Madykazoo™ Educational Foundation

The Journey



If I could go back and advise myself one year ago, these are the thoughts I had and the order of the steps I needed to build a children's publishing company and nonprofit from scratch. I did all the steps, but not necessarily in order! My knowledge grew as the inspiration for the vision and mission grew into something more magical than I had ever imagined—encouraging the next generation to live, love, and learn about the seven continents and become stewards of Earth.

Can Pickleball Be a Mission? Defining the Mission

Some entrepreneurs rush into creating an LLC or nonprofit before clearly defining their mission—I did. I just wanted to create visual stories for children who learn visually, like me. I created characters who had features I didn't like about myself growing up. Freckles. Buck teeth. Bowed legs. Wanting to hide, but couldn't make myself invisible.

In my retirement, I had been playing pickleball 9–10 times a week for over a year. (Yes, I'm pretty good and still teach at the Senior Center on Wednesdays.) But…I felt I was too young to spend the rest of my life not adding value anywhere. I had a friend who was active at 93! What if I lived another 20 years??? I didn't want to "waste" that time on a pickleball court.

Before spending money on filings, trademarks, websites, or software, there were several questions I asked myself:

- Why am I doing this?
- Do I have the time and money to commit?
- Do I have the technical know-how and business acumen?
- Will I have to rely on other resources? At what cost?
- What support will I need emotionally, physically, financially?

I should have also asked:

- How will the nonprofit support the mission?
- Can the business support itself financially?

I immediately waded through the first set of questions, but not the second! Lol. All I wanted to do was design and create. But it eventually became clear. This was bigger than I imagined: I was creating educational stories, activity books, and character-driven experiences that encourage curiosity, literacy, imagination, and global understanding. A magical message of Earth stewardship of the animals, food sources, and natural wonders of the seven continents. Whoa. That sounds important!

And that's what makes Madykazoo distinct.

The mission slowly unveiled and became the filter for every later decision. When I am unsure about an inspiration for a new visual storybook, I ask myself: Does this lesson or scenario help children learn about a particular continent, animal, food source, natural wonder, or circumstance? Does it enable parents and teachers to easily support the story's mission? Does it encourage children to become stewards of Earth? Does it support the mission?

Getting Legit: Forming the LLC

Although the final mission actually had a term (whole-brain learning), I didn't know that at the time. I am a visual person. If I can "see" it, I can build it. I don't have a photographic memory, but I remember pictures. I had an inspiration to create visual stories children could interpret where no story was the wrong one! The problem was, I can't draw, and illustrators won't work for free.

The answer to the question "Do I have the technical know-how and business acumen to design visual storyboards?" had been a hard "NO." Then late one night (before I started this adventure), Sam Altman appeared on my TV screen. He was on a YouTube podcast expounding the virtues of AI…"create images from prompts" was all I needed to hear! I jumped out of bed, turned on my computer, and began creating and recreating and refining the Madykazoo Misfits!

With all the original questions now a resounding YES, it was time to create an underlying legal structure to support the vision and mission. I had no idea where to start, but if AI could draw images, maybe it could do some research and outline what steps I needed.

I spent the day chatting with the browser's Copilot, asking questions. Answers created more questions. I fed AI my goals, ideas, mission, location, budget…and eventually we came up with a plan suited for my needs.

An LLC provides:

- Legal separation
- Liability protection
- Business banking opportunities
- Publishing and licensing flexibility

Why Delaware?

I selected Delaware because of its:

- Strong business laws
- Well-known legal framework
- National credibility

- Flexible management structure

Many startups choose Delaware for these same reasons. I hired IncNow as my Delaware registered agent. There is a yearly fee, but you need to keep both the Delaware LLC and the nonprofit in "good standing," which is incredibly important when applying for grants.

Note: I'm not a lawyer, so check with an accountant or attorney for your state.

