Doug Roller '76

Passion for Computers Leads to Duck Creek

BY TRICIA COOR, CLASS OF 2010

If you have ever driven down Jones Street in Bolivar, you may have noticed a little building before you reach Killingsworth Ave. The building has a peculiar yellow street sign out front with ducks on it. A passerby may not gather much about the building or the business it contains as they drive by and see the name, Duck Creek Technologies, but the business inside the building is a result of a man discovering a new passion and having the audacity to pursue it.

Doug Roller, a founder of Duck Creek technologies, graduated from Southwest Baptist University in 1976 with an English degree and later got his master's degree in English from Pittsburg State University. It is not exactly the typical start for a founder of a technology business, but Roller does not regret getting his degree in English instead of science or business.

"I think that the impact of their [my English professors] opening my eyes to a much larger world was a big part of what prepared me for the business world," said Roller.

When Roller first came to SBU he planned to go into the sciences, but after taking English classes, he changed his mind. "I was exposed to a lot of ideas and concepts that until that time I had been unaware of and in many ways those classes were a stepping stone," said Roller.

His professors in the English department had a huge impact on his perspective while at SBU. "I always felt they took a very personal interest in me," said Roller. "I have always had an enormous respect for professors I had in my department in English. In fact, I became an English major as a result of Tom Padgett and Betty Gipson."

However, the study of languages did not just impact his academic life but also his personal life. Roller met his wife Linda while in German class. Ironically, Roller knew Linda's mom, Betty Gipson, and uncle, Tom Padgett, before he met Linda because he had them as English professors. Roller was also a part of an English class that Gipson took to Europe.

The couple moved to Dallas, Texas, both with the intent on pursuing a doctorate. After taking a job at a bookstore, Roller began to discover his interest in business. So they moved back to Missouri and bought a small insurance business in Seymour, Mo. Through this business venture, he was introduced to computers.

"At that time the Apple, one of the first consumer computers came out, and I became obsessed with computers," said Roller.

He bought a computer and taught himself to write software for his insurance business. As the software became popular, other insurance agents wanted to purchase it. As a result, it "sort of accidentally started my first business, Micromagic," said Roller. Once this business began to grow, Roller sold the insurance business to focus on developing the computer software business.

"I have always had sort of a mathematical mind," said Roller. "I love English and I love reading. The combination of reading everything I could get my hands on in the computer world and just a passion for computers, which I had no idea I had, sort of propelled me in that direction. I taught myself to program, and the rest is history."

The history of Duck Creek Technologies began in January of 2000 with founders Doug Roller '76, John Roller '79, Rebecca Roller '79, Andy Yohn '87, Kerrick Tweedy '86, Jeff West, Barry Tate '89, Ken Toler, and Devin Clasby.

The company has since grown to nearly 200 employees in the Bolivar office. Duck Creek Technologies also has offices

in South Carolina and Connecticut and overseas in the United Kingdom.

As the business continued to grow, Doug Roller made the decision to step down as CEO and became the Chairman.

"We've been growing rapidly and the management process has never been my passion. My passion has been more about building the business and developing software," said Roller. "So, I made the decision at that point that it was better for us to find someone who was good and experienced [at management]."

The name of the business, Duck Creek, may seem like an odd name for a technology business. Roller explained that when the founders were creating the business they did not want something that sounded too tech-y. So they looked at different rivers, creeks and other geological features in Missouri, but they did not find anything that seemed to fit. This led them to decide on Duck Creek, which was a creek that ran by Roller's grandfather's farm in Oklahoma. Since three of the original founders were in the Roller family, they were attracted to the family-related name.

The company has not only fostered family relationships, but Roller also has maintained close ties to SBU. Roller approximated that between 30-50 SBU alumni work at Duck Creek Technologies.

SBU also was one of the main reasons Roller chose to keep the business in Bolivar. At the time, SBU had just begun its computer information science (CIS) department, and Roller thought it would be a great opportunity to find employees from the programs. This has proven true as Duck Creek Technologies has a very active internship program with SBU and does hire many of the CIS students.

"They've been great employees," said Roller. "We work closely with Dr. Tim DeClue." Dr. Declue is SBU's CIS department chair and shares Roller's passion for computers, music, and running. (see Faculty Focus on p. 5 for more about Dr. DeClue)

Roller plays in a band with Dr. DeClue and David Hacker '73, a fellow SBU alumnus. Roller also is dedicated runner and runs every morning with DeClue. Roller recently completed the Baltimore Marathon and also ran the Boston Marathon ealier this year. He has run about 30 marathons. His reading hobby is what got him interested in business and a job as a manager of bookstore in his early years and also helped him teach himself about computer.

The Local Folks left to right: Doug Roller, David Hacker, and Dr. Tim DeClue

As Roller looked back at the history of Duck Creek Technology, he attributed passion as one of the key factors:

"My own father, when I asked him what I should do, as he often did, answered me with a question, 'What would you do if money was no object?'" said Roller.

At the time I thought it was a confusing question, but when we started Micromagic, we really faced a point in time when what I wanted to do was write software, but what I was actually doing at the time was selling insurance. My passion was software, and there was certainly, at that point, more money in selling insurance than writing software, but after talking to my wife, we decided that we would take the risk."

Roller found that his father knew best and that satisfaction has come not from making a successful business, but because he pursued his passion.

"As you look back at your life, if you've done those things that you enjoy, you're going to look at it is as being successful."

So now if you drive down Jones Street and see the yellow street sign with ducks on it, you will see it not just as another business, but instead as the result of a man discovering a passion and taking a "quack" at it.