

BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW OF:

Patrick & Robbie Ropella



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By: Obie Crane & Pauletta Ward

Pat - I first got the “salesmanship” bug at about the age of 10, when for school fund raisers various organizations would give the teachers catalogs with all sorts of products from greeting cards to wrapping paper to gift lines etc. Then if you were successful selling let’s say the Christmas wrapping paper during the holidays, you would earn all sorts of things like camping gear, bicycles, electronics etc... I really got into the selling and the prizes and found I had a very strong competitive streak. So I learned real early on that I had a genuine knack for selling and for self-motivating myself and always won the biggest prize the catalog had available.

When I was fifteen, one of my first entrepreneurial experiences was as a reseller. I had been working part time while I was in school, doing maintenance and general labor duties for a very large, regional floral center based in Madison, WI. Felly’s Flowers had a big warehouse full of a pottery, stoneware, and all sorts of decorative stuff that they weren’t clearing out, and so I thought hey, maybe I could sell this stuff for them. So I asked them if they were ok with the idea and they were amused and said sure. So, I took a whole carload of Pfaltzgraff Stoneware (dishes, cooking pans, and kitchen accessories) products that hadn’t been sold at Felly’s and went door to door in my neighborhood, at my church, and to relatives etc... and sold it all. Felly’s sold everything to me at their cost and let me keep the profits. It was Christmas time, so all the wives, moms, and grandmothers and relatives ended up buying some for themselves and then some for gifts. I ended up selling about 3 thousand dollars worth in about three weeks and pocketing about \$1,500. Not bad for a 15 year old.

In high school I had my first “business mentor.” Mrs. Powers was our DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) teacher that I had from my Sophomore through Senior year. She was the first person that really said “you have a real knack for communications and a great personality for sales.” During my Sophomore year our DECA

class traveled to competitions and did mock job interviews, mock selling & business presentations etc. During my Junior year, the DECA class was given an entrepreneurial project. We were instructed to write up a business idea we might have interest in starting. So at 16 years old, I wrote my first business plan. It was for a recording studio. I had been traveling all over the Midwest and working as a roadie and soundman for a rock band called Presence. On Saturday mornings we were going to a local recording studio to work on a demo tape. So I had the unique opportunity to hang out at the studio a lot and become friends with the owners and recording technicians, so I decided that’s what I wanted to write my business plan on. I ended up writing a huge business plan, filled with an equipment list, brochures, a budget, a facility design, and all sorts of information I had collected on how to market and sell the services of the studio. Not only did I write the plan, but actually visited with potential investors to actually open the recording studio from scratch (I had zero money).

Like I normally do, I got so into it that the guys at the studio hired me to come in after school to help out with organizing and cleaning up cables and gear. I spent the better part of the summer in the recording studio learning how it really operated and how hard it is to make money in that business. One thing I learned was that these guys knew nothing about marketing. Basically they were a bunch of potheads that were releasing music for pretty successful regional bands out of the studio in Madison, WI. They had no systems, no organization whatever. So after I wrote the business plan I said “hey let me show you guys how you can improve. Here’s how you can organize your schedules and how you can manage to label and systematize the equipment and how you can organize your inventory and the materials you need.” They were pretty much blown away by my energy and enthusiasm. This was pretty much my first “consulting opportunity,” so to speak, and I got quite a bit of recognition from the DECA program

for it. I traveled through DECA to the regional & national competitions and won ribbons and a few of these big plaques for the Business Plan.

Obie- this is all still while in high school?

Pat - Yes, as a Sophomore and Junior in high school in Madison, WI at Lafollette, High School. Another thing I'd say was pretty significant is that I moved out of the house at 15 years old. At 14, I got started in Karate and started really getting into the Martial Arts at a large school called Paik's Academy of Martial Arts.

Obie- Moving out at fifteen? What prompted that?

