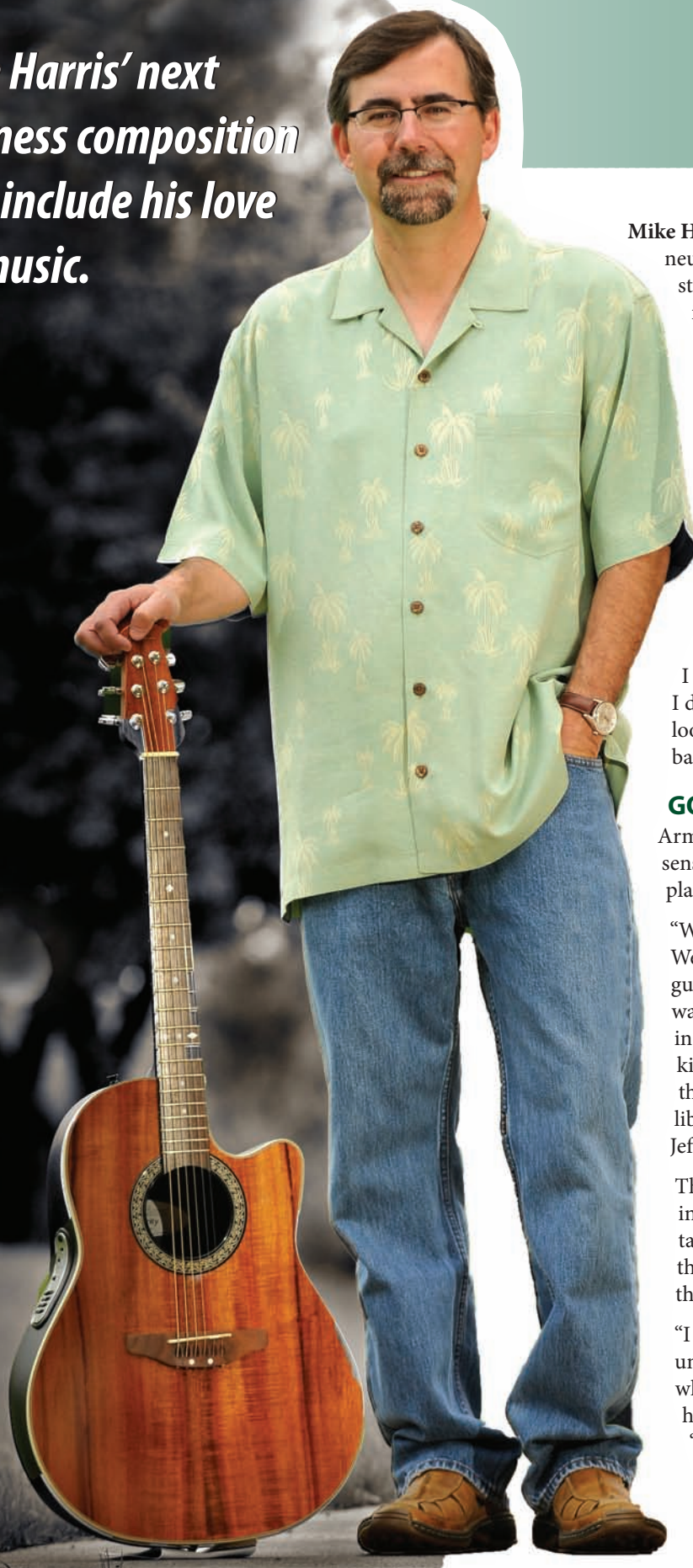


Mike Harris' next business composition may include his love for music.



Mike Harris ('82 accounting) calls himself a serial entrepreneur. A few years shy of his 50th birthday, Harris has started five successful companies and it sounds as if he is far from finished.

"I just love the formative stages," he said. "I love the idea of saying, 'we may have no clients yet, but we have a lot of vision and passion for what we plan to do.'"

Harris began his professional career with the public accounting and consulting firm of Ernst and Young. He followed that with a short yet valuable stop at Wind Point Partners, a venture capital fund formerly connected to SC Johnson.

"I went to Wind Point Partners to be their finance officer," Harris said. "I saw how they evaluated companies and ideas and business plans every week. I sat in on all those evaluation meetings, even though I didn't have to, because I wanted to see what they were looking for in terms of entrepreneurs, smart ideas and back-able business plans."

GOOD BUSINESS SENSE

Armed with a sense of what might make good business sense for venture capitalists, Harris began building the plan that would become Jefferson Wells.

"When I was writing the business plan for Jefferson Wells and doing some research on the idea, there was a guy who I was interviewing and he said on the spot he wanted to be a part of the firm," Harris said. "We lived in the same neighborhood in Racine; we both had little kids at the time, so when we needed to get away from the commotion, we came here. It was in the Parkside library that we were writing the business plan for Jefferson Wells. Isn't that great?"

