



Phil Saunders

Chairman of Griffith Energy and Genesee Regional Bank

"How you spend your time is more important than how you spend your money. Money mistakes can be corrected, but time is gone forever."

David Norris

The story of Phil Saunders' life is one of constantly overcoming obstacles. As such, it only makes sense that his turning point would be the time when he was faced with one of the biggest obstacles that can be thrown against a person. Nevertheless, Phil has always had strength of character, and with each challenge he manages to overcome, he's only grown stronger. Before we can describe the turning point that changed Phil's life and put him firmly on the path to success, however, we need a bit of background information.

Phil's early home life was anything but what one would call happy. Phil's father was always something of a frightful influence in his life, but at the age of 13, Phil realized the true gravity of the situation. His father was a heavy drinker and on top of that he frequently abused Phil's mother. The situation came to something of a head for Phil when during that same year, while his mother was driving him and his brother to a basketball practice, she suddenly steered the car into a ditch for seemingly no reason. Phil realized that his mother was driving while intoxicated, and from then on his family situation was beyond dire. He shouldered the responsibility of raising his sister and quickly became very independent in regards to taking care

of himself. Moreover, the basketball practice that his mother had been driving him and his brother to was something of a horror in and of itself. Phil had achieved a great deal of success in sports, and rather than pride, his father felt only rage and jealousy towards him because of this. Realizing that the time was rapidly approaching when he would need to fend for himself, Phil made a resolution. His turning point had come.

"I started thinking about how to make myself financially viable. My first little project was to make water skis."

This "little project" shaped up to be Phil's first taste of running his own business, and he proved to have quite a knack for it. First of all, and completely on his own, he identified the importance of having a niche in the marketplace. Because he was an avid water skier, but had never been able to find skis that met his standards, he decided to start there. He took a guided tour of a water ski factory in order to take a look at how they did things, identified the areas where he thought they had gone wrong, and then decided how to improve upon it himself. He went home that very day and got started manufacturing his own water skis, an undertaking that would last him throughout high school.

While he was in high school, Phil's predictions proved correct, and his life under his father's roof came to a sudden end. During Phil's senior year, he impregnated his girlfriend, and his father demanded that he be allowed to pay for the girl to travel to Canada and receive an abortion. Phil absolutely refused, saying that the two of them preferred to have the child. Enraged, his father, who was President of the school board, got him kicked out of school and told him to leave home. Without even a completed high school education, Phil was on his own.

Luckily for him, he had already learned about the importance of finding a niche and excelling in it. Phil moved into a six room hotel with a shared bathroom and married his

girlfriend. He continued to work his way into college, where he resumed playing baseball, paving his own way in an area where he had exceptional talent. Somewhat unexpectedly, Phil's father returned around this time and began to talk to him again. Now that he didn't have to live under his roof, Phil found his relationship with the man somewhat more palatable and he agreed to go to work at the truck stop that his father was partial owner of. Before long, he was presented with the opportunity to purchase a full third of the business for himself; using his savings, he seized upon the opportunity.

During his time working at this truck stop, Phil's knack for picking up on unfilled niches would pay off big time. During slow hours, he would often listen in and even carry on his own conversations with the truck drivers who had stopped in for a bite to eat. Over time, he realized that there was a common trend among what they had to say. The general consensus was that there was a lonely stretch of highway through the state of Virginia, where a truck stop was sorely needed. The oil companies in the area only considered it financially viable to build standard gas stations, and so full service truck stops were nowhere to be seen.

Phil recognized the opportunity for what it was and right away, he set out to find an oil company who was willing to listen to his idea and assist him with building a full service truck stop along that stretch of highway. He found someone and secured the financing, building his stop right next to the interstate where business promised to be good.

And good it was. During the years between ages 18 and 35, Phil did enough business at his truck stop to go on to sell the business, and as a result had enough money to retire in total comfort. However, so far he has chosen not to. For him, he said the aim was never to retire and do nothing, it was simply to:

"...approach the challenge that business offers and find the weak point, the niche that needed to be filled in order to solve the puzzle and succeed in the best way possible."

It is exactly this tendency for overcoming obstacles that has gotten Phil to the level of success that he enjoys today. His life still continues to see its fair share of hardship, of course. In 1971 his father died of prostate cancer just when Phil's relationship with him had finally begun to take a turn for the better. By then, his father had already been divorced from Phil's mother, who had taken her own life in 1968. However, it is these very challenges early on that helped Phil develop the strength of character to recognize and go after opportunities full force when they presented themselves. This perseverance in the face of some of the darkest tragedies is what separates Phil from others who have given up along the way; in every sense of the word, it has made all the difference.