

Michael "Mike" Ricciardi

Determination

Like the greatest country on Earth, the greatest people on Earth are defined by their determination to succeed. Michael Ricciardi's parents, Domenico and Franceschina, had that determination, and both possessed a combination of principles, perseverance, and inner strength that would change the course of their family's future. The embodiment of an unbreakable work ethic, they left Italy in the 1960s, determined to build a life for their children in the United States. Although their jobs often kept them away from home from before sunrise until after sunset, throughout this daily grind they kept their eyes on the horizon, mindful of the legacy they hoped to leave in the world. It was this determination that compelled Domenico to make the extra time in the evenings to personally guide the education of his youngest son, Michael.

Coming of age in a society riddled with world war and dead ends, Domenico had only finished school through the eighth grade, yet he understood its importance in preparing his children for success in their adopted country. As Mike entered the American education system for the first time and worked his way through elementary school, his father purchased Italian social studies, math, science, and geography school books, and led him through a completely separate curriculum each evening. "He was determined to ensure that I kept the Italian language, and I continued reading and writing it at a high level," Mike recalls today. "The Italian math was also more advanced than what I was doing at school, so I excelled and was put in advanced math classes."

All of that changed, however, when Mike's father fell ill in 1972. As his health steadily declined, the learning structure in which the young boy had flourished began to crumble. But Domenico Ricciardi was determined that his legacy of education be sustained long after he was

gone. "One day, he said that the one thing he wanted me to do for him was to get a college degree," Mike remembers. "About two weeks later, he passed away. That request really stuck with me."

Mike had the determination to honor his father's last wishes, but wasn't sure about how to go about doing it. His mother only had a fifth grade education, and she was too busy putting food on the table to guide her struggling son the way his father had done. Mike's older siblings

were also helping to make ends meet and didn't have time to tutor him. Over the next two years, Mike's grades plummeted, and he quickly fell from the top of his class to the bottom. That's when Ms. Swenson, a caring and dedicated seventh grade teacher, stepped in. Noticing that Mike had the mental capacity to excel, and only needed a guiding light in the wake of the traumatic loss of his father, she began inviting him home with her after school for extra math help. "She was a wonderful

lady who took a strong interest in me, which made all the difference," Mike recalls. "I was getting D's and F's at the beginning of her class, and by the end, I was getting A's. By the time I reached high school, I was back to my old performance levels."

Now the founder and managing partner of Relevant Technology, Inc. (RTI), Mike is the living legacy of his father's determination, and of the countless others who took time out from their traditional obligations to help him along the way. And now, RTI has turned into Mike's break from business-as-usual, in the hopes of enacting some of the most critical change imaginable. Through RTI, he works on information systems programs at pivotal national defense entities, including the Joint Program Executive Office for Chemical and Biological Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. And through RTI, he is determined to



revolutionize the way the federal government does its defense business by helping to remove duplication of systems, provide optimized performance and actionable information through interoperability, and cut development costs so more money can flow toward innovation in Research & Development. "As an industry, we need to truly be pushing the envelope, rather than reproducing the same products and putting different labels on them," Mike argues. "It's my unfinished business to use this vision as a means to make our country even greater, and RTI is my vehicle to help navigate the path forward."

To understand the path forward, however, one must first understand the path already traveled. Mike's determination to succeed and fulfill his parents' legacy was forged in the quaint medieval town of Sturno, in the province of Avellino, Italy. Thirty miles east of Naples, tucked in the enchanting hills of Italy, its Neapolitan culture overlays a folk atmosphere to form the stuff of dreams and travel magazine features, and by most measures of success, the Ricciardi family had it made. Franceschina Ricciardi was a prominent woman in town, the owner of a small manufacturing facility, where she created custom designed wool garments. Her husband, Domenico Ricciardi, owned two bars in the area and had been a marquetry furniture designer. Their four school-age children were doing well, enjoying a good education in some of Italy's best boarding schools under the guidance of religious orders, as was the custom for high-level education. But Domenico dreamed of something more, and was determined to blaze a new trail for his family in America.