The concept behind Jefferson Wells was simple, yet innovative - an accounting, finance, internal audit and tax firm that put its employees on client assignments by the hour. Harris believed there would be a need for these high-value services.

"I was kind of the profile of a typical buyer so I really understood what those guys would want to buy and what pricing would make sense - how to offer it up and how to be flexible in the way we worked," Harris said. "I did all the financial modeling and I projected out over five years what the numbers would look like and how much capital I would need to do the job right."

Turns out the plan worked pretty well. Harris projected reaching a level of \$36 million in sales in the

Getting the Party Started

fifth year of operation. In reality, sales exceeded \$130 million in the fifth year and Jefferson Wells was employing a couple of thousand people in 23 offices across the US. The success did not go unnoticed.

Harris built his company using venture capital, and that meant he had to give up some control. In 2001, Jefferson Wells was sold to Manpower. "I didn't have the ultimate say-so as to when we should sell the company. We were doing very well, we went out to the market to test the waters and we sold at a great price," he said.

FORTY AND STILL DRIVEN

The sale of Jefferson Wells took place about the same time Harris turned 40. True, he was set financially, however, he had a drive to do more.

"I didn't really want to go back to a full-time schedule of working 60 hours a week and building another company from scratch," Harris said. "But I really know how to do startup companies. There's a certain formula to it - some might say a certain little bit of magic to it. It's a different thing than going into a big company or joining something that already exists. There's a certain passion and a certain little bit of craziness. You've got to be willing to take some risks, fail and then fix it quickly. I had been all through that twice now and I really understood how you do it."

Because of a five-year non-compete clause, Harris moved outside the realm of accounting and finance. "I did a company called Capital H ... with a focus on human resources. And then I started another company, kind of a high-end IT consulting firm called SilverTrain," he said. "So Capital H and Silver Train were versions of Jefferson Wells in different disciplines.

"That was in 2001 and because I can't seem to stop myself and given that I like recruiting as a business, I started a company called the Novo Group (formerly Novo Recruiting) in late 2003. As soon as my five-year non-compete expired with Jefferson

Wells, I started another version of Jefferson Wells called Adams Harris in 2006.

"So I guess I am a serial entrepreneur - I can't get enough of it. I like creating ideas, refining them and then making them a reality."

BLUE-COLLAR THREAD

A common thread to his many startups may be the somewhat common philosophy. Harris describes his business ventures as blue collar. "We're not some big-shot consulting firm that bills out at \$300 an hour," he said. "We're more blue collar professional, we're scrappy, we're proud of that and I just like that kind of positioning."

Regardless of which business is involved, Harris wants to be the best value available to his customers. He believes that if you do a good job for people and you are fairly priced, customers will become repeat customers. He calls repeat business the ultimate test of success.

"I just love the thrill of building something from nothing, and I love to be the underdog."

Harris attributes some of his client-focused approach to his mother Phyllis who worked for many years at SC Johnson. "She liked helping people who came in from overseas and different parts of the country get settled into Racine. So she was kind of famous inside Johnson Wax for taking really good care of those people," Harris said. "I'm kind of like that with clients. I can go a little bit overboard to make sure the client is happy with what we're doing.

"I've said to clients in sales meetings, 'if you're not happy with what we do, I'll personally come back here and tear up the invoice.' And I mean it. And they seem to sense it's true and that I'll actually do it. The client is always right even when they're wrong. So I think a lot of those type of beliefs and attitudes in operating a business are old-school and have not really changed much over the years."

A GOOD FIT AT PARKSIDE

When Harris thinks about his old school, Parkside, he remembers a beautiful campus, a place where he felt very comfortable, and a place where he received a high-quality, affordable education.

"It was just great, I loved it," he said. "I wasn't overly involved in the organized student activities but I was always down here studying and hanging out."

At that time, on-campus housing didn't exist, so Harris lived at home. "So did a bunch of my friends," he said. "My brother was here, we had several other guys that were here. So we had our own little group and we were always at the Union ... I met my wife (Peggy) here when I was an accounting tutor in my senior year.

"You wouldn't believe all the alumni who we've talked to the past few years who met their spouse at The End. "That's where I met Peggy. (The End) was such a great party. Those were four of the best parties I have ever been to."

Harris didn't realize it at the time, but the The End was really the beginning of an amazing entrepreneurial career - a career that is far from over.

"I just love the thrill of building something from nothing, and I love to be the underdog," Harris said. "In every company I've ever started, we had no clients at the start and we were always the underdog to well-entrenched competitors. And I'm like, 'I love it - bring it on!' And when they say they're going to squash us like a bug, or you guys will never make it ... that's great, that's terrific - I love that incentive and challenge."