.

Willie Thompson:
It's all good. It's a Monday. How you feeling? How's life going right now?

Joe Nail:
Doing well. Had a big weekend of training this past weekend. Got 40 miles of running, 1200 push-ups in, getting ready for the summer, some more miles this morning. So a little sore, but mostly just excited for another week and again, being here so... Thanks for having me.
Of course. So you said 40 miles over the weekend?

Joe Nail:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
We'll get into how absurd that is to me, but how many did you do this morning?

Joe Nail:
I did eight this morning. So this is a little bit of a rest and recovery day.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, eight miles is recovery day. That's crazy.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, okay. Fair.

Joe Nail:
I'm doing more later today so...

Willie Thompson:
Oh.

Joe Nail:
One of the things we're doing on campus is getting different faculty members, professors, students to run alongside me in honor of a veteran or service member who they admire. And we're doing a big push-up mile challenge with the Stanford Wrestling team later today. So it'll be 50 push-ups, run a lap, 50 push-ups, run a lap, 50 push-ups, run a lap, 50 push-ups, run a lap as fast as you can.

Taylor Goss:
Wow. Okay.

Joe Nail:
So we'll see how that goes.

Willie Thompson:
Joe, you talked about the world that you'd imagine at the top of the pod, but before we talk about the world you imagine, we'd love to talk a bit about the world you were born into and have experienced thus far. So where are you from and what was your journey here to Stanford?

Joe Nail:
Yeah. I was born and raised in Kansas.
Willie Thompson:
Woo-hoo.

Taylor Goss:
Big Kansas fan.

Joe Nail:
That's a rare reaction at Stanford. Usually it's either what is that or I'm so sorry, or how the heck did you actually end up here? And actually, prior to this year, there had never been a Knight-Hennessy Scholar selected from Kansas. And then randomly, we had two from Kansas and one who went to undergrad, an additional scholar who went to undergrad in Kansas, which is great. But yeah, I was born and raised in Kansas, middle of five kids, two public service examples of my parents. My dad works for the Army, and then my mom's a middle school-

Willie Thompson:
Nurse.

Joe Nail:
... nurse.

Willie Thompson:
Mm-hmm.

Joe Nail:
And after graduating from high school, I did a year-long fellowship in Germany called a Congress-Bundestag Scholarship. And then I started at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I think in terms of what got me here, when I was in college, I tried to surround myself with other people who cared about some of the same things, military service, public service, et cetera. My junior year I started noticing a pretty disturbing trend, which was all of my friends who had written their college admissions essays about wanting to be doctors or serve in the military or start a business or contribute to their community, after graduation were not acting on those convictions. And it was not because they suddenly it had a change of heart. It was because they really didn't see the pathways to be able to do that. It seemed like investment banking, consulting, tech, et cetera, offered a lot more stability, financial resources, et cetera.

Willie Thompson:
Guilty.

Joe Nail:
It happens to the best of us. So yeah, my fifth semester of college, the fall of my junior year, I, at that point, knew I wanted to serve in the military. I knew I loved entrepreneurship and wanted to start a business and help create jobs where I was from, but I thought, what if I could actually create some sort of instrument or mechanism to get thousands of our nation's most exceptional people to do that in their home states and home communities all around the country? So I started Lead for America, started it in my dorm room. It's grown to about $9 million in revenue per year. We've created about 500 full-time public service roles across almost all 50 states. And in terms of how I ended up at Stanford, one of our biggest funders for Lead for America is Steve Ballmer, the former CEO of Microsoft.
Willie Thompson:
Yep.

Joe Nail:
And he is a Stanford Business School dropout after his first year, but also his right-hand person, Olivia Martin, who we were working with, is in the Knight-Hennessy Program.

Taylor Goss:
Yes, love Olivia.

Joe Nail:
And so I was talking to her about some of the goals for Lead for America. She said, "You know, with the new program you're trying to launch and everything else, there wouldn't be a better place to try to do it than Knight-Hennessy and Stanford." So I applied literally with 48 hours notice.

Taylor Goss:
Whoa. So wait, Olivia encouraged you to apply?

Joe Nail:
Yeah, exactly.

Taylor Goss:
Okay. Shout out to Olivia Martin. KHS 2021.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, wow.

Joe Nail:
We had that conversation, I think, October 10th. The application was due October 12th.

Taylor Goss:
Amazing.

Joe Nail:
And then along the way, I thought I was going to get deployed, so I wasn't going to apply. I hadn't taken the GRE.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Joe Nail:
And so I had to take the GRE the morning of my international policy deadline, sent it in.
My dude.

Joe Nail:
I only applied to Stanford. It was either get into the programs and be able to come here on Knight-Hennessy or just keep working. And I mentioned faith at the outset. It's really important to me, and it did feel like a God moment, and I just feel so blessed every day waking up here and could not be happier at Stanford and this community.

Taylor Goss:
Wow, what a story.

Willie Thompson:
I know.

Taylor Goss:
So much to unpack there. Let this be a lesson to everyone listening. Never too late. Never too late until the moment in which it is too late, but-

Willie Thompson:
That might be the-

Taylor Goss:
Up until then.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, that might be the tightest... I know Ashwyn said he did it in what a week, I think-

Joe Nail:
Oh, wow.

Willie Thompson:
I think it was-

Taylor Goss:
Oh, about a week, I think.

Willie Thompson:
About, yeah. So Ashwyn Sam, who's in the 2020 cohort-

Taylor Goss:
2020 cohort.

Joe Nail:
Yeah.
Willie Thompson:
... did his application in a week and he... Actually, I wonder, based on what he was saying, did you sort of just feel like you were just like, "I don't have time to overthink it, I just put it all out there," as opposed to if you had had a ton of time, do you think you'd overthought it?

Joe Nail:
I think it was a combination of things. It was one, I was just really focused on the work with Lead for America, and I hadn't really taken... It wasn't... I thought maybe at some point I would go back to graduate school, but it wasn't an immediate thought. I think on top of that, Olivia and I hadn't caught up for a while, so some of it was just totally the timing of it. I had remembered reading about the Knight-Hennessy announcement when I was even in undergrad at UNC.

And so I had always thought if I was going to go back to grad school that this would be great. When I had talked to her, I was thinking more along the lines of a year from now or something like that. But as we talked about it more, I just got more and more excited and I said, "Well, there's 36 hours to go," talking about my motivations for service and civic leadership and everything through my job anyway, and have a board member and a co-founder who I'm sure would be willing to put together a letter of recommendation. So yeah, I just decided to go for it. And yeah, I turned in the application, I think, less than five minutes before the deadline.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Joe Nail:
So that's just how it went.