Pat - Paik's Academy of Martial Arts was a very unique school that was in Madison and it was a huge old Brown Stone building (originally built as a Madison Public school) that had been remodeled with dorms and they now had about thirty rooms in this old K12 school. To me, it was a massive "castle-like" old building, with a boiler the size of a concrete truck in the basement, and had 2 levels, and the upper level was all rooms for dorms. Anyway, I had some issues with my dad as he was basically an absolute control freak and had all sorts of anger problems and was extremely abusive. By the time I turned 15, it got to the point where I was really getting into Karate and was getting rather confident with myself and he was getting even more physical, and so in order to protect me and my mom from all the things that were going on, my Mom made the decision that I would leave. We have 10 kids in our family and it was the first time that one of us had to leave before 18 - but in retrospect it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I left at 15 and moved into the Karate studio and lived there through my Junior and Senior year. I got, very early on, a taste of real life responsibility. I was paying for all my own bills, buying my own groceries, doing my own laundry, all as a Junior. I even bought my first car and drove myself to work, drove myself to school, got done at school, and went to work and then went home to Karate. It was a great wake up call and a great education in real life reality. I'll admit that I got into some things I probably shouldn't have been doing so young. I learned a whole lot real fast with the crowd I was living with. I lived with and learned all about Vietnam from the Vietnam Veterans that had

come back from the war who were now living with us at the school, and these guys were pretty messed up. I was also living with University students from the (very liberal!) University of WI, Madison that were extremely wild and a bunch of other young guys that were just barely grown up, coming out of high school and college, so yes it was quite an experience. Not to forget I was traveling nights and weekends as a roadie, with the band Presence that I helped start in HS, to bars all over the Midwest.

Nonetheless, these wild and educational experiences had a huge impact in what shaped me independently, entrepreneurially, and what lures me and/or drives me to success.

Right after I graduated from high school, I went down to Florida to live in Sarasota with my brother. I got my first professional sales job at 18 years old selling copiers for Cannon. So again, at a very early age I got into a professional role as a salesperson. Where most of my peers were in college getting their educations, I was down in Florida already in the "field" selling business systems to professional business owners, administrative managers, and getting a firstclass, live business education. I was in Florida for about a year and a half and missed my family and friends, so I came back to Madison for a visit and ran into the drummer from Presence. He was a close friend in high school now a delivery boy for a copier dealership. He told me who he worked for, so I went and introduced myself to the owner and I got hired with this copier company and went to work selling Minolta Business Systems around Madison, WI.

I started getting curious about a college education, so I started night school and I spent about 3 years taking classes through the University of Wisconsin, and The Madison Area Technical College. Taking a wide variety of night classes and weekend classes and completed a wide variety of courses in marketing, sales, finance, accounting, and various other courses. Not with a real clear goal of a degree in mind, as much as just wanting to learn more about how to get the education I needed to be an entrepreneur, because I knew I wanted to be self employed. I didn't really care about the degree as much as I did about getting the courses that would help me get into a role as an entrepreneur a little faster. So I sold copiers and did so very successfully. At 22 years old I was making

over \$50 grand a year – and that was 25 years ago. So a completed degree just didn't seem like a big deal to me, and I was pretty convinced at this point that sales for me was where it's at.

While working for the Minolta dealership, I still had a lot of entrepreneurial thoughts (I was a Success magazine junkie), and so after about 4 or 5 years of selling copiers I ran into one of my friends that I lived with at the Karate studio. He invited me to get back into Karate and join him as a real entrepreneur and start opening health clubs. So I quit the copier business and invested into the Health Club & Karate business with my "life savings" and became the General Manager & Partner in a chain of health clubs that we had plans to develop and expand between Madison and Milwaukee. When I joined, we had two clubs and we were getting ready to open our third club, and my role there was to systematize everything, organize and get us in a position where we could cookie cutter and grow much like a franchise operation. This was back when Subway Sandwiches was just taking off and I thought, hey, if they can make a franchise model work, so can we.

Obie- You had a job somewhere else after the copier company... before you started Ropella & Associates didn't you?

