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Beyond Innovation: Entrepreneurship at UT Dallas

Six Degrees of Preparation

By Donna Steph Hansard



From pitcher to postgrad student to business pioneer, Will Rosellini has relied on UT Dallas to perfect his path.

At age 28, Will Rosellini is a former minor league baseball pitcher who holds three master's degrees in business and science and is working toward a fourth in nanoscale physics.

He also has earned a law degree and is working toward a Ph.D. in applied cognition and neuroscience. Along the way, he has founded two successful entrepreneurial businesses, the newer of which was awarded \$1.38 million in development funding in February. In March, the same company placed first and picked up \$10,000 in prize money in a new-venture competition before going on to place fourth and earn nearly \$11,000 more in the Rice Business Plan Competition (see *IIE Teams Take Top Spots in Technology Contests* on page 5).

A self-described “businessperson’s neuro-engineer”—a reference to his commercial endeavors based on scientific ideas—Mr. Rosellini is a super-charged self-starter who continues to turn to The University of Texas at Dallas, particularly the Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (IIE), for education and guidance.

With Dallas and Houston poised to be the next big high-tech hubs, he says, “UT Dallas is probably one of the best places, if not the best place, to be immersed in the interdisciplinary skills needed to understand bionanotechnology.” This trailblazing field puts biological, engineering and physical sciences to work at nanoscience level—in atomic and molecular scales—to create new technology.

Conquering... By Degrees

Mr. Rosellini recites his accomplishments in a down-to-earth manner.

A graduate of Jesuit College Preparatory School in Dallas, he started college at Vanderbilt University on a baseball scholarship. He was drafted by the Arizona Diamondbacks and finished his undergraduate degree at the University of Dallas during the off-season. He played until 2001, when he retired to “decide what to do next.”

Soon, he was at The School of Management (SOM), working on one master's degree in accounting and another in business administration, both of which he received from UT Dallas in 2003 (see *When Life Throws You a Curve* in *MANAGEMENT*, Autumn 2003, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 30-31).

It was during his SOM graduate school experience that Mr. Rosellini first encountered the science behind entrepreneurship in a course taught by Joseph C. Picken, Ph.D. Dr. Picken walked the students through the art of creating a business plan and required them to submit a completed proposal for a new company. The end result for Mr. Rosellini later turned into his first venture, Texas Onsite Dental.

New York, New Jersey, Home

But before the dental service firm became reality, Mr. Rosellini set his sights on law school. He didn't want to be a lawyer, he says, but “I was frustrated that every major component of a business deal involved lawyers, and I needed to understand what they were doing.”

Mr. Rosellini headed to Hofstra University Law School in New York. There he concurrently worked on a law degree and graduated from Rutgers University-Newark and the New Jersey Institute of Technology with a master's degree in computational biology.

Then, two semesters away from Hofstra graduation, he relocated to Houston to help care for his sister after her open-heart surgery. He persuaded the university to let him finish classes in Texas.

Once back, he soon added a weekly commute to UT Dallas to his law studies. A program in applied cognition and neuroscience beckoned, as did research by Lawrence J. (Larry) Cauller, Ph.D., a School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences associate professor in neuroscience.

Dr. Cauller investigates how to corral patterns of activity in the cerebral cortex of the brain into commands. Cortical activity studies hold the promise that people with spinal cord injuries and other disabilities might use those commands to control such peripheral devices as voice boxes, robotic arms and computers.

However, Mr. Rosellini's belief that Dr. Cauller and UT Dallas verged on breakthrough science didn't reap immediate benefits. Dr. Cauller did not respond to Mr. Rosellini's request to work in his lab, and unglamorous commuter life continued.

"Once I finished my law degree, I decided it was time to get a job," he says. "So I dusted off the business plan I'd put together in Dr. Picken's class and started Texas Onsite Dental."

The successful patient-oriented service firm organizes onsite dental care for residents of nursing homes and assisted living centers. It has doubled in size in the three years since its inception.

As Luck...More Work...And Help From IIE Would Have It

Meanwhile, hoping to attract Dr. Cauller's attention, Mr. Rosellini made a presentation at a 2006 neuroscience conference sponsored by UT Dallas.

"A lucky thing happened. One of Larry's senior lab members, David Croft, saw my presentation at a time when Larry was interested in forming a company," says Mr. Rosellini.

The two collaborated, resulting in the recent creation

of MicroTransponder Inc., a company developing neuroprosthetic devices for use in restoring or enhancing nervous system performance.

"Much of MicroTransponder's early success is the result of Dr. Picken and UT Dallas' entrepreneurship program," Mr. Rosellini says. "Dr. Picken took my idea and helped me turn it into a business, including finding seed funds to get it off the ground."

Today, Mr. Rosellini's focus is on growing MicroTransponder, as well as completing his Ph.D. at UT Dallas, along with that master's degree in nanoscale physics from Rice University.

The attention to MicroTransponder paid a big dividend in February. That is when, through its North Texas Regional Center for Innovation and Commercialization, the Texas Emerging Technology Fund named MicroTransponder one of five early stage projects worthy of assistance intended to help create high-potential technology and high-value jobs. More immediately, that \$1.38 million infusion from state revenues will allow MicroTransponder to further develop and commercialize implantable stimulators that could help relieve chronic pain caused by degenerative nerve conditions.

From IIE's vantage, "we've helped launch Will Rosellini as a serial entrepreneur," Dr. Picken says. "He possesses the drive and initiative, is a fascinating guy and has accomplished much, and he's only 28.

"We've helped him avoid some of the most obvious pitfalls. We've coached him through the process of building what's going to be a significant company, which has been a lot of fun. We're proud of him, and we're happy to have been of help along the way." 💡



SOM alum and entrepreneur Will Rosellini specializes in commercializing scientific ideas.