

Karen Zelnick:

Entrepreneurs are expected to do it all. Run a company, develop great relationships with your investors, keep up with your personal life all while needing to keep yourself together. But like everyone else, founders struggle with their own personal battles. Today we're talking with someone familiar, someone who has overcome major challenges and reached success. Join us in today's conversation with investor Gavin Christensen for a special episode of Perfect Pitch.

Karen Zelnick:

Perfect Pitch is a podcast from Kickstart that reveals the minds of both investors and entrepreneurs throughout a startup's journey.

Karen Zelnick:

I'm your host, Karen Zelnick. Gavin, thank you so much for being here today.

Gavin Christensen:

You bet.

Karen Zelnick:

You've paved the way for seed funding in Utah and really kind of the Mountain West, which we're going to talk about. But before Kickstart, you were an analyst, associate and principal at vSpring Capital, which is now Signal Peak and outside of Kickstart, you enjoy one wheeling, gaming on VR with your family and the Kickstart team and playing tennis. And because it's our favorite question to ask you, what are you currently reading?

Gavin Christensen:

I try to do one biography history, then one kind of sci-fi fantasy thriller and then alternate. I've been on a little bit of a fun run, listening and reading a bunch of Neal Stephenson novels recently. He did a bunch of stuff that was kind of really topical related to the future, kind of in pandemic land, which I found fascinating. So I've kind of focused on that.

Karen Zelnick:

That's great. I tend to read multiple books at a time, but I'm the same. I have a serious book. I have a fun book. So Gavin, let's press rewind and look back at your life before founding Kickstart. Walk us through what you were up to in the years prior to 2008.

Gavin Christensen:

Like many things in my life, I tend to apply for something I'm trying to achieve or get accepted to and fail at least once or twice. So I tried to get into management consulting in '99 and totally whiffed. Didn't get any offers. I took a job with Fidelity downtown. I was on the phones doing sales for them and learned a lot about investing. I did get tired of taking IRA calls to help people with choosing which mutual fund they wanted to do, but I learned a lot about investing and really fell in love with investing there, which was really interesting.

Gavin Christensen:

Was able a year later to get an offer from several firms in consulting. I chose to join Monitor in Boston. That's where I really did strategy consulting, learned a lot about just generally about business and what I was interested in doing. Eventually decided to take an offer to come back to Utah, to join vSpring, which was really a startup venture firm that was really the first to focus on Utah. But probably the most formative thing that happened during that period was me getting diagnosed with something called Addison's disease.

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah. Tell us about that.

Gavin Christensen:

I would preface this by saying everybody has things in life that are challenging. These struggles tend to define us and make us who we are. So for me, my story of being diagnosed with Addison's disease when I was in Boston really is a big part of that. So I had been totally healthy my entire life. Back in '99 I was feeling. I had whiffed on getting into the industry I wanted, but I had just gotten married to an amazing woman my wife, Lindsay, and eventually got this job in Boston. We were driving out to Boston, kind of seeing the country. We were driving our '87 Buick staying in hotels, which is so amazing. We're staying in these hotels. This is amazing. Eating fast food. It felt like very luxurious to us.

Gavin Christensen:

There's some of the clues that kind of happened along the way that something was really not right. I had been feeling pretty rundown for a while. I would often get nauseated. I've always been very active, but I was having trouble exercising. I remember we were at the Mall of America kind of crossing the country and we're walking around. I had this like full body muscle cramp where I was just laying on the ground writhing in pain while many Minnesotans looked on wondering what was going on. I joined Monitor. We're living in Boston and it's an incredibly intense work environment there, 80 hour week, pretty normal weeks. I was just really struggling and I had lost a bunch of weight.

Gavin Christensen:

It eventually hit a crisis point where I had lost... Let's say I weigh about 170 pounds, I was down to 125 pounds. I got to the point where I couldn't walk upstairs.