Pat - Yes, I was at the Health Club for a few years and then I got in the Executive Search field. In preparation of building the next Health Club we ran into a snag because of the founding partner. I found out he had serious (let's just say) ethics problems, and that he taken up the habit of snorting cocaine, so I decided no way I can build a business with a partner like that. I had some of the other investors, friends and relatives tell me... he's going to end up bringing us all down. So, in frustration, I had to say "enough" and so I moved on. I went back to selling copiers in Milwaukee for Canon for about a year... knowing this was an interim step... because I hate going backwards and doing something I have already grown past. So while I was in Milwaukee, I went to a Management Recruiters office and said "I want to make a job change and I want to sell something or do something entrepreneurially, what do you have? What kind of interviews can you get for me?"

While they were setting me up for interviews they said "Pat, you might consider being an executive search consultant." So I thought - yeah maybe. But first I spent 6 months thinking about it. I'm a planner and love to strategize before making big changes. I was working full time, doing well, and during this six-month period, was going to school at night - taking accounting, business, and psychology classes, etc. One day I was talking to my psychology professor about making career transitions. He said, you know there are a whole lot of ways you can evaluate this, there are some really good books you should study... books about your skills, aptitudes and attitudes. For example you should study "What Color is Your Parachute" – it's a bestselling book on career transitions. And so I did. With the help of my psych. prof. during this 6 month, I was taking personality profiles like the MMPI (Minnesota Multi Phasic Personality Inventory) the same one they use when they place you in an institution. I also took a whole lot of other personality tests to identify what my personality strengths and weaknesses were, with the idea of focusing on balancing out the weaknesses and improving on the strengths. Test like DISC, The Birkman, and more. Then after doing all this introspective research, I spent a lot of time in the library studying career guidance books. One of the career options that kept popping up as a clear direction for me was that of service sales. In other words, selling high-ticket items, like real estate, stockbroker, insurance sales, executive search etc....

Interestingly, Executive Search kept popping on the radar screen, and I thought, well, I already have this interview/relationship going with this executive search firm, and they're showing interest in me, so I went back. I thought, ok, executive search, that's service sales, I'm interested as it's a high-ticket item, and I won't have to carry a bunch of business equipment/product around anymore. So I went back and interviewed again with the Milwaukee office of Management Recruiters and they hired me.

The owner of the firm Bill Healy said, "No way – he looks like he is 16;" and he was right, I did. I was 22 at this point, but I really did look like I was 16 – still didn't barely shave at 22. So Bill says, "There is no way, no one will take him seriously." Tom Hurt, the Sales Manager, said I like this guy, he's got energy, and he's convinced me he can do this job. If he can convince me, he can convince our clients. So Tom hired me, and

that year I ended up being the rookie of the year, and the following year I was one of the top regional rookies in the mid-west. I was recognized by Management Recruiters as kind of a rising star that took off in the business fast, and I really liked the business, too. My mentor, Maury Petengill at Milwaukee's Management Recruiters office, was a guy who was planning on retiring from a chemical desk he had been working. He asked me if I wanted to take over the chemical desk, and I said, sure, why not, and so he became my mentor in that office. For years later, Maury served as one of my recruiting industry mentors. I would call him with ideas and questions, and he kept encouraging me to learn more and grow, and would say, "Pat, get on your own as soon as you can, and you'll really go somewhere in this business."

Obie- Why executive search in the field that you're in?

Pat – As I said, Maury had worked the chemical industry for a while, was retiring from it, and was going to just leave the industry. It was an available desk. When I first went to the office and they hired me, they said, "Well, what desk would you have interest in working?" and I said, "I haven't even thought of that." I never even thought that you should be a focused practice specialist. Nobody had talked to me about it. I thought I would just be generally working on whatever projects came in. Boy, I couldn't have been more off base. Maury said everybody these days is a specialist, so you need to find a desk to specialize in so you can stand out and differentiate yourself. I said, "Well how about advertising?" they said, "No, we already have people doing that here". So, I said, "How about printing? I like printing..." and they said, "No, we already have somebody doing that too." The only open desk that we can think of that would make sense for you would be if you have an interest in chemicals. I didn't have any experience in any other markets worth starting a new desk from scratch, so I said, "Well, I'll do that until I can find something better." 20 years later, I'm still doing the chemical industry. Now I run the world's largest chemical industry search firm. What's totally bizarre is that my dad – who I had a lot of reason to hate, and no reason to follow in his footsteps – was a chemist his whole career.

