CAST
WOMEN WHO BROKE THROUGH
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FORECAST
The magazine of the College of Applied Science and Technology

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FORECAST

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STATE YOUR FUTURE.
Hello and welcome to the 2016 edition of ForeCAST magazine, brought to you by the College of Applied Science and Technology (CAST) at Illinois State University! As the academic home to eight departments and schools—Agriculture, Criminal Justice Sciences, Family and Consumer Sciences, Health Sciences, Information Technology, Kinesiology and Recreation, Military Science, and Technology—there is always something new happening in CAST. In this issue, you’ll read about three incredible CAST alumni who are paving the way for women in their field. You’ll also learn how one donor’s generosity is making a difference on campus, what we have planned for this year’s Science and Technology Week, and about our award-winning alumni, featured in our Academy of Achievement and Hall of Fame.

The College of Applied Science and Technology has a lot to be proud of as we continue to maintain national accreditation in 21 programs. Many people wonder why these seemingly unrelated departments and schools are grouped into one college, but the faculty and staff who call CAST home know that we actually have more similarities than differences. Our 30-plus programs of study hold over 20 national accreditations; we provide students with cutting edge curriculum; and our technology-intensive programs are guided by active advisory boards. CAST programs are infused with experiential learning opportunities in state-of-the-art laboratories, and most students participate in culminating experiences such as professional practice internships and student teaching. Our faculty are active teachers and scholars who merge their applied research and their teaching in a way that invigorates the classroom.

It is my distinct honor to hold the title of interim dean of the College of Applied Science and Technology. I have called Illinois State home for almost 30 years. My roles in CAST have included serving as assistant dean, associate dean, and chair of the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. I have also served as the associate provost for the University for more than 10 years, including time as interim provost. In addition, I have served as director of Campus Dining Services. I look forward to celebrating our great programs and college with you.

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading this latest issue of the ForeCAST, and please stay in touch. We love to hear stories from our alumni! Stop by next time you are on campus, or send your updates to Alumni@IllinoisState.edu. Visit us when you can; think of us often; go you Redbirds!

Sincerely,

Jan M. Murphy
Interim Dean, College of Applied Science and Technology
DONOR SPOTLIGHT

TAWANI FOUNDATION

By Kara Pool Snyder

THE COLLEGE OF APPLIED SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY HAS MANY GENEROUS DONORS. One such donor, the Tawani Foundation, has been giving support to the Department of Military Science annually for over 10 years.

The Tawani Foundation ROTC Awards program was founded in 1996 as a way to support the educational, civic, and leadership goals of cadets and midshipmen by recognizing outstanding performance. Retired Col. Jennifer N. Pritzker, Tawani Foundation’s founder and president, enlisted in the Army in 1974, having participated in ROTC while attending Loyola University Chicago. After commissioning in 1979, she spent over 25 years of service in airborne and infantry divisions before retiring from the Illinois Army National Guard in 2001. Her love of country and the duty to give back to local communities led Pritzker to establish the foundation with an emphasis on preserving military history and heritage by promoting the ideal of the “citizen soldier.” The ROTC Awards program is just one way she can achieve the foundation’s mission and give back to the community while simultaneously supporting our nation’s future leaders and those who choose to serve.

The Tawani Foundation’s gift is impacting a department that is turning around and impacting the world. Illinois State University’s ROTC program started in the 1977-1978 school year, with the first class commissioning in 1980-1981. The program includes cadets from Illinois State, Illinois Wesleyan University, and Bradley University. Currently, the program has 125 students/cadets, and to date, the program has commissioned over 400 officers.

Within the ROTC program, over 50 percent of the students are on some type of scholarship, and 40 of them are also receiving a tuition waiver from Illinois State for the semester. The Tawani Foundation’s annual gift of $10,000 impacts 10 students per year. “The Tawani Foundation graciously allows us to split the funds as we see fit,” said Lt. Col. Andrew Bender, professor of military science. “This allows us to provide funding for more students.” The funds are split among 10 students that receive merit-based scholarships. Cadet Kayla Campbell was recently one of the recipients. A senior this year, Campbell is a cellular and molecular biology major.

