The Complete Professional

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Building and then selling a high-technology startup company to a leading computer manufacturer in 1995 could have been written off as a lucky break.

Doing it again three years later lent some more credibility to electrical engineer and entrepreneur John McHale '78.

But doing it a third time? It’s practically unheard of, said Paul Zito of Austin, Texas.

"In total, we’ve sold the three businesses for approximately $1 billion to three of the world’s leading companies in networking," said Zito, chief financial officer of McHale’s first company, chief operating officer of the second and a board member of the third and fourth. "Of all those people you read a lot about who are great entrepreneurs, very few of them have done that three times. John is a different breed of cat. He has that ability to not only be a great engineer, but a great businessman and a great marketing mind too."

Those achievements — and what McHale has done with the prosperity that resulted — led the UD National Alumni Association to bestow upon McHale its highest honor: the 2008 Distinguished Alumnus Award.

After graduation, McHale started his career at Texas Instruments. His first venture — which he started at 28 — was a low-cost technology to connect personal computers on a network. Compaq Corp. took an interest, and after the sale, McHale bought himself a new computer and tried out the Internet.

"It was so slow that I called up my friend and said, ‘Hey, let's go start a company and make this Internet go faster.’" So began NetSpeed, which developed the first broadband technology for upgrading telephone networks to provide high-speed Internet service. Cisco Systems bought it.

The third successful venture was Tipping Point Technologies, which specialized in "intrusion prevention" — network security. It sold to 3Com Corp.

Today, he’s the chairman of BreakingPoint, which builds and tests equipment to help networking companies build faster and bigger networks.

"At 28, we had no idea what we were doing," he said. "We made every mistake. The good news is, I didn't need a lot of money to live, because I didn't have a lot of money. We were able to live a long time while we failed."

Now that his labors have borne fruit, McHale and his wife, Chris, have shared their wealth abundantly with UD’s programs in athletics, engineering and leadership.

McHale said his involvement at UD is out of gratitude not just for a high-quality education in engineering and humanities, but also for helping him discover his greatest gifts. McHale had hoped Flyer basketball would be one of them, but soon after he made the first cut, coach Don Donoher had to break the bad news.

"The best thing that ever happened to me was when Coach Donoher cut me from the team because I had no future in basketball whatsoever," McHale said. "I couldn't go left, and I was slow."

That was the letdown that launched his career.

"I was skipping chemistry labs and everything else going to basketball practice, and I wasn't telling anyone," he said. "Without basketball, I was able to go to class, and my grades got better, and it made a big difference.

The gratitude is mutual, said President Daniel J. Curran, for McHale's gifts have had effects at UD and far beyond.
"He's made a difference in the business world, he's made a difference in his community, and he's made a significant difference at UD, and he's done all these things with integrity, grace and joy," Curran said.

Joseph Saliba, interim provost and former dean of the School of Engineering, said McHale's contributions have promised excellence for UD students decades into the future.

"In the School of Engineering, we talk about educating the complete professional," Saliba said. "John made it possible for us to do that. He made us the state of the art in engineering education."

McHale's success, Zito said, lies in what appears to be an innate ability to meld engineering, marketing, manufacturing and leadership. But to McHale, that's just a natural extension of his personality.

"I love that God gave me the pleasure of going and creating things," McHale said. "I think I'm just a classic, serial entrepreneur. Really, I've always had that bent. Even as I was going through engineering school, I would talk about having businesses; I just had a sense for that early on. That's really what I do, is bring ideas to fruition. It's a lot of fun."