

[Health Care on a Napkin](#)

Tuesday, 10 November 2009 12:49 Elizabeth Limbach



One UCSC alumni swears that pictures can solve any problem—including health care reform

Dan Roam's career path wasn't anything he could have planned for or expected. Somehow, he started college with the intention of becoming a doctor and ended up drawing on the backs of napkins for a living—and making quite a name for himself doing it.

"I blame it all on Santa Cruz," he says.

The consultant, author and professional doodler is giving a presentation at the Santa Cruz Dream Inn on Nov. 12, at which he will attempt to break down the seemingly complex issue of American health care reform using simple drawings. The project, "American Health Care: A Four Napkin Series," is his latest in a long line of attempts to solve big problems on—you guessed it—the backs of napkins.

Roam, now a San Francisco resident, attended UC Santa Cruz in the late-'80s where he completed the pre-med requirements before realizing his heart was really with art, and stuck around a few more years to get a fine art degree. He worked as a graphic designer after college, where "it was absolutely normal that I drew all the time in meetings," he says. "But as I moved into the business realm, I realized it was weird—in a good way—that I drew in meetings."

Roam would go up to the whiteboard and draw out the problems at hand. "The dynamic would suddenly change in the room," he recalls. "The fact that someone was standing there making simple pictures changed the way people related and understood." This is when he first realized the power of visual thinking and the position he was in to share it with the world.

One best-selling book later ("Back of the Napkin: Problem solving and selling ideas with pictures"), Roam is a premier business consultant, having doodled for Microsoft, Ebay, Wal-Mart (don't worry, he says, it was on their environmental sustainability project), and the United States Senate, Navy and Department of Defense

among others. In the process he has also become an expert at reconnecting people with his or her (what he considers) innate propensity for visual thinking and problem solving.

“What I’m trying to do is have creative people be more business-like in their thinking, and business people be more creative in their thinking, and pictures are the perfect bridge for that,” he says. “Brainstorming meetings, financial analytic meetings, marketing meetings—you name it, anytime there is a meeting there is always something to be drawn.”

Having drawn his way through many big business problems, he met a new kind of challenge this past summer. “I got really freaked out by the tone that was emerging in these national Town Hall meetings regarding health care,” Roam says. “The angst and anger and antagonism...something was really off. I realized that if I really believe what I say about solving problems with pictures, it stands that I should be able to boil down the health care issue in a straight-forward, non-political way.” No easy feat, considering very few people—politicians included—fully understand the matter, let alone are able to explain it.

Yet, after a weekend locked in an office with a health care expert (“He gave me the facts, I drew,” he says), Roam emerged with a collection of simple drawings based entirely on actual health care legislation. So far, over 160,000 people have downloaded “American Health Care: A Four Napkin Series” from Roam’s website, digitalroam.com. “[The series] is a PowerPoint document about health care. What could be more boring on Earth? Why would anyone want to download that? Well, it’s simple, factual, non-political and clear,” he says. “People from all sides of the political spectrum have said thank you.”

He has been featured on The Huffington Post and appeared on Fox News, where he got seven minutes of prime time to talk about his health care napkins. “To me it’s the viewers of Fox who are the ones who really need to understand what is actually in the legislation and what is not in the legislation: it is not about death panels, it is not about socialized medicine,” he says. “None of those things have anything to do with the essentials of the debate.”

So what are the essentials, according to Roam? There are four, and each has its own napkin: one, health care in America is a business. (“That is the No. 1 issue we need to be aware of,” he says. “It’s an outgrowth of how our country was founded and what we believe as a society, whether it is right or wrong.”) Two, it’s not health care reform—it’s health insurance reform. (“Probably the most glaring error the White House has made in health care was calling it health care reform...if they’d called it insurance reform off the bat, I bet all of it would have gone through much easier.”) Three, what plans are really on the table (and which are just hype)? And four, what does this all mean for me?

Personal opinion aside, Roam believes he has developed a must-see breakdown of health insurance reform. He will be presenting his findings to Cruzans at the Dream Inn event, where he will also talk about the benefits of using visual thinking to solve problems.

All proceeds from the Nov. 12 event will benefit Healthy Kids of Santa Cruz County, a nonprofit health insurance and enrollment program for low-income children. Tickets are \$25, available at hipscc.org.