The scholarship process looks at grade point average and also at a personal essay that applicants write. Campbell remembers her essay prompt well: “In a critical situation, would you choose your men or your mission?” Campbell explained that due to the Army’s ethos, the mission always comes first. “Sometimes in the field you have to make tough decisions and make sacrifices. If you remember the ethos, your mission comes first. If you do it appropriately, your men will be taken care of.”

Before joining ROTC, Campbell played soccer for the Redbirds. As an athlete and now as a cadet, Campbell’s extracurricular activities keep her active on campus and in the community, leaving little time for a job. “I work hard to get scholarships so I can focus on my schoolwork and on ROTC. The scholarship from the Tawani Foundation helped give me some money to live on and took the pressure off, so I could focus on my priorities.”

Her priorities include science-intensive classes. Campbell lists ecology and organic chemistry as her current favorites, largely due to the quality instruction she is receiving. “In ecology class, Dr. (Bill) Perry is very funny, and in organic chemistry, Dr. (Shawn) Hitchcock is so helpful. He really wants to make sure students do well.” Campbell is benefiting from the quality classroom instruction that has been one of Illinois State’s hallmarks for decades.

After graduation, Campbell is looking forward to what’s next: “I always liked thinking about having a career in the Army. I like the idea of protecting the nation.” Upon commissioning in the Army, Campbell is hoping to serve in the Chemical Corps, Military Intelligence, or the Medical Service Corps.

“The Tawani Foundation is honored to be a part of impacting lives by recognizing excellence and achievement, especially at the point where academics and service intersect,” said Kareema Adiele, grants manager at the Tawani Foundation. “Donations, of any kind and to any department, are an easy way for people of all walks of life to show support for important and impactful programs, which can inspire recipients to pay it forward through their own future philanthropic endeavors.”

If you would like to support the Department of Military Science or another area of interest in the College of Applied Science and Technology, contact Heather Hartman at hshartm@IllinoisState.edu or (309) 438-3134.
Professional Development Dinner
Monday, April 11 • 5 p.m.
Prairie Room, Bone Student Center
Attend this event to learn formal dining skills and conversational practices for interview and work settings while meeting College of Applied Science and Technology alumni.

Keynote speaker Charlie Miller
Tuesday, April 12 • 7 p.m.
Bone Student Center
Attend the keynote speech by Charlie Miller, “one of the most technically proficient hackers on Earth,” according to Foreign Policy.

Neon at Night 5k Fun Run
Wednesday, April 13 • 8 p.m.
Student Fitness Center
Enjoy a 5K run through Illinois State’s campus at night.
This event is co-sponsored by CAST and Campus Recreation.

Women in Leadership
Thursday, April 14 • 9 a.m.
Club Room, Hancock Stadium
Spend an energizing morning meeting CAST alumni and learning tools for women to succeed in the workplace.

Academy of Achievement
Friday, April 15 • 8:30 a.m.
Club Room, Hancock Stadium
Celebrate CAST alumni during their induction to the Academy of Achievement. The academy brings together alumni who are thought leaders in their fields and who serve as inspiration to others with similar careers.

#ISUSSciTech

Check CAST.IllinoisState.edu for more information about each event.
Contact Kara Pool Snyder at kepool@IllinoisState.edu with any questions.
smooth milk cascaded into a metal bowl so shiny it reflected the gentle movement of Rachel Vollmer as she slowly poured. Turning on the mixer, Vollmer leaned her hand against the cool surface of a new stove nearby, standing at one of a half-dozen cooking stations in the spacious, new Foods Lab at Illinois State University.

“This place is incredible, and it is just what the students need,” said Vollmer, an assistant professor of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS).

