

The BODY POSITIVE

by Alex Curatolo MGT 6285 Summer 2019

If you ask Bianca Russo, founder of Body Positive Boot Camp, to describe one of the biggest “wins”

for her business, you might get to hear a story about a recent fitness class she taught in a local park. At the beginning of class, she called roll, making sure that everyone had arrived. As she called out one of the names, another member of the class turned and gasped – “you’re in this class too?” The two knew each other from an inclusive yoga studio nearby. And this moment of organic community building? *This* is what Russo counts as

one of Body Positive Boot Camp’s biggest wins.



Belief in the power of community is a thread that runs throughout the story of Russo and Body Positive Boot Camp. But before there was Body Positive Boot Camp, and before Russo was a social entrepreneur, Russo cared for her community in another way – she planned to be a nurse and worked her way through the ranks in hospitals.

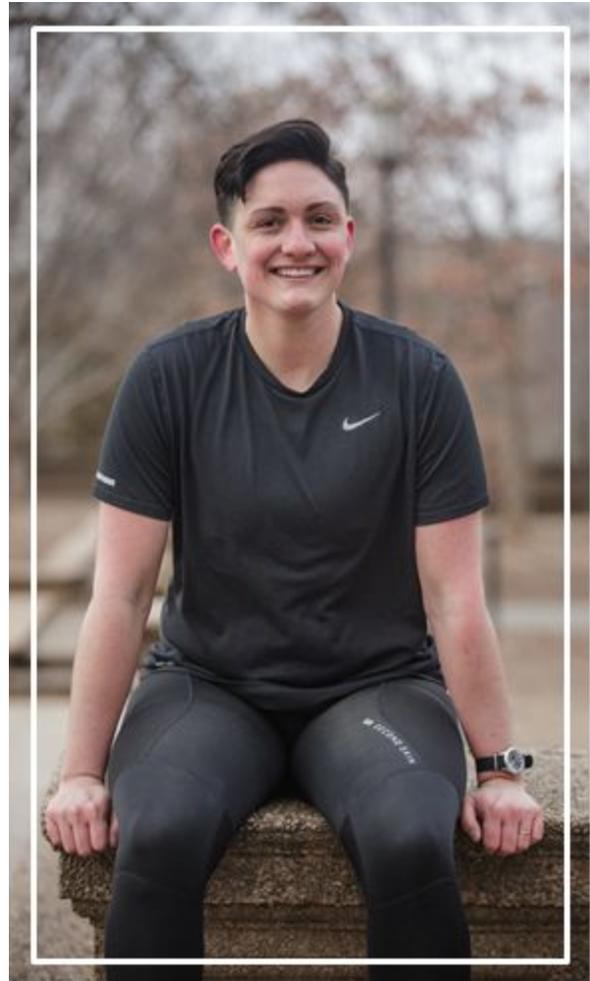
Eventually, she found herself working as an Emergency Medical Technician in the George Washington

University Hospital's Emergency Room. It was during her time in the ER that Russo realized just how many preventable illnesses and injuries came through its doors. After noticing this trend, she knew one way that she might be able to make a difference.

Russo started by pursuing her certification from the National Academy of Sports Medicine, while at the same time talking to folks in her community about their fitness choices. Did they make use of currently available fitness options? Was there anything missing from the options available? And what did they seek out when choosing between the myriad of fitness options available to them in the DC marketplace?

And there *are* seemingly endless fitness options out there. In the United States alone, fitness is a [\\$30 billion industry](#) (with personal training capturing

roughly [\\$9 billion](#)) with sustained growth rates of [3 to 4 percent](#) annually for the last



ten years. From gyms to boutique studios, in both major metropolitan and smaller markets, the variety of options has exploded in recent years. In particular, 2018 reporting by [CityLab](#) found the US is experiencing an “urban fitness revolution,” spurred on by the fact that fitness is a

“way to forge community and escape the drudging loneliness of everyday urban life.” Despite this proliferation, this revolution has not reached everyone equally, even in urban markets. This is especially true for queer and trans people.