Domenico decided he would give America a year. If he didn't have a house and a way forward by then, he would return to his family in Sturno. But things went well in Brooklyn, New York, and even before his self-imposed deadline, he had secured a good union job and bought a modest home in a diverse neighborhood—an eclectic mix of African American, Italian, Irish, and Hispanic families. He sent for Franceschina, who resolved to make the move herself while allowing her four children to finish school in Italy under the watchful eyes of their large extended family. But Mike, her youngest son, refused to be left behind. "I had just finished first grade, and I wasn't about to let my mother cross the Atlantic and start a new life without me," he laughs today. "With that, we boarded the *Rafael* and spent eight days at sea. It

was one of the most fun times I can remember, and when we stepped off that boat and got our green cards on July 7, 1967, we were Americans."

It was a time of great uncertainty for the Ricciardis, and for the nation as well. Mike was too young to enter the second grade, and since he didn't speak English, he reentered the first grade at Lady of Lords, a Catholic school in his new Brooklyn neighborhood. The nuns were helpful, but he assimilated the English language mostly through cartoons and other children's shows on television. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights movement was in full swing, and when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated a year later, white children in Mike's neighborhood were routinely targeted and beaten up for pocket money. Still, the Ricciardis were determined to move forward. Mike's mother swallowed her pride and went to work as a seamstress in a sweatshop, while his father went to work for a cabinetry company. As soon as he had made enough money, he sold the house in Brooklyn for a profit and bought his second house in Glen Cove, a Long Island town with deep connections to his native Sturno. With the move to Long Island, Franceschina now had a two-hour commute to work in the garment district, but living amongst the large Italian community was worth it. By that time, Mike's sister and two brothers had crossed the Atlantic to join them.

Just one year after the move to Long Island, the family was devastated by the sudden loss of Domenico. Beyond the emotional impact, the disappearance of his weekly paycheck left only Franceschina's miniscule weekly income. Growing up in Italy during the war, Franceschina knew how to ration and was adept at making something out of nothing, but this was a new kind of challenge. Thankfully, Mike's older brothers, Joe and Lino, were able to contribute in substantive ways, and both ended up working at Theresa's, an Italian restaurant in town. Mike went to work there as well, washing dishes on the weekends, and every dollar the boys made was contributed to the good of the family.

Before long, the owner of Theresa's decided to return to Italy and rented the restaurant to Joe, marking a game-changing moment for the family. Franceschina financed the down payment and helped with the initial monthly rent, allowing the family to break into the restaurant business. Business hummed, and when she left her garment job behind to take over management of the

establishment from her son, the whole family thrived. In no time, weekly sales had increased to over \$2,000. "My mother had grown up in a business family, and she really knew what she was doing," says Mike. "When my sister Filomena joined the ranks to work as a waitress, everyone was chipping in. All this while we were all going on with our school. We did so well that my brothers decided to open a second location, so at around fourteen years of age, I was largely helping my mom run Theresa's. I got used to being in charge and being the guy who figured out what needed to be done."

Academics often takes a backseat when one is simultaneously running a business, and Mike's schoolwork suffered, particularly since he often worked until 2:00 AM during his sophomore and junior years in high school. But his mother made it clear that there was no way he wasn't going to college. In this, she was supported by several other pivotal figures, like his 9th grade Social Studies teacher, Mr. Clancy, and his 12th grade math teacher, Mr. Atkinson. "They provided the inspiration and incentives that helped me believe in myself, and that ultimately guided me through my academic life," Mike avows.

During his high school senior year, Franceschina wanted Mike to focus more on school, and less on the restaurant, so he decided to work normal hours outside the family business. "Through my teens, I was working other odd jobs, which showed me more of life" he remembers. "Whether I was working as a landscaper, a gas station attendant, a construction worker, a golf caddy, at McDonald's, or in the produce department at the supermarket, I was gaining vantage points into the many facets of the world outside the classroom. The most valuable lesson from doing odd jobs is that you learn how to work hard, and this helps shape your character; defines your ambitions, and opens opportunities to what you can be."