Willie Thompson:
That's crazy.

Joe Nail:
I could give you the full cascade, but there was the initial application, there was the MIP application, which I actually turned in late. There was the GSB application and then there was the semi-final interview.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, okay.

Joe Nail:
And my total collective time relative to the deadlines was, my net was net turning in everything late because ...

Taylor Goss:
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. There's a big negative in there somewhere.

Joe Nail:
I had three that I turned in within 10 minutes of the deadline and one that was late, but it all worked out. So here we are.
Taylor Goss:
You're talking to a person right here who has some experience and history with procrastination. So I understand. I'll be honest, it does make a little bit of sense knowing that you're a person who's very into extreme sports, that you chose the extreme sport of last minute applications and you did pretty well. So congratulations.

Joe Nail:
The adrenaline just gets you going a little bit.

Taylor Goss:
The adrenaline.

Joe Nail:
It's like, this is kind of the litmus test of going to the airport too. Are you the sort of person who gets hours in advance?

Willie Thompson:
Oh yeah, that's right.

Joe Nail:
No, I like bringing my backpack and literally getting to the airport and having to run to the terminal. So that has backfired a couple of times, but the success rate is pretty high.

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Taylor Goss:
Amongst a varying level of different stakes, opportunities.

Joe Nail:
Right. Always a great story.

Willie Thompson:
Right, right, right. Absolutely.

Taylor Goss:
So clearly, public service is going to be an important thread throughout your story. Could you talk a little bit more about your parents? You talked about them as examples of public service. How specifically were they examples and unique to each of their roles they played in your life?

Joe Nail:
Yeah. Well, I'll start with my dad. My dad grew up really poor in Maryland and lost his dad when he was eight years old, lost his mom, I think, in his late 20s, was kind of surrounded by difficult economic circumstances, substance abuse, et cetera. And I think growing up in that sort of environment, he'll tell
you that it was only really through the discipline of sports and through faith, and he had the opportunity because of sports to go to all boys Catholic high school.

And it was there that he was really able to, I think, build a network of mentors, coaches, et cetera, who helped set him on a path to who he is now. And my sophomore year, at the end of my freshman year of high school, my dad was kind of faced with a little bit of an ultimatum where either he needed to deploy to Afghanistan for a year or he was likely to be out of a job. He was working as a military contractor at the time and my dad did not want to put our family in the same sort of economic circumstances he had had growing up, especially having five kids and two big dogs at home. And so he quickly decided he would go.

And for me, that was a demonstration on a couple of levels. Number one, I really admired that he was willing to put himself in harm's way and had this larger calling of service to country, but also he, I think, recognized that as our dad, as the leader of the household, that he had an obligation to make sure that we were taken care of first and foremost. And it wasn't even a thought of doing anything that would potentially jeopardize our stability and security. And so I think that is service on a familial or a personal level that I really admire and inspired me.

It was during that year that he was deployed that I first remember silently committing to myself, just in my room, that I one day wanted to serve in uniform. And so his example, in so many ways, has shown me what it means to be a good dad and also somebody who puts service above self. And then with my mom, I mean, my mom is just the most loving person ever, I think. Also, any person who decides or is able to have five kids could probably be a mayor, governor or whatever else, but has decided to apply-

Willie Thompson:
Absolutely.

Joe Nail:
... their considerable leadership skills within the household instead. And I think that's an incredibly high calling that oftentimes doesn't really get emphasized as having a family and raising them well. But with my mom, in particular, she's taken on a huge caretaking role for my older sister, Katie, who has a pretty severe disability, a cerebral palsy. And again, my mom is completely selfless, always will put her kids before herself, but in particular, seeing how she's always made my older sister feel loved, gone above and beyond to make sure she has the support and care, made sure she's in therapeutic horseback riding and Special Olympics and everything else. Yeah, my sister Katie has an amazing life, and my mom set a really high bar for what it'll look like when I one day take over as her caretaker. So I just feel extremely grateful for my parents. I really feel like I won the lottery there. And again, both kind of on a family level, but also a societal level, they're both acting it out in their career and their personal lives. What again, service and care above self looks like.

Willie Thompson:
Wow, amazing stories. And what are your mom, what are your parents' names?

Joe Nail:
My dad's name is Chris and then my mom's name is Carrie.

Willie Thompson:
Shout out to Chris and Carrie.

Joe Nail:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Chris and Carrie.

Willie Thompson:
Mr. Chris, Mrs. Carrie.

Joe Nail:
They also have a great story of how they met, but-

Willie Thompson:
Oh. I mean, you want to give us a Cliff notes? I mean, you opened the door there, Joe.

Joe Nail:
Oh, I have to because it's also somewhat related to what I'll be doing this summer.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Joe Nail:
They met at a pool actually, in Northern Virginia. And the story that I was told by my dad and believed for a really long time-

Willie Thompson:
Oh-oh.

Joe Nail:
... was that it was something from the sandlot where my dad told me that he thought my mom was really cute. He saw my mom as the lifeguard at the pool and pretended to drown, which to me seems perfectly plausible because he said, this part is true, he never learned how to swim growing up.

Taylor Goss:
Okay, okay.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Joe Nail:
So I was like, okay, this all tracks.

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Joe Nail:
So it actually wasn't until one night at dinner when I think it was a friend who asked, "Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Nail, how did you two meet?" And my dad goes, "Oh, Joe, you tell the story." And so I tried to, in as much detail as possible, to share the story of how they met. And then you know how sometimes when you tell a story, you can feel the energy in the room not being exactly right?

Taylor Goss:
Yes.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah.

Joe Nail:
Yeah, I could feel that. I looked to my left and see my mom face red, jaw clenched, and then her say, "That is not what happened." Simultaneously, my dad burst out laughing and was pounding on the table like, "Oh, that was great. That was brilliant." So the real story, I guess, was that my dad had been coming in, he was training for triathlon, something that was supposed to be better cross-training than just the constant pounding of running. He hadn't made a move or introduced himself to my mom. My mom thought he was cute, and I guess everybody called him the Nail Man, last name being Nail as he came in.

Willie Thompson:
That's a good nickname.

