

MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS
**THE COMBUSTION
CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE TWENTY-FOUR
DISRUPTIVE HARMONY**

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Shawn: Welcome to "The Combustion Chronicles" podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for "The Combustion Chronicles." Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us. I'm here with my co-host Michael Harper.

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Shawn: On today's episode, we're speaking with Gregg Breinberg who is the director of the PS22 Chorus of Staten Island. PS22 Chorus was formed in the year 2000 and is an ever-changing group of fifth graders from a public elementary school in Staten Island, New York. PS22 is not a school for the arts, and the course is not a magnet program. PS22 Chorus has been featured on "Oprah," "Nightline," "Good Morning America," "The Today Show," "Sesame Street," and perhaps most notably the 2011 Academy Awards. Today, the Chorus' YouTube videos have been watched more than 100 million times. The Chorus has performed for President Obama, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and many more amazing artists. During COVID-19, the chorus helped raise over \$115 million as part of the Robin Hood #RaiseUpNewYork telethon. Gregg, it's great to have you on with us today.

Gregg: An honor. Thank you, gentlemen.

Shawn: It seems you have had the best kind of success you are doing something that you love and making big impact directly in the lives of young people. What does that all mean to you?

Gregg: Life affirming. It was tough. For me growing up and my school experience, I always, kind of, felt left out with my particular skill set, so it was particularly gratifying to walk into a profession where I felt my skill set was the absolute perfect skill set for the job that I had. I always said I never feel like my musicianship was good enough to get me a career as a musician. And I enjoyed teaching, but music is my passion. So it was just great to marry those two passions and really just find a place for myself in this world, which, honestly, like, when I was in high school, I couldn't even conceive of where life would take me and I just serendipitously ended up in, you know, the best place possible for me. So I guess, the lesson learned for me is just, you know, you follow your instincts, you follow you what you feel is guiding you to your life's path, which for me was my love of music and my love of working with kids. And I just really found the perfect spot for myself. Even the elementary level, I felt was like a great place

for me because I had seen other elementary school choruses, and usually they're just doing some unison singing and sometimes it's pretty painful at that. And I just felt like my skills as a musician, like my best skills as a musician are harmonizing, coming up with, you know, some good harmonies, so my arranging, and my sense of pitch, which, I think, are the two most important skills to have when you're working with an age group like what I'm working with. And so, like I said, my skill set and my lack of any other viable option for what I could do with my skill set just led me to the perfect path in life, and it's definitely no regrets.

[00:03:44]

Michael: Well, that's fantastic, and the story is absolute fantastic, and, of course, the stories of the kids, fantastic. But let's get real here. What you did, arguably, is reinvent what music education is, in some way, for that age group.

Gregg: Thank you. I feel like we did have a hand in reshaping what chorus is, you know, especially in the school setting. Really, before the PS22 Chorus videos were out there on YouTube, you would see, like, choreographed performances, like, in a gospel style, where they're dancing and movement. I have no dancing skills whatsoever and no... Again, I say, my skill set is limited and perfect for the age group that I work with, but my rhythm is atrocious. So, it was just finding, you know, the right path and accessing the right skills that were perfect for this age group, yeah, just set me flying. I don't know even how I found myself and it's like I say, it's very serendipitous the way I ended up here. It's just, I was, kind of, thrown into everything, I was thrown into the education system, I was thrown into being a classroom teacher, which I never planned on doing. I taught, like, second grade when I first went into education, which scared the bejeebies out of me because, you know, music is my passion. And I said I've worked with kids throughout the years, but exclusively through music, doing private music lessons, and just finding that perfect outlet was really just luck. I mean, I had my parents that were teachers, and they thrust me in that direction, and just the perfect skill set for the age group that I work with.

