

Growing Gazelles

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In a meeting several years ago in the office of the Chancellor at the University of Mississippi, five startup business owners met with a representative from a national entrepreneurship foundation. In the conversation, the representative shared the familiar statistics about startup failures with the group. One of the business owners strongly disagreed with the proposition by this “expert” that they would likely become a casualty of this failure rate as well and proclaimed, “we will not fail!”

The business owner who made that bold statement was Craig Harvey, one of the founders of NVision Solutions. Several years later, Craig received the SBA Small Business Person of the Year Award for Mississippi, and ironically, the keynote speaker at the award ceremony was this same “expert.” Harvey, a former Marine, is not one to shy away from standing up for what he believes in. After the speech, Harvey reintroduced himself and shared with the “expert” that not only his business, but all five of the businesses represented that day years before were still going strong!

I recently traveled to Stennis Space Center to visit with Craig, Tim Brogdon, also with NVision Solutions, and Tom Koger, the Executive Director of the Enterprise of Innovative Geospatial Solutions (EIGS). We had a spirited discussion about the mutual desire to build a culture of entrepreneurship in Mississippi, and I also learned more about the history of EIGS and the efforts to create a geospatial cluster at Stennis. Specifically, I learned more about the vision for the Magnolia Business Alliance, which all three of them were actively involved. The Alliance was recently formed as a 501(c)(6) non-profit organization for the advancement of small and medium businesses in the Southeast.

I learned that EIGS, a state funded agency, was slated for dissolution because of a lack of funding. Harvey and his colleagues shared a similar “this will not fail” attitude by forming the Alliance, taking over the EIGS program from the state, and securing a \$600,000 SBA contract. The SBA awarded contracts to 10 similar organizations around the country to fuel the growth of business clusters. The Alliance, unlike many similar organizations, is founded by small and medium size business leaders for the purpose of serving and growing other small and medium size businesses.

Craig, who serves as COO and Executive VP of NVision has his hands full running this multi-million dollar growth company. I asked him why he was investing his time in also being President of the Alliance. He shared that, “you never see a 200 foot tall tree in the middle of a meadow. You see tall and strong trees in the forest.” His point being that there is strength in numbers for growing businesses. I think of the clustering of banks, restaurants, retail shops, and care dealerships near each other as proof of that point. Craig also hopes to help companies reduce some of the challenges he faced early by providing education, training, and encouragement. He noted, “we plan to identify fast growth gazelle companies and help them succeed.”

Post Katrina, Craig and his team at NVision moved their whole office which was then at Stennis to Hancock County High School where the emergency operations center was located. For six weeks, his team volunteered day and night to provide maps and information for first responders which led directly to lives being saved. Faced with the prospect of losing his business in the wake of Katrina, this generous and sacrificial service by Craig and his team goes to the character of the organization.

My takeaway from visiting with Craig is that the heart of the leader is a driving force in an organization. Who would you rather follow into battle, someone who declares, “we will not fail!” or someone who states “we will give it a good try.” As Craig noted to me, “it does not matter what got you here, it matters what you do now!” With Craig and his team of leaders at the helm, I have confidence that the mission of the Alliance will not fail and that exciting things are to come as this organization helps develop tomorrow’s gazelles.

Quick Facts:

Craig Harvey

Title: COO and Executive VP of NVision Solutions, Inc.; President of the Magnolia Business Alliance (www.magnolia-ba.biz)

Favorite Business Book: *Golf is a Game of Confidence* (Dr. Bob Rotella)

First Job: “I started at age 14 working for Hyvee Food Store in Muscatine, Iowa as a stocker and checkout clerk.”

Proudest Moment as a Leader: “I am most proud of the service of our team during the Katrina recovery.”

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