Joe Nail:
So she asked him one day when he came in, "What are you training for?" And he said, "Triathlons." And then as they started dating, started doing training with him. And the funny story about this is that when we were moving my parents from Kansas to North Carolina, I found an entire collection of newspaper clippings, trophies, etc., for my mom, who was winning all these local races. And I can share some of those with you. But yeah, my dad proposed to her on a training bike ride. They dated during triathlon. So to some extent, being hyperactive is not my fault. It's my parents.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Willie Thompson:
So it sounds like it's something-

Taylor Goss:
Wow.

Willie Thompson:
... you basically, I mean, people always talk about what they genetically inherit from their parents.
It sounds like you recreationally inherited sort of extreme sports, right?

Joe Nail:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
I've also got to just say, your dad, that's insane commitment to the bit, to consistently lie to you enough just so you could have that dinner table moment-

Willie Thompson:
With confidence. I appreciate you telling the story with confidence.

Taylor Goss:
Right, exactly.

Joe Nail:
This was not when I was 12 years old, I was fully in college. I was fully in college.

Taylor Goss:
Wow.

Joe Nail:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
The long con. Incredible.

Joe Nail:
So there are a lot of people, if they're ever listening to this who I need to apologize-

Taylor Goss:
Right.

Joe Nail:
... who I told the wrong story to because this may be also their first time hearing the real story.

Taylor Goss:
Okay. Well, now it's out there.

Willie Thompson:
Now it's out there.

Joe Nail:
It's out there.
Willie Thompson:
And so maybe as a point of transition, you're talking about extreme sports or I think Taylor introduced them as extreme sports, but I mean, I guess it depends on your perspective, but we'll definitely talk about Project 1310, but there's definitely a question of what drew you to ultra marathons? What drew you to triathlons, these things that, I mean, I probably will still only dream of, I'm probably never going to do a triathlon. Well, you know...

Taylor Goss:
I'm probably won't ever have a dream about doing a triathlon or I'll be having a real bad time.

Willie Thompson:
Well, it's funny because on the episode before this, Will Dwyer, we were talking about... Actually, what's your fastest mile, Joe?

Taylor Goss:
Now we're going to compare, across episode.

Joe Nail:
4:19.

Willie Thompson:
4:19? Okay.

Joe Nail:
Well, that's 1600 meters. So that would be fastest mile conversion would be like a 4:22 or something like that.

Willie Thompson:
Okay. I think Will was running that. But anyway, the running joke was that, I think he ran three miles that day and Taylor was like, "I haven't run three miles in my life." Can you share what got you interested in these physically and mentally challenging activities that a few people probably can relate to, but I feel like you make it look easy?

Joe Nail:
I don't know about that. Certainly doesn't feel easy doing it, but yeah. I mean, I did grow up as a truly hyperactive kid. There's home videos of me in the backyard in the rain just playing soccer against myself where I would imagine there's the red team and the blue team-

Willie Thompson:
Right, right.

Joe Nail:
... and nobody else. I have four siblings, people in the neighborhood, nobody else wanted to play, but I'm playing to a soccer game to a hundred. And somehow, I would always end up winning the game, but that's a whole different story. And growing up, that was my main pastime, was not being a super diligent student or whatever else. I was organizing the neighborhood... Depending on what the season was, if it
was baseball season, we were organizing a Wiffle Ball World Series. If it was the Olympic Games, we
were doing the Olympic trials, whatever it may have been.

So I always grew up loving sports. I played really competitive soccer growing up. And that was my forte
was I would just outwork people and run up and down the field. I was a right midfielder. So yeah, it
wasn't until I got to middle school that I actually did any running and I didn't really realize that that was
something that I could be good at.

So just doing the gym mile and realize like, "Oh, wait." I should maybe set my sights a little bit higher
here. But ironically, my events in track were the 400 and the 800, so I never was running more than two
minutes. And that's actually the stuff that I'm best at, is kind of a combination of strength plus aerobic, not
purely aerobic. The guys who are running cross country and track on the Stanford long distance teams
would totally kick my butt running the mile or whatever else. You got to run a sub four minute mile now
to even be competitive in the NCAA.

Willie Thompson:
Really?

Joe Nail:
So that level is just a whole different level there. How I actually ended up getting into the much longer
stuff was actually when I was living not far from campus here. So I mentioned that I started Lead for
America fall of my junior year. I have this sort of approach where it's like if you're going to do something,
you really go do it. And so about two months after making that decision, I had moved myself to
California and was in a really cheap shared flat on California Avenue right by campus.

Taylor Goss:
Oh, wow. I live very close to there now. I'm on Cal Ave.

Joe Nail:
There you go. So yep. Maybe, it's going to be in the water then. You're going to start doing ultras. But
yeah, I was kind of looking for some sort of release from the stresses of entrepreneurship, some sort of
counterbalance and a lot of entrepreneurship, especially when you start just talking to people all the time,
and I'm intensely introverted. When I take any of those tests, I'm like 80% I, like 20% E. And
simultaneously, California is just an amazing place where there's so many places to explore nature or
whatever else. And so every single weekend that I was living out here that first time, I would go pick a
location and just do some epic run and it would just get bigger and bigger. And so one weekend, I did the
Skyline-to-the-Sea Trail, which is about 30 miles starting at the Santa Cruz Mountains and then going to
the beach.

And then another weekend I went to Yosemite and did three loops of Half Dome in one day. I only went
to the top of Half Dome once, but I went to Sub Dome the other two times. So that was 50 miles and I
don't know how many feet, but a lot of feet of elevation up and down in a day. And then right before my
college graduation, because I didn't officially collect my diploma, I decided to do kind of my most epic
one, which was in the 48 hours before, I did 112 miles of the California coast, including the last 50 miles
of it on beach on the Lost Coast. And that's a totally crazy story in and of itself. Basically I finished it, I
was way behind. I called my mom on the way back and was like, "Hey, I'm really sorry. I don't know if
I'm going to make it back for my graduation," because I had booked the very last red-eye flight.