Pauletta - Would you say that your psychology Professor might have been a mentor as well?

Pat - Yes, definitely. He convinced me to really take a scientific or analytical approach to career selection. I had no idea how beneficial that process would prove to me until years later. Or that I would actually write a book of my own on the subject.

Obie- Take 60 seconds and tell me exactly what you do.

Pat - Basically what we do is split down the middle between two key activities. One is helping clients find the talent that they are looking to fill for positions they need to fill. If a company is looking for an executive, more often than not they will find us through recommendations from other companies we've worked with or individuals with a company we have recruited from or filled positions with. Often clients and candidates find us through the internet, too. Go into Google and type "chemical industry recruiter," and we're going to come up at the very top of the list. Clients will call us up and say, we need a vice president, a director of manufacturing, a global sales manager, you name it. Mostly we fill middle level management to executive level searches. A client will say we're looking for a person, this is what the person's job will be, and this is the skills and abilities we're looking for, this is where it's going to be located, and this is what we will pay, etc. We will go through a comprehensive needs analysis to gather all the information we need, so we can turn around and start calling their competitors, Vice Presidents of R & D (if that's the search they want us to conduct). Then, we will begin presenting the opportunity to people that are in a similar position at their competitors, or related companies to see if they have interest or know of anyone else worth networking with about that job. That's what we do.

The other side of the equation is that we will help executives that are in our industry niche when they're looking for a career transition. We will actually help them find jobs that fit their background. An executive interested in relocating from the Mid-west from New Jersey says my wife has just gotten a new job in Chicago. Can you help me find something in Chicago too? We will help that person with marketing, identifying opportunities, scheduling interviews, and helping make the transition.

Obie - Would you mind if I said you were a sophisticated employment agency?

Pat - No, but we don't use that term to describe the level of what we do. A headhunter or an executive search consultant is really the most appropriate. It is important to understand the difference. Employment agencies basically have a very simplistic approach to making people available for administrative roles and entry-level positions and there is very little screening and very little relationship development going on. It's very basic. If you go to a staffing agency, for example, and say, I need a secretary, they will go to their files send you thirty resumes of people often without even talking to the candidates. You look through and decide who you want to interview, and you call. That's it, it's totally different. We market opportunities and market professionals in an extremely professional manner in comparison. So we don't want to go anywhere near the word employment agency.

We actually get paid up front just to go to work for our clients. We don't even like to use the term recruiter. What is the first thing most people think of when they hear the word recruiter? The navy or marines etc. And what do most people think of the term employment agency? Not much better. So we use the term Executive Search Consultant because it separates us; it's about differentiation and perception, and you don't get perceived as a highbrow retain search firm if you're using the word recruiter.

Obie - It's more sophisticated then?

Pat - Yes, it definitely is. The key words are "executive search consultant." Whenever we market ourselves, we use that term because high level executives appreciate and value it.

Obie - That makes sense - you are never more sophisticated as you perceive yourself to be.

Pat - Let me give you some of the other information that is on your questionnaire and see if you come up with more questions. Birthday: born on July 2nd, 1963 in Greenbay, Wisconsin. Was adopted at age 2 and raised by my adopted parents with 9 other adopted children. It just so happens my other brother

who was also adopted by my parents is one of my biological brothers and was raised in my family with us, that's actually pretty unique.

Early in my career as a Headhunter, I was at PPG corporate headquarters at the top of the PPG glass tower in the center of downtown Pittsburg, meeting with the president of PPG. I had worked with him successfully and had placed a Vice President with him. But all the work was done over the phone and I had never met them. So I'm there visiting his office and his secretary says, "Mr. Ropella, will you wait in his lobby, he'll be back in a minute." He has this huge expansive office overlooking the city with a living room in the corner and I sat there and waited for him to come in. When he walks in a bit confused, he says Jane tells me Mr. Ropella is here for an appointment, where's he at. I said, "I'm Patrick Ropella." And he says "Well, where is your father - the one I have been working with"? He was very serious, and I said, "I'm Patrick Ropella, the one you have been working with." He said, "Are you kidding, no way."

