

Trenor Williams

Betting On Yourself

By the time Trenor Williams graduated from high school, he knew he wanted to be a doctor. Having watched his entrepreneurial father do well but then suddenly lose the family's home and cars in the wake of a bad real estate market when Trenor was 13, he had resolved not to touch entrepreneurship with a ten foot pole. "I wanted stability and a steady paycheck," he remembers. "I had a natural affinity for the sciences, and thanks to my mother's influence, I liked the idea of being able to give back to the community as a physician."

One can only run from one's genetic makeup for so long, however. An animated extrovert with high risk tolerance and a natural ability to capitalize on ideas of real value, Trenor couldn't snuff his own entrepreneurial spirit, which went from a quiet inkling to a steady flame, and from a steady flame to the calling that has come to define his professional legacy. "Stability is certainly important, but as I grew up, I came to learn that I was willing to bet on myself," he says. "And it wasn't only that I was willing to do it—I *needed* to do it." Now the cofounder and CEO of Clinovations, LLC, a consulting company providing game-changing clinical and operational expertise in the healthcare sector, Trenor's willingness to bet on himself and win has repeatedly surprised people over the years. "Though I've made some untraditional moves along the way, my family has had an unwavering belief in me," he affirms. "Still, I don't think any of us expected what we've achieved today."

Most of the work Clinovations does centers around care delivery health systems, including both inpatient and ambulatory outpatient services. As technology has become such a huge component of how care is delivered, patients are managed, and information is shared, the company has also built out its IT expertise. "Essentially, our model bundles highly

experienced management and operational consultants together with clinical acumen and expertise, creating a dyad that lends unbelievable value to our clients," Trenor affirms. "We bring a nuanced understanding of the clinical, operational, technical, and financial impacts of the decisions our clients face, which allows us to be real change agents for these organizations and health systems around the country."

Trenor had extensive experience in the commercial business environment and co-founded the Clinovations Collaborative in 2007. He enlisted a team of clinical leaders from around the Baltimore Washington area to gather for dinners, breakfasts, meetings, and other events. And in the fall of 2008, Clinovations LLC was founded as a clinically-focused strategic consulting firm.

By September of 2009, Trenor had set enough groundwork to hire a 23-year-old part-time analyst. By January of 2010, he hired their first full-time employee. When October rolled around, that number had jumped to six, and the growth continued at a steady pace so that, today, Clinovations employs a team of around 300 full-time employees and contractors. One hundred forty of those are physicians engaged in full or part-time work in clinical settings, highlighting the strong physician focus and influence that makes Clinovations so unique in the consulting sphere.

Just as Clinovations is a nontraditional force to be reckoned with, Trenor took a nontraditional path to bring it into existence. "I'm so thankful for the things that have led me here, from the places I've been to the work experiences I've had to the great mentors who have helped me along the way," he remarks. This path began in Roanoke, Virginia, where Trenor was born and raised, and where his great great uncle served as Secretary of the Treasury under President Lincoln. He started working for his father at age 12, busing



tables at Ippys, his three-story restaurant. “I loved being around my Dad,” he remembers. “I’d work for \$10 a night plus tips and kisses from the waitresses. For a 12-year-old extravert, it was heaven!”

Trenor saved up his earnings, and when he had earned enough money, he made his first big purchase—sending his father to a hypnotist to help him quit smoking. “The treatment proved successful—though his conviction may have had more to do with my dedication to the cause than with the actual hypnotism,” Trenor laughs. The following year, at age 13, he had earned enough money to send himself to Duke basketball camp. Between soccer, basketball, baseball, and volleyball, he was always playing at least one sport each season, developing a resilient and determined work ethic in the process.

While his father instilled in him a drive toward risk and reward and a penchant for incredible generosity, his mother was the rock of the family. With a masters in Social Work, she spent time employed with United Way and is now the Director for Southwestern Virginia for the League of Older Americans. “From a work ethic and stability standpoint, my mom is the yin to my Dad’s yang,” says Trenor. “I am very much their child and have the utmost respect for what they taught me—perhaps the most important of which is how easy it is to tell someone you love them. That openness and love is the foundation of my family today, and it manifests as transparency and an enthusiastic open-door policy in our company.”

Though he participated in student government and clubs and was a member of the Young Entrepreneur Council in high school, Trenor didn’t have much formal leadership experience until college. After graduating in the top 15 of his class, he first enrolled at the University of Virginia, where he became the manager for the women’s soccer team. He then transferred to Virginia Tech after three semesters, taking a semester off in between to launch and coach the girls soccer team at his old high school. That paved the way for an invitation by Virginia Tech to coach their women’s intramural team, which played a full varsity schedule and beat a number of prominent D1 teams. Virginia all-state players who could have earned scholarships for other schools instead opted for Trenor’s team at Tech, and thanks to his leadership, the team went D1 the year after he graduated.