I finished the 100 plus miles, drove the rental car. I was so late that I had to call the rental car company
and say, "I just, whatever it costs, I'm just going to ditch the car at arrivals. You need to meet me there."
And I was still in my running shorts and everything else from the run. Basically, get to the airport, had
somebody from the rental car meet me, dropped off the luggage, which I don't think made it on the plane. And then they were calling my name as I'm going through and I'm still, again, wearing the same sweaty shirt and backpack from the 112-mile run, had to ask people to cut in the TSA line. And then I ended up making it to my flight, 11 or 12 minutes before it started. It was a 10:00 PM flight cross country to Raleigh, Durham. I wake up the next morning, I didn't even really get to sleep. I woke up at 7:30 AM in North Carolina. My knees were both sprained. I had poison oak on my arm. I was completely sunburned and I was totally euphoric. I actually, it was the hardest thing I'd ever done. And with something that long, you go through an entire life's worth of ups and downs in a relatively condensed period. And I was just addicted to that feeling. And beyond that, my faith is really important to me and I don't think you can help but feel, at least for me, close to God when you're just immersed in nature and God's creation. So the combination of doing something really physically challenging and having so many times where you say, "No, I can't go a step further," and then deciding to actually keep going, doing that, doing in a beautiful place, feeling close to God and then, again, just realizing that there's so much more that you can do and are capable of, is really what I've found. So I think that's one of the messages too. It's not the main message. The main message is, for the summer, is to raise awareness for military veterans, but also I hope people look at it and say that, "Wow, I think I'm capable of a lot more than I think I am," because I'm not superhuman. I don't even have, honestly, that much time to train while I'm here. But I do think if you're willing to keep putting one foot in front of the other, that you're capable of a lot more than you think.

Willie Thompson:
Wow.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
Fantastic.

Taylor Goss:
So many moments in there that could have gone the wrong way in just that one story, but that all you found your way through. And I understand the euphoria because it would've been whatever the opposite of euphoria is.

Joe Nail:
It did kind of ruin my graduation pictures though-

Taylor Goss:
Oh, really?

Joe Nail:
Because I had to... My luggage, not all the luggage made it. And so I had to ask my mom to bring something for me to wear at the ceremony.
Joe Nail:
And so they brought some of my really old, or even maybe my little brother's clothes, which didn't really fit.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Joe Nail:
So the khakis kind of looked like capris and I think the collared shirt had some holes in it, or whatever else, and I just did not care. I was changing in the parking garage outside, so... I don't care. I could not have been happier. Then we got into the actual stadium. It was held in the football stadium and that day it was like a 95-degree day or something. And if you've been inside a stadium when it's already that hot, it's just like a convection oven, everything's heating up. So I kid you not, they had water coolers and everything set up, but I thought I was going to pass out. So while they were throwing the caps and everything, I was in the tunnel pounding water and pouring water on my head. So while they said toss your caps or whatever, the cap went in the air with one hand, and the other hand I was drinking water from one of the little cups.

Taylor Goss:
Wow.

Joe Nail:
But it was a lot of fun.

Taylor Goss:
That's incredible.

Willie Thompson:
Definitely sounds unforgettable, to say the least.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
And I wonder, just maybe as a connecting point, I feel like we're teetering closer and closer to talking about Project 1310, but before you even did Project 1310, because I feel like there's a couple of things about your lived experience I think are especially unique to the Knight-Hennessy community. I think the fact that you had already founded a nonprofit in Lead for America and sort of are building on that foundation as you begin Project 1310, and sort of your service in the military and the National Guard. And before we get into some of the more recent things, can we just go back to Lead for America and how you sort of got from the idea to the execution to the scaling, because I won't give the audience all the details around sort of the impact, but the impact is quite remarkable and tremendous in terms of the opportunities and pathways you provided to folks who do want to return to their communities and lead and serve. So can you just talk us through that journey with Lead for America? And maybe even in that, how do you lead as an introvert? I feel like that's, I think sometimes people feel like leadership is synonymous with extroversion-
Joe Nail:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, you've mentioned being 80% introverted. I'd love to also hear of some of your musings on that as well.

Joe Nail:
Yeah, definitely. Well, I'll start with the Lead for America kind of origin story, which I mentioned that I was in my dorm room at UNC. And I had been thinking about similar themes of pathways into public service for a while. I had started a different college access nonprofit after I graduated high school and helped start an institute of politics at UNC as well. But it was one of those things where I actually kind of woke up in the middle of the night and just decided, I'm going to try to put pen to paper, in this case, like fingers to keyboard, and type something up.

And a couple hours after trying to put it all on paper, I had the name. I had a one-page executive summary. That was my... my version of it was trying to actually say, "What will I share with other people?" And I remember as soon as putting that and actually seeing it in front of me, and I have no graphic design skills at all, but I used one of those free logo creators and even had the very first Lead for America logo.

And I was just completely obsessed with this could actually work. I want to make this happen. And I just went to... I remember going to class a few hours after that and I just could not focus at all. I got cold called during the class and had literally no idea what was going on. I was like, "Okay, this is going to be a problem." So I knew I just wanted to start working on it.

All the other things though that I had done prior to Lead for America were a lot smaller in scale. When I started putting together the budget and projections and everything, it's like, we need to raise millions of dollars and there needs to be a full-time team and everything else. And so, one thing that I had learned is that you can't do anything like this if you're going to try to do it alone.

And so the very first that I did was, I went through, over my fall break, which happened a week later, was I went through my entire Facebook, my entire LinkedIn and went through all the contacts and I did what I'll call the heck yes or no test. So there is a slightly different term for it.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right, right, right.

Joe Nail:
And this is still something I try to use in my life in general, which was, I went through each person and said, not on who they are as a person or whatever else, but in terms of working with them to create this institution, is it a heck yes or is it a no? And after going through literally thousands of people, I had a list of nine people who were a heck yes. And so I texted or emailed all of them and said, "Hey, can I talk to you?"

And so over the course of fall break, I just set up calls with each of them and basically was asking for their feedback. And then if it seemed to be going well, I would ask my favorite question which is, "What would need to be true in order for you to consider being involved with this?" That's what I use to fundraise. It's what I use to add team members. What would need to be true in order for you to consider doing this? And some people were like, "Count me in as long as I'm not going to be living on my mom's couch next summer."
Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Joe Nail:
Most people, because they're really great people, already had things set up or whatever else. But of the five members of the founding team, the four additional folks I brought on in that first year, all of them were either on that list or directly referred by somebody on that list, which is incredibly powerful. So started bringing them into the fold. Once I moved to California, I kept them engaged through weekly sessions and then we started going to our universities and raising funding from them. And then the other thing that I think was totally instrumental in those early days was trying to become the world's leading expert on this space.

There are probably very few people in the world who know more about Teach for America than me, and that's because I studied its founding. I read time and time again, Wendy Kopp, their founders thesis from Princeton where she laid out the initial plan, all of their financial reports, 990s, et cetera, trying to understand how did they build this institution, not because I want to do everything like Teach for America, but because here's an institution that's grown to $400 million per year and what can we learn at least about how they've built an organization and a business model that really works.

Taylor Goss:
Sure.