There are roughly [40,000](#) health clubs in the United States, and “yet there aren’t a lot of places where queer and trans people [feel safe](#) to work out and train.” Queer and trans people frequently experience discrimination in fitness settings – from gendered intake forms and locker rooms to harassment from other patrons. Ilya Parker, a social justice advocate and personal trainer, set to out to change that with [Decolonizing Fitness](#), which includes a database of affirming trainers worldwide. As described by [Parker](#), the “focus is shifting from only centering cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied people...[t]he database is

prompting people to be mindful of those who carry multiple marginalized identities.”

As of January 2019, that list included roughly 100 trainers – showing the vast disparity in accessibility for queer and trans fitness. However, Decolonizing Fitness’ roughly 25k Instagram followers tell a different story about the desire for this type of affirming, inclusive fitness service. Russo responded to an Instagram post from Parker, and Body Positive Boot Camp was one of the first providers to be included on the list.

Discrimination in fitness is only a symptom of much more insidious discrimination against those who don’t fit into the cisgender/heterosexual paradigm. A 2015 [report](#) by the Movement Advancement Project and Center for American Progress found that transgender Americans are likely to

experience “extreme financial insecurity” – are four times more likely to have a household income below \$10,000 than the general population. This is true despite the fact the report finds transgender people have higher college

diversity. As found in the *Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, Weight-based discrimination has increased by [66 percent](#) over the last decade, and even perceived discrimination has a detrimental impact; for example, preventing patients



participation and completion rates than the population as a whole. Why? Per the [report](#), “transgender people face extreme discrimination in virtually all areas of life.”



Fitness, echoing society at large, is similarly unwelcoming to body size

from seeking health care when needed.

A recent Huffington Post [article](#), describes weight-based discrimination this way: the “stigma of being fat follows Americans everywhere: at home, in medical settings, at school and at work.”

In the workplace, people with obesity earn

approximately [3 to 6 percent less](#) than their thinner co-workers, being seen as less qualified despite working longer hours – solely because of weight.

This discrimination absolutely follows individuals into the fitness realm. The journal *Stigma and Health* [reported](#) research findings on the experience of weight stigma among gym members and found that “stigma at the gym was associated with negative attitudes toward the gym, maladaptive behaviors to cope with stigma, weight bias internalization, unhealthy weight control practices, and poorer self-reported physical and emotional health”



Back to Russo, who knows what it’s like to feel invisible at the gym. She’s doing community-oriented research and hearing over and over again that there is a desire for fitness options that are body

positive and affirming and inclusive of members of the queer community.

What can make fitness queer and weight inclusive? Starting from the moment a client decides to sign up, making sure that all forms and facilities are not gendered. Making sure that clients’ identities are understood and supported. Understanding and being able to modify any exercises as needed based on a person’s body, ability, and fitness-related goals. And, to [quote](#) Body Positive Boot Camp, avoiding “unsolicited diet-talk and any weight-loss industry bullsh*t”

There was desire for these types of fitness services, Russo was qualified to provide them, so her business idea was solidified. She presented this idea to her counselor at the DC Small Business Development Center at Howard University – who immediately told her the business

sounded too niche. But Russo knew her community, and knew this was a service that was needed by its members. She forged ahead.



Even with a business idea and plan in place, starting up the business was challenging. Russo encountered government bureaucracy in the District which made setting up a business difficult, even for a motivated owner such as Russo. For example, a checklist of tasks provided by the DC government had items that were out of order and website links that were invalid. Compounding this difficulty for Russo is that she is a one-person shop; all tasks to keep the business afloat fall to her.



In establishing Body Positive Boot Camp, Russo established herself as a social entrepreneur.

Taking this label apart – the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an [entrepreneur](#) as “one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise.” Does this describe Russo? Absolutely. The organization, management, and perhaps most significantly *risk* of Body Positive Boot Camp sits squarely on Russo’s shoulders. And it’s not necessarily a small amount of risk – the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#) has found that while roughly 80 percent of small businesses survive their first year, only about half of all new businesses survive to their 5th anniversary.

