

You're gonna hear them roar

Recently at the Williston Basin Petroleum Conference in Bismarck, I ran into David Borlaug, president, Lewis and Clark Fort Mandan Foundation, and caught up with his personal and professional life. Like most non-profits, the Lewis and Clark Fort Mandan Founda-



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For Bakken Breakout Weekly

tion uses money to pay its bills, and Borlaug was looking under most of the rocks within the newly renovated halls and walls of the Bismarck Civic Center. Upon departing our separate ways in search of our own people of interest, Borlaug said something that stuck with me.

"I can remember as a kid thinking Mickey Mantle would be the person I would want to meet at a conference like this," Borlaug said. "Today it's guys like Bill Gates and Harold Hamm, oh how times change."

In addition to "the times," priorities and interests change too. Over the past 20-plus years of interviewing interesting personalities, the conversation with billionaire Rob Ryan stands out considerably more than the others. This tech entrepreneur knows how to fly under the radar while creating billion dollar organizations in humanistic ways.

Through a variety of serendipitous events, I became one of a handful of people who had the opportunity to interview the billion-dollar-man while covering the fifth Annual Global Economic Summit in beautiful Jackson Hole, Wyo. This prestigious annual event happens in July and is attended by the globes' top economic minds, venture capitalists and media organizations. A rare white elk sighting is more common than spotting many of the people who attend this economic conference.

Ryan is considered on the same technological and entrepreneurial level as Steve Jobs and Gates. Ryan's 1989 start-up company, Ascend Communications, Inc., generated more than \$2 billion in sales. In 1999, Lucent Technologies acquired Ascend for \$24 billion in what was considered "the largest technology merger" at the time. Since then Ryan has gone on to create six more companies that sold for more than a billion dollars.

An investor in "about a half a dozen

companies in the Bakken" Ryan is looking at investing more into this energy tech revolution through start ups and business acceleration. Ryan is the founder, chairman and CEO of Entrepreneur America and currently runs the Roaring Lions Ranch in Montana, where he lives.

"I raise entrepreneurs," Ryan said. "We've been doing it for about 17 years now. Recently we have joined forces with HERO Partners and are trying to establish HERO Companies."

Ryan says HERO companies are ones that can adapt and transform their environment and produce multiple streams of revenue, almost perpetually. These companies are not common and the people who possess the HERO qualities do not grow on trees.

"We are very selective with the companies we work with," Ryan said. "But then we go in and try to accelerate their growth — in fact dramatically accelerate their growth."

Ryan says his dream, and drive, in this endeavor is to change the cultural paradigm of the United States through entrepreneurship.

"So the dream I have is to impact the United States through entrepreneurship with millions of entrepreneurs spread throughout the United States," Ryan said. "But not in places where they already have entrepreneurs like Silicon Valley and Boston, those places already have engines of entrepreneurship. I'm looking at doing it in the rest of the country."

According to Ryan, most of the people he works with do not have "fancy degrees" or diplomas, rather an honest work ethic with an ability to build businesses. Ryan's educational background is math, physics and science, but believes his billion dollar process speaks to the core of an individual.

"I've developed a process on how to grow a company from scratch to billions of dollars, and I've done it four, five, times now," Ryan said. "You can call the first one perhaps an accident, but it's hard to call them all an accident."

Ryan believes by empowering an individual's special skills, or core competencies, one can develop a process to build a successful organization. These interpersonal core competencies take precedent over the product in the marketplace.

"I compete through competencies not products," Ryan said. "Once I figure out what you are good at, then I can dream up with you, in fact, I can probably dream it up better than you, a million products we can do."

Ryan calls each one of those product ideas a pedal on a sunflower, anchored



Submitted photo

Rob Ryan, left, speaks with Jason Spiess at the fifth Annual Global Economic Summit in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

by a seed disk of core competencies. He said the process he has developed with focusing on the talents and strengths of the person have seen successful transcendence into multiple industries. Ryan believes whether it is the media, energy, technology or any other industry, his process can work in any industry.

Ryan said often times uncovering the inner talents is difficult, bordering on soul-searching for some. Then there are those who just don't have what it takes.

"Sometimes people just realize there isn't much inside of them," Ryan said. "You've heard of Gertrude Stein's 'there is no there there,' well, sometimes there isn't much inside. You open the wrapper and there's not enough in there."

Ryan said when that happens, he looks at it as a very fortunate time in the process.

"It's good for the entrepreneur to discover this, because imagine if you spent your life savings and all your effort and there is no there there," Ryan said.

Complementing yourself with talented people, having a small ego and having a solid family foundation are additional keys to success, according to Ryan.

Professional and personal life

In fact, Ryan says having a successful professional life is dependent on a good marriage. His wife, Terry, an attorney, is "involved with every aspect of his life" and "reads every document" in his business.

"In 45 years I don't think I have actually ever read a legal agreement," Ryan said. "I always tell people if Terry's name

isn't on it, don't bother giving it to me because I am not going to read it or consider signing it in a million years."

Ryan said institutional studies have been performed indicating successful world leaders and entrepreneurs throughout history have one common thread — a long term marriage. He said a good marriage offers stability at home and the ability to communicate with someone outside the workplace.

"If you're the CEO, who do you bounce ideas off?" Ryan asks. "You can't go down and show your vulnerabilities to the people who work for you. So it's a very lonely position and your wife becomes your partner on that."

On the flip side, Ryan said the worst thing you can do if you want to be successful is divorce often.

"If you divorce a lot, two things happen," Ryan said. "You lose stability and your fortune keeps getting divided in half."

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