Joe Nail:
So anyway, those are some of the basic things. Build a team, cast a vision, and then sometimes inexperience can be your greatest strength. And so for me, I tried to use the student visa or the fact that I'm a 21-year-old who doesn't know anything, to get people to actually open up and take me under their wing. And I found that that was really helpful. And then again, I could go into more detail about how we actually launched the application, everything, but those were the early days. And then on your question about leading as an introvert, I do think that that can be also a superpower of sorts because when you're starting something, it's really easy to have a tendency to want to say yes to everything. And for me, I don't struggle with that as much because my happy place-

Taylor Goss:
Can't relate.

Willie Thompson:
Right, right.

Joe Nail:
I do a little bit, but I struggle with that less because of the fact that in order for me to be at my best, I need time away. And so I think coming at entrepreneurship from a place of introspection can be incredibly powerful and useful. I also think that oftentimes, introverts, because they have spent less time maybe talking or being the life of the party, have spent more times at the parties in the corner, watching and observing.

Willie Thompson:
People watching.
Taylor Goss:
You're over in the corner-

Joe Nail:
So that's me.

Taylor Goss:
... you're over in the corner with the cup-

Joe Nail:
That's me.

Taylor Goss:
... saying, "They don't know that I'm building a nonprofit."

Joe Nail:
But through those sorts of moments or like... I've never been the person in the class who's the first one to raise your hand. I'll let the discussion go and then just try to have one comment that I feel like I can contribute. But I think that sort of style actually works really well, especially in nonprofits where there tends to be more of a spirit of deliberative democracy, if you will.

Willie Thompson:
Yep.

Joe Nail:
So I think it serves me really well. I can't compare it to anything else. And certainly, a lot of the nonprofit leaders I admire are also extroverts, but I do think it can be a superpower, especially when it comes to building relationships with people, which is the foundation for any success.

Taylor Goss:
So we foreshadowed at multiple points to this point, Project 1310, the core of what you're focusing on this summer. And I want to understand where the idea came from. I want to understand who you're doing it with. You talked about how you can't do any of these things alone. Who are you partnering with?

Joe Nail:
Mm-hmm.

Taylor Goss:
What's the mission and how is it connected to your Imagine a World statement that you mentioned up top about how faith, family, and courage are your guiding values and all Americans bound together through service? How is that reflected in Project 1310?

Joe Nail:
Yeah, so just a bit of background on Project 1310. This summer, I'll be attempting to be the first person to run 50 marathons and do 50,000 pushups in a single summer. And I'll be doing that across all 50 states.
So every state, run a marathon in an iconic location, from Denali National Park in Alaska to Death Valley in California, to finishing at the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., do 1000 pushups, and then go to the next state. And the reason for this, there's kind of a couple pieces of it, but really, it's to honor and raise money for military veterans. And that comes from, that started really with my extended family. I have many members of my extended family who are in the military. I mentioned my dad deployed to Afghanistan when I was in high school. And about three and a half years ago, I had originally, when I was in college, I thought that I was just going to do active duty military service. And then when Lead for America took off, I realized that that's maybe not in the cards. And so, it was actually the summer, I think of 2020 or 2021, my dad who was my inspiration for service, nearly passed away from cardiac arrest in the middle of the night and moments like that will completely shake you to your core. And as I flew back to North Carolina, not thinking that my dad was going to make it, I was kind of having a realization that, "Wow, I've spent every waking hour for the last however many years, just building Lead for America and I haven't spent as much time with my family or working on my faith or doing some of these other things that are really important to me." It may seem a little strange, but there's certain images I think sometimes you have in your head of dreams or things that you imagine are going to happen that you just can't shake. And I'd always imagined commissioning in the military and having my dad pin on those first set of gold bars.

My dad and I had always bonded through sports and through the military. And then all of a sudden on that plane ride, I was just thinking that was one of the reoccurring images, was thinking that that's never going to happen. I was home for a while, but my dad, by the grace of God, recovered and is doing a lot better now. But I just had this conviction that even though I was building Lead for America, that I wanted to find some way to serve my country in that way. And I thought that I would be a better CEO for doing it as well. So I had a conversation with our board chair and he said, "Look, I totally support it. The same spirit that's animating you to do this is why you started Lead for America, and if you want to do it, go do it as soon as you can, go through Boot Camp, everything else, because life's not going to get any simpler."

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Joe Nail:
So I shipped off to Boot Camp, took three months of unpaid leave from Lead for America to do that. So enjoyed being called all sorts of names and crazy things for three months, honestly had a blast at Boot Camp, minus the COVID gulag, which is a whole different story. But tying this again back to Project 1310, every time I've gone to military training, I have just been so refreshed and inspired about being surrounded by men and women who have been willing to put service and country above self. And it's one of the few institutions in American life that truly does pull people together from across all sorts of different backgrounds and search of a common purpose. And for me, it was kind of a missing link because we've been trying to build through Lead for America, a national service program that brings people together, and yet there I was at Boot Camp feeling like, here's an institution that is kicking our butts on doing exactly that. And so how do we bring more of that spirit back to our organization?

Project 1310 is a launch for a new veterans' fellowship that we're starting with Lead For America. We'll be selecting one veteran in each of the 50 states. They'll get $100,000 stipend. They'll spend the summer working in DC with their Senator or Member of Congress, and then an entire year working with the governor, mayor or a CEO in their home state. And really, this is designed to be a launching pad for people who have served and sacrificed at the highest levels for our country to be going into positions of public service and leadership and responsibility.

It used to be that over 40% of Congress was made up of military veterans. Now it's just 8%. And that is similar across other institutions. And I think that that has a real and adverse effect on our country when
we don't have that sort of connective tissue where there's people who have a proven track record and experience of putting again, country above self. So again, pulling it all together, why the marathons? I'm part of the military's marathon and endurance teams, and so I actually get paid when I do race to be able to represent the military and doing that-

Taylor Goss:
It's clear that it's all about the money for you.

Joe Nail:
But I said, instead of just going and racing, what could I do to combine my passion for running and doing everything else and this being a 50 state program and instead bring people together in all 50 states in service of this goal. So when I go to the states like, "Yes, I'll be completing the marathon distance and doing the push-ups," but every single mile and every single push up, all 51,310 combined, are going to be dedicated to a different veteran or service member who's nominated. And every single state will be meeting with veteran or service members and having them come out and join for push-ups or for a mile walk or run or whatever they want to do.

