

Christopher Archer

Wise Risks

A fellow classmate stepped in front of Chris Archer as he walked to class at Howard University and handed him a flyer. "I'm having a huge party," his classmate told him. "I want you to come. Spread the word."

Chris thanked him and headed off to his marketing class. He recognized that classmate, not just because he was making a name for himself in promoting parties around campus, but because he had the same approach to life as Chris had: that with hard work, and careful observation, he just might be the one to grab a great and elusive opportunity. Even at such a young age, Chris had seized the nearly impossible opportunity of going to the prestigious school of Howard University, when so many of his equally bright and talented peers in the rougher parts of Brooklyn had somehow lost their way.

Today, Chris is the president and founder of Radius Technology Group, a government contracting company focused on IT security and computer program management. He started the company after years of careful planning, observation, and waiting for the right moment to arise. He is often asked how he achieved his great success at such a young age, to which he recounts the story of his flier-giving classmate, who is now known to the world as Sean "Puffy" Combs, an entrepreneurial powerhouse in the music industry. "He was one of the hardest working guys I've ever seen, and he truly earned his success," Chris explains. "You can't be the boss overnight. A lot of work goes into perfecting your craft, no matter how talented you are. I'm somewhat conservative in my day-to-day life, but I saw that you have to take some wise risks to achieve a reward, so I observed, began recognizing trends, and learned how to make calculated risks."

Chris started Radius in response to his realization that there was a strong need within the

federal government to enhance IT security. "Our goal is to help our clients secure the enterprise by making it more functionally useful in achieving their mission," Chris explains. "Sometimes, security can inhibit an organization's mission, so we try to make it an enabler instead." Radius makes this possible by focusing on re-educating the people running these IT systems to ensure they are using their equipment to its full capacity. "Once you get the people on board, the technology takes care of itself," he affirms. "There's almost

always a solution, so it's more a matter of getting people aware of how to use their IT efficiently." While Radius primarily works on IT security, it has recently branched out into physical security as well, instituting services that protect the physical space, like ensuring outsiders can't eavesdrop in certain areas. The company has contracts all around the world helping the Department of Justice secure the sites they work at.

Radius was launched in October of 2001 and landed its first contract in June of 2002. Chris had been working at KPMG leading audit teams into various government agencies when he saw the need to make IT enterprise more secure. "We were finding so many holes in their security apparatus," Chris recalls. "As the new FISMA law came into being, government agencies were scrambling to comply, so I had the opportunity to bid on a contract that was completely unrelated to what I was doing at KPMG." The bid was successful, and Radius Technology Group came into being. With six employees working on the contract, Chris realized it was time to leave KPMG to fully devote himself to Radius.

Although competition for government contracts has grown as a result of budget cuts, Radius has never had a problem attaining financing, partially due to their unique skill set of



blending physical and IT security. "We've used the growing competition to better ourselves," he notes. "We've looked at it not as a problem, but as an opportunity. Security has become more of a commodity across IT, and everyone says they're doing it, so it forces us to dig deeper within our niche, get better, and find innovative ways to apply what we do to other aspects of our field."

Chris may tend to lean toward risk-aversion, but his success in business results from taking calculated leaps of faith at opportune moments. This sense of balance surfaced early on in his personality, enhanced during his childhood growing up in Brooklyn, NY. "The city was much more segregated during my era than it is now," he notes. "If you went up two blocks, you were in a really nice neighborhood, but down two blocks, it was really rough." While his neighborhood may have been choppy and inconsistent, his family served as the stable foundation in his young life. While his upbringing was a combined effort of the whole family, his grandmother proved to be the matriarch and the true grounding influence in his young life. "The number of people I truly look up to can be counted on one hand, and she's among them," Chris smiles.

His grandmother was born and raised in Trinidad, where she worked at a beauty parlor to save money. Like many other immigrants, she saw America as a means for a better life for her and her family, so she came over in the 60's, bringing her children over shortly after. "She came with a certain determination and a fire in her belly," Chris recounts. "Her back was against the wall, so she made it happen." She worked her way up through various jobs before settling as a nurse's assistant, and while she never made more than twenty-two thousand dollars a year, she has always been a master at managing her money, so that now, at the age of eighty-eight, she has the family house in Brooklyn as well as a house in Trinidad, which she travels to yearly. "She always told us to buy what you need, not what you want," he recalls. "She was the rock of the family. She didn't say much, but she led by the way she operated. I try and set that same example for my kids."

Chris's mother had him when she was a teenager, and because his father did not stick around to help, his aunts and grandmother stepped in. His grandmother owned a four-story apartment building where Chris and his mother rented an apartment, as did his aunt. Because the

family was together and all made an effort to pitch in, his mother was able to finish school and work to contribute to the family expenses. Chris was the only child until his brother was born sixteen years later, followed after by his cousin, so during his childhood, his grandmother made a point to work while Chris was at school so she could be home when he was. "She would always be home at a certain time," he notes. "That constancy was very comforting, especially given how inconsistent most other things were."

While Chris's family surrounded him with stability and support, many of the kids he grew up with were less positively influenced, and thus got caught up in the darker side of Brooklyn. "There's often misconceptions that people in rougher areas are less well-off because they are lazy, but that's really not true," he stresses. "Most often, these people have responsibilities that are greater than their means are, so it leaves their kids to their own devices. What happens is that these working class people are at their job all day and every day, so they aren't always able to be there for their kids and give them that stability my grandmother gave me. That allows for a certain element of drugs, stealing, and gang activity to occur. There's a lot of pressure, and I've seen it eat up people who were much smarter and more talented than me."

