

Bob Jesse says entrepreneurship is the combination of taking a chance and making an educated decision.

“Search for advice from knowledgeable people and pay attention to what they say,” he says. “Then, surround yourself with good people and give them opportunities.”

The opportunities started when Bob learned self-sufficiency growing up in the midst of the Great Depression. As he grew up, he developed his ability to work with wood. With that skill he attended Central High School in Fort Wayne, where he learned to be a pattern maker. After high school graduation in 1942, at the height of World War II, he joined the Merchant Marines. His ships were crossing the North Atlantic often, and many were sunk by the German U-boats hovering below the surface.

In 1944, Bob’s ship was delayed and didn’t make its intended arrival during the Normandy Invasion. It did, however, suffer a torpedo blow to the stern during its ocean crossing. As it sunk, the sailors abandoned ship. Bob was helping man the lifeboats, and when everyone else was safely off, he climbed down the netting. Just as he reached the lifeboat, another torpedo hit the ship directly under the lifeboat, blasting him into the air and killing everyone in the lifeboat but Bob.

Bob was rescued, but suffered severe injuries: a broken back and ribs, broken legs, smashed ankles, and numerous internal injuries. After months of care, he came home to Indiana, got married, and started college.

“I enrolled at Purdue, intent on a career in mechanical engineering. To earn money for college, I set pins in a bowling alley during the school year and drove a truck in the summers,” Bob says. “I studied a lot, too, because I was short on requirements like algebra, trigonometry and English.”

After a professor talked to him about civil engineering, Bob became interested in that field of civil engineering. Then, Dr. Ralph Fadum, of Purdue University’s Soils Engineering Department, put Bob to work on a soil research project. That gave him experience and much-needed money.

In his first job earning \$2,900 a year, Bob gained experience and responsibility at C&C Construction. By 1951, he was second-in-charge of a wastewater treatment plant building project.

“We moved to Marquette, Michigan, and after that first wastewater treatment plant project, the company took on others,” Bob says. “In 1955 I was promoted to General Superintendent, and my family moved back to Fort Wayne so I could oversee all C&C’s projects.”

In 1956, Bob became part-owner in the company. The company continued to expand and was later purchased by Westinghouse. Bob was its president from 1970-74.

As a subsidiary of Westinghouse Electric Co., the name of C&C Construction Co. was changed to CEBOR Construction Co. Headquartered in Fort Wayne, CEBOR became a very large operation, with major projects from coast to coast and in Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Venezuela, Panama and Australia.

Because of the size of the operation, the constant travel throughout the United States and overseas, and the increasing difficulties of dealing with foreign countries, in addition to being away from his family, Bob decided to resign in July 1974.

In 1974, Bob purchased his own company, Indiana Construction Company, to pursue his entrepreneurial dreams.

“Construction was in my blood, and I wanted to stay in it as an entrepreneur. There’s just something about building a project that is rewarding,” Bob says. “The company was very small, with revenues of \$1.5 million a year, and I wanted to create growth and increase the opportunities.”

Bob grew the company and increased its opportunities. While keeping the company’s current projects and original focus, Bob worked to secure its first wastewater treatment facility project.

“Indiana Construction Corp. was limited in its geographical reach, and I knew it couldn’t grow as it was. So I slowly and carefully worked to change the business. I had people ready to come to work for me whenever I could get the first wastewater treatment construction project,” Bob says. “In addition to growing the business, I kept the company’s employees involved in ongoing projects, which included banks and other buildings, for example.”

The company and its employees were always busy. Even as the business grew, Bob says he remained connected to the jobs and the people working on them.

“As the business owner, I think it’s important to listen to employees and those in the field. Not everyone has a handle on every good idea,” Bob says. “I have ideas and I would go out to our projects to find out what other people’s ideas were, too. Then I could take the ideas from one project to another, helping everyone put the best to work for the project and the company.”

For Bob, it wasn’t job volume that counted. He was more serious about ensuring that Indiana Construction Corp. made a profit.

“There were times we cut our profit pretty thin, but I had employees, and I felt it was my responsibility to keep things going,” Bob says. “As our reputation grew, our jobs got bigger. One of our largest was a more than \$10 million facility.”

When he disposed of the company in 2003, Indiana Construction Corp. had annual revenues of \$35 million. After building Indiana Construction Corp. into a successful

construction company, Bob didn't rest on his laurels of having built one successful company. He applied his entrepreneurial background and spirit to a series of additional business ventures, including Classic Products Corp., Hoosier Trailer & Truck Equipment, and 4625 Partnership, for example.

"I didn't want to put all my eggs in one basket, so when I saw a little company that could be acquired and developed, I investigated," Bob says. "I watched for opportunities, especially where there was strong management in place. My interest has been in the buying and selling, not in management."

As a caveat to the adrenaline rush of buying and selling as an entrepreneur, Bob is quick to warn others that it is "easy to get caught up in glamour. Make an educated decision, not based on excitement but based on due diligence. Then, surround yourself with good people and don't get greedy."

Seeing a business and its people grow is satisfying to Bob.

"I like to see what happens as a business grows. I also like to give employees an opportunity to grow with the company like I was given in my earlier years," Bob says. "It's not a gift to be given success. Instead, it's more important to be given an opportunity upon which we can each develop and succeed on our own."

In addition to giving businesses and employees the opportunities to grow and succeed, Bob has been active in the growth and success of higher education. He has served on Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) councils and committees, and he is president of the IPFW Foundation.

His work on the Purdue University Board of Trustees has been a source of special pride. He was a member of the board from 1976-1999, including four years as Chairman.

"Working with and serving on the Purdue Board of Trustees was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It was especially rewarding," Bob says. "I met and learned from so many people during that 23-year relationship. I hope I was able to make a contribution to Purdue, yet I felt I got more out of it than I gave."

Bob was honored as a Sagamore of the Wabash recipient by both Indiana governors Robert Orr and Frank O'Bannon. In 1996 he received the first Bob F. Jesse Medal from IPFW; the award, named in his honor, is presented each year to a Purdue graduate for unique and significant contributions to IPFW.