Every state will be meeting and doing local media and sharing why it is that we're doing this big project. So unfortunately, the reality today is that it's really hard to break through and get people's attention. And so doing more extreme challenges is one of the ways of being able to break through. And I am really excited. I think it's going to be a blast even though it's really hard. But what I'm most grateful for and most excited for, is trying to build a community around appreciating and honoring veterans and hopefully having a really great launch for this new veterans initiative. And truly, if what we're doing over the summer can even positively impact a single veteran's life, then that will be success.

Willie Thompson:
The thing that I think that I found remarkable in the work that you're doing is how accessible you actually make it to people who want to contribute in the ways that they can. So for example, they're doing the one-mile challenge where you can do 20 push-ups, 20 push-ups-

Joe Nail:
Run a mile, 20 push-ups.

Willie Thompson:
Run a mile, 20 push-ups, two sets, right? Twice?

Joe Nail:
Yeah.

Willie Thompson:
So you do it twice. And even the intentionality behind that, right? So for folks, we'll put the website for Project 1310 in the show notes, but there's 20 push-ups to remember the, I think it's the 20 veterans who die from suicide every day, and then two sets to serve people who are, to honor people who have served and those who are still serving.

Joe Nail:
Exactly.
Willie Thompson:

And then a mile to symbolize this transition from military to civilian life. So you can feel the intentionality, sort of at every level of the work you're trying to do. And I find that very endearing and encouraging, especially in the times we live in today. Maybe as a transition into that, in terms of the focus on service, how do you think about the decision to be a member of the military in this day and age? I know my brother is in the military, he's in the Army. My pops is a Army veteran as well. And it just feels to me like the discourse is a bit different now, in terms of what military service means. And it's a very nuanced conversation, especially given my experience as a Black man and having family members who serve in the military. And I'm just wondering, how you have thought about that and continue to think about that, and sort of share with people the heart of the nature of the work that you're doing around serving a community that, by any objective structure of the imagination has done so much for civilians.

Joe Nail:

Yeah, no, I think it's a super important question and I think, I mean, first, you have to acknowledge that people join the military for a lot of different reasons. I think for a lot of people historically, there has been a spirit of patriotism or I want to serve my country, but very practically, and, this is a lot of the people who I served with or went to Boot Camp with, they were joining because it was a path to a better life for them and their families.

Willie Thompson:

Yep.

Joe Nail:

It was, this is going to help pay for my education or this is going to provide intergenerational stability. Again, for a lot of folks, it is about this larger calling, but it's also about, again, how do I just provide more opportunities for myself or for others, which I think is really important as well. I think that a question that I've gotten quite a few times since starting at Stanford is, whether stated this directly or not, is how do you morally justify serving in the military? And I think people, especially over the last 20 years, look at the wars in the Middle East, some of which, had we known what we know now, maybe they wouldn't have gone the way that they did-

Willie Thompson:

Right.

Joe Nail:

... and see all the problems that we have here at home and say, "How can we justify also spending this much money on military and defense?" And I guess I would say a couple of things to that. One at a systemic level, and this is a place where I don't expect to convince everyone, but it's just my opinion.

Willie Thompson:

Yep.

Joe Nail:

I think that taking a realistic view of international relations and foreign policy, there will always be a country or a nation that is seeking to have greater influence or power. You look at the course of human history and there are always empires, there are superpowers, there are countries or civilizations that are competing for that status. And America is not perfect. However, by the standards of those that have risen
to the level of a world superpower, I think our core founding documents and values are far and beyond superior to any other country that has ever held the status of a world superpower or who aspires to that sort of status. And I think that really matters. I think similar to encouraging people to vote, even if you don't really like either alternative, it's still important to cast your vote and pick the alternative you like better. I think that the United States is a lot better than the alternatives we have and has done a lot for the world in terms of providing peace and security. And we wouldn't have universities, in my opinion, like Stanford or the ability to advocate for the various issues that each of us may care about, if we didn't have people who are willing to literally put their life on the line to protect our freedoms. And I think that is really taken for granted, all the way up to the point that you have a world war or a global conflict where that all of a sudden becomes existential. And it's only been for me through learning history and talking to veterans of World War I, or not World War I, but World War II, to understand just how different of a mindset and shift that was. So I may not convince anyone on that, and that's totally fine, but that's just my personal opinion that I think America is an amazing place. I think it is exceptional and I think it's worth defending and serving. I think on a personal level though, I think that even if you don't like that part of it or you don't see eye-to-eye with me, I think you can acknowledge that there's something special about any person who cares so strongly about something, whether it's their family, their country, etc., that they're willing to put their life on the line or sacrifice something really significant in order to serve that higher goal. And so again, regardless of whether your motivation for serving the military was, I love my country, I want to protect it, which was a huge motivation, especially post 9-11 or it's, I want to provide better opportunities for my family and I'm willing to sacrifice and go through something hard to do it, or some combination of both. I think that's a deeply admirable thing. And I think our country would be in a whole lot better position if we inculcated more of those values of service and sacrifice and courage, which I mentioned in my Imagine a World statement than some of the alternatives that increasingly seem really popular today, where people are focused on themselves or kind of glorification of self or a brand or whatever else. That's not what is going to bind us together. And it's certainly not what's going to help us realize the full promise of what America could be.

Willie Thompson:
Absolutely. And I will say to this sort of intellectual and personal rationale for being a part of the armed services, I've that conversation like this with my family members about what it's like to be descendants of people who have been systemically oppressed and choosing to take on that mantle of service. I think Nikole Hannah-Jones has talked a lot about that with her dad as well. And I do think this is core aspirational notion of what America means, and that's why folks like MLK, Martin Luther King Jr., could say, at the end of the day, all we're asking America is be true on paper, be true to what is on paper.

Joe Nail:
Exactly.

Willie Thompson:
And what they said on paper was very, if that is the case, then to your point, I think we live in a world that is... I prefer that world more so than the counterfactual. And I do think that there's something especially unique in the military community that we have in Knight-Hennessy between, I'm thinking folks like Alma Cooper who just won Miss Michigan, Moira Casey, Justin Yates. So there are people who come here to Stanford and are seeking to be of service in the armed forces in some way, shape, or form. And I do find that admirable and inspiring.
Yeah. Thanks for sharing both the ideological and the more personal reasons, from the very beginning of our conversation. It's clear how important service and especially military service was to your life, through your family and otherwise. As you've gone down these paths of entrepreneurship and military service and support for veterans, how have you seen your relationship with your family be affected by that?

