

REALTIME FILE

Verizon - Hans Forest 7.17.18 Recording  
Transcribed: Wednesday, July 18, 2018

TRANSCRIPTION PROVIDED BY:  
ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION SERVICES, LLC  
[www.CaptionFamily.com](http://www.CaptionFamily.com)

\* \* \* \* \*

Transcription is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility. This  
realtime file may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

\* \* \* \* \*

(Music)

>> Welcome back to Up to Speed, a Verizon podcast. For today's episode, we're sharing a conversation between Verizon's newly appointed CEO, Hans Vestberg, and actor, social activist, and founder and CEO of the Whitaker Peace and Development Initiative, Forest Whitaker. In this conversation, Hans and Forest discuss the work the organization has pursued since it was founded in 2012 and the role technology can play in supporting its efforts to foster peace and reconciliation in disadvantaged and fragile communities around the world. Let's listen in.

>> HANS VESTBERG: So, hello everyone. I'm here with Forest Whitaker. This is Hans Vestberg. For me, this is a very special moment to have Forest here. And for many who knows or who has read about Forest, he is a fantastic actor. He has an Oscar and he has a lot of other things. I have another history with Forest. We met some seven, eight years ago when I was working with Technology For Good, seeing how technology has a positive impact on our society. And then I met Forest and he had a lot of the same mission and vision about what technology can do. And you had already by then started your social activism. So, I would like to start talking about how did you start? Coming from your background, a great actor and all of that. You're a social activist. What was the starting point and what have you done since then?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: I think I have to go back to when I was a youth and think into why I wanted to deal with conflict and conflict resolution peacefully. Because as a kid I was privy to the Rod's Riots where I came from. I was raised in South Central Los Angeles. And at the same time, I was also around the Panthers that were growing

there, and they were blown up around my corner. That was really impactful to me when I was a kid, and the birth of the gangs. I knew there was something that I wanted to do, that had to do with conflict resolution. I just didn't understand exactly because of the different understandings that I had gotten as a kid. And I had this opportunity when I went over to Uganda to start looking or working with some child soldiers there. And that sort of sparked a new interest for me. And I started working with them building their dorms and ultimately it moves from there to working with the U.N. to finally starting my own NGO that we've been working on, that you've been working with me on for like a number of years now.

>> HANS VESTBERG: So, when you came there you saw these very young child soldiers having a very hard life. And your idea was how can you support them to come to a much more normal life and not being in that very difficult place. That was your thinking.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: Yeah, I mean I started to talk to some of the youths there. And some of the stories that they were telling me really shaped my desire to be able to be of service and to work with them. I think there was this young girl I met in IDP camp there. They were all at this place because of the Lord's Resistance Army at the time. She told me they tell me I'm stupid, and maybe I am because I never learned to do the things that other people do. I never even learned how to greet people. She said they tell me that I'm crazy. Maybe I am because I do things sometimes, I react sometimes and I don't even know why. I don't understand why. And this girl was in the middle of like hundreds and hundreds of IDP tents. And the people around her hated her because she had been a soldier in that war. She had been a child soldier. And she was like alone, feeling lost, and it just really affected me. And the next thing I knew, the U.N. had asked me if I would come in and talk to them about some of my experiences. So, I taped her and taped some others and brought their voice to the U.N. It was actually from there that they had asked me to start working with them. That was the first time I started working at the U.S. first as a dual ambassador and as a special envoy for peace and reconciliation.

>> HANS VESTBERG: And when you start working on that, you start communicating, you also start thinking about how can you help them to get out from that difficult situation. So, you education was important for you. What other things do you think were important to these child soldiers for normal life? What were the basic things that were needed?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: There was something that was needed that seemed intangible, a sense of identity. It was when I met these child soldiers, when I looked in their eyes, I could see the same look in the gang members that I knew back home. It was the same look. And I understood a certain sense of feeling a needing to belong, a certain sense of feeling lost, a certain sense of disenfranchisement, what have. And now I needed to figure out what would be of assistance, a methodology that would allow them to regain a sense of self, empower themselves, have knowledge to help their

communities, and ultimately build to be self-sustaining and prosperous. I created these four tenants for the program. Conflict resolution education, which was ICT or computer technologies, which I was working with you and your team to equip them and to train them. And life skills, which were trauma skills, which is very important dealing with past histories and pains. And then social entrepreneurship and business. And putting those things together, we would create an individual that would be able to go out into the community and be able to activate any number of things. Whether they be peace building or building businesses for their communities. So that's what we started to do.

