

Michael May

There's Always a Way

Blinded by a chemical explosion and lying in an ICU with 300 stitches in his three-year-old body, Michael May's future looked dark—figuratively and literally. But what he began learning that day, thanks to the strength of his mother's determination and the rock-solid support of those around him, is that there is always a workaround, if you're just determined enough to find it.

In fact, Mike says that this experience, as much as any other single circumstance of his life, prepared him for a life of entrepreneurship. "Television didn't interest me all that much. My friends would want to watch cartoons and I'd drag them out in the middle of a 100-degree day, saying 'Let's go play kickball, let's play baseball ...' It really didn't occur to me that I had to do things their way. I could make them do things my way ... So if we played football, we played tackle football; that was better for me. If we played baseball, we would play in a certain way that would accommodate me, and I just figured this stuff out as I went along. Little did I know that it was going to be instrumental in training me to deal with a life skill, which is figuring out workarounds."

Mike has parlayed his aptitude for developing workarounds into a career that has included working as an analyst for the CIA, raising almost \$7 million for a technology startup that produced the world's first laser turntable, developing and marketing adaptive devices for the blind that generated \$6 million in annual sales, serving as VP of sales for the company that produced the first GPS devices adapted for the blind, and, recently, being selected as President and CEO of the Lighthouse for the Blind Inc. in Seattle, Washington, a century-old organization with annual revenues of just over \$80 million. Oh, and along the way, he also set the downhill speed record for blind skiers and was honored by two

Presidents of the United States.

Playing in the garage of the family's new home as a toddler, Mike and his siblings got hold of a container of calcium carbide, the chemical used in miner's lamps. "It takes a low amount of oxygen to burn, so you can be underground where there is low oxygen, and the flame doesn't go out," Mike explains. "When you mix it with water, it becomes acetylene gas." Somehow, the container exploded in Mike's face, instantly blinding him and causing widespread injuries to the rest of his body that landed him in the hospital for the next six months. "I was pretty carved up. I barely lived through that catastrophic experience."

When he was kindergarten age, the family moved from New Mexico to Walnut Creek, California, largely in order to be closer to the medical resources that Mike was going to need. "This tells you something about my support network, because not all blind kids—or not all kids—have the kind of support where their parents are willing to move across the country to find a better opportunity. They figured that since my eye doctor was in San Francisco, it wouldn't hurt to be close to him, because I was continuing to have operations to try to get me some sight." Between age three and age twelve, he would undergo four cornea transplants and grafts that would prove ineffective. Much later, in 2000, stem cell and cornea transplants would give him partial vision. However, researchers believe that because of the early age at which Mike lost his vision and the forty years during which he was completely blind, his visual cortex lost much of its ability to interpret the signals coming from his eyes. So today, while he is able to discern color and motion, he is unable to recognize faces or objects, and he has almost no depth perception. "My eyes have been very healthy optically ever since [the transplants]. The real mystery has been how my brain perceives the



information going to my visual cortex. They're still doing tests on me in the FMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) machine here at the University of Washington in Seattle."

Mike credits his mother for striking the perfect balance between providing support and encouraging him to rely on himself. "They found a school system that was fairly integrated [between blind and sighted students] which, at the time, was a big deal, because kids usually went to a school for the blind, but my parents didn't think that was a good idea," he says. "So, I grew up in a system whereby all the blind kids went to the same elementary school within the district. I was in a school with 600 sighted kids and fifteen blind kids. That really helped in participating more in the real world that I would have to integrate into."

Mike's family reinforced the importance of integrating into the sighted world with the household routine he grew up in, giving him similar responsibilities in the home to those of his sighted siblings. He says, "My mother, particularly, was a combination of supportive and tough. My father was a serious alcoholic, which is why my parents got divorced, and though he was around occasionally in a helpful way, I can't really attribute my strength in life to him, other than in a backwards fashion. When he was gone I was 13, my sister was 14, and my mother was going back to school, so here she is with five kids. My sister and I had to step up to the plate, cook meals, and take on other responsibilities that we might not have had to do otherwise. With my father gone, it wasn't really a matter of giving me responsibility; there was no other choice in life. Having had two kids of my own and knowing how hard it was to raise them, I can't even imagine what it was like for my mom to try to raise five kids."

Rather than encouraging Mike to concentrate on activities "appropriate" for a blind person, his mother never placed limitations on what he wanted to do. "The fact that I had to fend for myself and figure things out certainly was accentuated by the fact that I didn't have people in my life who knew how to do this stuff already, so I had to figure it out on my own. My mother didn't necessarily know how, either; she wasn't an [orientation and mobility] instructor or a teacher of the blind. She was just a mom, so she would tell me, 'Well, you figure it out. If you want to play with those kids, then go figure it out.'"