Michael: And let's dig into that. So, we talk a lot, in the disruption world, about creating your own category. I don't know if you've heard that term before but, like, Uber is the quintessential example of that, right? That before Uber, that industry didn't exist, we used taxi cabs. Uber comes along, they create their own new category, now that's all we do pretty much, and the rest of the industry has had to catch up. I think in some sense, from my perspective, that's what you've done, is you've created your own category that others will be following, right? That music doesn't need to be a sit-in-front-of-the-piano formal singing time, that there are ways to get kids inspired to sing differently. It's about using YouTube in ways that had not been done

before. And, you know, it sounds like, from what you've said, that maybe you didn't intend to set up that new category, but I'd love just to help the listeners go there in terms of, if they're looking to make an impact like you have and however they're going to do it, you know, what are those steps that you think were the critical steps in getting you to this new category?

Gregg: Know thyself, know what you have to offer, and understand the population that you're working with. And, like, you know, a lot of people will comment, a lot of the more traditional music people will comment on videos like, "How come the kids aren't standing?" and, "How come they're not just sitting up, stomach in, shoulders out?"

Michael: "They're not breathing correctly."

Gregg: Exactly.

Michael: "They're not doing the basics. You're not teaching them the formal skills that we were all taught."

[00:07:12]

Gregg: Exactly. And this is why I feel like I'm very blessed to work with the level that I work with because I feel like I have that freedom to introduce them to chorus in a way that's kid-friendly, in a way that's... And to me, it's not even like the way that kids should be singing, like, that's what I hated about choir when I was a kid. It's just, I hated that. I always felt like, to get your best singing and to access your best sound, you really have to connect to the music and not think about anything but the song, and making sure that you're tapping in completely to the lyric that you're singing, or the pitches that you're singing, the rhythms that make the music come alive. And, you know, I didn't feel like it was fair or even appropriate to... Like, I feel like that's...let them do that if they want to go into like classical singing where you really need to do that. But I'm working at an age where I'm introducing them to that style. So, yes, I've had many kids go on to the more traditional choir settings as they move on to intermediate school, or high school, or beyond. But they all come back and say they never loved chorus as much as when they were in PS22, and that's gratifying, obviously.

Shawn: I love that, and I love your whole approach to that, Gregg. You know, I was one of those children that was just naturally gifted. Could sit down and play the piano, could sight read, and still today, at 47 years old, if I post a video of me playing the piano I still get scolded because my positioning is not correct and my fingers...(Shawn laughs)

Gregg: Glad I'm not the only one.

Shawn: Yeah, you're not the only one. And, you know, Michael was digging into this a little bit and I really want the audience to know. But, you know, in 2015, Gregg, you were awarded the Tribeca Disruptive Innovation Award because the industry recognized what you were doing in public education and, you know, in an area that had been disadvantaged. How do you tell someone even more, and this is what Michael and I were just digging in with there, is, you, kind of, just took off all the handcuffs and said, "I don't care that it's nothing traditional, but I'm going to get the passion out of these kids."

Gregg: I had an experience that I think was cathartic for me, when I... It was my very first year teaching, and the intermediate-school teacher came to my fifth-grade students to audition them for their intermediate-school chorus for the following year. And I had a young man who is very ADHD, the nicest, nicest, sweetest child, and a brilliant, beautiful voice, pitch perfect, I mean, everything that I would look for in a chorus member. But at that time when I first started, I wasn't doing my approach. I was really doing what I was initially taught, the stomach in, shoulders out, all that you know. And that was my very first year when I had this young man, like I said, and he would just, because of his ADHD, he would constantly be rocking back and forth. That's all. He couldn't stand still when he sang the music.

[00:10:32]

And this middle-school teacher wouldn't take him into chorus, and I was so angry and so appalled because this kid was so musical, and this was like, you know, the kid who was struggling in other areas and this was his outlet, this was his thing, this is what he excelled at. And everything that I, you know, had ever been taught when I was learning how to be an educator is, you capitalize on the kid's skills, and you meet them where they're prepared to meet you. And it was so upsetting to me that this kid just... And I asked her, "What about this young man?" And she said, "I couldn't handle that, the rocking back and forth." And right from that minute on I was like, "You know what? I'm done. I'm done with this all standing, with the hands at the sides. I want these kids to just enjoy the music and have some fun."