>> HANS VESTBERG: And that's when you also started your foundation with the peace and development initiative in order to get a greater scale of this work that you've been starting. Right now you're in several different places with the WPDJ initiative. Where have you been focusing so far?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: We were in Uganda first and South Sudan, Mexico, and of course now we're working with Verizon. We're in Los Angeles, California, in the United States. And we're about to move into South Africa, which we just received the funding for South Africa. So those are the places we're working in right now.

>> HANS VESTBERG: And when you have seen quite a lot of these youth coming through your training with these four pillars, how is the success? These children coming out and these youth trained in these four important pillars? What do you see when they've been there for a while?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: There's been so much success. We've had members who have become heads of the youth union, members of parliament. I think the youths that we've trained in South Sudan, Eastern Equatorial State are hired by the government to train the ministers and also act as intermediaries for the state. They have started about 12 different businesses, three quarters of which are financially profitable. It's very exciting.

>> HANS VESTBERG: That's an amazing outcome.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: We built community learning centers and these community learning centers, the community themselves have been coming in and we've been able to see through our external training of like business education that we're getting people who like in ICTs, now 50% of them are employed, getting jobs. 70 odd percent of them have advanced their employment or educational system. It's really been, the numbers, we even got some of the data coming back to us, have been pretty startling. I've been really impressed with the businesses that they started. Not only did they start businesses.

Take for instance Uganda. They start a business where it's an electrical store and they start to scale out the electrical store, but they train other youths. They train hundreds of people. Sissy, she has a beauty shop. She trained like 200 other girls to become

beauticians while she is running her business and moving forward.

In Mexico, it's much more socially driven. They have business initiatives where they're going into prisons and they're training people in prisons to be able to deal with conflict and things of that nature. And now we'll see how it affects the growth in Los Angeles and what's going to be happening. We have a very unique program. It goes with the core curriculum of the schools. And in that core curriculum we infuse it with like conflict resolution education. And I don't believe there is any other system that's done that really.

Or that's integrated. And so we're going to see what happens with the full school approach. How it might trickle into the high school, how it might change over the years how people matriculate and move forward.

>> HANS VESTBERG: That's amazing. One of the things that I over the years have been involved together with you, been involved with the U.N. Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals.

And I have done it for one big reason. I think that technology has such a big impact and can be such a catalyst to actually bring some of these major challenges on earth actually to a better place. And I think that you and I early on had a lot of conversation on how important technology would be for these youth to get the type of education and understand what's happening in the world.

So what you view on the ICT training and how important that is for these children, these youth, to come to a much better place.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: I mean it's an unbelievably empowering tool. I think we're fortunate that you signed on in the beginning, Elaine and your team. Conflict resolution through computers. But to be able to actually utilize it to be able to amplify their voices, to be able to connect in a different way, to be able to use it as early warning systems, which we've done. The practical story, as I like to say, when the war broke out in South Sudan, we had worked with you training them in ICT skills. And when the war broke out, they were scattered, all the youths were scattered. But then they started helping each other to safety using these devices that they had learned to use. Some of which they had never even touched the keyboard on before. So that was really a powerful, I knew it was something they needed to do, because I wanted to see them connect. But to see it applied on the ground in this way was unbelievable. And it's worked like that in every one of our systems. I think at some point you have to see, be able to give yourselves some credit as to what actually occurred. Because you'll see someone who doesn't know where the on button is on a computer, by the end like doing presentations with his laptop. You know? To the entire community. Going into places and doing projections and fixing other people's equipment. So it's really quite unusual.

>> HANS VESTBERG: Great to hear. So one of the things that both our strategy and the Verizon Foundation is very focused on is education. And we've been committed to education for a long time. And we've done even larger commitments right now to education and to communities all around the U.S.