Mike figured it out, including the special

challenges of adolescence—and being blind, on top of that. Reflecting on those years, he said, "It would be easy as a teenager, when one is so vulnerable and insecure, to blame something on blindness, and it may or may not have been due to blindness. Take, for example, dating, or even just flirting, whatever interaction with the opposite sex ... When you get rejected—which happens to everybody—the question immediately arises, 'Is that because I'm blind?' And that would be an easy trap to fall into."

Which is not to say that there were not certain special challenges associated with being blind. Getting that first after-school job, for example, was harder for a kid who couldn't see. "That was always tough," Mike says, "because it was hard to have those jobs as a bag boy or a stock boy. So I didn't really have any jobs other than the little things I might have been paid by a neighbor to do, or maybe some babysitting or something like that." Mike's first real job was working as a counselor at the Enchanted Hills Camp for the Blind, a summer camp near Napa, California, run by the San Francisco Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired since 1950. "My mother first took me to the camp when I was seven years old," Mike says. "I went back almost every year up through high school. It was the first opportunity I had to really interact with other blind people." In 1974, at age 20, Mike was hired as a counselor. A year later, his mother, who by this time had a degree in counseling and psychology, was hired as director for the camp, a position she held for eleven years. Mike worked as his mother's assistant director. "I really developed a wonderful relationship with my mom who, before, was just my mother, and now she became a colleague and my boss."

During high school, Mike became interested in electronics, and particularly in ham radio. "I think it really first happened when the shop teacher at the high school didn't want me in shop class, because he was afraid I'd chop my fingers off. I'd been in shop in junior high, but the high school teacher didn't want me. So, they pawned me off on an electronics class, which I ended up liking as well." Mike had a friend who was working on his ham radio license, and Mike became absorbed in learning about and building his own equipment. "I actually got my license, and it became a big part of my life in high school and in college." Mike built a 70-foot radio tower in his

back yard and sometimes went to Santa Cruz to work on a 175-foot tower. "They figured out that a blind guy wasn't going to be afraid of heights. But let me tell you, when you're up in the air 175 feet and that tower starts waving around in the wind, it's pretty scary."

Even more dominant in Mike's memory of his high school years, though, is his experience as a wrestler. He credits his coach, Ed Melendez, with providing a strong, almost father-like influence on his character, discipline, and determination to succeed. "A lot of my life was consumed with wrestling, with working out and competing. I never got involved in smoking, alcohol, or drugs, mainly because that didn't go along with being an athlete. Our coach really emphasized being in good condition, and when we weren't wrestling, we played basketball. And I think back and wonder, 'Who taught this coach that a blind guy could play basketball?' But somehow we figured out the workarounds for playing basketball."

Mike attended the University of California, Davis, with the intention of majoring in electrical engineering. But he soon learned that getting an engineering degree was a lot more intense than being a ham radio hobbyist. He made it through a very tough freshman year and, though in his sophomore year he began to get more into the rhythm of school and study, he ultimately made the decision to leave the engineering program. "I realized that it wasn't something I was going to be able to pull off; I had multiple interests, and in engineering you have to stay very focused—you can't take classes in humanities and that sort of thing, and I just wasn't that focused at that point in my life."

Mike says that he wishes someone had guided him earlier toward studying for a career that would enable him to earn a reliable and comfortable living. "I used to always hear from the high school counselors, 'What's your passion? You should do something you really care about.' And it's fine, I think, to approach life that way, but there's also the side that says, 'What can you do that will make you productive and flexible; so you can travel around and not be restricted to one location?' I wish that someone had alerted me to the benefits of a profession like that." Ultimately, Mike completed his undergraduate studies with a degree in political science, mainly because "It was the easiest thing to get and get out of there."

It was toward the end of his time at UC

Davis, however, that Mike would have one of the most formative experiences of his life. He had applied to spend a semester abroad at the American University of Beirut, in Lebanon, but at the last minute, the dean of that school was shot, resulting in the cancellation of the trip. "That was when all hell broke loose in Lebanon," Mike says. "So, I'm dead in the water. I don't want to just do another year at Davis, so I looked around and found this program." Asked if he wanted to go to Denmark, Mike responded, "I'm looking for a real cultural slap in the face." When he learned that traveling to Ghana and living with a family in the village of Kumasi was an option, he applied and was accepted. "It turned out to be very, very hard and challenging," Mike says, however, that this year of living in a culture so extremely different from the one he grew up in gave him a perspective that, he says, has driven him since that time: "We are just a grain of sand in this universe. I was living with a subsistence-level type of situation, which is really more typical of the majority of people in the world than the privileged life we have in this country. It made me much more open to other cultures, and it somewhat shaped my approach to blind and disabled people, realizing that we're all unique; we all have our strengths and weaknesses. The experience in Ghana really cemented that profoundly in my thinking."