Joe Nail:
Well, there's big differences between people who have dedicated their entire lives or the men and women who have literally given their lives, versus what my military services looked like to date, which is, I've tried to do what I've been asked to do and do as best I can in each of those settings, but I'm at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of the officer ranks.

Taylor Goss:
Sure.

Joe Nail:
I've never deployed overseas. That's something I hope to be able to do, but I think that especially for those who have either paid the ultimate price or for the families, not just the service members and veterans, but the families of those who have sacrificed for decades, that they just don't receive enough appreciation. And so I hope the fact that I have some military affiliation lends maybe some extra credibility for this. But I'm also saying, "Look, it's not about me. It's about all these other people who have really given so much." And I think a contribution in any regard is significant, but especially for those who have, again, given everything that we just don't do enough to honor them and their families.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, thanks for sharing that and providing that context. I think that's an important thing to remember. I think it's a testament to your thoughtfulness-

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, for sure.

Taylor Goss:
... about your work that you want to share that. So thank you.

Joe Nail:
Yeah. Well, and even at Knight-Hennessy, we have, again, folks who fall into that category of having deployed and put themselves in harm's way, time and time again. And those are exactly the sort of people whose contributions I'm hoping to be able to honor and put a spotlight on this summer.

Taylor Goss:
An ad as we're coming to the close of our conversation and we have to leave Denali, which is, we're in the room Denali, which is somewhat ironic.

Joe Nail:
I was on the mountain last summer for three weeks, so I know Denali well.

Taylor Goss:
Well, here we are back in Denali.

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Taylor Goss:
And-

Joe Nail:
That'll be the first run, is Denali National Highway-

Taylor Goss:
Right., okay.

Joe Nail:
... in Alaska.

Taylor Goss:
It's all coming-

Joe Nail:
It's coming together.

Willie Thompson:
Full circle.

Taylor Goss:
It's all coming together-

Joe Nail:
Yep.

Taylor Goss:
... full circle. And something else that you mentioned earlier was talking about your Knight-Hennessy application and the process that you went through that, but 48 hours to application.

Joe Nail:
A lot can happen in 48 hours...100 miles.

Taylor Goss:
Exactly.

Joe Nail:
A Knight-Hennessy application.
Taylor Goss:
And to dig in very specifically on the improbable facts section of your application, unique amongst the
people that we've interviewed, and that you had maybe the tightest timeline to get it done. But for me, it
was something that I probably took the most time, percentage wise, and took a lot of thought. So what
was your process in arriving at your improbable facts, which are facts on the application that Knight-
Hennessy applicants provide that are things that maybe people wouldn't expect to be true about them? So
how did you find your improbable facts, and would you mind sharing one with us?

Joe Nail:
Yeah, absolutely. My process was, especially since it was relatively last minute, I did actually just text
friends, family, et cetera, and say, a variation of either, what's the craziest thing that I've done that you
know about me or what's...? I'm putting together an application-

Taylor Goss:
Yeah.

Joe Nail:
... and I imagine that they want to have a three-dimensional picture. What's something that people might
not expect to hear exactly? So there was, I think one of the facts I used was about, had I not started Lead
for America, that I was planning to spend part of the following summer studying the politics of penguins
in Antarctica. I just really love penguins. I also love Antarctic exploration. And so I had found a way to
try to combine those interests.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Joe Nail:
This is maybe for a future conversation, but I am hoping to do a race in Antarctica next winter, our
winter, their summer. So that was one of them. I'll use one other one though, which kind of connects it too
with the entrepreneurship piece of it, which is, I was-

Willie Thompson:
Sorry, before you get into entrepreneurship, do penguins actually have politics? Is that a thing?

Taylor Goss:
Well, they are emperor penguins.

Joe Nail:
Oh, absolutely.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, my gosh.

Joe Nail:
And they vary amongst the various types of penguins as well. An Adélie penguin has a very different disposition compared to emperor penguins. And yeah, I mean, I could go into a lot more detail about this, but the plan was basically to study a penguin colony.

Willie Thompson:
I'm going to take these questions offline, but that's fantastic. Sorry. That's fascinating. Back to the entrepreneurship piece.

Joe Nail:
Yeah, back to the entrepreneurship piece. So I mentioned, and it ties back to my family as well, so my dad was pretty insistent that all of us learned the value of hard work as early as middle school, to find some sort of job where you're going to bring in money and also not just be idle the entire summer. And I've always been pretty stubborn. In fact, my very first words were, "No, you stop." My dad was trying to change my diaper and imagine your child, I know it's Imagine a World, but imagine a child-

Willie Thompson:
I imagine my child.

Joe Nail:
... imagine a child that you're concerned about because it hasn't spoken and it's a little bit behind schedule. It's going to miss its flight though. It's behind schedule and then all of a sudden you're trying to change its diaper and the baby's not responding well, and then you're telling it to stop and it's screaming, yelling, whatever else, and then spits out the pacifier and says, "No, you stop." And in fact, those were my first words. But anyway, going down-

Taylor Goss:
That's a certain level of grass and grammar at that age.

Willie Thompson:
I know, right? Absolutely.

Taylor Goss:
I'm impressed.

Joe Nail:
It goes back to the class discussion. It's like, unless I really know that I'm going to have something to add, I'm not talking.

Taylor Goss:
Right.

Joe Nail:
Pacifiers are an introvert's dream. Normalize pacifiers for adults.

Willie Thompson:
Amen.
Joe Nail:
I don't need to be talked to, I have nothing to say. But anyway, one of the improbable facts was my dad encouraged us to all have a job. And for me, I didn't want to work for anyone else because I'm, you know, "No, you stop. I don't want to take direction from somebody else really." But at the time, I was also painfully shy, so shy that one of my biggest fears was when my mom would be like, "Hey, you should go with your brother to the grocery store and you're going to get the groceries." Because not because of getting the groceries, it was going through the checkout line to interact with the cashier. Stranger scared me, I just can't do it. And yet on the hierarchy of things that I was scared of, I guess working for somebody else for the entire summer was higher on the hierarchy. So I basically asked my parents to take me to Costco, get me a little loan. I bought some snacks, drinks, et cetera, which is technically probably not allowed because they all say, not allowed for resale-

Taylor Goss:
Right, right, right.

Willie Thompson:
They do say that.

Joe Nail:
But when you're in sixth grade, who cares? I took a table, used butcher paper and stencils, put on there Joe's Snack Shop, took it down to the pool and started selling them. I'll never forget this. I remember somebody saying, "Wow, what a little entrepreneur." And I was both really nervous and proud at the same time. I was like, I had heard that word, but I've never been called something like that before.