It started off, and if you watch older chorus videos that I've posted from 2000 or 2001 when we were first getting our show on the road, you know, you see the kids are definitely not giving the same types of performances. Musically, they definitely sounded superior to other elementary school choruses at the time they were harmonizing and doing things that you I didn't see elementary school choruses doing, but they didn't really have the face of what the PS22 Chorus is, you know, now recognized as. So, yeah, that, kind of, pointed me in the direction of saying,

"Hey, you know what, trust your own instincts, you're getting a sound out of them that you know is superior to what you've heard from other kids before, and let them enjoy it. Why do I have to force them, especially if we're meeting for 45 minutes, sometimes an hour and a half practices. You know, it's just so uncomfortable for them."

And then, as soon as I allowed them to just have the freedom to just get lost and enjoy the performance, and love the music, and find the feeling in it, and just do it your own way, all of a sudden, it was just like, "Wow, this is a whole another level of performance that they're giving even in their sound." I mean, when you're feeling a song, you sing it better. It's really important to, especially when you're introducing, you know, a choir setting to kids who have never been involved in that to meet them at their level and make it something fun for them. You know, there'll be time later if they want to get into some more serious singing, but the appropriate thing, I think, to do as a teacher is take it down to their level. And that's not to say to underestimate them. I think that's, you know, another thing that's, kind of, contributed to our success, is that I try to challenge them not only musically, but even emotionally with the song selections that we do.

[00:13:08]

Michael: Yeah, it's huge, it's huge. And for me, there's so many takeaway nuggets that are transferable to any industry. Putting the people first, harnessing their passion, meeting them where they are. We talk about that all the time as disruptors of meeting people where they are, throwing out that challenge for growth, and then letting them be a part of that challenge journey. Those are huge, but I think even the biggest one for me is letting things evolve over time. It's so hard, at the beginning, to say, "This is going to be huge. You know, I'm going to start this and we're going to perform for famous pop stars and presidents." It doesn't work that way, right? It's about time, and evolving, and paying attention to each little step along the way, and enjoying the journey, right?

Gregg: I mean if they're not loving it then I'm doing something wrong. I've seen chorus members from, like, the early years, like the 2000s and saying, like, "Wow man, you were tough, but..." You know, and they come back, and they tell me they appreciate how tough I was, but I'm like, "Oh my God, I can't believe I was, like, that mean back then." But you've got to...

Michael: It's a journey, yeah.

Gregg: Yeah, it is a journey. And also when you start picking up a following or you're getting attention that you never got before, and you want to keep this going because year by year, you want to have the opportunity to give these kids these life-changing experiences that we've been lucky enough to be privy to. I say lucky but I don't want to discount the kids' hard work and all of our hard work to make this happen, but, of course, there's luck involved in anyone getting successful. And I'm grateful for all the things that came together to make this chorus something that's been disruptive, as you say, and something that's been inspiring to more people than I could have ever imagined.

Shawn: So, let's jump in, Gregg, to 2008 when Perez Hilton linked a video of the "Flying Dutchman" and it immediately went viral. Can you take us back to that moment, as a teacher, as a human, what it felt like when that all happened? And the doors really opened for you at that point in 2008.

Gregg: At the beginning, when I first started posting videos, and it really, again, everything is so serendipitous, not to overuse the word but it really was, it's the only word. I'm a huge Tori Amos fan. So I started just by posting the Tori Amos covers that we'd done because I was in some Tori Amos chat rooms and we were talking about it, and I was telling people how I had the kids singing Tori's songs, and I even went to a Tori Amos, like, a conversation event that she did and got to tell her that my chorus sang. And it was like a moment, you know, it was a moment at the event. Anyway, so when I first started posting the videos, they were pretty much exclusively Tori Amos videos at the beginning, and her management got wind of what we were doing through a Tori Amos fan site. And they contacted me and said, "We'd like to set up a meeting with your chorus and Tori."