Mike applied to several law schools, which is a frequent career direction taken by political science grads, and he was accepted to some programs on the West Coast. But he was also accepted into the master's program at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. "What attracted me really was that it was close to Washington, DC. I just felt I needed to go somewhere different, and Washington, DC, sounded really exciting and different." During the time he was completing the two-year program at Johns Hopkins, Mike began working part-time for the CIA as an analyst. However, when the time came for him to graduate from the program, he didn't really consider continuing a career with the government. "Working for the CIA was fascinating," he says, "and I was the first blind CIA employee, but still, it's the government, and the government is pretty stodgy in its approaches to things, so I wanted to go back to California."

Mike spent much of the next year in a frustrating search for a job that fit his interests and

abilities. "I would get lots of interview requests with a lot of banks, which is what a lot of my peers were doing—working as international loan officers. But the HR people would say, 'We don't think this department is a good fit for you,' and they would pass me off to someone else. The problem was, for a blind person with a master's degree and no job experience, there was really nowhere to get started; it was a chicken-and-egg problem." Mike describes it as "a tough year" that included two months selling Time-Life Books over the phone. "You learn to face rejection when you call people up and they hang up on you. It wasn't until some very cool managers at the Bank of California in San Francisco decided to take a chance on me that I got a job and began my career."

After working for the bank from 1980 to 1982, Mike worked with a company that specialized in high tech approaches to international political risk analysis. Mike left that company, which was subsequently acquired by TRW, to join a group of other entrepreneurs who, beginning in 1984, raised almost \$7 million in order to start Finial Technology, developer of the world's first laser turntable. "As an entrepreneur, you have to be adaptable; you have to learn about workarounds. The ironic thing is, that as a blind person, you also have to know how to find workarounds. I started learning those things at age three. So, by the time I hit my career stride, I'd had thirty years of experience with workarounds and adaptability."

After spending three years and building Finial Technology from the ground up, a difference with investors over product development strategies resulted in Mike being bought out. While disappointed that his investors no longer shared his vision for the company, Mike also says that the experience with Finial was a major confidence-builder. "Number one, to be able to raise \$7 million as a couple of young, naïve guys, and then to be able to accomplish the laser turntable, which both Sony and Philips were unable to do, gave us a lot of confidence that anything was possible. At the same time it was very disappointing. Fortunately, we made enough money that I was able to take a year to travel and contemplate and think, 'Do I want to go back and get a regular paycheck, or do I want to do this startup thing again?'"

During his "sabbatical" year, Mike focused

a good bit of time on his passion for downhill skiing, which he had acquired after college. "Skiing is such a visual sport, so if you can figure out how to do it as a blind person, it's really exhilarating ... I happened to enter a couple of races and won, and one led to another, leading to me being put on the US team going to Switzerland." Mike competed in the 1984 Winter Paralympics, winning medals in the downhill, giant slalom, and combination events. "It all just spiraled into more competition and became a major focus of my life. I'd been competing in giant slaloms, but I realized that the best way to compete against a sighted person would be in speed skiing, because there are no gates; you just go straight, and there's very little visual component to it. So I started competing in regular sighted skiing."

During his year off, Mike was in Europe, skiing, when he set a goal of breaking the downhill speed record for blind skiers. "Actually, it was just a practice run. We hit 65 miles per hour, and we were expecting to hit 100. But then a snowstorm came in and blanketed everything, and eventually we had to go home and get back to work, so we had to abort our attempt." Mike's 65 m.p.h. mark still stands as the speed record for a totally blind skier.

Returning to his entrepreneurial interests in 1988, Mike started Maytek Products, manufacturing specialized sports and radiographic accessories. Two years later, he and a partner began a business building and selling computer systems for the blind, CustomEyes. He eventually sold both of these companies to other investors.

While working with the computer company, Mike became acquainted with Arkenstone Inc., a corporation that produced adaptive computer equipment for persons with disabilities. In 1994, after selling his other businesses, Mike joined Arkenstone as vice president for sales. Under his leadership, Arkenstone generated more than \$6 million in annual sales, increasing its software revenue by 10 percent or more each year. The company had developed an adaptive GPS product for the blind, but determined that the product was not a strategic fit. So, in 1999, Mike spun off the GPS business into what became Sendero Group LLC. He would lead Sendero Group as president and CEO for the next eighteen years.

"We worked largely on federal grants, because in the blindness field, there's not enough

volume to really fund these things [independently]," Mike reports. During his years at Sendero, he spearheaded efforts that resulted in seven federally funded grants totaling over \$4 million. "This allowed us to come up with the first successful GPS [for the blind], and then over time, we just put it on smaller and smaller Braille and speech devices, ending up on the iPhone, where it is today." Mike reports that since he has left Sendero, the new frontier for development is with indoor navigation for the blind, in places like malls, airports, and hospitals. "That's what I left behind; I turned it over to my colleagues Kim Casey, Sheri Harding, and Paul Ponchillia, a blind professor from Michigan who has been working on this [technology] for years."

