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## Redbird Buzz Episode 6: Abe Lopez-Brown, Summer 2021

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Abe Lopez-Brown Interviewee

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# Redbird Buzz

## Episode 6: Abe Lopez-Brown

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*July 2022*

**Rachel Kobus 00:00**

This conversation was recorded in the summer of 2021.

**Rachel Kobus 00:12**

Hello, Illinois State, welcome to another episode of Redbird Buzz. I'm Rachel Kobus with Alumni Engagement. 2012 Redbird alum Abe Lopez-Bowen brings joyful energy with him wherever he goes. This can be seen in his extensive involvement as a student at Illinois State where he served as a Preview guide, a resident assistant, a co-chair for Students Today, Leaders Forever, and University Program Board president. His spirit and good heart also led to Abe being crowned the 2011 Homecoming King. After graduating, Abe wanted to do more and take risks of finding himself and his passions. After moving to California in 2015, Abe created Lightward Photography, a brand who's been published in a national wedding photography journal, and brought Abe invitations to work across the globe. Continuing to push the boundaries of his creative mind in 2020, Abe created Lightward Empowerment, an empowerment coaching business through which he helps his clients bring their dreams into a living, breathing, tangible reality. And since 2016, Abe has served as a commitment mentor with the Clinton Global Initiative University, mentoring an international student cohort as they bring practical innovation to some of the world's most pressing issues. We are Redbird Proud of Abe, and without further ado, let's hear more from Abe and how he inspires others to live a life of meaning by living such a life himself.

**Rachel Kobus 01:31**

So Abe, what's the word, Redbird? Can you tell us a little about yourself?

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 01:35**

I am a person who is actively engaged with life and building systems and building relationships. And I'm a creative who truly wants to kind of take in all that life has to offer. And I've seen that play out ever since graduating from ISU in so many different ways, but we can kind of talk about that throughout our conversation. Yeah, that's a little bit about me.

**Rachel Kobus 02:05**

Okay, and I love that you use the word creative as a noun, like, so talk about what's it mean to be creative and how does that lead into your small business - and not even small business anymore, your growing business of Lightward.

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 02:21**

You know, I think when I think about the identity of a creative, for me it means approaching every single thing in my life with a, kind of a lens of creativity, whether it be from the home that we're making, or the relationships that we're building, or the team dynamics that we're creating, I think that creativity offers myself and my husband who runs Lightward kind of this open-handed space and environment where we can create something beautiful out of mundane things and also really extravagant things. And I think that kind of the identity of a creative to me means really just, like, seizing the opportunity to create more beauty in the world, whether it be with humans or environments or with thoughts or with words. Everything kind of that we touch we kind of view as creative.

**Rachel Kobus 03:15**

I love it. And like you said, I know another part of Lightward, and the way you and your husband manage it, is that you're just, you're in the present, like, you, everything is, and are, and obviously I was reading up about Lightward and the amazing things you are doing, so can you talk a little bit more about what is Lightward and how did you get to where you are right now?

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 03:39**

It's actually funny that you ask what is Lightward, because Isaac and I have that conversation a lot with our team and we're actually working with a big branding agency out of Chicago and we're doing, like, kind of a rebrand and focus on our brand and what does it mean to be Lightward? I think the biggest, the, kind of some things that we talk about, being Lightward is this kind of experiment to see if living in our truth can work not only just with health, but also with the health of our business. Can we make money doing the things that we love in a way that is aligned with the things that are highly important to us, like trust and openness and freedom and respect and love and creativity, like we were talking about? We want to remind people of their own light and I think that's what, you know, Lightward means, like, toward the light. The things that we are doing is building, are building towards this kind of metaphoric sense of light and openness and health, because I think for our generation specifically, we're just excited about changing things up a bit, and not, for me -

**Rachel Kobus 04:49**

So true.