The new lab includes commercial-quality stoves and dishwashing area. State-of-the-art cameras run throughout the lab, so instructors can display stations for all students to see on a large screen. “We’ll also have the capability of showing stations side-by-side and recording classes for online teaching and demonstration,” said Yazedjian. All tables and prep carts are on rollers, so the room can be rearranged to suit the various classes that will return to the lab this fall. The yearlong project is estimated at more than $750,000, funded by an allocation from the University’s Board of Trustees and from the College of Applied Science and Technology.

The upgrades reflect how the food industry has evolved over the last decade.

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The upgrades reflect how the food industry has evolved over the last decade, said Nancy Koch, a FCS instructor who will teach in the lab. “This gives students the opportunity to work in a facility that is more up to code in terms of equipment, and realistic in feel to what they will see in the industry,” she said. Yazedjian added the boom in eating out follows family trends. “It used to be a big deal to get dressed up and go out to eat, but there are so many activities in which everyone is involved, that eating out has become a commonplace event.”

That shift sparked the development of a new option in FCS called food and nutrition management that also began last year. “The industry is not what it was 10 years ago,” said Yazedjian. “Along with having some background in business, managers need to have some understanding of the kitchen and dietary needs.” The option focuses on diet, much like the sequence for registered dietitians, but also includes a food management element that is desired in the marketplace.

“There is a big push for restaurants and commercial kitchens to cater to the dietary needs of clients,” said Vollmer, as she poured a mixture into the ice cream maker. “It’s more than simply allergies, although those are important. It’s about understanding dietary challenges.” Yazedjian looked to the aging Baby Boomer population as an example. “As people get older, they tend to lose taste buds and salt their food more to get flavor,” she said. “We need to find ways to add flavor without elevating their sodium intake.”

Pointing to several batches of finished ice cream, Vollmer explained the tasty treat is actually a project for students. “They have to alter a basic recipe by substituting a possible challenge. In this case, they have to swap out the milk.” Next to several cups of creamy strawberry ice cream sit a darker, icier blend. “Some try cashew milk,” she said, scooping up a bit with a tiny, plastic spoon, “but they find out pretty quickly the fat and the protein contribute to the smooth mouth feel.”

It won’t just be FCS students who benefit from the new Foods Lab. Yazedjian sees the lab as a community resource. “There are community groups we could not accommodate before because we did not have the space. So whether it is chefs teaching families how to cook around allergies, or a troop of Boy Scouts earning a badge, this would provide them with a place.”
Andrew Siwicki '14 may have the best job description ever: He makes robots dance on national television.

Well, that’s not all he does. Not even close. But just one year after graduating from Illinois State, Siwicki just took his industrial robotics expertise onto NBC’s America’s Got Talent, where he teamed up with dance group Freelusion for a stunningly choreographed routine. It was a career high—in a very young career.

"From programming the robot routine and applying the necessary safeties, I would have never thought I would be this far in my career," said Siwicki, a Momence native.

Siwicki traces his early success back to his education in Illinois State’s Department of Technology, especially its faculty and Caterpillar Integrated Manufacturing Laboratory. Siwicki worked in the lab, which has 10 state-of-the-art ABB industrial robots and a wide array of related equipment for student use.

“It’s a pretty special space. It’s a showcase for us,” said Department of Technology chair Ted Branoff.

Siwicki majored in renewable energy, with a minor in engineering technology. He graduated early, but already had a job lined up at ABB, the same company that produced Illinois State University’s robots.

When he’s not making robots dance, Siwicki is a robotics engineer and paint specialist at ABB. That means he’s in charge of the robots that precisely paint most of the cars you see on the street today. He’s based in Michigan but travels to plants around the country to work on ABB’s multimillion-dollar robotics systems.

The way they taught classes is exactly how the real world is.

He says he “found his career niche” in Illinois State’s robotics lab, which exposed him to both sides of robotics—the machine, and the underlying Programmable Logic Controller (PLC) that makes it work.

Even more so, he credits faculty members Kevin Devine and Dave Kennell with the kind of hands-on, problem-solving robotics instruction that prepared him well for his job at ABB.

