FIRST PERSON

THE JOURNEY TO CEO INCLUDED EDUCATION, OPPORTUNITY AND PERSPECTIVE

Earlier this year I had the privilege to speak to more than 450 students and faculty at Cal Poly Pomona. My life provided the canvas for a discussion about success, and my story demonstrated that education, relationships and real-life experience are intertwined. At Cal Poly Pomona we are the backbone to successful careers. Today, I am the chief executive officer and board member of a publicly traded real estate company with more than 900 employees and over 40,000 homes acquired, renovated and leased in 22 states. What began as a vision five short years ago, when my mentor and the founder of Public Storage, David Singelyn, shares his perspective on success at a forum on campus.

Goal at 18: Paint custom cars. “I wanted to learn how to repair frames and graphics.”
Experience: Took 10aupt automotive refinishing class and started a small business. Worked 12-14 hours, Friday through Sunday.
Skills: Body work, welding, painting and airbrush.
Lesson learned: “When someone else pays your bill, you have to make sure they’re happy.”

Career interest at 19: Digital design. “What could I make a career out of working with computers and doing design?”
Experience: Took as many design classes as possible at Palomar Community College. Painted more cars. Continued to work for dad in custom cabinet shop while car business was getting started.
Skills: Photoshop, Illustrator
Lesson learned: “Having to do customer service when someone is yelling at you about a product that you messed up, and then making no money off the work.”

Career interest at 21: Digital design. “I was learning through an accounting internship arranged by the university’s Career Center.”
Experience: Started a small business.
Skills: Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign
Lesson learned: “I was learning through an accounting internship arranged by the university’s Career Center.”

End of story.

David Singelyn offers a few thoughts on success.

• Do things that you enjoy — you will do them better if you have an interest in them.

• Think big because serendipity can take you only so far.

• Endeavor to learn every day and do not fear failure. Success and risk are often intertwined.

• As you progress on your journey, take advantage of everything your current opportunity has to offer.

Lastly, believe in yourself because if you don’t, how can you expect others to believe in you.

David Singelyn, a 1987 accounting graduate and 1991 information systems graduate, is the CEO of American Homes 4 Rent.

PHILLIP KAUFFMAN HASN’T HAD WHAT YOU’D CALL A LINEAR CAREER TRAJECTORY

Just as he was about to launch his career after graduation, Phillip Kauffman watched his custom auto painting income plunge more than 80 percent, and he moved back in with his parents, but don’t think for a moment that he fell into an abyss of self-doubt. In fact, life was just getting more interesting.

During his time at Cal Poly Pomona, he traveled to 120 cities in 24 countries. (“I’m not worried about spending money to have a cool experience.”) After graduating, he took a trip to Italy, where he proposed to his girlfriend. On the way back, waiting for an early morning flight in Madrid, he struck up a conversation “with a random guy in front of me.” Serendipity.

The random guy at the airport had a graphic design studio in Los Angeles and invited Kauffman to visit. Kauffman arrived with samples of his work in hand. “He said I had a great portfolio, but he gave me a test.” Could Kauffman design movie posters if so, make three or four samples and come back in two weeks.

Kauffman returned with 20 and left the meeting with an internship. That morphed into full-time work as a junior designer and then art director, with print production and photography thrown in. “I was literally doing three or four people’s jobs, and I loved it.” In the meantime, he created a 32-page book of his designs and sent it to 10 places. “I thought he might have sent it to the wrong company, but I also sent it to an online portfolio site, and a handwritten note to each creative and marketing director. Several of them liked the work and started calling, hoping they could elevate their design work. As associate creative director, he made the tools the hero, photographing them in black and white and adding real highlights — the signature color. Along with the redesign of their new website, he managed a team and learned to navigate the culture of a large company.

A leading beverage company later reached out because of one of the portfolio books he had mailed out. They asked if he was interested in becoming their creative director. He said yes! And there he is today, leading creative works. And he patient with job prospects.”

Kauffman credits Cal Poly Pomona art faculty members Raymond Kempf and Sarah Meyer, as well as his involvement in their fraternity, Sigma Phi Epsilon, for inspiring and motivating him to succeed.

“Sarah’s class taught me how to be creative when you have no more creativity left. Every week we would come in with a new set of posters and she would say, ‘These are OK. Do more.’ (She kept pushing me, and she was right. This was exactly how the real-world environment of a design job was. I was working full time and staying up all night designing more posters.) End of story.

Well, not quite. “We didn’t cover what I do for fun.”
First, there’s The Screw Hole, which Kauffman designed after he kept dropping screws while working on a centrifugal fan. He created the designs for a Kickstarter campaign, got more than a thousand backers, and launched the product in 2014. (To skills, add “how to create, fulfill and ship a product,” as well as “speaking on camera.”)

Kauffman is designing and developing five more products: a watch winder, furniture and kids toys to name a few. Most are in the prototype stage, and he is looking to license his products to get them mass-produced.

End of story.

Well, almost. “One more thing: You don’t always know where your path will lead, so you kind of go with it. — You’re always learning along the way. Be able to recognize the difference between comfortable and complacent.”