

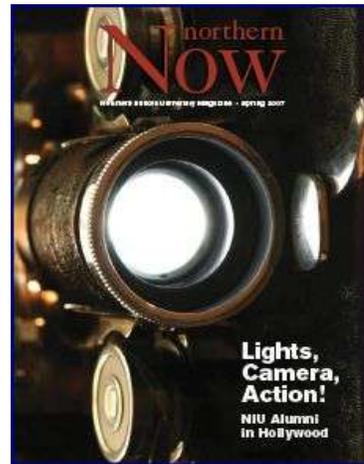
Northern Now

by Tom Parisi

What a difference a few years—and a single zero—can make.

After riding the crest of the Silicon Valley’s growth wave, Dean DeBiase returned to his hometown of Lake Forest in 2001. Although he hadn’t been back to NIU in two decades, it didn’t take long for DeBiase to reconnect with his alma mater.

The entrepreneur who proved his mettle in the creativity capital of the world liked what he found. The university recently had opened Barsema Hall, home to the College of Business, and the Convocation Center, home to athletics. Northern’s enrollment, reputation and athletic programs were soaring.



Like the companies he had taken to new heights in Silicon Valley, “the university had a growing momentum, a buzz about its future and a propensity to think outside the box,” DeBiase says. The 1980 marketing graduate soon joined the College of Business Advisory Board and later accepted an invitation to serve on the Board of Directors for the NIU Foundation.

“We are lucky to have John Peters as our president at this pivotal point in our history,” DeBiase says. “His team has what I call ‘the power of 10’ factor, because they are 10 times as effective at getting the job done. Their dedication and resourcefulness are fueling NIU’s growth and market awareness.”

When the NIU Foundation began planning the fundraising campaign for the Alumni and Visitors Center, Dean and his wife Linda decided to provide “a shoulder of support” with a \$25,000 donation. Then Linda reminded Dean about his exponential theory. “What about that power-of-10 thing you always talk about with the NIU team?” she asked her husband. “Should we put a zero on the end of that number?”

As Dean tells the story, he quickly came around to the idea—once he came to. The couple earlier this year made a generous \$250,000 pledge to the Alumni and Visitors Center. In recognition of the gift, the center’s Boardroom and Alumni Networking Center will be named in their honor.

“There was this opportunity to do something big and we said, ‘OK, let’s step up to the plate,’” says Linda, who also attended NIU before graduating from Lake Forest College. “This Alumni and Visitors Center project means a lot to NIU. For visitors and alumni alike, this will become the face of the university. It’s going to make a dramatic difference.”

The center’s impact will be felt across NIU’s colleges, students, faculty and alumni. “It will be the epicenter of the university,” Dean DeBiase says. “This will be the place where we can honor our past, celebrate the present and plan for the future. It will be the place where alumni and the business community can come together and network, whether through seminars, meetings or parties.”

As in the business world, DeBiase says, timing is everything. “We need to transform the buzz we’re getting into sustainable growth and raise the university’s national profile. NIU needs our help. With state universities continually facing budget cuts, we need to rethink our gifting, to set stretch goals. We need people to step up and get a little outside of their comfort zones. For my generation, the time is now. If you make an impact, you can enjoy it for the rest of your life.”

The power of 10 applies to human resources, too. DeBiase has been busy contacting his old college buddies, bringing them back to DeKalb and rekindling Huskie pride.

“Especially in Dean’s age group, we see many alums who have gone very far, very fast in their careers,” says Michael Malone, vice president for university advancement. “A lot of these alumni reconnect through personal networks. Dean himself has

connected us with numerous alums, and this isn't uncommon. Oftentimes, successful alums are great networkers. Once one gets involved and has a good experience, others follow."

DeBiase looks forward to attending the groundbreaking for the Alumni and Visitors Center at homecoming this year, and he's urging fellow alums to do the same. "Every little bit adds to the momentum," DeBiase says. "The Alumni Center undoubtedly will enhance our university's image—maybe by a factor of 10."

Internet trailblazer has penchant for adventure

Dean DeBiase isn't one to rest on his laurels. He just isn't one to rest, period. After earning his NIU marketing degree in 1980, DeBiase embarked on a career that might best be described as a series of adventures. He blazed a trail that took him from the rich cornfields of DeKalb to the technology-rich Silicon Valley and back home again.

DeBiase learned the ins and outs of management at FedEx and later led the turnaround of a business unit at Zenith Electronics, where his team introduced and commercialized cable modems and spearheaded development of now mainstream broadband services and HDTV.

With the Internet still in its infancy, DeBiase was recruited to the Silicon Valley to become CEO of the ImagiNation Network, the largest online computer games and instant messaging network. DeBiase eventually sold the enterprise to America Online and joined the company's executive team. "I spent a few years at AOL in an extremely dynamic era," says the entrepreneur who used to strategize over breakfast with Steve Case. "AOL was growing rapidly and was the most fun place to be in the late '90s."

DeBiase left AOL and was recruited to lead Autoweb, which became the most popular online automotive company for consumers. As CEO, he steered Autoweb through an \$80 million IPO offering, grew annual revenues to more than \$50 million and led a merger with Autobytel, creating the largest Internet automotive marketing services company.

During the 1990s, DeBiase also founded Start-Up-Partners, a growth strategy and interim leadership group, helping CEOs and boards tackle their most challenging issues. The management firm has helped numerous businesses, from Fortune 500s to startups, including Chicago-based FreeDrive, an online storage service provider that he repositioned and sold to its competitor.

DeBiase, his wife Linda and their two sons, Logan, 13, and J.R., 16, returned to the Chicago area three years ago. He continues to work around the globe as chairman of Start-Up-Partners and is working on a book on how to build next-generation companies.

As for his penchant for high-tech business adventure, DeBiase says, "Prospering in this competitive era means knowing how to spot and when to personally take advantage of marketplace opportunities, rather than staying put at one or two companies for your whole career.

"I like to do things for fun and money," he adds. "But it has to be fun."

Q and A with Dean DeBiase

How did NIU prepare you for the business world?

NIU taught me to be a much more creative thinker, to take nothing for granted, to think and act outside your comfort zone, and to use everything you have to get where you're going.

Any advice to NIU students?

Start making your careers happen now. Your networks, your circle of influence, everything you do from the moment you enter college to all throughout your career is really up to you. You have to keep the momentum going and build it up.

What would you recommend to new graduates?

Get a good blend of corporate and entrepreneurial experience. I like to think of it as a secret sauce with those two necessary ingredients. You'll be more in demand because your background will have more flexibility and adaptability. Also, don't wait for someone to tell or ask you—think about building your own business portfolio and intellectual property base.