And one of the workstreams is together with the Whitaker Peace and Development

Initiative. So how do you see our collaboration in that sense when it comes to especially around California and Los Angeles in education?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: It's been enabling. We started this program together and it's centered purely around the core curriculum in the school system. But be able to find a way to let them understand how to deal with conflicts in their lives and stuff. And Verizon has opened up the door for us to be able to expand and to scale and to move that forward. And all of our programs are centered around education. And we're educating them in different modalities and stuff. And Los Angeles, it's an unusual program because it's all middle schoolers. So it's our youngest program. Because we're trying to with youth educate them to deal with the stressors of the day and also be able to amplify their voices for tomorrow.

>> HANS VESTBERG: And then we are also of course very excited over that collaboration. And as I said, as a company we sometimes underestimate what we can do and how we can serve. And our technology is going out to every household and every place around the country. And of course we have a great opportunity with technology to combat some of the challenges in inequality we have in this country. This is our strategy. We are number one in technology in network. For us it was a very good fit. We are extremely honored that we could collaborate with you and see that we can reach even more youth and getting out the message that you are giving. Another thing that we also have been working together with, and I know you're extremely engaged in this. I was part and at least worked with the Sustainable Development Goals that were approved in 2015. And I always pride myself that I tried to get 18 goals and not 17, and the 18th would be ICT, information communication technology, we all know that I failed because there's only 17.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: I don't think you failed. It's so integrated into every system that -- .

>> HANS VESTBERG: Yeah, it is.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: It's considered like the heart blood of something.

>> HANS VESTBERG: Yeah, it's sort of the enabler for the 17. And that's when I get a little bit like it was probably even better than having an 18th goal. But one thing that you are, you are an advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals, together with 16 others. It's 17 of you that are nominated by the U.N. General Secretary to talk about this all around the world. So really what are you doing as an advocate for the SDGs all around the world? What has been your experience so far. This is impacting the whole world. The whole world, 193 countries signed up for all of these 17 goals. Basically unheard of so many countries doing the same thing at the same time. What is your role?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: I do advocacy. I speak about it in places all over the world. Not just about to point out the 17 goals, but the target goals, as well. The framework to convince people to look at these goals as a framework for them to be able to figure out how they can operate with their own companies and with their own lives to be able to help us move forward these agendas that hopefully will recharge our planet and bring us more to a sustainable world. You know?

When it comes to like application, when I looked at my foundation, the NGO, we are operating with about 11 of the goals, operating in a sustainable way. Whether it be gender equality, where we have partnerships with U.N. women. We make sure we have equality there. Whether it be dealing with infrastructure, by building computer learning centers across all of these. But we've been able to touch upon the majority of the goals. So I'm able to do it as an advocate, I'm able to do it practically, and I'm able to do it as a citizen personally in my own life to recognize it's all the little things that we do that are going to change the structure of our future.

>> HANS VESTBERG: I'm going to ask you a question that I think I know the answer to, or I would have an answer, but I think it's important to ask you. So these Sustainable Development Goals can be a little bit distance for a corporation, a private company. So how do you see a company like Verizon being part of impacting the success with these Sustainable Development Goals?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: That's a much stronger question for you.

>> HANS VESTBERG: I asked you, you know. (Laughing)

>> FOREST WHITAKER: (Laughing) I do think when you say lofty, the Sustainable Development Goals, even the name itself has an alienation effect. When you say Global Goals, it comes a little closer to you. And when you basically just talk about poverty, eradicating poverty, hunger, giving people jobs, you know, gender equality, climate change. It would be great at an organization that has so many tentacles to be able to start to educate the public. I think the public needs to be educated as to what they can do, actually, too. It's supposed to be a ground-up movement. The MDGs were from the top down. This is from the bottom up. But it's not, because the people don't know. They don't embrace it. The corporates are doing so. If you guys can let people know if you want to deal with climate change, don't do this. Operate differently. Like in this country, shower once a day or every few days. Turn off your lights, do this and that. That's easy for climate change. When you talk about education, talk about volunteering your time to go to schools to help, whatever. People need to have small goals that they can utilize so they can actually effectuate a change. And then there will be a movement.