Mike's list of awards and honors is impressive, including the Kay Gallagher mentoring award from the American Foundation for the Blind (1998), the Da Vinci Award for Accessibility and Universal Design (2006), the American Foundation for the Blind Access Award (2009), the Louis Braille Individual Award (2012), and an honorary doctorate in humane letters from South Carolina's Coker College (2015). But two honors Mike lists as most meaningful are the 1984 commendation by President Ronald Reagan and his appointment by President Barack Obama to the 2010 White House Paralympics delegation. Attending a White House ceremony following the 1984 Winter Olympics, at which Mike skied a demonstration run, Mike was listening to Reagan speak. "I'm just listening to his speech, and all of a sudden, he said, 'I'd like to offer a special note of congratulations to Michael May and Ron Salvio. Mike skis better blind than other sighted skiers. Mike, you and the other competitors here are a testimony to all young people that they should never be afraid to dream big dreams, and they should never hesitate to make those dreams a reality.'" Speaking of his meeting with President Obama, Mike says, "I got invited to a meeting with the president and actually sat down at a table with him and a couple of other key advisers and discussed the question, 'What is it that disabled people need?' I also went to the meeting for the first stem cell executive order that he put out, right after he came into office in February 2009. And I had several other interactions with him."

Mike was also the subject of a best-selling 2007 book by Robert Kurson, *Crashing Through: The Extraordinary True Story of the Man Who Dared to*

See. In the book, Kurson profiles Mike and the many challenges he has faced and overcome, culminating with the uncertainties of the stem cell surgery and its outcome.

Now, in his work with the Lighthouse for the Blind, Mike oversees an organization with 470 individuals working in eleven locations, including South Carolina. The Lighthouse reaches its 100th anniversary next year. Like many blindness organizations, it started as a sheltered workshop, but, Mike says, "The Lighthouse here is all about employment. The content of that employment has changed over time, from originally being piecework jobs to the point now where people are full-fledged machine operators and program managers. And of course, there's now a blind CEO." The Lighthouse, unlike many such organizations, does not rely heavily on fundraising. "This is more of a social enterprise," Mike says, "meaning that we make stuff and we sell it." Last year, the Lighthouse generated \$80 million in revenue through its various enterprises. "We make seven to eight thousand different parts for Boeing aircraft," Mike says. "We make hydration systems for the military, similar to the CamelBak. We make something called an entrenching tool" (basically a foldable shovel used by the military). "We make office products, like white boards and file folders, that we sell in our stores, along with products from our other agencies. Our stores sell everything from extension cords to sticky notes. We have call centers that do contract work for retailers and catering businesses." Mike's high-tech background predisposes him to interest in providing call-center and other services to high-tech companies, and he is also interested in developing technologies and systems that would permit disabled persons to work from home. Mike identifies his key leadership trait as empathy. "I think my best tool as a leader is to understand people's strengths and weaknesses."

Despite the exciting opportunities opening in front of Mike as he assumes his new leadership role, he continues to face challenges and heartbreak. In 2016, his twenty-four-year-old son, Carson, was killed by an avalanche while skiing. "This was a parent's worst nightmare. His body wasn't found for six weeks. I have a rubber bracelet that I haven't taken off since I got it in his memory. It has one of his favorite sayings on it, which is, 'Starve the ego, feed the soul.' He was a

humble guy who wasn't afraid to be a pioneer; I think he taught me some things about pioneering." In Carson's honor, Mike and others have formed Carson Technologies, which focuses on developing early search-and-rescue technologies. Mike was also diagnosed with cancer in May 2016 and endured a grueling course of chemotherapy and radiation. Though still recovering from the after-effects, he says that his doctors tell him he is cancer-free. He says he is looking forward to better things in the coming year.

Looking back on his life so far, Mike gives credit to his mother as a true hero or, as he puts it, "a testimony to the moms of the world." He also mentions his ex-wife, Jennifer, the mother of his two sons. "It was meaningful to me that she put up with my entrepreneurial roller coaster," he says. "I was really appreciative of her for doing that." Mike's wife, Gena, who is also visually impaired, is a financial advisor for Morgan Stanley. "She is joining me on this journey later in life, with other crises going on. She's really impressive in her own right; I feel that I've met my match in terms of business acumen. She's a competitive cyclist who was on the US Women's Paralympic cycling team."

When he gave the commencement speech two years ago at Coker College, Mike says he told

the graduates, "There's always a way. If you go into life figuring that there's always a way, you don't have to know what that way is. You find other people to collaborate with, and you will figure it out. But you have to have the perspective on life that there's always a way."

For Michael May, finding that way has become a way of life.

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