By the time Mike started community college, he had taken a job at an electronics company called Multiwire. There, he became fascinated with "numerically controlled machines" – the science of programming machines to do work for you. Walking the factory floor, he found out that a man named George Thompson had the best job in the company, writing the software for these machines. One day, Mike approached George and asked, "If I wanted to do

your job one day, what would I have to do?"

Struck by the young man's candor, Mr. Thompson told him to get a computer science degree. With that, Mike transferred and enrolled in Buffalo University's Computer Science program. Financing his education through loans, a job in the computer lab that gave him increased access to resources for homework, and another job in the cafeteria that earned him free meals, Mike double-majored in applied mathematics and computer science and graduated with more credits than he needed. It wasn't just to honor his father's dying wish, nor was it solely the result of his mother persistent support and encouragement over the years. More than anything, it was because Mike was determined to do it for himself. "Our family has always been full of independent thinkers," he says. "We are self-governing individuals, driven by integrity and our determination to succeed. As well, I wanted to honor my family name by really making something of myself."

When he graduated in 1983, not only did Mike earn a degree, but he also met his life partner, Marie. She was a freshman Biology Major at the time, and the two were married in 1989. He also landed his dream job as a programmer at Multiwire, working in Mr. Thompson office just as he had planned. The two became close friends, and Mike grew tremendously from the mentorship and homegrown knowledge George Thompson possessed in all things, from systems programming to investments. Multiwire also offered to contribute to his graduate degree, so Mike obtained a Masters in computer science at the New York Institute of Technology. While there, Mike was solicited by one of his professors to do defense programming work. The experience paved the way for 1985, when leadership changes at Multiwire signaled future instability. Mike changed jobs to work with his professor at United Technologies, a defense contractor. Operating at the top of his game, Mike was then recruited by Computer Horizon to provide contract for hire work for Sperry at its new location in Reston, Virginia.

After settling in Virginia, Mike became eager to exit the "contract for hire" world and took a job with Goodyear Aircraft Company, where he worked with some of the world's foremost experts on Synthetic Aperture Radars. Life was good—until the division was broken off and sold to Loral. Under the new leadership, Mike was charged with

getting himself billable for the first time. “We were told to approach other divisions, find out what they wanted, and effectively sell ourselves,” he explains. “It became our new world order, but I soon realized that if I could sell my own time to these other divisions, I could just as easily do that with my own company.”

With that, in 1989 Mike and Marie launched Michael Anthony Ricciardi Computer Systems Designers (MARCS D) to run in his off-hours. A neighbor, working for CACI, began awarding him billable hours at CACI's Distribution System Division, and by 1990, he was making enough to leave his day job and commit to MARCS D in earnest. He soon picked up additional billable hours from Martin Marietta, Xerox, and IBM Federal Systems. Mike and Marie incorporated their venture in 1992 as Ricciardi Technologies Inc. (RTI), and business really started blossoming. But it wasn't until he found a true second-in-command that everything seemed to fall into place. “In the beginning, I felt like I had to do everything on my own,” Mike remembers. “I was hiring folks by the hour, until I met a young engineer working for IBM named David Godso. He was incredibly smart, also raised by a single mom, who became like a brother to me. Dave reinforced my own life lessons that sacrifices and encouragement do indeed lead to success.”

Mike convinced Dave to leave IBM and join the fledgling company as his third employee. Dave was structured and reliable, allowing Mike to focus for the first time on business development. “He was the ideal employee,” Mike avows. “If you run a consulting business, everyone is a smart person who looks to you, so you have to be out there in front with a sword, slaying the dragons. Having Dave there in the trenches allowed me to go and do that reconnaissance, while he led the team. It was a real turning point for me.”