Karen Zelnick:

Oh my goodness.

Gavin Christensen:

Which is kind of crazy. We actually lived on the second or third story. At the time I'm 24 and I can't walk upstairs. I would throw up every morning. It was the doctor saying, wow, there's something just really wrong with me and I passed out while he was taking my blood pressure. He couldn't actually register any blood pressure and they took me to the ambulance at Mass General. So Dr. Wall, my doctor in Boston was a big JFK fan and so he noticed some of the really subtle clues that I had something called Addison's disease, which basically means that you no longer have adrenal glands. It registers when it...

Gavin Christensen:

The adrenal glands play a really key role in the body. They regulate everything from blood pressure to metabolism, to mood, and they release certain steroids and hormones, which you don't have if you don't have adrenal glands. So it's irreversible and it's a chronic illness that you can manage, but you have to manage manually. It really took me years and even decades to figure out how to live with a chronic illness. If I'm a Type 1 diabetic, there's such great technology now. I have a pump and I can look at my levels that are measured for me. So I kind of know if I'm high or low and what I need to do. It's still really challenging.

Gavin Christensen:

Unfortunately, Addison's is rare enough that there is no pump. I just have to do everything by feel and so there's this constant sort of meta analysis that I have going on in my mind of how am I doing? Do I need more steroid? A couple different steroids that I take oral steroid. So when I play tennis, I always joke that I'm doping. I literally am taking steroids, but your body would naturally secrete more steroid when you exercise and mine doesn't. So I have to add.

Gavin Christensen:

Just to give you an idea, if I don't manage my medication appropriately, and let's say I didn't have medication for... I got cut off for a few days. It probably would take me about three to four days to die. I have to set an alarm, wake up, get medicine and go back to sleep and then wake up because that's how you wake up in the morning is your body releases cortisol and other mineral corticoids to wake you up. So it's a manual wake up, which I'm used to now, but one of the things that took me too long to figure out is when I'm really stressed out emotionally, your body reacts to that too. So I have to do that manually.

Karen Zelnick:

Do you have an example of a time when you were working really hard on something and had to overcome the symptoms of Addison's and what you did? Just a very specific example if you have one.

Gavin Christensen:

In the early days of Kickstart I was trying to get Kickstart off the ground and I was also spending time with one of the partners of vSpring, helping to get a fund in Mexico off the ground. The one that Dalton was eventually part of. I got an illness and with Addison's it's tricky, you can get illnesses and they can quickly kind of spin out of control. It got really bad and I started throwing up. I went to the ER and what they do is they give you this injection of cortisol. They also injected me with morphine. They gave me this heated blanket and I remember thinking, man, that blanket was amazing. I still actually think back about that blanket. Wow, that was such a great blanket.

Karen Zelnick:

Do they sell that anywhere?

Gavin Christensen:

Yeah. Yeah. Obviously it was the morphine that was very helpful for a calming effect, but I think it just is a good example for me of, okay, I pushed it beyond the physical limit. But a lot of it was the mental stress that I was not compensating for, that kind of pushed me over the edge. I got better and kind of

got back at it, but those were the kind of things that would happen that would give me a whole kind of cycle of self doubt after things like that.

Gavin Christensen:

Wow, can I even do this? Who am I kidding? I remember when I was newly diagnosed, I was visiting my brother and his new wife. We were trying to find our car and whatever, you can't find your car, but I was for whatever reason, a little bit off on these steroids. So I was like where is our car? I broke down and started crying. So it really changed my mindset and for several years after I got it, I was like obviously I'm not going to have the career that I thought I would.

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah. I was going to ask. How did that diagnosis impact how you saw your life moving forward?

Gavin Christensen:

I'd always been pretty used to being very kind of mentally quick and there's a lot of brain fog associated with Addison's because of sometimes you literally don't have enough oxygen in your brain. So I became more quiet. I started to really be very thoughtful about what I would say and be careful. It really affected my confidence for years. So I really started dialing back my expectations about what I could achieve. I don't know how long I will be able to work was a constant worry of mine because I don't know how long I have.