So then what differentiates a *social* entrepreneur? Mary Birchard, of the National Center for Social Entrepreneurs, was [quoted](#) as describing social entrepreneurs as people who “take their strengths and capacity and match them to

an opportunity they see in the marketplace –an opportunity that both meets their mission and provides financial stability –this is what we call the double bottom line.”

“**accessible, safe, and enjoyable**”

An academic definition, from an [article](#) published in the Academy of Management Perspectives is that “social entrepreneurs establish organizations to meet social needs in ways that improve the quality of life and increase human development over time [] while benefiting owners in ways that continue revenue flow and allow them to earn a return on their investment.” The article continues on to discuss that these businesses tend to “serve a variety of stakeholders” – or

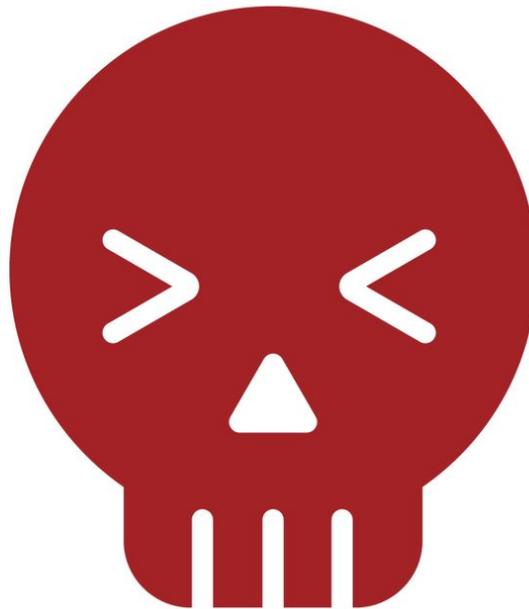
those who are impacted by the organization.

In the case of Body Positive Bootcamp, it is clear from speaking with Russo that she feels a responsibility for stakeholders outside herself – and not only her clients, but her community more broadly. Ask Russo about her business, and it will very quickly become clear that her business is designed to “meet social needs” and “improve [] quality of life.”

When asked about her overall goals for Body Positive Boot Camp, Russo first explains that she wants to make training “accessible, safe, and enjoyable” for anyone who comes through the door (literally and metaphorically speaking, since she trains many clients online). She aims for the business to be the “antithesis” of most gyms or fitness studios; she wants to create a safe space for her clients. Body Positive Boot

Camp's skull logo belies the always positive vibe Russo cultivates; the opposite of a push-through-the-pain mentality.

At present, Russo offers in-person and virtual private and small group training, with package and sliding scale rates available, to make her training accessible for a range of budgets. This "pay what you can" model has found success in other inclusive fitness programs. For example, Radically Fit, based in Oakland, California, offers a sliding-scale "[Community Cares](#)" program – with a "Pay it Forward" membership option that helps to subsidize other community members.



Of course, Russo does have financial goals for Body Positive Boot Camp. Her first major financial goal? Be profitable! That goal was easily achieved in her first year in business (especially impressive given that *Forbes* has estimated that it often takes [18 to 24](#)

months to get a new business off the ground), and she projects it'll be even more profitable in its second year. Russo's new financial goal? Double profits between her second

and third years in business. It's a challenging goal, for sure, but Russo is up for the challenge.



One of the ways she intends to achieve her "doubling" goal is through the

expansion of her online training offerings. Online offerings will benefit both bottom lines — the “[mission and money](#)” – of Body Positive Boot Camp. Financially, online offerings will allow Russo to scale her business in a way that would not be possible offering only in-person training. In support of her mission, online offerings are more accessible on both a geographic and financial basis – allowing Russo to connect with clients who might otherwise be unable to access affirming fitness services.

Let’s first be clear – this is a business and Russo thinks like a business person. You’ll hear her casually talk about the beta testing that she has done with her online offerings to-date, and the ongoing research and development testing she’ll do to fortify and smooth her online product even further moving into her third year in business. She’ll tell you

about the importance of search engine optimization and that the traffic that her website gets from google has been a strong contributor to the growth of the business.