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 04:49**

Yeah, like, what can our business look like when we give - one, we pair people really well. Number two, we give them truly, like, the trust to trust themselves and build - have, of course, the core responsibilities that they have, but entrust them to do more with themselves and with the business. I think, you know, all those things kind of go into Lightward and it's just an ongoing experiment, what we can do with this mentality of anything is possible, literally from, like, a podcast that we have to like, you know, a random app that Isaac built two years, his second app that he built on the Shopify platform that enables other creators to create on top of Shopify, and it's, like, doing really well already. All of that is just with the core kind of motivation to produce more and to produce more health for not only the systems at play, but also the people at play and environments.

**Rachel Kobus 05:51**

Great. So - and obviously, it takes a team, so you touched a little bit on your employees, so what's it like to build this sort of company? What's it like to look for those specific team members? I have to brag for you, you've said you have a small but mighty team, but they've been with you for six plus years now and, I mean, that's strong retention, you don't see that a lot, especially small businesses, it's a lot of risks. What do you do?

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 06:18**

We were actually recording a podcast episode with a product manager from Shopify actually who oversees kind of the app store in Shopify and he was like, it's actually really hard to create an environment where, especially in tech, where people stay for more than two years, so how do you do that? And, you know, we started, Isaac, my husband on the tech side, had two employees for the first couple years being in business and he did that by just really an honest conversation about where the company was going, and not any promises, but he promised to keep the experiment alive and well with what he was building. So, you know, we've had two employees, we started with two employees, and they actually non-traditionally started with us, so they were in transition with their own careers and lives, like one of them was coming back from Spain, he was teaching abroad and he was like, well, I have coding background, like, what can I do? Another person had customer service background but didn't have a lot of coding background, but he didn't want to, he wanted to get into more coding and code meets customer service. So we were like, hey, as this grows, we're going to actually pay you, we're not going to start you full-time, we're actually going to start you off with, like, a couple hours a week and as the company grows then your salary and then your time is gonna grow, which is like actually really non-traditional, because a lot of people are, you know, looking for a full-time job, which then -

**Rachel Kobus 07:50**

A true experiment, like, this is a true experiment, like you said, from the, yep, sorry - [cross talk, inaudible].

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 07:54**

Yep, totally, and then the pandemic hit, so that was like - for many years - so our oldest teammate, is, has been on for six plus years, and then the second one five plus years, but then the pandemic hit, and it was actually us four, we were at a team retreat in New Zealand and - because we, again, we were like, why not take a little team retreat to New Zealand and enjoy nature and each other? And then, you know, because everything went online the company really, really skyrocketed on the tech side and now we have 10 people on payroll. So we went from four to 10 in, like, about a year, and some of them, you know, came on through connections that we had - actually all them except for one, there was one person who used the, one of Isaac's product for his own business, he was a CTO of a publicly-traded company in Canada and he used one of Isaac's apps for their store, for their online storefront, and he was like, hey, I'm looking for some, just kind of extra side work just for, you know, his brain happiness, like, he wanted to have some extra projects. And then he slowly transitioned full-time, he left his full-time job as a CTO to come on the Lightwork team. And that, like, you know, so I'm saying all this because it's, we don't really hire traditionally, we hire a lot of people we know, and everyone's like, don't work with your friends, but we're actually really emotionally intelligent for our age, I believe, and also we set the groundwork and we set the stage for high trust, high communication, high, just kind of

vulnerability with each other, like, one of our biggest core values and actually on every job, kind of, application or, kind of, job, what's it called?

**Rachel Kobus 09:48**

Description?