Karen Zelnick:

Gavin, that's a really sobering thing to have happen, especially when you're so young. There are a lot of founders who carry something like this. What advice would you give to them?

Gavin Christensen:

It's no coincidence that I'm talking about this now 15 years in, because I would be very afraid of what my first investors would've thought of me knowing I had this illness. At some level, most people would've no said no to Kickstart matter what I did. So people didn't need another reason to say no. I think the world has changed a bit about the challenges that people have and that most people have something, and it can be overcome in careers and in personal life.

Gavin Christensen:

But we're still not there. On the one hand, I hope it inspires people that maybe they have some kind of physical or mental deficiency as they see it, that they can overcome and still do great things. So that's partly why I share it now. So that was my decision and I think it was probably why, sadly.

Karen Zelnick:

That's a lot to carry, especially with the burden of also then starting something. Like you said, it wasn't right for you to talk about it at the time and we're really grateful you're talking about it now and that people can be inspired by it, and lifted up and learn from it. But what advice would we give to people who feel they can't tell their investors? What can they take away from this?

Gavin Christensen:

Hopefully be inspired saying, hey, maybe I can overcome my challenges and make it happen. The journey of the founder is always lonely and hard and it's hard to share with others. Sadly, I felt this. Sharing weakness isn't always rewarded with understanding and trust. It sometimes can lead people who you want to share with to doubt you.

Gavin Christensen:

That said, I think struggling with this issue and its implications has created maybe a little bit of a superpower in the behavior I've developed, which is kind of an always a meta analysis of hey, how am I feeling? How am I doing? That's really helped me to have a lot of emotional control over what's happening around me. That coupled with someone who felt like I could have died in my twenties and didn't, has really left me you with conviction, that there's no guarantee about how long I live. So try to live deliberately. The day to day drama of building a business is hard and challenging, but I can sort of pace myself through it and help others to pace themselves through it. So I think that's something that I've learned to do from this illness.

Karen Zelnick:

I really appreciate you sharing what you've learned and the things that have helped you. I'm also curious, are there things that you would do differently looking back, that you would change now?

Gavin Christensen:

Most of my regrets are in the category of over correcting. Feeling so worried about taking care of my family and having this business work that I build a castle wall, then a moat, and another moat around my ability to control my health. I think I probably should have been much more willing to share the burden with those that were closest to me. I think a lot of entrepreneurs can relate to that of hey, got to have some safe people in your life that you can share the burden with. You're actually not doing them a favor by protecting them from it.

Karen Zelnick:

I like how everyone can learn something from that. Sometimes the instinct is to put moats on top of moats. So just start where you're at and kind of work and try to be better moving forward.

Gavin Christensen:

The cool thing that I think I've learned, especially the last five to seven years of hey, a lot of marriage counseling, a lot of personal counseling, a lot of perspective is it's never too late to get it right and to improve and move on. So if we let go of our conception of who we are, as soon as you let it go, you realize, well, what am I even protecting? Who cares?

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah.

Gavin Christensen:

I'm so far from infallible. I just let go of this conception we have of ourselves and it's pretty freeing. You're like, oh, I'll just focus on learning and getting better as a person as opposed to trying to protect some false conception of who I wish I were. Or hey, that was the dad I wish I was, or the husband I wish I

was, or the leader I wish I was. It's like, well, I can let that go and just focus on being the best I can be now with others saying, yeah, that's actually where you are.

Karen Zelnick:

I think that's really beautiful and I actually recently read an article about not being afraid of beating yourself up about regret, but using it to your point of letting go of just all the conceptions of what you should be. Stop shoulding yourself and say oh, I should have been this, but moving forward and saying hey, tomorrow I can be this. Tomorrow I want to be this. It's a really freeing perspective and reframe, I think/ so I love that you brought that up. Is there anything else you would like to share with listeners?

