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Business

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Posted on Mon, Jul. 04, 2005

Compelled to excel

Those beginning entrepreneurial careers can glean tips from 100 success stories

By Cecil Johnson
Special to the Star-Telegram

Before he evolved into the "somebody" who founded the Southern Poverty Law Center and a famed civil rights attorney, Morris Dees, a "nobody" student at the University of Alabama, started a birthday cake-delivery business to pay his way through college and support his family.

Dees is one the 100 highly successful men and women from various fields that Peter Han interviewed for his book, *Nobodies to Somebodies*. Han, 30, a Microsoft employee and successful entrepreneur, uses the story of Dees' early entrepreneurial endeavors to underscore the point that many business and professional leaders started their careers with rather mundane objectives, then progressed to "bigger dreams."

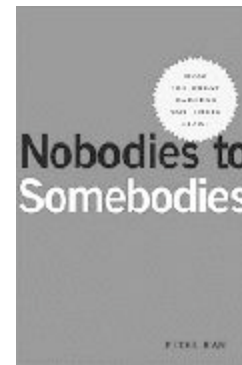
He quotes Dees:

"I've got this birthday cake idea, and so then I maneuvered around, and got a mailing list of parents with kids' birthdays. I remember sitting at the table -- we got married when we first got to college -- and my wife was licking envelopes -- we mailed letters about thirty days before each kid's birthday -- I didn't take any courses in direct mail -- just a typical letter."

Dees and his wife mailed out about 800 envelopes a month, and their business prospered beyond their expectations. It was the precursor of the direct-mail publishing company that would make Dees wealthy and allow him to pursue his idealistic legal and civil rights endeavors.

"One day, I was sitting watching a big mailing machine with a big mailing we were doing with 25 to 30 million pieces for some book offer, before I sold my company to Times-Mirror -- I thought back to sitting at that kitchen table and licking that one envelope," Dees told Han.

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That reflection on Dees' career occurs in the chapter "Become a Big Fish by Mastering the Small Pond." It also illustrates Han's admonition in another chapter titled "First Pay the Rent." For most of prominent business leaders, professionals and politicians that Han interviewed, paying rent was an overriding consideration when they started out. Han quotes Daniel Dimarco, chief executive of Nucor:

"When you're 25 years old, you're looking for your first job. You're not necessarily thinking of becoming CEO of the largest steel producer in the United States. What you're looking at is, OK, you're married, you've got a young family, and you're just getting started in life. You're looking for a job that pays well, with potential for growth opportunities, hopefully in the field that you've developed your expertise in, through the education process."

People in their 20s and 30s, who are just beginning their professional careers, are Han's target audience. The author is fully aware of the anxiety that besets many young adults as they confront a workplace that is dramatically different from that faced by their parents and preceding generations, a work environment characterized by great opportunities and equally great challenges and insecurities.

He illustrates that the 100 very successful people he interviewed faced similar uncertainties when they started out. He allows them to tell, in their own words, how they got started and the unanticipated turns their careers took. Han skillfully extracts quotes from the interviews and arranges them into an interesting and inspirational mosaic.

Among the other "somebodies" interviewed are Brad Anderson, CEO of Best Buy; Lowry Kline, vice chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola Enterprises; Kathleen Logochi, president and CEO of Tower Automotive; Ron Sargent, CEO of Staples; Nobel Prize-winners Peter Agre, James Heckman, Harold Kroto and Richard Roberts; former Sen. Bill Bradley; former Texas Gov. Ann Richards; former Commerce Secretary Mickey Kantor; former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala; author Tom Clancy; and actor John Lithgow.

Han discerns five "rocket approaches" used by his 100 somebodies to find the right work for them -- the random walk, open-ended exploration, closed-end exploration, killer excellence after expedience and trailblazing.

Nobodies to Somebodies: How 100 Great Careers Got Their Start

By Peter Han

Portfolio

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\$22.95

Cecil Johnson is a Fort Worth-based free-lance writer.



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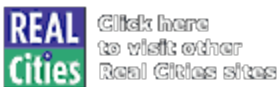
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