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 09:49**

What's the word? Description, yes, job description, is, like, your health is number one. It's not about the business first, it's about like, if your health is not good, then what are you going to do bring? So your top priority is your own health, and then comes the business. So I think that's really, kind of says a lot about what we value here and what we're building, because when you have healthy people - and of course not everything's perfect, but honestly, in the last six or seven years, as, you know, ever since we started having people on our payroll, there hasn't - everyone's like, yeah, you go through up and down, but like, in our experience the lowest of lows was just like, hey, I think - actually, I'm gonna pause myself here. Isaac, my husband, started a thread in our Slack channel recently, and he said, what did you need to unlearn coming on to Lightwork team? And starting on the Lightwork team, what did you need to unlearn about work? And a lot of people were like, oh, that I don't need to dread Mondays, or that I can actually be trusted to take off time in the middle of the day to walk my dog and not feel like I'm on the clock. Or that actually my health is the number one importance and, like, we figure out a way to make that work. And a lot of people had to undo these, like, kind of traumatic work experiences where they, where everyone says, like, oh, yeah, you are trusted but like, no, you really aren't. And I think it's really fascinating the environment that we're creating, because it's all an experiment, like we keep on talking about, but so far it's working and it's working really well.

**Rachel Kobus 11:25**

Well, that's how good results happen. You have to keep experimenting with them, so this sounds like a great experiment. And like I said, it's, I want to say this for everyone listening too, is the foundation is you stick to your values. You set very unique values, like, we hear the same values of trustworthiness and openness, but to have health as a number one value, you don't hear that very often in a business that maybe isn't very, like, stereotypically health-focused, like a fitness center or something like that. So the fact that your company has this as its number one value is just very, how do I want to say it, maybe appealing, but experimental, eye-opening, something that hopefully other businesses can pick up on as well too, because, like you said, high retention means, you know, happy employees, so I think you're doing a great job with Lightward and the name itself just speaks wonders. Lightward, to me, in my mind, when I read about both you and Isaac, is onward and upward, keep going, keep trying, keep doing new things. That's what you're doing.

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 12:24**

Absolutely. And I'm going to read a part of the job description of a recent role that we just hired. The title is "Being Lightward." "The bits in this section apply to all Lightward employees. Your responsibilities: these are the living things that I'm looking for you to hold, to monitor, to understand and to sustainably expand. Number one, your health as determined by you, informed by all the ways you know yourself. Number two, your relationship to everyone on the team, as determined by you, informed by all the ways you're connected. Number three, our collective relationship to the world as determined

by you, informed by everything." And I think what we do that I'm really proud of is we actually seek to understand what's actually really happening because we can't assume that we know our employees, what's going on in their minds, unless we give them a space to communicate it. And then we do fun work from there, which I get really excited because we have a really awesome team that we're, you know, and it allows us, you know, the tech side of the business actually funds the other parts, so we have a podcast that we produce every week, we just interviewed the CEO and co-founder of Whole30, her her episode's coming out next week, another New York Times bestselling author, Jedidiah Jenkins, he's the week after that. Lawyers, artists, CEOs, it's really cool to explore what it means to be alive for different people, so that's a project we're doing. I have a photography arm of Lightward and I have a coaching arm, so I coach clients, I'm an empowerment coach, and then also we have a membership community focused on empowered living and we're having our kind of first in-person retreat in the fall. Hopefully everything goes well with COVID. But yeah, so there's so many things alive and in motion, and going back to health, you know, the tenth person who we hired on our team on our payroll was, is a fitness and wellness expert, so like, literally, we spent, we're spending money that we could hire a developer or someone else and we are focused on making the team healthy and being a resource for not only me and Isaac, but our team for free, you know, coaching, fitness, and nutrition and all this stuff too because why not do that if we have an opportunity to ground ourselves in health.

**Rachel Kobus 14:45**

Yeah, I love it. So another part about, you know, when you're doing experiments is taking risks. So do you have any thoughts, whether it's personally - I know just from following you on social media and reading through Lightward's bios of yourself, but you've taken risks to get here too. Being an entrepreneur isn't just, happens overnight and look at us being successful and healthy, like, this takes time and effort and whether that's personally or professionally, so can you talk about any risks that you've taken or how you get through those challenging moments maybe that's happened as a small business - I don't want to say - an entrepreneur?

