

Building A Better Web And A Better World

An Interview with Frank H. McCourt, Jr., Executive Chairman, McCourt Global and Founder, Project Liberty

EDITORS' NOTE Frank McCourt is a civic entrepreneur and the Executive Chairman of McCourt Global (mccourt.com), a private family company committed to building a better future through its work across the real estate, sports, technology, media, and finance industries, as well as its significant philanthropic activities. He is a fifth-generation builder who is extending his family's 132-year legacy of merging community and social impact with financial results, an approach that



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started when the original McCourt Company was launched in Boston in 1893. McCourt is a passionate supporter of multiple academic, civic, and cultural institutions and initiatives. He is the founder of Project Liberty (projectliberty.io), which was launched in 2019 to build solutions that help people take back control of their digital lives by reclaiming a voice, choice, and stake in a better internet. In May 2024, Project Liberty announced *The People's Bid for TikTok* with the backing of Guggenheim Securities, the investment banking and capital markets business of Guggenheim Partners, and Kirkland & Ellis, the world's largest law firm. *The People's Bid* aims to capitalize on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to redesign TikTok to help Americans reclaim their digital independence. For the first time, it would give TikTokers control of their data and provide creators and businesses ownership of the relationships they've worked so hard to build. *The People's Bid* has attracted deep support from leaders across the fields of finance, policy, and technology, along with thousands of concerned citizens. Project Liberty was also instrumental in the launch of *Frequency*, a blockchain that

powers the people's internet through the Decentralized Social Networking Protocol (DSNP). McCourt has served on Georgetown University's Board of Directors for many years and, in 2013, made a \$100 million founding investment to create Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. He expanded on this commitment in 2021 with a \$100 million investment to catalyze an inclusive pipeline of public policy leaders and put the school on a path to becoming tuition-free. McCourt owns the French football club

Olympique de Marseille and formerly owned the Los Angeles Dodgers. With family roots in the construction business dating back to the late 19th century, he has built upon this history with initiatives ranging from the development of Boston's Seaport to large, mixed-use projects in Dallas, London, Phoenix, New York City, and elsewhere. McCourt graduated from Georgetown University. In 2024, McCourt released his first book, *OUR BIGGEST FIGHT: Reclaiming Liberty, Humanity, and Dignity in the Digital Age*.

Will you discuss your career journey and what you feel have been the keys to your business success?

I started my professional journey at 13 by founding a trash collection company, then joined the family construction business at 16 when I was old enough to work in that environment. I then had an urge to move from so-called horizontal construction to vertical construction and started our building group which led to my work growing a development company. Fortunately, I was able to use some of the value I created to buy the Los Angeles

Dodgers, and the rest is history. It has been a ground up – literally – career, and I feel that I have benefited greatly from rolling up my sleeves and deeply learning all aspects of the businesses I am involved in.

I have learned that a strong work ethic really matters because there is nothing that replaces experience. It is also important not to be afraid to fail because failure is inevitable, and those are the greatest learning moments. You need to be in the game to succeed, which means you need to take risks and continue to evolve. Lastly, it is critical to be a continuous learner and to have a high level of curiosity because the world is constantly changing and evolving, and I think that adaptability and a willingness to embrace change are important attributes.

What was your vision for creating Project Liberty and how do you define its mission?

I love technology, and I am old enough to have witnessed the creation of the Internet as well as its evolution into the World Wide Web. At the time, I viewed the Internet as this wonderful invention to connect people and to make us less vulnerable as a country by having a decentralized communication system where we can share information, get smarter, and advance our great nation. But I watched the originally decentralized Internet become highly centralized and start to be used in unhealthy ways. I experienced the ills of the current Internet personally when I was going through a public divorce in Los Angeles, and felt the sting of weaponized social media where people could say anything they wanted to hurt people, and almost do it for sport. This to me was very telling and

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made me see that this beautiful Internet that was designed to make us all better and smarter was being turned into something very different – a powerful weapon to cause chaos and polarization and harm. I felt that I should act and do something about it rather than just complain about it, and it is one of those issues that once you see it, you can’t unsee it.

I started to analyze how it would be possible to fix this systemic problem at its core, and we have the privilege of having some brilliant computer scientists who work for Project Liberty, led by Braxton Woodham. I asked them the question, “If resources were not an issue and you could address what is wrong with the Internet, how would you go about doing that?” They came back with what I thought was a simple, but brilliant idea, which was to create another core thin layer Internet protocol that would connect us as individuals on the Internet and return our identity, our data, and our relationships back to each of us, rather than all of that being the property of these big platforms. So just as the Internet was originally created with a core thin layer protocol called TCP which connected devices and then evolved into the World Wide Web with a simple protocol called HTTP which connected data, our team created another protocol called DSNP which connects us as humans.