I have always been able to come across on the phone very polished and very competitive with people twice my age, because of the sales experience I got early on in life, so when I get in front of clients face to face, sometimes, they are like, you have got to be kidding.

Growing up, when I went through all the hassles I went through with my dad, my grandmother told me over and over, "It's not your problem, it's his problem". She said that enough to me over the years that I started saying it in firm agreement to myself. It made a huge difference dealing with my dad later in life and also has helped me deal with the rejection you get in sales and in the challenges of business, too. I really believe there is real value to be self-taught, resilient and tenacious - never willing to stop learning, and never willing to give up. I now regularly tell myself, "I am successful, I feel terrific, and everything I touch turns to gold."

My dad railed against me constantly for years about how I was going to be a loser, I wouldn't amount to anything, I couldn't get anything right, and just ripped me to shreds every chance he could. Then, my grandmother would say, "He definitely doesn't know what he is talking about. He is the one with the

problems. He's the one that is messed up." My dad did the same thing to my brothers. They had all gotten his abuse while they were in high school, but left to go off to college or the military – for them it wasn't as bad. By the time I got into elementary school my dad was already off the deep end and had all sorts of mental issues going on and was taking it out on me non-stop. My Aunt and my Grandmother were the two people that kept me from going over the edge.

Obie- I am anxiously waiting to hear when you and your wife Robbie got together, or were you two together early on in your career?

Robbie - I met Pat when he was operating the health club, and I came in for an interview process and he was a partner in the health club. Basically, and honestly, one of his partners wanted to hire me because he thought I was hot. Pat said that was unprofessional, you don't hire someone for how they look, you hire for their ability.

Pat - I didn't want to hire her. I thought she would be a major challenge, because the guys in the interview process, my partner and another financial backer we had, they all thought about hiring who they could score with. Well, I was saying no and they were saying yes.

Robbie - Within a few weeks of joining the health club I was selected top membership sales person and Pat found out that I wasn't a pushover for men, and I was just very firm and would just say, "I'll knock you out if you try to mess with me." We developed a mutual respect for each other because he helped a lot in my sales training, and if he needed help with typing or filing or administrative projects, he came to me for help.

Pat - She had tons of marketing ideas, one thing I noticed early on is that we would be talking about how we could market the club and she would be like, how about this, and how about that, and I was like wow. She's pretty incredible at marketing, very creative, and has lots of great ideas... and, man, can she build relationships with customers.

Obie- So, how did your relationship develop?

Robbie - A friendship, we had a very strong friendship. I was in the process of going through a divorce and hated men. I just thought all men were evil. It was interesting, though, because Pat had met my boys. At that time, they were 2 and 3 and he said to me, there was a rich guy out in California that had paid a woman \$10,000 dollars have his babies. He said, "You have the most beautiful children. I really don't want a wife right now. I like being single; but, I do want children, so, if I paid you \$10,000 would you have my babies? I remember flipping my hair and saying only if it's artificially inseminated. He was confident and a strong friend. A short time later, he left the club and moved to Milwaukee and then I left the health club, too.

Pat - I moved to Milwaukee, and we occasionally connected on the phone, and every once in a while we would run into each other. Then I moved to Chicago and we hardly ever talked anymore and almost seven years went by between the time we worked together and my time in downtown Chicago. There were a couple of times when we tried to connect, because she had now gotten divorced, but it just simply didn't work out - timing wise. Finally, one weekend it did, and this time we were able to get together. It was perfect timing for both of us, and I was really ready to settle down, but she wasn't.

Robbie - On our first date, he wanted me to come down to Chicago and I didn't. We had been friends for years, but on our first date, he drove halfway up to make sure that I actually would show up on the date because it was such a long drive. I got out of the car and he ran up and hugged me and said, "I love you." and I said, "You're crazy if you think I'm having sex with you. It's out of the question." and he was like, "No, no I love you." and I just said, "Get in line. I've heard that so many times, don't even waste your time with me." – but he was persistent, and the second date he asked me to marry him. He just kept going and going and after about 3 months I said, "Fine, I will marry you because you're driving me nuts."

Pat - I have incredibly thick skin having gone through what I went through with my dad and then having gone through sales for many, many years. Selling copiers is incredibly competitive. For every copier that you sell, you get 20 customers that won't buy from you because there are 20 other product lines out there.

