

It's naïve to believe you have to run a multi-million-dollar company to be a winner. Ron Parks shows how running a small business well can provide the foundation for a fascinating and rewarding—not to mention economically enjoyable—life.

When Ron graduated from a small Nebraska high school in 1957, the class prophecy foretold, amusingly, he would become a barber in Chicago. Instead, he emerged from the bottom third of his class to build and run a company recognized for its excellence, one that supports an unusually well-rounded life of varied interests and substantial achievements.

In 1972 Ron bought a steel-fabrication company with eight employees and 4,000 square feet of rented space. Today his company is a standard-setting operation that designs, builds, and installs stainless-steel equipment for the food-processing industry. It is likely you've eaten food within the past week that was produced with his equipment.

That his company provides the economic livelihood by which employees support their families is a source of great satisfaction to Ron. Contrary to the trend in many corporations to hire and fire cavalierly as the economy swells and retreats, he has grown his workforce carefully, and he's never laid off a worker for economic reasons. In fact, his belief in the importance of his workforce as a community has led him to take unusual measures to protect his workers' jobs during economic downturns. That says a lot for his character as well as his belief in stewardship, a value he learned as a kid on a Depression-era farm in the Nebraska Sand Hills.

The success of Ron's company and his independent and often novel approach to solving problems have made this extraordinary entrepreneur a quoted source for articles in *Inc.* magazine and *Fortune Small Business* and have earned him awards and recognition. In 1986 Ron was Nebraska's Small-Business Man of the Year. In 1990 he received the first Omaha Chamber of Commerce Small Business Award. In 1997 he received a Partner in Economic Development Award from the Sarpy County Economic Development Corporation. In 2005 he received a Nebraska Distinguished Entrepreneur Award from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

But there is more to life than business. Ron's leadership abilities, business acumen, good judgment, and varied interests have prompted widely diverse groups, including both businesses and nonprofit organizations, to ask him to serve on their boards, and he has responded generously, sharing his expertise and underwriting many projects and programs for them.

All work and no play make anyone a dull companion. Ron, on the other hand, enlivens conversations, not only because he has continued to learn beyond school walls, but also because he so obviously relishes life. His interests in manufacturing and in art have propelled him into a new career as a sculptor. And his search for adventure and for knowledge, especially of the natural world, have spurred him to many extraordinary journeys.

In 1988, he took a 10-week sabbatical, driving his Ford pickup on the AlCan Highway to Alaska. He sat among the grizzlies at McNeil Falls to photograph them in their natural habitat. He spent time in an Eskimo village on an island in the Bering Sea and sat in a hunting blind made of ancient whalebones to fulfill his desire to see the rare blue whale.

He flies his own plane across the country. And for more than 12 summers, he piloted a 42-foot boat with his wife, Judy, exploring the Inside Passage in segments from Seattle, Washington, to Skagway, Alaska, observing whales and other marine wildlife, enjoying the magnificent scenery, and sharing the voyages with landlocked friends and family. Now, in semi-retirement, he and Judy live aboard for half the year, continuing their adventures.

Ron's achievements, his breadth of experience, and his generosity in helping others prompted Robert E. Bernier, Ph.D., state director of the Nebraska Business Development Center and assistant dean in the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska-Omaha (UNO), to write, "In the game of entrepreneurship, Ron Parks is a major league player."

Judith Stolz Parks started seriously putting words on paper when typewriters provided the greatest efficiency and carbon paper blackened fingers. She earned her master's degree from the renowned School of Journalism at the University of Missouri.

She worked for *Best of Business*, a quarterly magazine for executives, and then for Stackpole Books, where she came up with book ideas and found good authors to write them. When a job opened up in Omaha, Nebraska, she jumped at the chance to return to the Midwest.

Judy wrote for a living. Ron ran a well-respected business and wanted to write a book. Judy's boss put them together, not only as a favor to Ron but also as a matchmaking project. It worked. Their dinner meetings turned into dates; the dates turned into a lifelong commitment.

After they married and settled in, Judy retrieved the huge box of notes from their many "napkin chats" and began interviewing Ron. She skillfully drew out his ideas and crafted them into *Manager's Mentor: A Guide for Small Business*. This remarkable book provides a superlative summation of Ron's vast experience and knowledge as an award-winning business person, who just happens to be her husband.

Judy enjoys adventures with Ron aboard their boat on the Northwest Inside Passage half the year. Otherwise, she's flying, playing piano, gardening, and catching up at their home near Omaha.

Meanwhile, she's hard at work on her next project: a heart-healthy guide to good eating.