Establishing the Nonprofit Strategy

Creating the Foundation

The nonprofit will eventually have some funding from my estate, but that won't be enough to support the global vision and impact I want to make. So I began building the Madykazoo brands—Madykazoo & Me and Madykazoo Studios—where all proceeds from any sales benefit the nonprofit, Madykazoo Educational Foundation. The nonprofit exists to advance educational and charitable goals. The LLC creates products. The nonprofit creates impact.

Once bank accounts were established locally, I researched software to collect online donations with the least amount of fees. Zeffy charges the nonprofit 0% (it asks donors for an optional tip instead), Stripe charges 2.2% + $0.30 per transaction, and Zoho charges 2.9% + $0.30 for domestic cards.

Eventually I settled on the Zoho One suite for keeping the books and recording donations from my Stripe account. I started using the Zoho CRM module to capture email addresses from signup forms on the website, but branched into using more of Zoho's diverse portfolio of products. It's not necessarily the most intuitive software to learn because each module is so different, but they are working to create a uniform UI (user interface).

Best Practice

Clearly document how the two organizations interact. Separate:

- finances
- bank accounts
- records
- websites (if necessary)
- accounting

This separation protects both organizations. Keep operating costs and income in the LLC, with profit regularly transferred to the nonprofit. Keep donations separate and direct them to the nonprofit foundation's accounts.

Nonprofits require far more documentation and compliance than most people realize. The filing itself is only the beginning.

Protecting Intellectual Property Early

Designing the Brand

Before creating books and products, I designed:

- the Madykazoo logo
- a wordmark
- a visual identity
- seven unique characters for the seven continents
- one magic compass that defines the why and how

These became the foundation of everything that followed.

Trademark Strategy

A trademark protects:

- brand names
- logos
- public identity

Without trademark protection, building recognition becomes riskier.

Copyright Strategy

I also began protecting:

- character artwork
- illustrations
- creative content

As characters became more developed, copyright registration became increasingly important.

A Note About AI and Copyright

Because I used AI tools to create my early character images, I had to learn how copyright treats AI art. The U.S. Copyright Office does not register images generated **entirely** by AI, and applications must disclose any AI-generated material. Protection covers the *human-authored parts: my edits, unique character traits, and refinements, how I arranged and composed each scene*, and the *story text* I wrote. Trademarks are a separate process and protect brand names and logos used in business. I'm not a lawyer, so if you use AI in your artwork, talk with an intellectual property attorney before you file.

Learning the Design Tools

With no money to pay for illustrators (I had a bad experience using Fiverr), I had to learn how to use design software. Staying away from Adobe products (the screen text is too small), I dabbled with Affinity, Inkscape, Photopea, and other design programs. Not my cup of tea. Eventually, I stumbled upon Canva, and it felt like heaven! I can search for an evergreen tree and remove branches, change colors, add snow, add ornaments, rotate it sideways and show BEAR and OS carrying it. My perfect my idea!! Wow. Just wow.

Designing the Core Character Universe

Creating the Seven Core Characters

Before publishing books or social media posts, I focused on character development. This included:

- unique appearance (purple mohawk, freckles, etc.)
- personality (lazy lizard, pensive penguin, etc.)
- educational purpose (protagonist, savior, etc.)
- storytelling role (mischief maker, alerts danger, etc.)
- magical powers (map-making turtle shell, super strength, etc.)
- quirky features (hops really high, can elongate neck, etc.)

The characters are the heart of the brand. When submitting characters for copyright, it's a good idea to have pose and expression sheets. This was difficult with all the paid AI products I tried that promised "consistent character" features. The turtle might end up with five legs, the kangaroo with a snout like a fox, the panda with the colors of a grizzly, the penguin with no freckles, etc. Time-consuming.

For a pose sheet, you need front, back, and ¾ sideways poses. Standing and sitting are good ideas too. Develop a prompt sheet for things like camera view, too—for example, front standing, or a bird's-eye or ground-level view. Trial and error.

For an expression sheet, think of all the expressions your character might have in a future story: sad, happy, hungry, surprised, sleepy, asleep, scared, etc. Having these shots already fine-tuned really helped when storyboarding a new adventure. But you still need to be alert when editing, because that fifth leg creeps in now and then.