So I learned to deal with a high level of rejection and recruiting is very much like that too. So, even though she said no, I said whatever, it's just a matter of time. Most guys would be like, oh, forget it.

Robbie - Pat actually showed up at church one morning and he lived almost three hours away. I show up to go to church, and there's Pat sitting in a brand new Volvo in the parking lot. I said, "Pat, what are you doing here at my Church?" and he said, "We are getting married and since we're getting married we need to start going to Church together." I hadn't even said yes yet. So, I said to Pat, "I have a date this afternoon to go boating, and this evening I'm going to dinner with someone else." He just smiles and says to me, "You can cancel the dates or I'm going along; but you are not getting rid of me." We were engaged within a couple of weeks after that.

Obie- That is so romantic.

Robbie - Yep, it was. So I canceled my dates. Then Pat says let's go for a little road trip, and he drives me and my boys, Ricky and Robert, who were 7 and 8 at the time, to this huge wooded lot that was about an hour away and he says, "Kids, you want to get out and play?" And they said, "Sure awesome - it looks like Sherwood Forest." Pat says, "Good, because I just bought this land and I'm going to marry your mom and this is where we're all going to live. So anyway we were married on Christmas Eve. We have been married now almost 20 years.



Left to right: Ricky, Patrick, Robbie, Robert

Obie - Was there ever anything you wanted to do that you didn't get to do?

Pat - The only one thing that I wish I had done was actually completing a degree. I am placing senior level executives who often times have an undergrad in chemistry or chemical engineering, a Masters and or P.h.D and an MBA. Many of the guys I'm working with have extensive degrees, and then the executives that are hiring these people all have extensive degrees, and I'm working primarily with middle-level directors and presidents at the world's largest companies and none of them know that I don't have a degree. Honestly, most really don't care. It's kind of interesting how that worked out. I have a lot of education - about 3 years of formal education, and a ton of specialized courses and book study. Education comes in a lot of different forms, and I consider myself extremely well educated, mostly self taught, and I do read more than most. I just simply wish I had actually gotten the diploma. I like to jokingly tell people that "I have a degree in BS, and an MBA from the School of Hard Knocks."

I have always had a knack for making money; I have been blessed in this area. I have lived very comfortably since graduating from high school even though we were pretty poor growing up - try raising ten kids on one worker's salary. There was a period when Robbie and I were actually qualified millionaires and we lived in a million dollar 20 acre estate with two homes, a horse ranch, and a barn with an apartment above it. You can check it out if you'd like at www.ropella.com/properties. All that stuff is great and wonderful, but my primary motivation now for my future is helping others - I love creating jobs and helping people grow. One of my favorite things to do is coaching our employees on learning and growing, and I'm kind of their MBA teacher and mentor. All of our employees are kind of looking at me as their business and career leader. I'm teaching them all sorts of things about business and marketing, driving them towards additional studying, recommending books to them and I love that. To be able to teach is something that I really like, but to be able to do so in my own corporation and make money out of it, well, you just can't beat that.

Obie- Do you still own the estate?

Pat - No, we had the 20 acre estate with two houses on it. One home we built to use for an office, a Spanish style 5000 SF on 5 acres right next door to our horse

ranch, with a barn and an apartment above it. Then we had the primary residence, an absolutely gorgeous Mediterranean-style home with a pool and tropically landscaped gardens. Again, you can check out the property at www.ropella.com/properties. Right after 9/11, the economy hit our industry really hard. We liquidated all that we owned, cut all our debts, and went back to the basics of simple living and recruiting one day at a time. We got rid of all the employees and expenses and all the assets, and then rebuilt one month at a time. After 9/11, hiring flatlined and our business pretty much collapsed, so I went back to just me – working by myself. Over the next five years we built R & A back just to a handful of employees – like 4 or 5 people. Then we hit our stride and grew to over 35 full and part time employees and consultants.

Then, in 2008, the economy tanked again as we headed into the great recession. We had to dramatically cut back - but it all worked out, and we are growing and moving forward again. This time we had so much marketing going on and we had expanded well beyond the chemical industry that we had more oars in the water to help us ride through the storm.