The reality is that 50 years after the invention of the Internet, you and I are not on the Internet – our devices are on the Internet. That IP address is the address of our device. Isn’t it time that we as individuals control our experience on the Internet rather than being out of control and exploited by the Internet?

I asked Braxton and our team to go out and find who was already doing this so that we could team up with them to accelerate the work. A few weeks later, Braxton came back to me and said that he had not found anyone else developing this kind of technology. This surprised me at first, but it made sense when I thought about it because the current architecture, which is highly centralized and predominate in our lives, is all about data extraction and aggregating all our information and then monetizing it, but it is also about manipulating us and triggering us to drive engagement and farm more data.

I greenlit this work, which would evolve into Project Liberty, in December 2019, and the team began to build this protocol and

eventually released it to the world. Then, we began building the full stack on it so that we can have an upgraded, alternative Internet and social media ecosystem to the one we have today, where individuals are able to reclaim ownership of themselves. What I mean by that is that our identity and our data in the digital age is our personhood – it is who we are. We should not be treating our physical being as separate from our digital being – they are one in the same. As a matter of fact, when these big technology companies collect millions of data points on each of us and centralize that information in an algorithm, they know more about us than we know about ourselves. It is time that we reclaim what is ours – reclaim our identity, our data, our relationships – and have the Internet work in a way where we own our identity, and we own the product of our work. Our relationships are ours, they shouldn’t be owned by someone else. We can fix this by turning the ownership and control of our data back to each of us. Our virtual selves can be returned to our physical selves, and we can be reunited with what makes us human. Because after all, what makes us human is what we create – our choices, our thoughts, our feelings, our relationships. All of this has been taken from us by these platforms that are mining our data and profiting off of it – some of which is constructive, but much of it is destructive. We see the harm to society: democracy is struggling; it is hard to separate fact from fiction in our information ecosystem; civil discourse has eroded; the harms to children are unforgivable; and trust is being destroyed. Without trust we do not have democracy, we do not have capitalism, we do not have a world like the one we have benefited from in years past.

This is a critical moment and not a day goes by that we do not hear about a new problem, but the most important message I have is that it does not have to be this way. We can change how the Internet works to make it a human-centric Internet, not a machine-centric Internet. It is time to once again decentralize the Internet and get it back on track so that it fulfills the vision of its inventors and the visionaries who created it.

When you look back five years to when you started this effort, has it progressed the way you had hoped?

I think we are making great progress, but I have no delusion about the magnitude of this

undertaking. One of the characteristics of my career journey has been patience because, to change things, you must be fully committed to persevere. Things don’t change overnight – until one day they do. What I mean by that is we have been at this for over five years, and you can see and feel that the pace of change is accelerating. There will be a day in the future where the current paradigm is going to dramatically shift – I am 100 percent sure of it. We are going to have a better version of the Internet where people own themselves again; where people feel that they are back in control of their lives; where parents can be parents again; where we can all be citizens, rather than subjects, again; where we can have conversations even when we disagree; where we can tell the difference between fact and fiction; and where we can strengthen our democracy. This will happen, but it is going to require a mass migration from the existing Internet to this new, upgraded version. When users take that leap of faith, we are going to see change happen quickly. It is going to feel like it happened overnight, but it will be the result of hundreds of people who are working on this project day and night to fix the issue.

There is an old saying that goes something like this: first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, and then you win. We are in the fight phase now, and this is our fight. The work we’re doing at Project Liberty is for all Americans to reclaim what is theirs and to fix what we all know intuitively is broken. I have eight children, and my number one job as a parent is to protect my kids, and this is an issue all parents are facing. Solving it is going to require collective action, and every day more people are realizing that the path we are on is not sustainable and we need to fix it. We are creating a movement, because at the end of the day it will require collective action – people working together in great numbers to achieve a common goal – that leads to real change. I believe that we are at the beginning of a major movement, and people are starting to engage. We need to replace fear and helplessness with hopefulness and possibility for the future – the future we want and the future we deserve. We have the power to change this – ultimately it is just an engineering design problem – and the reasoning to join this movement boils down to a very simple concept: if we can reclaim our power, we can do anything. ●