“The way they taught classes is exactly how the real world is,” Siwicki said. “That’s exactly what I’m doing at ABB. I go to a plant by myself and have to figure it out.”

But back in September, he had to figure out a new problem—how to get a robot to dance in lockstep with Freelusion on America’s Got Talent. The dance group approached ABB about developing a robot-driven routine for the reality show’s live semifinal round, and Siwicki was tapped for the job.

The robot, under Andrew’s pre-programmed control, moved in perfect sync with the dancers, video content, and other visuals. But it wasn’t easy. Dancers often change their routine throughout the rehearsal process, and Siwicki found himself making unrehearsed tweaks right up until showtime.

“The most challenging part was trying to make the robot not look like an industrial robot, to make it move like a dancer,” said Siwicki. “I’d have to think like a dancer too.”

While Siwicki’s TV gig may be unusual, his employability and career path are not, says Branoff.

“We have a large group of ISU alums working with ABB, and I was very pleased Andrew chose to start his career there,” added Devine. “I am not surprised he is doing well at ABB.”
Induction into the Academy of Achievement is an honor bestowed on graduates of the College of Applied Science and Technology. Nominations are based upon an alum’s demonstrated significant contributions to a chosen profession/community and demonstrated commitment to Illinois State following graduation. No more than 20 years may have passed since inductees graduated from Illinois State. The academy attempts to bring together “thought leaders” in their fields who serve as an inspiration to others to pursue similar career paths.

MAC CONDILL ’99, Department of Agriculture; owner and operator, The Great Pumpkin Patch

BRAD LAUER, M.S.’05, Department of Criminal Justice Sciences; vice president of northwest operations, U.S. Security Associates

MOLLY MCGUIGAN ’05, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences; senior project manager, Compass Group

SARA GRIESEMER ’03, Department of Health Sciences; research scientist in the special projects unit of the laboratory of viral diseases at the Wadsworth Center, New York State Department of Health

CORY DOUGLAS ’02, School of Information Technology; president, Area-Wide Technologies

DAVID PERRY ’97, School of Kinesiology and Recreation; assistant principal, Neuqua Valley High School

KYRA TILLMAN ’99, Department of Technology; vice president, BTM Industries

Find full bios at CAST.IllinoisState.edu/Alumni/Academy-Of-Achievement.
HALL OF FAME

Induction into the College of Applied Science and Technology Hall of Fame is an honor bestowed on current, past, or honorary members of the CAST community. Nominations can be based on outstanding performance in one's profession; demonstrated leadership in one's profession or the community; outstanding service to the institution; and statewide, national, or international recognition.

ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION, corporate inductee

MARCOS FERNANDEZ ‘80, Department of Agriculture; associate dean and professor of animal sciences in the college of agriculture, Purdue University

LOUIS BLADEL III ‘89, Department of Criminal Justice Sciences; special agent in charge of counterintelligence division in the New York Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation

BJ FRIEDMAN ‘75, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences; professor of nutrition and foods, Texas State University

ALAN JANSSEN ‘75, Department of Health Sciences; senior health communications specialist in the global immunization division, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

AMY FOWLER STADLER ’86, School of Information Technology; managing partner, Lewis Fowler

MIKE BUCEK ’82, School of Kinesiology and Recreation; vice president of marketing and business development, Kansas City Royals

STEVE WARE ’84, Department of Military Science; executive vice president, Millennium Corp.

TOM SCHILDEGEN ’77, M.S. ’80, Department of Technology; professor of technology, Arizona State University

Find full bios at CAST.IllinoisState.edu/Alumni/Hall-Of-Fame.
Out of the eight departments in the College of Applied Science and Technology, seven are in male-dominated fields. More women are studying agriculture, technology, computer science, and criminal justice, but they are still outnumbered when they graduate.

