



Boston Business Journal

November 9, 2001

A UMass Revival

Entrepreneur's effort yields gathering of alumni--and first-class businesspeople

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Two years ago, when Glenn Mangurian decided to start a business consulting company in Hingham, he was at a disadvantage: All of his customers were overseas; he had no contacts in New England. So he read local papers and scoured local company web sites, searching for names to build a network that could perhaps become a client base. Among those he found were people who had attended his alma mater: the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

As the database grew to 50 senior executives, predominantly in high tech, Mangurian hosted a breakfast and invited everyone on his growing list. He expected five; 25 showed. He was shocked. Now his list has grown to more than 400--the vast majority of whom are Massachusetts-based people whose job titles are an alphabet soup of power: CEOs, CFOs, CTOs and senior VPs.

In a state that boasts the likes of Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston College and Boston University, the land-grant state university and its alumni have long suffered second-class-citizen status, making do with no door-opening old-boy's network and no structure in place to pave the way to corner offices for its graduates.

"The reputation of UMass suffers in-state because it is dwarfed by the private institutions here," says Mangurian, 52. "Out of state, it has a great reputation. But people don't boast that they went to UMass like they boast they went to Harvard, like they boast they went to MIT, like they boast they went to BC."

And yet now, largely due to Mangurian's workmanlike efforts, more and more of the Bay State's white-collar professionals are finding one another, meeting at thrice-yearly breakfasts and networking in a way that has been unprecedented among UMass' best and brightest business alumni.

(over)

`Most powerful'

"Going from UMass to IBM (to CMGI), even in the Boston jobs I had, I was surrounded by people from Harvard, BC, and pretty much from every other school except my alma mater," said David Andonian, president and chief operating officer of CMGI Inc. in Andover, who received his bachelor's degree from UMass.

Andonian was a co-speaker with Forrester Research's then-president, William Bluestein (who died unexpectedly in September), at a breakfast held in October 2000.

"This is probably the most powerful alumni group in the university system," says Mangurian, who admits that, in trying to develop his company, Frontierworks LLC, it was in his professional interest to compile the list and contact alumni.

But that didn't make the group any less valuable to its members--or to the university itself.

"It's a real kind of pan-campus opportunity," says James Mallet, director of development for the UMass Isenberg School of Management, who has helped sponsor the breakfast gatherings since the first one in early 2000. "It's a nice way to build university affinity--and not just a specific school affinity."

Indeed, most schools on the campus do fund-raising and development work only for their own graduates--the university itself has done little to build networks of alumni in areas such as high tech or business, no matter which school students graduated.

For alumni whose only connection to UMass was through fraternities or former roommates, Mangurian's group has made a difference.

"This really brings back the university setting, the freshness, the number of contacts," says John Vaillancourt, 40, chief financial officer of Fidelity-backed Insurance.com in Newton. "It really lets you see the breadth and depth of UMass alumni in business and industry. There are lots of very successful alums."

Confronting paralysis

If Mangurian's story of skunk-works entrepreneurship wasn't enough, members of his e-mail list (he, not UMass, controls and maintains the database) were notified of a sudden and serious injury he suffered last summer. With no previous medical history, Mangurian felt a pain in his middle back which worsened until it became so piercing he could only lie down. Hours later, he lost the feeling in both of his legs. He remains paralyzed from the waist down--and the ruptured disk that caused the paralysis continues to mystify doctors.

The injury has added a new element to Mangurian's business--and personal--philosophy. And while the freak occurrence could have unraveled his hard work, it instead bound his resolve that much tighter.

"I don't feel sorry for myself," he says. "I'm not ashamed of my injury. I've got my mind, I've got my upper body--the only thing I can't do is walk."

And even that may be possible. Doctors have given him a two-year window in which full recovery is possible. And as of last week, Mangurian was able to make both legs move, even if only in small ways.

"I have a feeling, as freak as my injury was, I might have a freak recovery," he says.

