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## A Life Transformed

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# A life transformed

It's controlled chaos at the Portland Product Werks office. Only a few weeks before the launch of a new brand, shoe displays line the walls, samples spill from boxes stacked three high and people hunch over computers with phones to their ears. Even a small dog stands at attention, gingerly sniffing deliveries and visitors.

In the middle of this whirlwind of activity is Sean Beers '98, a Bluetooth earpiece firmly affixed as he makes yet another call. Beers looks at home among the frenzy, plowing through calls and action items. He laughs about it being a crazy week.

"They're all crazy," he jokes.

Beers is the model of the driven, successful CEO. His résumé is envy-inducing: a CPA license; a law degree from Lewis & Clark and admitted to the bar; a 12-year stint at Columbia Sportswear Co. culminating in him leading its footwear division; presidencies of Korkers Products and now Portland Product Werks.

But Beers had a different beginning than most accomplished businessmen. He dropped out of high school and was living a life, in his own words, of "extreme addiction, intravenous drug use, rampant alcoholism." On April 29, 1992, he was arrested with five pounds of cocaine in a Drug Enforcement Administration sting in a Los Angeles mall. Ultimately, he spent 39 months in prison.

He came out of prison clean and sober, and, he says, "highly motivated to get as far away from my past as I possibly could." He was facing his thirties, had a wife and children and he could feel the clock ticking.

While in prison, Beers had taken correspondence courses from Portland State University and wanted to finish his degree in accounting. He turned to Linfield College and its Distance and Continuing Education program (now known as Online and Continuing Education).

"I started looking around for the best accounting degree I could find," he says. "Linfield enabled me to get an education and a degree from what I felt was the premier institution in the state, while still being able to work full time."

Those days, he says, were a bit of a blur. "I was so busy that I was literally skidding into classes, racing out — I had to work early every morning — it was just a dead sprint."

He took an entrepreneurship class from Professor Eugene Bell while at Linfield and was required to write a business

plan for the course capstone. Beers wrote one for a capital equipment lease finance business, but wouldn't turn it in until Bell signed a non-disclosure agreement.

"Isn't that the point of the class, to make something real?" Beers laughs, shaking his head at his hubris. "I was pretty inflexible on those things and pretty confident."

After getting his accounting degree at Linfield, Beers started at Columbia Sportswear. He was initially in charge of investor relations before moving to the product, merchandising and marketing side of the business. Eventually, he began law school while still at Columbia.

The amount of work was enormous. "You're reading 100 pages of case law a day," Beers says. He snatched study time whenever and wherever he could.

Tim Boyle, president and chief executive officer at Columbia Sportswear, said via email, "Sean was always working, and I remember him with his nose in a law book every chance he got!"

Beers says that he earned his law degree on Tim Boyle's airplane, flying around the country on Columbia Sportswear business trips.

On top of his law studies, he took the CPA exam, and passed all four parts on his first try. The average pass rate is just under 50 percent. "I was pretty driven, I guess," he muses.

"Sean is a force of nature," says Boyle, "and it confirms that significant effort can yield geometrically greater results."

Beers believes everyone has the ability to expand their knowledge and effectiveness by working smarter, not necessarily harder.

"I remember days where I was so overwhelmed...how do I expand my brain to have a greater capacity? And, you can do it." He nods. "You can always take on more substance."

Beers graduated from law school in 2002. He passed the bar exam but was not admitted because of his felony conviction.

That wasn't good enough for Beers. He embarked on a three-year battle to be admitted to the bar. Again, he says, it was about putting the past behind him, to prove that he was a different person now. His main objective, he said, "was to get as far away from that past as possible."

On Aug. 18, 2005, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled unanimously in Beers' favor. The court ruling hinged on Beers showing he had reformed — in effect, that he had fully put his





An accomplished business executive, Sean Beers '98 holds a law degree and CPA license, and is "a force of nature," according to Tim Boyle, CEO of Columbia Sportswear.





Sean Beers '98 is president of Portland Product Werks.

past behind him. The case is now taught in law schools.

After 12 years at Columbia Sportswear, Beers was leading the footwear division and decided it was time for a change. In 2008, he became the chief executive at Korkers, overseeing its first boot designed for use on icy terrain. In 2012, he created Portland Product Werks, a company that partners with brands that want to enter the footwear marketplace but lack the experience to do so.

Portland Product Werks became the licensee for Woolrich for that company's slippers and footwear. Now, Portland Product Werks has launched Dovetail Workwear — a line designed specifically for women and sold directly on Amazon, Zappos, Orvis and Nordstrom, among others.

Beers, characteristically, is looking toward the next challenge.

"The main thing," he says, "is creating something that doesn't exist. I'm not interested in working on things that

are already working. I'd like to work on things that are horribly broken or don't exist yet.

"I'm not burning to make a million dollars, that's not how I keep score," he continues. How does he keep score, then? "By solving problems. By making a difference."

To that end, Beers finds it important to talk about his history. "It was a stigma for a lot of years," he says. "I've spent a lot of time on re-entry efforts with felons who are coming back to society."

He volunteers with Social Ignition, a non-profit that teaches entrepreneurship to prisoners and those recently released from prison. He tries "to help teach prisoners about how to apply their entrepreneurial insights to real businesses in the real world."

And then he switches his earpiece on, ready to take the next call, make the next sale, launch the next brand.

– Christian Feuerstein