And 30 years ago, they were really outnumbered. Betsy Pech became one of the first women in the state to teach high school agriculture in 1978. Tami Haukedahl walked away with a degree in corrections in 1980 and joined the Illinois State Police, becoming the first woman to patrol the Tri-State Tollway in the Chicago area at a time when there were no uniforms tailored for women. Jedediah Cantrell started as a nurse’s assistant in a nursing home, got her degree in health information management in 2001, and is vice president of operations for SwedishAmerican Health System.

FIND OUT HOW THEY DID IT.

Breaking the Mold

By Kate Arthur and Steve Barcus
When Tami Haukedahl ’80 graduated with a degree in corrections, women were more likely to be matrons in prison than sworn police officers. But the Redbird basketball player knew what she wanted to be since she was a teen and she learned from former head coach Jill Hutchison to stick to her game plan. After more than 27 years with the Illinois State Police, she retired to become deputy chief of police at Elgin Community College.

Q At a time when women were becoming nurses or teachers in droves, what attracted you to the police force?
A I was one of the lucky ones. I knew I wanted to be a police officer when I was 15. I knew no police officers. Police work drew me because I could help people. I was so fortunate to get my dream job with the state police.

Q What was your first assignment with the Illinois State Police?
A I started out on the tollway system around O’Hare; they call it the spaghetti bowl. You have 50,000 to 70,000 cars and trucks pass through your 12-mile patrol area in an eight-hour shift. Anything that would happen in a city that size also happens in cars—homicides, suicides, crimes, babies being born, drunk drivers, crashes.

Q How did your career evolve?
A After seven years, I became a sergeant, and eventually a master sergeant, and then shift commander. I had an opportunity to join the Division of Internal Investigation in ’93. I did investigations on state employees or DCFS (Department of Children and Family Services), or Public Aid, or state police troopers accused of wrongdoing. After three years, I went to the Illinois State Police Crime Lab in Chicago. It was so interesting. I was eager to start every day and see where it went.

Q Did you experience any gender discrimination or bias from male officers?
A At 23 years old, I was the first woman (trooper) on the Tri-State Tollway. I was working with experienced troopers, most of them Vietnam vets. There were no bathrooms for women. There was one locker room that we all had to share, complete with a bunch of urinals. Our uniforms were tailored for men, and the hair standard was the same as males so I looked like a 10-year-old boy.

A My first supervisor, a sergeant, was quite skeptical about women being state troopers. One day he asked, “What is the academy sending me here?” I told him I’d give 100 percent and he wouldn’t regret it. At the end of my career, I was fortunate enough to be the commander of the Tollway District. That sergeant was still in the district. He came in to my office and said I had a lot to overcome and he was proud of me.

Q What personal philosophy guided you?
A I was able to help people in a lot of ways, whether it was changing a tire, which I did hundreds of times, or just listening to someone who needed an ear, or helping crime victims. I had such a sense of satisfaction from it. My parents had a tough time understanding that I would be willing to lay my life down for what I believe in.

One night I arrested an armed robber and I thought it would end terribly. He robbed a toll plaza at gunpoint. The tollway is a controlled-access highway, so there was no exit between me and him. He had to drive by me and I pulled him over and the gun was on the front seat. We all ride by ourselves. We’re highly trained, so you always revert to your training. You harness your adrenaline like athletes do.

Q What did ISU do to help prepare you for your career?
A My education at ISU really laid the groundwork for me to be successful in law enforcement. The faculty was an all-star group and being able to apply that knowledge and use it in a practical way is the basis for my success.

Being in sports definitely helped too. I understood how I’d fit in with the team, what I brought to the table, and what I needed someone else for. Jill Hutchison was my coach, and you don’t get any better than that. She’d drill in our heads that we had a job to do, and to just keep focused, and execute the game plan. That helped me throughout my career.