And once the groundswell is a movement, then the upward is going to move even stronger. And I think it will even motivate corporate even more to be like even more involved than they are when they see the people being so strongly involved. Kids. I've argued about this name. I shouldn't be saying that.

>> HANS VESTBERG: (Chuckling) No, it's fine. I think you're articulating something that I've been articulating internally Rose who is heading up our foundation, many of the things that we do as a strategy supporting our Sustainable Development Goals. The technology we're rolling out, the way we're dealing internally or thinking about diversity and all of that. All of that is flooding into that way of dealing with the power consumption and equipment. And all of that, maybe sometimes you don't see the direct connection with the Sustainable Development Goals and what we're doing daily, but I think our work as management and all the employees of the company really need to understand that we are part of supporting this and we are a huge corporation and it's not something that is outside a company. It's actually part of our strategy that we do every day. We should be very proud that we have a chance to impact that. I think that you and I are, we work together. You coming from your foundation. I've been in the private sector. And I think that we always find that we are different, but have very important roles to play. We play our strategy, you play your strategy. It's nothing outside of what we think we should do as a corporation or as an NGO in your case. I think that has been my learning from it. And I'm very humbled to work with Verizon, which has this drive. And I see more and more coming. So I think we as employees of the company should feel that this is something important. But it's definitely the part of our core strategy. I mean this is what we do every day. I mean we build this infrastructure, we see that it's working all around the company. So let us round up a little bit there. And one thing that I know you've been having your foundation for some six years or something like that?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: Yes.

>> HANS VESTBERG: How do you see the future of the foundation. How do you continue to develop that? You mentioned in the beginning you're in several different countries. You have more youth coming to your learning centers. Where do you see this continuing? Do you see geographical expansion? Or what do you see?

>> FOREST WHITAKER: I do see that we'll be expanding and scaling outward. We continue to do so. The programs are working and so others are coming to us and the reputation has been such that now we're used as a model by the U.N. even in the refugee camps as someone who has implemented. So I think we'll hopefully scale out the school program that we have in the United States. I think it's very important. I think that will be a great goal, working with you and with others to make that happen would be great. And I think we'll continue to create at least one other country a year as we move forward, probably two, but at least one.

>> HANS VESTBERG: So I would like to end there by thanking you Forest, for both working together with us, but not only that. For the fantastic dedication that you have to work with peace and reconciliation for youth, which you have taken on. And I have seen you close by working with this and I know your passion for it. I have passion for technology and what technology can do. And that combination, I have to say is, is exciting to see how we can actually combat some of the bigger challenges on this earth

today.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: I think someone like yourself, a CEO of a major company like this, has so much impact just by your example and your model. People will follow from your company and like things, your decisions will be made with that in mind of the better good. Even with profitability, there still is a better good that can occur. And I think that's so commendable. I mean you have the heart to be able to do that. And by your heart, you can expand others. I think that's really, it can't be underestimated. You know, what you may be doing here at this company can change the world just by making the example of caring and making sure you're involved with creating a sustainable, positive future for the world. So I thank you.

>> HANS VESTBERG: Thank you, Forest.

And for all the listeners, I hope that you have also learned to know Forest from the other side, which I learned to know him as the social activist person with a lot of engagement to actually solving the larger problems that we have on this planet. And many of you know him as a fantastic actor. We didn't talk about that today. But you can see his movies and he is just a great guy. But I think we at Verizon are very honored to have you here and working together with you. And that you shared your passion and how you work with it. So thank you very much, Forest.

>> FOREST WHITAKER: Thanks. Thanks for having me here.

(Music)

>> Thanks for listening. To learn more about the Whitaker Peace and Development Initiative, you can visit [www.WPDI.org](http://www.WPDI.org). And for many more Verizon news, follow us on Instagram and Twitter at VZUpToSpeed. Or like us on Facebook at Verizon Up to Speed. And stay tuned for more conversations about technology today.