Gavin Christensen:

So April is National Adrenal Disease Month, which many of you probably do not know, but as part of the board of the National Adrenal Disease Foundation, we're trying to spread awareness about Addison's disease. Specifically to allow emergency room physicians to know these symptoms so that they can help save these individuals. So to support that effort this month we're going to attach a link to this podcast and on our social to allow you to donate to NADF. I would be happy to match any donations that come through to a reasonable level. We do know some people with a lot of shooting powers and hey, let's hope that becomes a problem, but I'm really excited to match those donations.

Karen Zelnick:

That's so exciting. Thanks, Gavin. We'll be sure to include a link. Gavin, this is something we like to ask everyone. So I'm going to ask you as well. What's an effective practice that you've implemented in your work or personal life that you think has had a great impact on your success?

Gavin Christensen:

So for me, getting to a good spot with Addison's disease is probably as much about just holistic health as anything. I have to take this certain steroids every day or I just eventually will die. So that's pretty easy to do that and if I miss it by 30 minutes or an hour, I know. There's kind of the emergency stuff, which is an [inaudible 00:15:50] crisis where I have to have people around me that can give me these shots and stuff like that, which my partners know about.

Gavin Christensen:

But then there's just general health. What's a good, healthy norm for me in terms of sleeping, just as important as exercise and diet, right? Which I think is something that our community of entrepreneurs really tends to sacrifice for other things is sleep. I've just learned to listen to my body and to know, okay, these people are talking to me and they're saying similar things that they normally say, but literally everything they're saying is bugging me. So that's probably me, not them. Those kind of things that come with a little bit of self awareness.

Gavin Christensen:

So those are some of the things that have worked and paying a close attention to mental health. And for me, that's a lot of things I do in terms of spending time with family, religious observance, but also having fun is a big deal for me. I find that my energy for life gets sucked away if I'm not having fun. I love Kickstart and building and helping companies and startups build but I also like to just have fun. I'm not a

guy that just needs to work all the time. I've done that, but I'm trying to not do that now. So whether that's tennis, one wheel, VR, other board sports, we have to find those things that refuel us.

Gavin Christensen:

My advice to entrepreneurs and our team is always hey, I'm way less impressed with people that can work insane hours because they tend to burn out and make bad choices or do bad work. It's all about consistent productivity over time. That's what gets it done. That's what creates great companies. I think pacing ourselves a little bit, recognizing that it's hard to take the quantity out of entrepreneurship. It's sort of part of the deal, but also finding things that renew us is a really big deal.

Karen Zelnick:

I feel like I needed to be taking bulleted notes on every single one of those points. I'm so grateful that you shared all of them. I've had so many aha moments and moments of gratitude for you being willing to one, just share so openly about your story and spread awareness about this important issue. So I'm grateful we're able to help bring awareness to that.

Gavin Christensen:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity and I really appreciate... In some ways it's sort of sad that it's taken me this long to be open about this, but I'm so grateful I'm in a position I can be. I hope it inspires others that have some weakness, real or perceived, that they feel like other people would maybe discount them if they knew to recognize that they can achieve great things and have a fulfilling life.

Karen Zelnick:

I'm confident it will. Being able to create awareness and dialogue around this just gives people the space to do that. So I think it will. Gavin, thank you for being here today and of course, thank you for listening as we dive deep into what it takes to create the perfect pitch. If you want to learn more about our investor Gavin Christensen from Kickstart, we'll have a link to his profile and a longer bio in our show notes at [kickstartfund.com](https://kickstartfund.com). You can listen to more episodes of Perfect Pitch wherever you listen to your podcast and if you like what you're learning, leave us a review or rating. We'll be back next time with more insights from entrepreneurs and the investors who fund them. So be sure to subscribe so you don't miss a thing.