Specializing in hardware and software development at the time, RTI landed contracts in Maryland and California with Fortune 1000 businesses, including CACI, Loral, Lockheed Martin, L3, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, SRC, and Exxon/Mobil, and with federal agencies like the Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and Department of Transportation. The company's steady uphill trajectory was, however, brought to a sudden halt by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which resulted in a stark curtailment of federal R&D dollars.

“Fortunately, half of our business was related to production work through acquisition support, which sustained us,” Mike points out. “But to lose 50 percent of our business, at the drop of a hat, was a real wakeup call. I had to restructure the business in 2002 and gradually build it back up.” As an additional hedge, Mike and Marie started up another company—Domenix, named after Mike's father and his own son, both Domenico—that served as a Temp Agency for several clients.

Through the next several years, RTI shifted its focus to technical solutions and support for the development and production of systems to counteract weapons of mass destruction. Mike grew the company to over \$5 million in revenue, and had just won a \$29 million contract, with another \$85 million contract award pending, when he was approached by a company called Science Dynamics. The company offered to buy RTI and take it public, with Mike's family retaining 30 percent ownership. “It seemed like a good move at the time, but it was actually just a ploy on their part to build up the stock value,” he concedes. “I got a payout, and the employees got payouts from our ESOP, so it wasn't the end of the world, but I felt like there was a lot more I could have done with the company. The folks at Science Dynamics weren't interested in pushing the business forward, so I left the company—now called Lattice Government Services—in 2007. I figured I'd do some consulting and spend more time with family, especially my teenage daughter, Michele, and young son Domenic.”

But Mike couldn't stay out of the race long. In 2008, he decided to expand and re-energize Domenix. A number of former RTI employees quickly signed on with the company, and in a short time it had grown to over \$3 million in annual revenue. Then, in 2009, a law was passed that prohibited companies from doing both systems engineering technical assistance (SETA) and government development work. Mike responded by spinning off the Domenix SETA work into a new Limited Liability Company, Domain X Technologies LLC (DXT). DXT would be owned and managed by Marie, while Domenix would continue to be owned and managed by Mike himself, with a primary focus on software and hardware development. Today, with the recent rebranding of Domenix as Relevant Technology Inc. (RTI) to recapture the original RTI acronym, Mike is now in a position to fulfill the

legacy envisioned by his parents when they first came to America. "We have all the pieces in place, and the playbook is taking shape," he confirms. "I'm a big believer in small teams accomplishing great things. We're not worried about getting lots of contracts, or hiring lots of bodies. We're hyper-focused on adding value and helping to shape an IT infrastructure that redefines our country's national security."

In offering advice to young people entering the working world today, Mike reminds us that it's actually better to be good than lucky. "As Donald Trump says, the harder I work, the luckier I get," Mike affirms. "Always take personal responsibility, and never blame others for what's going on in your life. There's always another path—another way. As long as you have your life and your health, you can get something done."

Mike has lived this mantra to the fullest, finding time amidst his entrepreneurial ventures to teach at Northern Virginia Community College, sit on several scholarship committees, and participate in many events at the Center for Innovative Technologies (CIT). He and Marie are supporters of the Carson Scholars Fund, a college fund for students displaying academic excellence and humanitarian qualities, as well as Copolus, an organization committed to bringing Italian language studies to the American school system. They also support the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the March of Dimes, and various other nonprofit organizations.

Yet in philanthropy, as in all things, Mike's philosophy is pragmatic, his efforts concentrated at the root causes of society's afflictions. "You can't have freedom without someone determined to defend it," he points out. "And you can't have

freedom without a piece of paper called the Constitution to enshrine it." It's why he supports Constituting America, an organization that seeks to bring knowledge of the Constitution into American classrooms to promote a better understanding of the intersection of our global and historical contexts. "Achieving success, whether in business or in other aspects of your life, is rooted in the freedoms defined in this country's Founding Document," he says. "It's why this country is so great, and why I feel proud to have come here. It's given me the chance to succeed, and the best way I know how to give back is by voicing the benefits, promoting the values, and strengthening our belief in our Constitution. That's why I live by example, focusing my mission and mantra on how my family, my team, and I contribute to those principles."

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