Why This Matters

Books can be copied. Unique characters create long-term brand value. Think Disney. Think Sesame Street. Think Magic School Bus. People return because they connect with characters. Parents return because they connect with the story's lessons. Children return because they're in love with penguins.

Getting Verified: Goodstack and Candid

As a new startup, I am paying for all costs myself, so I have to be pretty frugal on a senior's Social Security income. If I could do it over, I would get the nonprofit verified before buying a single software subscription. Verification opens the door to nonprofit discounts and programs that can significantly cut startup expenses.

I learned that lesson the hard way with Wix. Don't pay for a full year of any software!!!! Give it a year of use before that commitment, and perhaps by then donations will be able to offset the cost.

Goodstack

Goodstack checks that you are a real, registered nonprofit in good standing and that you actually represent it. The beauty is that you only prove it once. Many companies use Goodstack verification for their nonprofit discounts, product credits, and giving programs, so you don't have to send paperwork to each one separately. Madykazoo Educational Foundation's verification is complete.

Candid

Candid (formerly GuideStar) keeps a profile for every U.S. nonprofit, and grantmakers use it to size up who you are. Claiming and filling out your profile earns a Seal of Transparency—Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum—depending on how much you share. Here's what made it worth my time:

- **One profile, many places.** Candid shares your profile with more than 200 charitable giving sites, so donors see the same accurate information everywhere.
- **More giving.** Candid's own research found Seal holders receive, on average, 62% more in contributions than organizations without a Seal.
- **Apple Pay.** All Seal holders are eligible to receive donations through Apple Pay.
- **Free grant research.** Nonprofits under $1 million in annual revenue get a free year of Candid Premium, a grant-finding tool, when they earn a Gold Seal.

Still on My List

- Candid Gold or Platinum Seal
- TechSoup validation
- Microsoft for Nonprofits
- Google for Nonprofits
- PayPal Giving Fund
- Benevity Causes Portal

Sources: Introducing the 2026 Candid Seals of Transparency · Claim your nonprofit profile · Candid study on transparency and contributions

Building the First Website

My first website was intentionally simple. In the past, I taught website design—20 years ago. Boy, have things changed!!! I understand the "guts" of a website—code, JavaScript, HTML, widgets, CSS, etc.—but it was the higher-level user interface (UI) that I found hard to adjust to.

I started with Wix. Unfortunately, it was going through a year-end UI changeover. I bought a year's subscription with costly add-on features. I documented "how-to" steps, but the screens changed the next day. Nothing made sense or was consistent. I gave up after a frustrating, wasted month.

Almost afraid I was too old for this new technology; I tried another product: Webflow. OMG, what a difference. It was intuitive. (OK, I don't like having to look at Help files.) After watching a few YouTube videos at night, I could implement that feature the next day. Love it! Phase 1 of the website tied into Zeffy and Stripe for donations and a contact form, in addition to some fancy features. Voilà, we had a website presence!

Creating a Social Media Presence

Building Awareness and the Brand

As soon as Phase 1 of the website was live, I created social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram, easily updated with Meta Business tools, to:

- introduce the characters (ROO, PEN, OS, IZ, TUT, BEAR, and OWL)
- share activity freebies (coloring pages, connect-the-dots, puzzles, etc.)
- add new releases to keep a "live" presence
- drive traffic to products
- legitimize the brand

Writing the First Activity Books

With the foundation and LLC in place, I began producing educational content. More learning! How do I publish on Amazon KDP? How many pages should a visual storybook for young learners be? What size should the book be: 8.5”x8.5” or 8.5”x11”? Should I include a copyright statement? An About the Author page? What's Next page? How do I size the cover for Amazon KDP? How do I fix rejected pages? How do I resubmit? How do I get paid? And, lastly, how do I direct buyers to purchase?