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 15:25**

Yeah. You know, I think the things that keep on coming to my mind when you're asking this question is just, like, being value-driven. And that's a cliché answer, but like, what is driving my actions and what we're building? Again, it's trust, again, it's, like, believing that this can work and that's, and surrounding myself with people and experiences that are going to help us achieve more and not, like, honestly, being really picky with the things that you do. I think I saw quote recently, like, the more you heal, the more picky you get, because your kind of standard of what you could take on before is actually different when you're actually strong enough to say no, and there's a lot of nos that you need to say and there's a lot of yeses that you can say, but I think being, like, really firm in your nos as well as your yeses are super important. And taking risks, like, I think, to be honest with you, I don't think that - when I hear the word risk, none of this seems like a risk because I'm so grounded in, like, what is possible and what - like, I moved to Denver right after Illinois State, a year after I graduated Illinois State, and I literally graduated, did a job at Target for a year, and then I was like, I don't want to do this. I remember calling Larry Dietz, like, in my office at Target, like, crying, I was crying. I'm like, Larry, I did not graduate from ISU to hate my life, like, what is going on, and he was like, he just helped me through that moment.

**Rachel Kobus 16:58**

Of course he did, that is what he's there for.

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 16:59**

Yeah, he's so amazing. But I think, like, I packed up my car and moved to Denver for love, for an ex, and I think, like, I opened up that, I literally packed up my car and moved and had a serving job, but then, serving job lined up, and then literally, like, two or three days before I was going to move to Denver, I actually got a call from a big nonprofit in Denver and I was their first out-of-state hire, I got a job there. And I think, like, I think when you follow what's right for you, I think that that kind of produces momentum that no one can stop. And I think that's really, has inspired me along the way to continue saying yes to the things that feel good to me. And I mean, as that translates to what we're doing in Lightward, all the things that we're doing feels really, really good to us, which then gives us momentum. So that way, when we do have roadblocks, or situations that come up that need, you know, more mind work to get through or whatever, then we have the momentum to do it. So I don't really think, if I'm being honest, I don't, like, I think it takes a lot of work and a lot of intention and also, like, we haven't risked things that we weren't comfortable with losing, if that makes sense.

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 18:18**

It makes perfect sense. That is a great way to put it.

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 18:20**

You know what I mean?

**Rachel Kobus 18:20**

A different way to put it, I like it, thank you for sharing that. So I always have to ask this question too, and sharing, because I know we do have something in common from Illinois State, is that we both were on Homecoming Court during our respective years. I know!

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 18:35**

I love it!

**Rachel Kobus 18:36**

[Cross talk, inaudible] I know, so I was so happy when you said yes to doing this because I remember being on court in 2010, this is dating us too, so - but then being able to sit on the judging side of it and see Abe come through and let's just say, after rocking his interview, and being one of the most prospective students, I feel like, in the student body when you were here, got to be Homecoming King, too. So that's a great memory for me for Homecoming Court and I know you share that, being involved in that capacity, but for all of maybe our future Redbirds listing today too, how else - I would assume and hope ISU has helped drive you in your entrepreneurship and I know your School of Communication background obviously, just speaking with you and that has helped you with your empowerment, your life coaching, but what else has ISU done for you, do you believe?