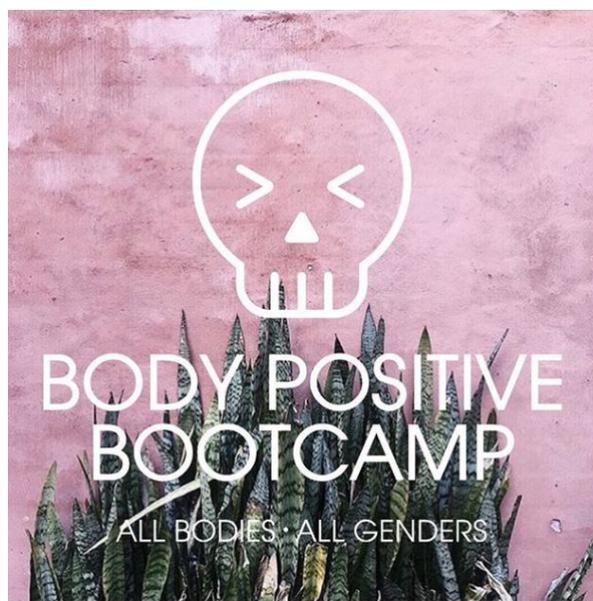
Of note: Overhead costs for the business are very low, and Russo has spent almost no money on marketing Body Positive Boot Camp, relying instead on careful use of social media, an honest and straightforward web presence, and referrals from a “network” of people in the District – doctors, therapists, dieticians, and, of course, current clients. Of course though, discussion with Russo always comes back to Body Positive Boot Camp’s mission. Business decisions Russo makes very deliberately account for the needs, requests, and comfort of her clients and community.

Russo emphasizes individual training and services (even the welcome



emails are personalized to the client - which is becoming increasingly rare with today's software capabilities and email anonymity). She emphasizes the similarities between her training interactions and the "bedside" manner she developed from her work in hospitals. Put straightforwardly, Russo is central to the current vision and experience of Body Positive Boot Camp.

As a person, Russo is positive, enthusiastic, and engaging, and it's not hard to imagine how she has been able to successfully connect with not only so



many different clients (evidenced by her loyal roster) but also her wider community. When asked about herself and her business she is thoughtful and open, willing to share equally about the successes she has had and challenges she has faced during her time in business – and she doesn't sugarcoat those challenges. It's clear that in her mind, she is always considering next steps - thinking about the impact of her actions on community and business in a way that makes clear that she has the vision of a leader.

In discussing future plans for her business, Russo acknowledges that currently the in-person one-on-one training is the “central artery” of her business. But in order to grow the business moving forward, her next step will be to build out her virtual training services – making them run as smoothly as in-person offerings. And from discussions – it is clear that Russo feels the tension of changing the central services currently offered by Body Positive Boot Camp.

Russo is hardly alone – deciding how and when – *and if* – to scale is a difficulty frequently encountered by social entrepreneurs. In an [article](#) from the *Huffington Post*, Teresa Chahine, the Author of [Introduction to Social Entrepreneurship](#), discusses how scale can be a “means to an end” for a specific social goal, but it can also discount the

fact that perhaps there are “certain situations and contexts when designing for scale can prevent us in getting the results we’re after, in serving hard to reach individuals and communities.”

In another [article](#) from the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Chahine re-frames this central question, asking “[w]hat will we let go of when working to create tightly packaged, replicable, and scalable interventions? And what are the non-negotiables we will hold on to, even if it means less scalability?” Russo’s business has non-negotiable values – community, inclusivity, accessibility – that will not be sacrificed for scale. From talking to Russo, it’s clear that she is already grappling with these types of questions.

Russo will no doubt wrestle with this tension, experiment, and land somewhere in between extremes as her

business continues to grow. And no doubt, she will be asking asking for feedback from her community every step of the way. But for now, you might find

“**...radically inclusive space...**”

Russo with her community in a gym in Mount Pleasant training loyal clients or in Meridian Hill Park teaching a session of “Mindful Movement” or maybe even on Facebook, leading a virtual workout for far-flung clients. Always embodying her ideals of making a “[radically inclusive space](#),’ where all bodies and genders are welcome.”



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