This stage focused on:

- testing concepts
- learning publishing workflows
- receiving feedback
- establishing creative standards

Creating Distribution Channels

Amazon KDP and Etsy

Publishing through Amazon KDP opened access to possible global distribution. But I still had no traffic or purchasers. There are tens of millions of books on Amazon. After the website was finalized, I loaded digital products to an Etsy store I had set up nine months before.

Etsy provided another platform to:

- test products at lower prices than printed hard copies
- reach niche audiences
- learn customer behavior
- get immediate feedback to see if anyone is viewing my products

Never rely on a single platform. Diversification reduces risk and reaches different audiences. I still want to create a presence on Teachers-Pay-Teachers platform after I create supplemental material (finger puppets, teacher aid sheets, etc.) for each Storyteller's Quest book (hoodoo, cousins, turtles, etc.). Once I have something that adds value, I'll expand.

Phase 2 of the Website

Phase 2 of the website build has taken me about three solid, technical, mind-bending months--with the help of Claude. (We’re talking 8-12 hours a day, every day—until wine time 😉.) Webflow allows Claude *some* access to the website. We had to work closely together—me defining requirements, Claude building it, me testing, Claude refining, me testing, me changing the design, Claude rebuilding…rinse and repeat.

Fortunately, my background includes relational database design, so creating and using Webflow CMS tables made perfect sense. We created a Media Vault CMS to store and tag images that are used (and reused). The Publications Books CMS stores pages from a book so they can be used in a flipbook feature built by Claude and designed by me.

We tweaked every page to fulfill grant requirements, ADA alt-text compliance (for screen readers), and guidelines for privacy policies and terms. We added SEO tags, schema markup, and Google and Bing tracking codes, and blocked AI training bots.

Applying for Google Ad Grants for Nonprofits drove a lot of the features on the Madykazoo.com website. I constantly checked with Google's AI, Gemini, to see if a feature would be compliant and beneficial for grant reviewers. Since grant ad funding was my goal, it was essential, and it really helped make the website a much better product in the end.

Our purpose was:

- establish credibility
- introduce the mission
- showcase characters
- create a home for future growth
- scalability and easy handoff of processes to a successor

Setting Up Analytics: Proving It Works

A beautiful website is only half the job. Grant makers and donors want proof that people are finding it, using it, and acting on it. That's what analytics does: it quietly counts who visits, where they came from, which pages they read, and what they do next—sign up, download a freebie, donate, or click through to a book.

What We Set Up

1. **Google Analytics.** I signed up for a Google Analytics account, created a “property” for Madykazoo.com, and copied its measurement ID. The process was painless to setup, but I have a lot to learn about setting up ad campaigns, interpreting the results, refining for success.
2. **Adding the code in Webflow.** We pasted the tracking code into the Webflow site settings so it runs on every page automatically. No page-by-page work required.
3. **Google Search Console.** This tells Google the site exists and how it's built. We submitted the sitemap (the site's table of contents) and asked Google to index new pages like the FAQ and Research & References. If you add a substantial amount of, or a new important page like References, it’s good to go back to Google and ask to resubmit your sitemap rather than wait for the next round of crawlers to find it.
4. **Bing Webmaster Tools.** Same idea for Bing. We verified ownership with a small code tag on the home page and submitted the sitemap there too.
5. **Deciding who gets in.** The site welcomes search engines but blocks AI training bots, so Madykazoo's stories and artwork aren't used to train AI models.

6. **Ongoing reports.** I need to develop a monthly routine to look at visitors, top pages, traffic sources, freebie downloads, and donations. This will help me establish what parents and teachers want, what characters are the most searched, etc. so I can create more products based on that demand.

Why It Matters for Grants

- **Required evidence.** Google Ad Grants expects conversion tracking, meaning proof that ads lead visitors to meaningful actions.
- **Grant reports.** Funders often ask, "How many people did you reach?" Analytics gives real numbers instead of guesses.
- **Campaign success.** When I post on social media or launch a new book, I can see whether it actually brought visitors to the site, and do more of what works.

If I could do it over, I would set up analytics on day one of Phase 1 of the website. Every visit before then is a number I'll never get back.

Next step: applying for grants. Stay tuned!