The lessons I learned on the court and in the classroom brought me my success. There’s no doubt about it.
Betsy Pech ’78 thought she wanted to be a veterinarian in high school. She never considered a career in agriculture, because that’s not something high school girls thought about in the ’70s. Physics ended her dream of becoming a veterinarian, and she attended two colleges before transferring to Illinois State, where she discovered ag education. Pech became one of the first women in the state to teach high school agriculture and won numerous awards, including Top Vocational Agriculture Teacher in Illinois and the Honorary Holbert Award from Illinois State’s Department of Agriculture, the department’s highest honor. After 34 years of teaching at Hartsburg-Emden High School, she retired in 2014 and lives in rural Lincoln with her husband of 35 years, Randy. They raise Hereford cattle.

What was the first surprise about teaching a male-dominated subject?

I was probably the first female production ag teacher in Illinois. It absolutely didn’t dawn on me that there weren’t any females out there. I’ve always been around males, working on a farm, so it didn’t dawn on me that I was going to be stranded out there by myself. There were a couple of times when someone tried to put me in my place, male teachers, but the kids were fine, that wasn’t an issue at all. It wasn’t enough to discourage me.

What did you want your students to learn about agriculture, and how did that change as fewer students came from farms?

About three years ago we graduated the last of the farm kids, but luckily, it’s still a rural community. I always told my students you live in the best of areas—you can drive down the road and see corn, and soybeans, and tractors, and 30 miles away, you can be in a city of 100,000. But the people who live there don’t know what your life is like.

My last five or six years of teaching, I had almost every kid in high school. It was an elective, and I wanted the kids to enjoy learning about agriculture. It’s my passion. Four years ago we went to the Farm Progress Show, and I took two buses, freshman through seniors. There were only three or four kids left at the school.

Did any of your students pursue agriculture, and what advice did you give them about ag education, which often requires extra hours with FFA and competitions?

Quite a few went into agriculture, one is a veterinarian, several work in the seed industry, and several went into diesel mechanics. One of my disappointments is I haven’t had students go into ag education. But I have sat down with college students and told them if you’re going to get married, you have to have a spouse who’s very understanding of an (ag education) career.

If you do it the way it’s supposed to be done, you’re going to be gone evenings and Saturdays. One of the other things I told them is that if you go to a rural school district, you need to know how to teach mechanics. You don’t have to be a master; you just have to know enough to teach the class. I just built and wired a playhouse for my grandchildren. Those are things I taught my students and I taught myself by going to workshops.

What do you miss about teaching now that you’ve entered your second fall without a classroom?

I miss the students. I miss the camaraderie of the teachers, but I do not miss the paperwork. It was probably about January last year that it finally hit me that I do like my evenings at home. I do like my Saturdays. I have four grandchildren. But I had a fantastic career. I loved every minute of it. I couldn’t have written a better script for my life.
Jedediah Cantrell's career is rooted in more than 20 years of experience in health care. Beginning as a nurse's assistant in a nursing home, Cantrell '01 took on roles in laboratory science before pursuing her Bachelor of Science in health information management at Illinois State. After graduating, she applied her education and experience, gaining increasing responsibility in the health information management (HIM) field. Today Cantrell serves as vice president of operations for SwedishAmerican Health System, headquartered in Rockford, where she is responsible for hospital internal operations and clinical services throughout the health system and provides oversight of the SwedishAmerican Regional Cancer Center. Additionally Cantrell is active on a number of community boards and in a number of organizations. She received her executive MBA from Bradley University.

Q: Was moving into a leadership role always a goal?
A: It was. Early in my career, I wanted to move into leadership and make decisions. Be careful what you ask for. But, the move toward leadership is what led me to HIM. One thing I always appreciated about HIM is the variety—you can focus on data analysis, patient records, coding impact, revenue cycles, clients, and IT. It is a diverse field. Between my desire to get into management and do something different every day, HIM was a perfect fit for that.

Q: What is your favorite aspect of your job?
A: What I enjoy most is that we're in an exciting time right now in health care. The changes we are undergoing are related to redesigning how we deliver patient care, how we are reimbursed for that care, how we partner with other health care entities, and how we work to provide positive health care experiences. You wrap that up and try to figure out how to provide the best experience for our patients while managing a financial environment that's changing. All of the moving parts can be challenging, but I enjoy working with my team as we figure out “the how.”

