

Serial Entrepreneur Mason Gates Can't Stop Starting

- Casey Quinlan/Mighty Casey Media, October 2007

Venture Forum success story Mason Gates can be described as the entrepreneurial version of the Energizer Bunny. Although another Gates, Bill, licensed the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up", Mason Gates could claim that tune as a personal anthem. He just can't stop starting businesses up.

While he was at Radford University in the late '80s, he started an alternative campus newspaper, *The Perspective*, with a friend, teaching himself in real time how newspaper publishing worked. With the lessons learned from that experience, he started his own media company, Gates Communications, and built it into a powerful presence in college media.

Gates first came to the Venture Forum in 1991. He was looking for capital, and in seeking advice on how to raise funding he "found Stan Maupin in the Yellow Pages." That led to a shot at a 5 Minute Forum, and started his voyage to buying a unit of Whittle Communications: *Campus Voice*, a 4' X 4' poster-sized newspaper seen on the walls of campuses across the US, featuring one article and two ads.

Gates had looked at Chris Whittle and Whittle Communications as role models when building his campus newspaper back at Radford.

"When I got out of college, there were two companies I wanted to work for. One was Disney, who turned me down. The other was Whittle, who turned me down. I ended up buying one of their divisions."

He had heard that Whittle was having cash problems, so he called a Whittle executive and said, "I want to buy *Campus Voice*."

He and the Whittle exec hit it off on the phone, so Gates put together an executive summary of his plan with a little help from his friends - specifically, a friend at law firm Herschler Fleischer who also put Gates together with a connection at Carter Kaplan. Gates talked with the investment banking pro for about an hour, and wound up with \$1.5M.

"This can't be happening!" is what Gates says he thought at the time.

"When you're \$60K in debt and just out of college, why NOT start a company?" says Gates.

It's hard to argue with that logic - paying back \$60K on an entry-level salary is a daunting prospect. A great business idea that's well-timed and well-executed can put you in the black in the time it takes to get to an investor "yes".

Gates is living proof of the success of that approach. He admits that he was a lackluster student - smart, but not a grind. He was much more social than studious, which attracted him to Radford and its population of first-generation college students.

"They're pioneers," says Gates of those first-in-their-family college kids. "They feel that they can't fail, and they're not risk-averse." He found that the college career center was risk-averse, though - as he approached graduation in 1989, he went to the career center and said

that he wanted to start a company. The career center folks pointed him at a row of filing cabinets stuffed with data on companies that he could go work for.

They didn't get it - "it" in this case being entrepreneurship. Radford, for one, is getting it now. They've started the Radford University Center for Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, spurred and supported by Gates and other successful Radford alumni.

The landscape of business has changed - globalization and technology have lowered the barrier to entry in the global marketplace. One of today's newly-minted college graduates can bring an idea to market quickly. Mason Gates and his alma mater both recognize the importance of helping young entrepreneurs turn their vision into reality.

"I funded a club at Radford University called College Entrepreneurs, which created a ready-made group of students that I could tap for various projects." That insured that Gates had the input of a key marketing demographic AND a fresh take on his ideas.

Gates' businesses have all impacted college students and recent graduates. After selling Gates Communications, he joined the management team at JobDirect.com, a job board that matched college students and college career centers with job opportunities. Korn Ferry bought JobDirect.com in 2000, and Gates returned to Richmond from New York, where he had moved to manage the transition of Gates Communications to its purchasers, and where he had started and grown JobDirect.com.

Next on his list of start-ups was 4GL School Solutions, creators of a software system that helps school systems track their special-ed programs. Gates' contribution to 4GL was as a consultant working on sales and sales-cycle development and training, building a mass-marketing approach and helping 4GL raise capital. The company successfully raised \$7MM and, says Gates, "sold to the mass market like hot-cakes."

Gates then consulted with EverDrive LLC, the web-based used-auto-parts start-up, to build a culture of customer service in their call center. EverDrive wanted to create a pro-active rather than re-active model, so Gates set himself up in a small cubicle and immersed himself in the operation. He feels that's the only way to really see what's working, and what needs to change.

"I'll put on the outfit or the uniform and get out there and do it, so I understand the processes."

Gates' work in the last few years has been to help companies build their marketing and culture - and in the background he's been building his next project, InternDirect.

"I sent a mass email out to all the people I know in the entrepreneurial world - hey, entrepreneurs, who needs an intern? - and started to match students with projects."

InternDirect has brought Mason Gates back where he began - college. Helping college students gain *real* real-world experience, using the virtual, mobile world, is making InternDirect a nexus of business and education. Gates got the idea that became InternDirect when he was working out of his car, like many mobile entrepreneurs do. He didn't need an intern he had to

supervise in his office, he needed a virtual intern who could respond quickly and work without supervision.

Mason Gates has made his big ideas pay off. Yet he says, “I’ve been involved with just as many failures as I have successes,” an observation that’s made by many successful entrepreneurs. The willingness to take the risk, to put the plan in motion, is what separates dreams from reality, success from failure.

Gates says this about what the Venture Forum offers: “To me, it was what initially brought me to the community of people who are entrepreneurially minded.”

“The Venture Forum is willing to hear new ideas,” says Gates. He notes that the power of the Forum is in cultivating, sponsoring, sharing, and blending those new ideas - creating more new ideas in the process.

Mason Gates is an example of how an idea can become reality, how dreams can become success.

Do you have an idea? Bring it to the Venture Forum, the intersection of innovation and capitalization in central Virginia - growth starts here.