The unfortunate trend Chris saw became most apparent as he progressed through high school. He attended Brooklyn Technical High School, a prestigious establishment focused on engineering. He did well throughout elementary and middle school, with dreams of becoming an aeronautical engineer, however upon entering high school, he began noticing the many temptations the city had to offer. Skipping class slowly became popular, with drugs and alcohol surfacing among some of the school's brightest students. Chris, however, was hesitant to join his classmates in their rebellious behavior, mostly because of his natural tendency to avoid risk. "I straddled both grounds," he confesses. "I skipped class a few times, and my grades slipped, but once I saw kids getting kicked out, I realized that making it through high school was my only ticket out. According to that line of thinking, the biggest risk I could have taken was following my peers, and not focusing on my studies. I may have veered out of line now and then, but never so much so that I didn't get my homework done."

Aside from his sheer talent, Chris

understood that staying focused on school would allow him to move up in the world—a notion that easily served as strong source of motivation. At the age of fourteen, he landed his first job as a bike messenger, which allowed him to see all sides of the city, from the corporate lawyers and Wall Street bankers to the sandwich makers at the corner store. “I loved the hustle,” he gushes. “It allowed me to see a lot of people working in all areas, which gave me the confidence that I could get to that top level too.”

After graduating high school, he attended Howard University in Washington, DC. He originally had no desire to attend college outside of the city; however his mother saw the giant opportunity he would have in attending the country’s top African-American school. Unsurprisingly, it turned out to be one of the greatest experiences of his life, since he was able to see the world outside of New York City and join the ranks of other driven and talented young people.

For most of his time in school, he was unsure about which career path he wanted to pursue, so he chose to major in Marketing. “My roommates were very determined and focused,” he recalls. “I took the hint from them decided that while I may not know what I wanted to do, I had to do something, and I had to do it well, so I chose to learn about something I could use out in the world.” He realized he loved marketing, not so much for the sales aspects of the major, but because he was able to learn about human behavior and interaction.

After graduating in 1991, Chris worked in the Department of Energy for several months before being hired to work as a data base administrator with a government contractor for five years. During that time, he was promoted to be project manager of a contract, but realized when his wife became pregnant that he needed to make more money to support his growing family. Fortunately, he was hired by Coca Cola as the Mid-Atlantic Region’s Inventory/Cost manager. In that capacity, he oversaw costs, financials, and inventory, which gave him a valuable lesson in supply chain management and accounting. A few years later, the company asked him to be on the team that implemented SAP business solutions software, so Chris, his wife, and their one-year-old son hit the road, working in major cities around the country for three months at a time. “We were

able to see the country on someone else’s dime,” he says. “And I got a great education on IT and computers at the same time.”

After three years with Coca Cola, Chris’s wife became pregnant with their second child, which once again prompted him to look for an even better job. He was quickly hired by KPMG to do IT auditing in their DC practice, where he worked with a small, loyal team. He remained with the company for another three years, but when talk began to surface of him being promoted to manager, he began to rethink his options. “I never had the desire to get into high-level management at KPMG because I saw the pressures they put on you to make the numbers,” he recalls. Until that point, he had been working comfortably with a small, loyal team on reoccurring jobs, and when he realized that a promotion would mean he was responsible for finding new sources of revenue, he lost his desire to move forward. “I’ve been doing various things on the side since I was a teenager, but I was waiting for the right opportunity to arise to really dig into that,” he recalls.

The opportunity came in an unexpected form, when Chris realized a friendly acquaintance had a professional need that he had the ability to fulfill. From his previous jobs, he had acquired a diverse skill set in technical training, IT, auditing, and financials, and he had noticed that many government agencies had holes in their IT security systems. The insight and skills he had picked up had accumulated into a powerful opportunity he could not help but jump on.

“I don’t like to make a move until I have to, but I had set things up in such a way that it seemed more risky to continue doing what I was doing rather than take the leap,” he recalls. “It wasn’t planned, but all those experiences helped me easily transition into government contracting.” As a result, he signed Radius’ first contract with this acquaintance in 2002, and rather than taking out loans, had a few friends invest in his plan, and with a team of six dedicated people, Chris got to work. Now, ten years later, Radius is a thriving organization that employs thirty people and hopes to expand ten-fold in the near future.

Looking back, Chris feels he relied too heavily on his talent for too long. Success came easily to the company for its first five years, and while he was doing the foundational pieces correctly, it was not until recently that he could say

with confidence he was working the business to its full potential. One such example is that he recently hired a visionary specialist to help formulate more creative IT solutions and hopefully give the company a greater edge in the market.

Since beginning Radius, Chris has learned that the most essential piece in leadership is empowering people and trusting them to do their work well. "I don't believe in micromanaging, but I do know that you have to recognize critical points where you need to step in," he explains. "I look at all my relationships as a partnership, where we make an exchange. This is what I have to offer you, and this is what you have to offer me. If we agree, then you go do your thing and come to me if you need help." He hopes that at the end of the day, his style of leadership will allow his employees and clients to feel glad they took a shot on him, and that they learned something from their joint experience.

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world, he emphasizes the importance of learning as much as possible. "There's a lot of value in working for someone else," he notes. "You get an education on whatever business you're working at, and you get paid for it. I believe you increase your chances of success by figuring out what you might like to do, see who is

doing it well, and go work for them. It doesn't matter if you're pushing a mail cart or running to get lunch, because you're exposing yourself to the industry you want to be in." Beyond that, his story is a testament to biding one's time, waiting for the right moment to arise so the only direction to move is up. After all, to an entrepreneur, wise risks are not really risks at all; they're a way of life, and a road to success.

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