And I flipped. It's funny because we've sung with so many celebrities over the years. The very first big celebrity we got was my all-time favorite. So, of course, when you watch those videos, as I'm sure some people might want to be inspired to do, because, really, it's a moment, you'll see me being total, "Oh, my God." I was just total fanboying, and I was just such a happy idiot that day. And that was what led to Perez Hilton finding, because Perez Hilton, also, is a huge Tori Amos fan, so that's how Perez Hilton found us through that video when Tori Amos actually was serenaded by my chorus. And once that video was posted, then Perez started posting other videos, I think "Flying Dutchman" was the next one he posted after that, and then he just started, you know, following the kids and was posting many, many performances that we never necessarily expected him to post, "Eye of the Tiger," which was, like, I think, our first, you know, getting really big in terms of viral.

You know, like the Tori Amos video, when it started, got, like, 200,000 views, but the "Eye of the Tiger" video, I think that one got up to a million quickly. And then right at the same time, Coldplay had posted a cover of "Viva la Vida" at the same time that Perez posted "Eye of the Tiger" in 2009, and that's when things really exploded. And we got amazing offers, the kids got to sing at the Capital for the Congress, they were covered by the Associated Press, and it was just, all of a sudden, just became a whirlwind of events that the kids were being asked to perform at. And so, 2009 is when really, like, the chorus took off and it's just an amazing ride we've been on since then. It's amazing, you know, but really it was the Tori Amos meeting, and the Perez Hilton boosts that he gave us that really set the worldwide acclaim that the kids have gotten into the stratosphere.

[00:18:23]

Shawn: That's awesome. So, you know, Gregg, we work in the business world, you're working in, you know, public education with fifth graders, but I can tell you, there's a lot of similarities in what we do. So how has the success of PS22 changed the limits of what you think is possible personally? And what advice would you give when it comes to believing in and leaning into this?

Gregg: Wow, like, I think like I said before, I think the most important thing is knowing yourself, knowing what you have to offer. I think sometimes people go into a profession because they just really need to make money, and especially now with everything that's going on and it's unfortunately going to be a lot more of that and I don't know how easy it's going to be to find their niche. And quite honestly, I mean, this is an awkward time for me to be giving advice because I'm a little lost at the moment, it's been a really rough transition to this remote education that we've been going through.

But my advice, I guess, uh, work with your circumstances, work with your skill set, and uh, know the population that you're working with, and try to find your own way of doing it. Keeping in mind, also, and again, this goes with keeping in mind your population, knowing when to ease off and knowing when, "Hey you know it's like..." I think the most important lesson you learn as a teacher is, the way you make your students feel is how you're going to get the best results out of them and how you're going to make a lasting impact on their lives. So, my goal, and certainly, especially like the last five years as I've, you know, acclimated to the fame that the kids have, you know, acquired over the years. Like, there were a couple of years that I was so dedicated to just keeping it going, keeping this fame train going for the kids just to give them the opportunities, and I just realized, "You know what? I'm not enjoying this as much because I'm not as focused on what really matters." And don't get what...

Michael: Right. Yeah, you've got to focused on those core principles...

Gregg: Exactly.

Michael: ...that evolve over time, but they're there.

[00:20:39]

Gregg: Exactly. And that evolution over time is key too. It's like, you know, I was definitely a different music teacher when I first started, and I'm sure I would have given myself a good talking to, you know, back then and said, "Ease up, buddy, ease up," you know?

Michael: Yup.