**Abe Lopez-Bowen 19:28**

Yeah, I I'm gonna kind of piggyback off of the Homecoming thing real quick. I think what was really cool about it is, you know, getting to college wasn't, like, easy-peasy for me. It was, like, I was, I needed to always fight to be in the honors classes. I literally, when I was 14, convinced my guidance counselor that I belonged in honors classes because my tests didn't, my standardized tests didn't align with that. And I've always been this person that, like, if I want, if I saw something that I want I chase after it, even if I didn't have a lot of people around me to kind of benchmark myself off of. I'm a Latino, I'm, you know, first generation grad, I mean first generation college student, and, I think the homecoming, to me, that time, I remember calling my old professor Jennifer McDade, and it was the Sunday before homecoming week and I was on Homecoming Court, and I said, I have a job interview for this sales position in Chicago on Friday, the night of the hoops contest or whatever, where they would, where they would announce King and Queen, and she was like, Abe, think about if that job was not in downtown Chicago, because at the time I was like, this is in downtown Chicago, it's super cool, and I was like, this is all I've been wanting my whole life. She's like, but take the job, take Chicago out of the job, like, would you like this job? And I'm like, no, like, none of it seems exciting to me. She's like, Abe, you literally have spent three years investing in Illinois State and this has been your life, like, this is your week, enjoy it, there are gonna be a lot of job offers that come to you, so I think you should do it. And I did, and I stayed for the weekend and I won, but it was really cool because it was just like this - I think, to answer your question, I think it prepared me to, one, Illinois State prepared me for a life that was committed to, one, just, like, excellence, like, we can do anything, I was a student leader at - I was bringing LMFAO or, like, part of bringing LMFAO when I was 20 to campus or, like, hosting Herman Boone when I was 18, the coach from Remember the Titans, through my involvement with University Program Board, I was, like, who - like, this little 18-year-old me with my advisor Kate Lafrenz, like, we were hosting this, like, mega superstar basically. I think Illinois State just really taught me that things are possible and I think that's what, that's why the kind of jarring experience post-college of, like, being in an environment that was not for me, coming from an environment that really was for me, I was like, no, like, I can actually build a life where the environment is actually cultivating this sense of, like, one, safety for me to actually be who I am, and then two, like, you know, kind of sharpen me as a leader and a person. And now, like, now, I honestly, if I were to be talking to my 2012 self when I graduated, like, I wouldn't even, I wouldn't believe what I've done and what I've experienced, which is really cool. And we're only just, I feel like we're only just beginning. I was tell - we were literally having lunch a bit ago and I was like, you know, I've aged really well since, you know, college, in terms of, like, not just my look, I've lost weight and I've become a lot healthier, but also just how much of the world I've seen and how many people I've been able to connect with and products I've been able to do. It's all just, I'm so grateful and I'm so, just, like, excited about what's to come.

**Rachel Kobus 22:48**

And I'm excited for you about what's to come because I think a lot of great things are going to come for you, are going to come for your company, we are excited to have you as a Redbird alum, Abe, everything, your excitement, your passion, your dedication back to Illinois State, it's amazing, you were very much, you know, as we like to say, #RedbirdProud, you could put a face to it of Abe Lopez-Bowen, definitely one of those people.



**Abe Lopez-Bowen 23:12**

Thank you.

**Rachel Kobus 23:12**

So with that, I guess if there's anything else you want to add to our time together. Again, I appreciate speaking with you, your journey so far and, like you said, it's a journey that's going to continue for many, many years, but anything else you'd like to add, talk about?

**Abe Lopez-Bowen 23:30**

No, I think just, you know, as an encouragement to anyone listening, whether you're a student or even in the business world, I've been able to meet with, you know, heart-forward entrepreneurs and heart-forward CEOs and artists and lawyers through, you know, not just our professional endeavors, but also just, you know, through the communities we run in, and I think that there are things, like, being shaken up in the world, which is really exciting to be a part of, and I think that if you are curious about that kind of direction of building businesses and projects and teams in a heart-forward way, like, there's so much, there's so many resources out there and so many people who are actually pursuing this, not just studying this, but actually making millions of dollars doing this. And I think that there, it's not just, like, I saw something online the other day, like soft skills were, quote, unquote, soft skills were actually, like, viewed as not strong back in the day, but I think, like, in the future of business and entrepreneurship we're going to need to be really human-focused, and not just cookie cutter human-focused, like, actually, what does it mean to produce environments where people can feel safe and encouraged and empowered to be their best selves, so that way the product or whatever we're building can be its best self. So, you know, I'm really excited about that and please feel free to reach out if you want to connect with that, Lightward.com, we're doing a lot of cool things and we'd love to connect.

**Rachel Kobus 25:10**

That was 2012 alum Abe Lopez-Bowen and we thank him for sharing his story with us today. Tune in next time to Redbird Buzz for more stories from beyond the quad.