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Joe Nail:
And that was actually my first experience of saying, "Well, sometimes if you really care about a mission or a purpose, then you're willing to do hard things," in my case, having conversations with strangers in order to do that. And eventually, I started having friends and neighbors also work at the snack shop. And so we actually made some decent money over the couple of summers. But the bigger principle of that was the value of hard work, listening and honoring your parents, and recognizing that they are always looking out for you and oftentimes know what's best for you, bringing other people along in the mission. And then ultimately, it wasn't until I had some of those foundational experiences later on that realized, "Okay, rather than selling snacks and drinks, maybe I can put some of these strengths of entrepreneurship in service and still tie that to, again, creating something that didn't previously exist." And so that was a foundational experience for me and will always be my first entrepreneurial experience. And I really don't think there would be a Lead for America had there first not been a Joe's Snack Shop.

Willie Thompson:
Shout out to Joe's Snack Shop.

Joe Nail:
So thank you mom and dad.

Willie Thompson:
Right, right. Shout out to the parents. Before I get to these last two questions, this question's really been bugging me the whole time we've been doing this podcast. How are you going to recover between ultra marathons? How does that work? How does that actually work?

Joe Nail:
Yeah. Well, I mean, I'd be lying if I said I'm not nervous for the summer because it is just going to be a lot of pounding on the body. I think that there's a big difference between racing a marathon and completing the 26.2 miles.

Taylor Goss:
Ah, okay.

Joe Nail:
So if you're racing, let's say you're doing the marathon at 6:30 pace, this summer I'm going to be trying to, I don't know, average 10-minute miles.

Taylor Goss:
Okay.

Joe Nail:
I'm going to go with whoever's coming out. Pace should not be a barrier to anyone being able to join for as much or a little of the marathon as they want. I can't be out there all day because then you got to go to the next state.

Taylor Goss:
Right.

Joe Nail:
But there's a big difference between the pounding of running 6:30-miles and running 10-minute miles. So that's part of it. Another part is just getting your body ready. Again, this past weekend, as an example, is back-to-back 20-mile days while also doing push-ups. And I was doing those at faster paces than when I'll do over the summer, both because it's time efficient, but also just to get used to the pounding a little bit. Then yeah, hopefully, will have the whole suite of recovery tools, the NormaTec boots, the ice baths, all those sorts of things. So if I had a whole year to train and prepare for this or it was just my full-time job, I honestly wouldn't be that concerned about it because I think the human body is capable of a lot.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah.

Joe Nail:
I'm mostly nervous because I still am working and doing two master's degrees and everything else.

Willie Thompson:
Right.
And so yeah, the key will just be focusing on slow and steady the entire time, and then getting lots of sleep, that's forever the most important recovery tool.

Willie Thompson:
Right.

Joe Nail:
And then getting off my feet where I possibly can. So yeah, I'm... Nerves are usually your body preparing to do something special. So that's why I tell myself when I think about just the enormity of it, but I just want to go back to also the dedicating each mile and push up to a different military veteran. I think that's going to be the thing that ultimately is going to help me get through this, however long it takes. The goal is to do it in a single summer. I am going to do everything I possibly can to make that happen, but all 1,310 miles and all 50,000 push-ups are going to happen, 100%. And every single one is going to be dedicated to a veteran. And literally, as I'm running, I'm going to do a quick video at the start of each mile saying, "This mile is dedicated to this person," which is going to get sent to whoever nominated them.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, wow.

Joe Nail:
And so every single mile that I'll be going, I'll be running for a very specific person and reason and I think that alone, will keep me going.

Willie Thompson:
Awesome. We'll make sure to include in the show notes and everything ways people can watch and engage.

Joe Nail:
Yeah, and send in names of people who they want to be nominated to be included, as folks who have a mile or a push-up dedicated to them.

Willie Thompson:
Awesome. Well, before we get out of here, last two questions. What advice would you give to other people applying to Stanford and KH, and how has the KHS community supported, helped you in your personal and professional endeavors?

Joe Nail:
I think we've already established that I'm maybe not the person to ask...

Taylor Goss:
But the alternative would be helpful.

Willie Thompson:
Right, right, right.
Yeah, what not to do. No. I think oftentimes when people are thinking about their next step, whether it's what job to take or applying to grad school, they're looking at it from the sense of preserving options or maximizing optionality. And so it's like, I'm going to apply to all these schools or I'm going to apply to all these sorts of positions. And I think the better thing to do is to figure out, what do you really actually want to do? And then there's the expression in military history of burning the ships. The general orders his men to take the island and in order to motivate them, burns all the ships. It's like, oh, you're going to take the island because there's no path to retreat. And so for me, I've taken that sort of approach where if you believe in something enough, you should do it, even if you think you're likely to fail.

And this goes back to the heck yes or no test as well. Is going to the school, is doing this master's degree, really a heck yes? Or otherwise, it's a no. And I think granted, that's coming a little bit from a place of... I know there's economic realities and circumstances and everything else, but if you're considering applying to Knight-Hennessy, then chances are you've had a lot of incredible opportunities already. There's lots of jobs, there's lots of schools that would love to have you. So rather than just taking a scattershot approach, really focus and say, "Is this where I want to be?"

And so I think that was one of the things that really helped me in my application was, I was able to say to Stanford and Knight-Hennessy, here's all the ways that Stanford and this community has already changed my life in terms of our first funder, our founding board chair, where we got a co-founder, and I know that this is the place that I want to be. And if accepted, I'm here because this is plan A, this is plan B, this is plan C. So that may not apply to everyone, but I think in a world where people encourage you at every stage to preserve optionality, having conviction and just really fighting hard for plan A is something that I would encourage people to do.

Willie Thompson:
Awesome. Wow. Joe, thanks for this amazing time on Imagine a World. We're so glad to have had you on for today and we're so excited to see you start at Project 1310 on June 8th?

Joe Nail:
June 8th is the plan.

Willie Thompson:
June 8th. All right. Well, thanks for joining and we can't wait to see you out there.

Joe Nail:
Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure. And yeah, just really appreciate the time and excited to hopefully see some of you all out there this summer as well to join for a mile or a push-up.

Taylor Goss:
Thank you for joining us for this episode of Imagine a World, where we hear from inspiring members of the KHS community who are making significant contributions in their respective fields, challenging the status quo, and pushing the boundaries of what is possible as they imagine the world they want to see.

Willie Thompson:
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