Gregg: I got good sound out of them but I didn't get the kind of performance that I would get out of these kids because, as you say, over the years, you refine your skills, and you refine your technique, and you learn what what's really important. And I think I needed a little reality check at some point and just realized that it's not... And I've always tried to make this point to the kids, and I feel like I've successfully made this point with the kids, because even at the end of the year, sometimes we'd film videos like, "What's the most important experience that you've gotten out of chorus?" And very rarely do you hear them say something like, "Oh, getting to sing at the Oscars or getting to sing at the..." They really say just making the music in the auditorium and they talk about the lessons that they learned. And that's such a gratifying thing as well, you know, that the fact that they have this notoriety online, but yet they live very down-to-earth lives. And that also comes from the fact that they are, they're modest children, they're humble children, they don't come from wealth, and they don't have, sometimes, even the most basic of tools to succeed, which is so sad now, especially. And we're realizing it now as we try to venture into remote education, we're seeing there's such a disparity in what the kids are really able to do, not because of their ability, but because of just their circumstances.

And, you know, that's another important thing to keep in mind, it's to balance your desire to succeed, and this is really important to me as an elementary school music teacher, certainly as an elementary school teacher that's gotten this online following, it's not to work for the following, it's to work for the kids. And then, once I think I got my head a little more, straight with that, I got, I think, much better results. I've been enjoying my time with the kids so much more. I mean, these past two years, I wouldn't say they were the most prolific with regards to, you know, the widest amount of views or attention that the chorus has gotten, but it's been the

most enjoyable two years, maybe, of my career. I mean, aside from the Oscars year, which was pretty amazing. (Shawn and Gregg laugh)

Michael: In the business world, though, that when businesses lose sight of their people, when they forget about what's important, when they forget about their mission, that's where they go wrong. So, again, all of this is so transferable to any industry or organization. But let's crank up the heat here because this could not have been an easy journey the whole time, right? And there are plenty of talented music directors out there, plenty of choir directors out there, I'm one of them.

Gregg: Oh, wow.

Michael: I enjoy working with young people. And, you know, I enjoyed it, did my thing, but it's not an easy road all the time. So, what are those obstacles that you came up against, and how did you climb those walls?

Gregg: Honestly, the biggest obstacles for me were just, kind of, trying to innovate the education system in terms of incorporating YouTube. When we went on YouTube, there were no other public schools on YouTube, or at least no public-school performances that were being shared by the public school itself. So, we ran into a lot of red tape, I mean, with the, you know, the bureaucracy of the Department of Education. And, honestly, they've gotten a lot better with time too. I think, it was old-school management when I first came into the profession and internet was a brand-new entity. So, it was like, they very, very afraid, and obviously justifiably so. And I presented them, you know, what I felt was a safe way to get this started. And right about the time when the "Eye of the Tiger" and the "Viva la Vida" Coldplay video were getting some massive attention, right at that time, I think as soon as it started to blow up, the DOE was getting scared and, you know, they told they contacted my principal and they said, "He's going to have to take this down."

And I was freaking out because, you know, "My God, all the work that I did to try to get these kids opportunities is now being, like, right when it's, like, actually coming to fruition you're going to make me take this down?" And so, I'm sorry to say this, I messed up, this is right before Perez Hilton posted the "Eye of the Tiger" video. So, as I'm being told to take everything down, and like I said, things are heating up but not at the point of, real, where we're about to blow up online, I'm being told to take everything offline. So my principal, you know, who is very supportive of my program and, you know, it was not her idea to take this down, but she said, "Gregg, you've got to do it, just take it down." She's like, you know, "Take it down and, we'll

work on that, and we'll try to get this sorted." So, I slowly took stuff down, you know, the videos I didn't care about. You've got to play a little bit with the rules sometimes.

[00:26:07]

