

EMBA Grad Customizes Education for Entrepreneurial New Career

The entries in the Executive MBA Business Plan Competition are not, generally speaking, destined for greatness in the real world. They're not really destined for the real world at all. The competition was created in 2004 as a culmination of the program's corporate entrepreneurship course and as a means to challenge students to apply the entire program's learning to a comprehensive project.

It's also an outlet for creativity. This year's finalists included the Motorcycle Stable, a rental and service club for bike enthusiasts; Concrete Services, an additive that makes concrete as water permeable as the ground; and Sante!, a gourmet wine and food destination. The winner was PhasTech, a diagnostic system to detect dangerous bacteria in the food supply. The intention is not that the executives behind these plans will ditch their corporate careers for start-up dreams. For most, the exercise is purely academic.

Not for all. One of last year's competition finalists, Charlie Robbins (EMBA 2004), entered the EMBA program with an idea to create a property management company that would take care of vacation homes in resort towns. Today, little more than a year after his graduation, Sea To Ski Premier Home Management is his livelihood.

Robbins is no stranger to entrepreneurship. His father started a pipe distribution company out of his garage in the mid 1970s, and saw it grow to a nine-branch operation bringing in annual revenues of \$30 million. Over 20 years in the family business, Robbins rose from shop worker to president. When he sold the company a few years ago, he decided to enroll in the UW EMBA program to round out his management skills and kick-start the next chapter of his professional life.

"While I attended the Business School," he says, "I was always thinking of what I was going to be in my next career." It hadn't occurred to Robbins that his future title might actually include "company founder." But there was always this idea in the back of his head. "My wife and I had a vacation home in Park City, Utah," he explains. "And when we were there for a week, we were spending the first two days getting things in order and the last kind of closing up. So that one-week vacation became really a four-day vacation. And I thought, we can't be the only ones."

As Robbins made his way through the program and broadened his knowledge and connections, he started to believe that the business could come true. Every course took on enhanced meaning as he applied it to his personal case. "While I studied every discipline—accounting, finance, marketing—I had a definite company in mind," he says. "I could correlate each assignment to Sea To Ski Properties." The entrepreneurship course and its competition afforded Robbins a diverse team of executives to hone his plan, a range of faculty experts in every discipline and entrepreneurial judges to help him identify and shore up any weaknesses.

Now that plan is a real company offering one-stop-shop- ping for the Park City vacation home buyer/owner. Sea To Ski owns a Windermere real estate franchise, and offers financing through Seattle Mortgage to help newcomers find the perfect home away from

home. The property management offerings include landscaping, lawn maintenance, house keeping and snow removal. And the concierge service will stock the house, load the bar, wax the skis, tune the bike and point the way to adventure, entertainment or leisure. "If you are looking for a place in Park City, the ultimate goal is that you will hire the franchise to help you buy your home and maintain it as well," Robbins says.

Actually, the ultimate goal is beyond Park City. Like all good entrepreneurs, Robbins left ample room to grow right in the company name. If the beta version continues to prove successful, he'd like to open offices in Western resort communities from coast to mountains, sea to ski.

Ambitious plans don't faze him anymore. "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't apply something I learned in the EMBA program," he says. "The lessons and feedback from professors and the criticism from the business plan competition have proven invaluable."