Q: What's your greatest success?
A: I'm a strong believer that mentorship and reaching back to help others is critical in the advancement of our communities. I try to make it a point to spend time with students and people who are early in their careers. I spend time with mid-level professionals and I participate on education and community boards because it is important to give back. To see people advance and stretch beyond themselves counts as success for me.

Q: How do you find time to give back?
A: It can be tough. Not only do I have the roles I hold at SwedishAmerican and on community boards, I am a wife and mother of three: TJ (23), Saniya (5), and Kimoni (3). My husband, my family, my community in Rockford—I have a strong support system that allows me to make time for others. Again, having a strong team at work who are experts at what they do is essential, and I rely on them.

Q: What do you think is the greatest challenge facing today's workforce?
A: Most health care workers are women, but that ratio is not necessarily reflected in leadership positions. A study by the Pew Research Center noted that while women make up the majority of the labor force, only 22 percent of senior management positions are held by women. What are your thoughts on this?

A: Unfortunately, it's our reality. In health care it's what I see every day. Although the number of males in health care related roles is growing, most health care workers are women, but that ratio is not necessarily reflected in leadership positions. In most health care organizations when you look at the board of trustees, board of directors, and executive leadership team, there aren't many women present in those roles. I am proud to say that SwedishAmerican has done a very good job of diversifying their board of directors as well as their executive leadership team. There has been an effort to make sure that our leadership is diverse and reflects the communities that we serve. There's still work to be done in the industry.

Q: What advice do you have for students and young alumni?
A: You have to do what you love doing, and not chase the money. When you're doing something you love, something that drives you, something that gives you a sense of satisfaction while you're doing it, the money will follow.
Pick a job you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life. What might sound like a quote from a commencement speech or something from an inspirational calendar actually rings true for School of Information Technology alum Brandon Dewitt ’05. As chief technology officer (CTO) for MX in Lehi, Utah, Dewitt often finds himself saying, “I’ve never been to work a day in my life. I hang out with creators who have found a purpose.”

MX has almost 200 employees, but the company is still considered a startup. As such, he has trouble defining his main responsibilities as CTO. “Some days a salesman, some days a janitor, some days a coder, some days a friend, but I’m always a builder and a creator.”

Founded in 2010, MX’s main goal is to offer digital money management solutions that amplify user loyalty and drive an increase in profitable revenue. MX partners with digital banking providers and financial institutions to enhance the account holder experience and position banking partners as true advocates for end users. MX strongly believes that finance can be simpler, more useful, and even enjoyable.

Some might think making finance enjoyable is an oxymoron that would be impossible to overcome, but employees at MX are up for the challenge. The team at MX believes that “it’s everyone’s job to get things done,” Dewitt said. Days at MX kick off with a 15-minute, stand-up meeting where engineers share what they accomplished the previous day, and what they hope to execute today. “We share concerns, ask for assistance on significant problems, and brainstorm solutions.”

Dewitt often follows up the stand-up meeting with an hour or two of writing code. “I got into starting companies to write code that changes how humanity interacts with daily life,” said Dewitt. “Part of my happiness is found in tackling hard problems in maintainable and scalable ways. I need to spend time coding every day.”

Dewitt is mindful of spending time on things that make him happy, especially after receiving a wake-up call that made him realize what matters most in life. “I had been through a few careers at this point, and I had never purchased a car,” said Dewitt. “I decided to ‘reward’ myself for the success I had experienced. I went to the BMW dealership and negotiated to get a BMW X5, white with a brown leather interior, and pick it up the following Monday.”

Part of my happiness is found in tackling hard problems in maintainable and scalable ways.

“As I was headed to pick up the car on Monday morning, I received a call from my doctor, who said I needed to go to the hospital,” Dewitt said. “I told him I had another appointment and
that I couldn’t come in; he informed me that I needed to go to the hospital as soon as possible. I canceled my car appointment and headed to the hospital to learn that I had a fast-growing cancer.

