

## **A Bullied Child, Abandoned at Birth, Becomes a Global Leader in Dental Health Innovation and Education**

Donald W. Mitchell

Everyone loves rags-to-riches stories, but few people have lived such lives. In addition to a desire to see others succeed, many people like to complain that they don't get any breaks . . . and use setbacks as an excuse for not having accomplished much. But are breaks really the basis of rags-to-riches success, or is it something else?

The punch line of most rags-to-riches stories is that it's what you do, not where you start out, that makes the difference. Let's look at a modern-day Andrew Carnegie to see what lessons we should draw for accomplishing more.

Dr. David Penn was abandoned in a hospital in Sydney, Australia by his refugee parents. His first fortunate break came when he was adopted as baby by a childless couple. His next set-back came when his adopted parents broke up: Dr. Penn was mostly raised by his determined Mum who struggled to earn enough to support him.

Wanting a better education for him, Dr. Penn was sent to a boarding school at 13 where he suffered from continual bullying and violence while mentally stagnating from the school's weak academic program. This setback was a low point from which many teens don't recover.

Dr. Penn was adamant that he wanted to come home and finally persuaded his parents to free him after two years of misery and three break outs from the school. Thrown into a new sink-or-swim school, he thrived thanks to a new friendship with a nice teenage girl.

He started university studies at 17 and quickly found that he had entrepreneurial instincts. He earned a good living from providing part-time tutoring to high-school students and sponsoring a lucrative football betting game at the university. Profits were so good that he hired someone to do his laundry for him, much to his Mum's dismay.

Buying a dental practice after graduation, Dr. Penn was soon so successful that he bought a second practice and had both completely booked

by the time he was 27. Seeking new challenges, he later started a dental laboratory in Hong Kong to make dental prostheses. That business has grown over the last 25 years into a global industry leader.

Through the dental laboratory, Dr. Penn found ways to improve the practice of dentistry, providing better materials and prostheses while educating dentists on how to be more successful using these improved resources. The business did so well that he characterized its business model as being as near perfect as a business model can be. But he was restless and wanted to do more: He started and ran three more successful companies. But those accomplishments still weren't enough.

Where does a man who is so successful go to find new challenges? In Dr. Penn's case, his next stop was to study for an online MBA at Rushmore University. Why? He wanted to examine what he had been doing in business from a new perspective and thought that the individual tutoring by the world-famous professors at Rushmore could help.

Because he had been asked by another university to develop an MBA program for dentists, Dr. Penn made that one of his topics for earning an online MBA; and he created an MBA curriculum and model unit on ethics for dentists. The program was designed to build on the best of what well-known universities were doing and his experiences with individual tutoring at Rushmore.

Dr. Penn found from his studies that experientially directed learning (working on practical problems to learn business principles) energized and informed him in ways that he did not realize could be done through academic studies. He pointed to David Kolb's book, *Experiential Learning*, to characterize how the experienced person can make large gains in gaining and applying new knowledge:

1. Perceive new information.
2. Reflect on how the new information can impact some area of life.
3. Compare the new information to your experiences.
4. Think about how the new information could provide better ways to act.

After gaining his MBA, what did Dr. Penn have to say about the educational experience?

“Was the course worthwhile and would I do it again? Absolutely! Upon reflection, the most difficult aspect was defining the course and ensuring that the tasks were worthwhile and challenging. I set myself an enormous performance gap to bridge but emerged at the end with an achievement that has altered my thought processes forever.”

Since graduating, Dr. Penn expanded his dental laboratory by integrating a new product line from another company. This experience was so exciting and successful that he has been thinking about studying for a DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) degree to consider and expand on his post-MBA work.

What challenges will entice Dr. Penn next? It's hard to tell, but they are bound to be large ones. Now that he appreciates how education can accelerate his success, the sky is clearly the limit for him.

How can you refocus your talents and experience to accomplish more? Perhaps you should start using Dr. Penn's four steps to help you. Rather than thinking it's all about breaks, start looking for ways you can perceive new knowledge. And follow on from there as he did.

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