Obie - Who are some public figures you respect and admire.

Pat - One; George Bush big time. There are not too many people I can respect for having the courage to stand behind their convictions, even though many others around them and in the media think their stupid. Yes, he made some mistakes; and, yes, he accomplished a lot, too. I also have a similar belief system, as he's a strong Christian conservative that believes in a relationship in Christ and is not all about religion and understands the difference. He believes that the job he has is the one that he has been appointed to have at this time. I can respect and relate to that.

There are other business leaders that I have a lot of respect for, and I really think are unique. The obvious ones like Bill Gates, or General Norman Swartzkoff, Zig Ziglar, and even John Schnatter, the founder of Papa John's Pizza. People like these who started from nothing and take an idea and build them up.

There are guys in my industry (Executive Search) that have done that – people the general public wouldn't

know. Then there's Michael Dell of Dell Computer. You know, when you can take anybody that can start an idea in their bedroom like Michael did and make it global company, all you can say is wow! I also started my business in an extra bedroom in my house. Actually, I started in my living room; I had a one-bedroom condo in downtown Chicago when I started Ropella & Associates, and in the corner of the living room I had a desk. So, some of the greatest businesses and the greatest leaders started like I did with nothing except an idea and a few bucks. Anybody that can do that – and stick with that when every one else tells them your crazy – now that's somebody that deserves respect.

Pauletta - Do you want to get into any of your awards?

Pat - Yeah, sure. I got my first black belt when I was working in the Karate studio at about 20 years old. Then, Robbie (my wife) and I got into karate together at the age of 40 and got our black belts here locally in Milton at Martial Arts America.

Robbie - Pat took 2nd, two years ago, at the US Open Karate Tournament in contact fighting-point sparing.

Pat - I have done quite a few National Karate Tournaments and won many trophies, but as corny as it might sound, my most significant awards are the lives I have changed over the past twenty five years through the hundreds of people who I have helped land the jobs of their dreams, and improve the quality of their and their families lives.

Pauletta - Do you want to talk about how you came to Florida?

Pat - Yeah, there are some tie-ins there. We are in a business that is technologically enhanced; so, in a sense, if you have a telephone and a computer, you can go anywhere with this business. I can take a laptop and a cell phone and work on vacation from Costa Rica if I want to. Which is very unique, there are not too many businesses that can really pretty much go anywhere 24/7 and with no seams, and unnoticeably make it look like you're right in your office. Anyway, when Robbie and I were talking with our sons Ricky and Robert about where they wanted to go to college, they reminded us of some friends that had gone to

a Florida college, and said they were interested in a couple schools in Florida. We had interest in sending them down here, and I had a real interest in leaving the Mid-west because of the cold. So, I started investigating the possibility of coming to Florida. Right about that same time, my nephew had just gone through Whiting Field, flight school through the training for the Navy, and invited us to come to Milton and Pensacola, Florida for a visit.

My nephew (Eric Ropella) and I were real close and I had kind of been a big brother at times. He had gone to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, got the classic education, then the Navy sent him here for flight school training, and now he is flying combat helicopters out of San Diego and is a Major. My other two nephews (Eric's two brothers, Keith & Todd) also have very neat backgrounds. Keith went through the Coastguard Academy and is now a Coastguard Captain on a cutter in Alaska. Todd got a degree in electronics and then a master's degree in marketing from the University of Wisconsin and has worked in Australia and England for a satellite manufacturer.

Obie - Was there a trip or graduation then or something that called you to this area.

Pat - Exactly, I was thinking about Orlando or South Florida, like most people do. When you think of Florida, you don't think of the Panhandle at all, unless you have been to Panama City or Pensacola Beach on vacation. I never even thought about this area. I thought about Sarasota, Tampa, Orlando or Ft. Lauderdale. Those are the areas I would have moved to until I came and saw Pensacola and Milton. I immediately liked the pine trees and oak trees and the seasons much like the Midwest, and now I really love this area.