“After sitting and crying for half an hour, I called my mother and told her the news. Then I called and canceled my BMW order. When I ordered the BMW, I was focused on what was materially important to me, instead of how the decisions I made influenced and impacted the world around me.” Dewitt eventually ended up purchasing a hybrid car that gets 44 miles per gallon and an electric smart car.

Dewitt was diagnosed on September 8, 2014, and spent three months in daily radiation and weekly chemotherapy treatments. He was still working and in communication with his team at MX, but staying quarantined from the office was difficult. Dewitt remains grateful for the support he received from his co-workers. “I had visitors during that time, and the entire company supported me throughout the whole journey,” said Dewitt. “They even wore ‘Just Dewitt’ shirts every chemotherapy treatment.”

Dewitt shared his story with Illinois State Information Technology students at RedbirdHacks, a hackathon hosted at Illinois State in April 2015. “Brandon has always been an innovative thinker and an excellent programmer, but his battle with cancer turned him into a great role model,” said Mary Elaine Califf, director of the School of Information Technology. “I’ve seen him talk to students both before and after. Before, he was an interesting speaker who does some exciting things; now, he’s the kind of speaker who touches hearts and lives.

“He’s still the entrepreneurial brilliant programmer, and yet, he also has figured out what else matters in life and is willing to talk to students about those things.”

“My experience has caused me to live and work with more purpose,” Dewitt said. “I realized I wanted to read more; I realized I wanted to be the person that I have always imagined I could be (without the typical excuses); I realized the everyday interactions of life are not boring, but they should be cherished and purposeful.”

Dewitt’s goal of reading more started during his hospital visits, and one book he got his hands on was This is Water, by David Foster Wallace, a former Illinois State University professor. “It has become required reading at MX and informs how we interact with one another at the office and in our daily lives,” said Dewitt.

After his diagnosis, focusing his efforts became a main priority for Dewitt in his life. “When I was diagnosed with cancer, I realized pretty quickly that life is not infinite,” he said. “This was an inspiration to magnify the impact of my efforts, but also to focus them. The seconds we have left are a finite resource and saying ‘no’ is a necessity if we are going to optimize the use of those seconds.”

This focus extends to the office. “Every week at MX, we visit with financial institutions and organizations that are looking to solve big problems in new and innovative ways. Our biggest challenge is not generating opportunity, but deciding when to say no to one,” said Dewitt. “My natural curiosity and excitement about building, creating, and solving problems makes saying ‘no’ a challenge.”

Dewitt’s natural curiosity for learning meant that he saw more of Illinois State’s campus than some students. While he ended up as a computer science major, he initially began his journey at Illinois State University in the School of Music. “The intersection of art and science at the University has made the most significant impact on my success,” said Dewitt. “As humans, we are not single-track; we require both sides of our minds to be engaged.”

This way of thinking started early for Dewitt: “I wrote myself an email before starting my first entrepreneurial endeavor, and I still live by it today. Every time I read it, I realize how prescient my younger self was; the naiveté of my youth still guides my present.” The email references to-dos that engage both the right and left sides of the brain: Be passionate to the point of ridicule; statistics don’t lie, so learn to read them; practice objectivity; and remember that “integrity matters more.”

This was an inspiration to magnify the impact of my efforts, but also to focus them. The seconds we have left are a finite resource and saying ‘no’ is a necessity if we are going to optimize the use of those seconds.

The last point on Dewitt’s list encourages him to “find out what’s real, what matters, and what you value.” It is clear that creativity is one thing that rises to the top of that list for him, day in and day out. “When I leave the office, I feel the true fulfillment that comes with knowing that what was built today did not exist yesterday, and the momentum we have built over time can continue to grow,” said Dewitt. “Planting the seed of creation is something that can never be undone and fulfillment that is rarely matched.”

When asked what advice he would give to someone who is considering starting their own company, Dewitt said, “Do it! Start a business, or go learn at a startup company how to start a business of your own. There is no time like the present to lose everything in the pursuit of purpose.”
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