Gregg: So, it was scary because, yeah, I was so excited for these kids. It was like something so wonderful, and all the online feedback had been...everything, everything was positive. So right as I'm being told to take stuff down, I would take, like, two videos down and, maybe, put up something, put one up, you know, and hope it wouldn't be noticed. Like, as the number of videos were going down, I figured... So, I put stuff up that was kind of, like, benign. So, I figured, I'll put up "Eye of the Tiger" because, you know, that's from 1980s, no one's going to care about that song. Well, lo and behold, as I told you before, Perez Hilton posts that video, it blows up, and right from there, you know, like I said, then the Coldplay fan site posted that on their newsletter, which went out and it blew up. That's when the Associated Press came on board, that's when Stevie Nicks invited us to Madison Square Garden to sing for... It was just all this amazing stuff started happening. And as soon as, like, the Associated Press came out, there was also an article in "New York Magazine" that was all, like, amazing. All of a sudden, it was fine, and we could post. So, I was like, kind of, freaking out, though, because all of a sudden, we're going viral right as we're being asked to take it down, and then all of a sudden... As I said, as all the amazingly positive feedback came back from major... Oh, and "Nightline." "Nightline" did a piece on the chorus that was, you know, well received. And I think all of that was just like, "Okay, this is fine, let it go."

Gregg: You gotta to take a chance, sometimes, and, you know, you've got to bend the rules a little bit, you know, as long as you're working on what you really truly feel are the kids' best interest. I felt like I'm going to do what I feel is right and apologize later. And, fortunately, I didn't even have to apologize

Shawn: That's funny, Gregg. In another part of our ecosystem, in our consulting group, MOFI, we actually teach this mindset around the big three. And it's, "Do no harm, break rules but not laws, and proceed until apprehended." And it sounds like you just kept doing all three of those and look what happened. And that's the mindset we try to teach disruptors, so that's awesome.

Gregg: I think it does. I think everything that I have, you know, learned and acquired throughout the years, it's all transferable, it's all transferable. I have given, like, lectures at PWC. I gave a lecture, you know, they wanted to talk to me specifically, I think, along the same deal about the disruptiveness of the program and wanted to, I guess, you know, inspire their business people with what we did. So that's so incredibly rewarding.

Gregg: Not only are we inspiring you know, the music people and the education people. We're also inspiring everybody, really, can find some inspiration, and that is the beauty.

Shawn: Yeah. So, we have come to this point now. Great conversation. We could probably go on forever with all of us...

Gregg: Sure.

Shawn: ...music geeks sitting here. But we have the section when we close out "The Combustion Chronicles" called the combustion questions. So, we use this amazing algorithm to pull these questions. That algorithm is known as the Harper Brain over here. But, Michael, let's turn it over to you.

[00:29:29]

Michael: Absolutely. So, Gregg, are you ready for your combustion questions?

Gregg: All right, the brain, it doesn't function too well in the morning, I'll try to be as quick as I can.

Michael: We'll make it, we'll have some fun.

Gregg: All right.

Michael: All right, so question number one, if you could make a 20-minute phone call to yourself at any point in your life, present or future, when would you call yourself and what would you say? Twenty minutes, any time, either present or future, you could call yourself, what would you say, who would you call, what time?

Gregg: If I would call myself, I would call myself, my junior year of high school was probably the most difficult year of my life, and I'd call myself and say, "Don't worry, you're going to find your way. You're going to find your way and it's going to bring you a lot of satisfaction in life. And I know you don't see a path right now, but your path will come to you and give it time."

Michael: You could call me junior year in high school as well, I'd appreciate that.

Gregg: You got it. We'll make it a group call.

[00:30:30]

Michael: Number two, question number two, what's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

Gregg: Oh, wow, that's tough. It depends on the day, but I'm a strawberry guy.

Shawn: Yes, right up my alley there.

Gregg: All right.

Michael: All right, question number three, what do you think about shoe-laces?

Gregg: I honestly just took the shoe-laces off my comfy pair of sneakers, so, yeah, there is my answer. (all laugh) Avoid whenever possible.

Michael: Get rid of them?

Shawn: Get rid of them? Love it!

Gregg: Yeah.

Shawn: Well, Gregg, thank you so much for being with us. This was awesome. Can't wait to hear what the next big PS22 video is going to be, and appreciate your passion for our kids, raising leaders in America. So, thank you again, and you have a great day.

Gregg: Thank you, I appreciated your questions. And nice talking to you, guys. Always good to talk to fellow musicians and just fellow good humans, so thank you.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "The Combustion Chronicles." None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.