Robbie - Pat tried to get me to move to Florida for some time, and I said "no way," until the boys expressed interest in going to school in the area. Then we decided to come look at the area and we found the 20 acres we ended up buying and building my home on.

Obie- Where did the boys go to school?

Pat - University of Florida.

Obie - Both of them?

Pat - Yes.

Obie- They're out now?

Pat - Yes. Well, Ricky is now running Pittman's lumber here in Milton for his father-in-law. He was going to be a doctor, but then he got the entrepreneurial bug. He's a lot like me - he's a communicator, self driven, and now he's married and has a new baby - so you may call me Grandpa. Robert has also joined Pittman's and is in charge of all deliveries. What's really a trip is that Ricky married Jessica, and Robert's now marrying Lauren - Jessica's sister, and the brothers built brand new homes right next door to each other in the woods. Robbie and I are very proud of these guys and very happy to live right around the corner from them. I'm a very lucky and very blessed man!

Pauletta - Do you want to talk about your future?

Pat - Projections, yes. We have some really ambitious plans. We're shooting for the stars with the intent that if we land on the moon we're going to be pretty happy. We worked with Team Santa Rosa, the State of Florida Economic Development Department and Governors, and have received a number of grants and incentives to expand and grow our company. Basically to the tune of almost a half million dollars in incentives that we're going to get over the next five plus years in land grants, hiring grants and training grants. So we are looking to expand and grow our company here in Milton with the intent of having 40 to 50 employees in the next 3 to 5 years, and then having micro offices, what we call satellite offices, in the major metro markets around the country, like New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston.



Our recently completed 10,600 sq. ft. office in Milton, FL

The idea is that we put offices in the major metro markets where all the major chemical companies and consumer products companies are headquartered, and then place rainmakers to focus on developing relationships right there in the region. The rainmakers will be responsible for finding the opportunities for business that we would sell retainers on. They would convince the clients we're the firm to use and then bring the business to us here in Milton and we'd manage all the business processing. You can check out our gorgeous new building at: www.ropella.com/hq. So that is our 3 to 5 year plan, on top of developing additional divisions where we would provide other services beyond executive search, such as Leadership Transformation and Executive Coaching, Company Search services and Consulting Matchmaking to the major corporations we serve.

Pauletta - Do you want to talk about consulting and book writing?

Pat - Yes, in the next few years our goal is to begin providing consulting to the same corporate customers we are working with in a number of areas. First, much like executive search, it's all about networking. So is the process of identifying merger, acquisitions, and joint venture, lead generation. Company executives that are hiring consultants are also hiring us to do senior level executive search. The people we are working with are mostly the Presidents and the VPs. The same people who are hiring us are also hiring consultants to help them find acquisitions, mergers and joint venture opportunities.

Obie - Explain to me what a joint venture is.

Pat - Two companies bring together similar assets and as separate assets they are not as valuable or productive as they are as a whole. Our role would be to help find the businesses, the product lines, the divisions that might be for sale, and the companies that might want to acquire them, or want to merge with them or want to create a joint venture with them, and we would get a fee just like we do now with executive search for bringing the parties together. It's a very similar business model. So we're expanding into that and are actually starting to do so with a strategic partner who is an expert in this function already.

Then we're also going to start providing consulting to the human resources executives and the hiring managers on how to better identify, recruit, and retain talent. That is what we have been doing for 25 years, and now we are at the point where we have the credibility to be able to say "we're experts in this field, let's sit down and talk about how you can improve your internal systems." This is why I developed the SMART™ Talent Management System and wrote the two books: *The Right Hire & The Right Team*.

So we are now developing a Human Resources Consulting Division. There are huge opportunities in this field, very significant. So this is where we are going. Pretty ambitious plan and initially all domestic. As we expand the executive search business, the consulting division, and the various consulting services we will be providing, we're also going to expand globally. In 10 years our goal would be to have a very similar model (as we have here in the US) with a corporate headquarters location and satellite offices based in these regions: Latin America, Europe and Asia. All with the intent that in 10 years we will be the global, dominate leader within the chemical, technology, and allied industries.

One of the things I said earlier is we're shooting for the stars, and if we don't make it that far, but we land on the moon, we will still be real happy with how far we've come.

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