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in every issue

“Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Entrepreneur”

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HISTORIC HYPOMANIACS

Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Carnegie, William Penn and the author's father, R. Craig Allison, were said to live in an elevated mood state that felt highly intoxicating, powerful, productive and desirable.

Oscar Levant, pianist, composer, actor and native Pittsburgher, once quipped: “There's a fine line between genius and insanity. I have erased this line.”

You don't need to spend a lot of time with entrepreneurs to realize that many of them have at least smudged the line. For every Willie Loman there are five Willy Wonkas. A Mr. Hyde for every Dr. Jekyll.

You see in them huge capacity for risk. You discern obsessiveness. You recognize quick yet restless minds. You notice a constant need to prove their worth — to others and, more importantly, to themselves. They must control. They start their businesses not out of intellectual curiosity but a desire to forever end having to click their heels in front of a dullard's desk. They want to accumulate “screw you” wealth. Their biggest fear is not failure. It is boredom. They curse the darkness of the status quo and selfimmolate to illuminate change.

HYPOMANIA

Perhaps great entrepreneurs aren't technically crazy, but they sure aren't like most people.

Author Michael Lewis calls the entrepreneur a frontiersman and describes him this way: “Really, there is no good word for what he does. I first noticed this problem when I watched one of those people — a man who had made himself a billion dollars — try to fill in a simple questionnaire. On the line that asked him to state his occupation, he did not know what to write. Searcher? He couldn't very well put that down.”

Psychologist John D. Gartner takes it a step farther in his book titled “The Hypomaniac Edge: The Link Between (A Little) Crazy and (A Lot) of Success in America.” He describes hypomania as “an elevated mood state that feels ‘highly intoxicating, powerful, productive and desirable’ to the hypomaniac.” Those hypomaniacs are today's entrepreneurs. They were also, Gartner argues, Christopher Columbus, Alexander Hamilton, John Winthrop, William Penn, and Andrew

Carnegie.

MY DAD

Let's take my late father, R. Craig Allison, for example. He started many companies in his lifetime. He started a plastics company, safety barricade business, a concrete contracting company, a street repair and gas pipeline company, a consumer electronics repair business, a cable-television provider and a maker of telecommunications test equipment.

Some were failures, some moderate successes, and the last was a public-company home-run that he never lived to see get out of the park and bounce into the Allegheny.

Yet with all of this chutzpah and success, he never felt himself worthy. He wanted to prove to others that he could belong to the best clubs, have the best house, and be "a player." Success was a way to get back at those who looked down upon him throughout his life. It was vengeance.

He had a rapid-fire mind and could grasp abstracts quickly. Due to his lifelong insomnia, he would regularly call me at 2 a.m. and tell me to turn on the television to see the germ of his latest brainstorm. He had what people call "vision." He tried starting a cable company when the industry was in its infancy. He predicted the growth of cell phones in the early '80s. He knew DSL would revolutionize communication in the mid-'90s.

He understood how to raise capital and what motivated people to invest. The \$6 million in start-up capital that he raised to create Tollgrade Communications, Inc. in the late '80s and early '90s became a company valued at \$72.6 million on the day of its IPO on December 14, 1995, and eventually reached a market capitalization of \$2 billion by mid-2000.

He defended his family like a pit bull having a bad day. His anonymous philanthropy was far-reaching.

But there was a sad, dark side to my dad. His mental highs touched the stratosphere and his lows were deeper than the Mariana Trench. While he could be rib-cramping funny, his temper was legendary.

He battled his weight all of his life, knowing it would eventually kill him. He had a heart bypass in 1978 at the ripe old age of 37 and a second procedure in 1992. He endured more than 20 cardiac angiograms and multiple angioplasties and stents throughout the years.

He was 5'8" tall and weighed more than 200 pounds when he died in 1998 at age 57. He was diabetic, which, for a person with heart disease, is like throwing a pitcher of gasoline on a backyard barbecue. He didn't watch what he ate. And after he died, my mother found a pack of cigarettes in his pocket. He lived life to its fullest and died a death of a thousand cuts.

Craig Allison had an enormous capacity for risk fueled by eternal optimism.

On his last day, he was in the midst of forming a start-up of a bio-tech company and a metals processing company.

MY BEST GOOD FRIEND

Example two is, as Forrest Gump would say, "my best good friend" Ron Morris.

Ron has started more than seven companies. He sold his last company, J.D. Warren, a few years ago so that he could pursue his two dreams: teaching and radio. Now he runs the entrepreneurship studies program at Duquesne University, and is the host of a successful radio program on WPPT 1360-AM called "The American Entrepreneur," which boasts a weekly audience of 25,000. There has been some talk of national syndication, which suits him just fine. He wants to be the next Bruce Williams, which is ironic. I think he's pretty good at being Ron Morris.

He's still an active investor in start-up companies, but only if he secures control.

Ron has the same lightning-fast mind and moxie as my father. He thinks in three dimensions. He is consumed by an insatiable inquisitiveness about how to make money. He succeeds more than he fails when he invests in new business ventures. He describes himself as a "risk-takin" so-andso."

And he openly discusses with anyone who will listen, including his weekly radio audience, that he is a recovering gambling addict. For more than a decade, Ron has worn a rubber band around his wrist to remind him not to gamble on sports. Asponsor told him he gambled because he didn't like himself.

Ron Morris is also battling liver cancer. He is convinced that the excessive adrenalin, that flowed through his body as a result of his entrepreneurial journeys caused his cancer. Punishment for his success.

As I watch him fight the disease while running a successful entrepreneurship studies program at Duquesne, hosting a popular radio show, and starting new businesses, I think of my dad.

They are the entrepreneurs whose unique personalities lifted up the economy and made life better for the rest of us more conventional folks. They deserve our thanks and our prayers that, along with the gold they found at the end of the rainbow, there's also peace.



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