In college, Trenor would bartend to earn money and focus on mastering his premed courses, already feeling an affinity for family medicine due to the diversity it afforded and the stable career it would engender. Upon graduating, he opted to attend the Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. With only 47 classmates, it was the second smallest medical school in the country at the time, and Trenor focused on delivering care for West Virginians. He also got involved with Planet Hope, an LA-based charity delivering healthcare for homeless women and children that led him to spend summers on the West Coast, providing immunizations and physicals for families from nine different shelters.

Most medical students go straight from med school to residency, but Trenor felt driven to do something a bit different, and as always, he was willing to bet on himself. With that, he took a year off, which began with him sleeping on the couch of a good friend in Richmond while waiting tables and saving up money. Another friend was coaching a club soccer team at the time, and once Trenor had saved enough, they took the team over to Europe and spent several weeks touring Germany, Amsterdam, and Denmark. Trenor then spent six more weeks traveling through 13 European countries before coming back to the U.S. with a more concrete vision for what he wanted out of medicine.

Knowing he wanted to do his residency in Los Angeles but would need to build up his Spanish language abilities, he then saved up enough money to spend two months in Guatemala, where he did a four-week immersion class for eight hours a day, volunteered at a Catholic hospital, and spent some time exploring the rest of Central America. “My poor mother thought I was crazy for taking that year off, but I was confident I’d get into a great residency program regardless,” he affirms. “Taking the time to go out and have those experiences allowed me to really solidify the story of why that exposure would make me a better physician, especially in family medicine. I focused on expanding myself as a person so I could better understand other cultures and backgrounds.” True to his vision, Trenor landed a Kaiser Permanente residency in LA and made the move shortly after returning to the U.S.

During his three years in residency, he

took up a side project with some friends from college who had left Napster, a music sharing company, to launch a music technology business. They needed a contact in LA to work the music industry there, so they equipped Trenor with talking points and sent him into meetings to do business development. Later, he got involved with a project to launch a healthcare dotcom, which inspired him to start one of his own. "The idea was to provide an informative resource supporting medical students and residents, building brand loyalty so that, when their salary quadrupled upon graduating, they would utilize the platform to make bigger purchases," he explains. "At that time, I was a second- and third-year resident, moonlighting and stretched thin as the dotcom bubble was bursting, so it didn't work out, but it was a great learning experience."

Indeed, it was clear that Trenor felt pulled toward a world beyond medicine, but it wasn't until one fateful day in 2001 that the contour of this world began to take shape. His dotcom work had fueled an interest in the burgeoning field of healthcare informatics, so in his third year of residency, he decided to look up healthcare IT conferences going on in the area. The Gartner Group, an analyst company, was holding one in San Diego the following week, but the attendance fee was \$1,700—far too steep for a penniless resident. Undeterred, however, Trenor drove down on the day of the conference, donned a shirt and tie, and walked in. "I told them I was a family practice resident and would love to get on the show floor," Trenor recalls. "They let me in for \$150, and I walked through the doors and into my future."

As Trenor took in the universe of health IT and got a feel for its terrain, a young woman named Sara came up to him. She worked for the Vice President Trenor had haggled with to gain entry to the conference, and said, "I don't know who you are, but that kind of thing doesn't happen!" The chemistry between the two was instantaneous, such that when she accompanied him to dinner five hours later and slid comfortably into the restaurant booth with him, the married couple across the table from them asked how long they had known each other. The pair dated long distance for two years and have now been married for almost a decade. "Sara has been unbelievably critical to the success of my company and the success of my family," he avows today. "She is a

perfect partner for me in every way, and has been more supportive than I ever thought possible. She has astounding emotional intelligence, and we work incredibly well together."

As his Family Medicine residency concluded in the summer of 2001, Trenor decided to use his medical education as a vehicle to explore the U.S. Through a Locum Tenens staffing agency he did some traveling medicine work for the Sioux in South Dakota and the Navajo in New Mexico. He then received a call for a medical director position at a ski resort at Mammoth Lakes, high up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Northern California. There, Trenor managed an ambulatory family practice of three doctors and two nurse practitioners, responsible for both outpatient and inpatient services.

Then, in January of 2003, Trenor bet on himself again, enacting a pivotal life transition by deciding to leave not only Mammoth Lakes, but active practice all together. He returned to Northern Virginia to wait tables and plan his next move, which involved attending a San Diego conference of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society in March of 2003. As luck would have it, he passed a table for a consulting firm called HealthLink, where he recognized a man playing guitar as the guy who used to lead Gartner Group's healthcare IT conference. The two had met back at the conference in 2001, and though Trenor interviewed with five places that day which all offered him jobs, he ultimately decided to enter the world of consulting via HealthLink. "I had no experience in consulting, but they took a chance on me, which was powerful," he remembers. "It was an opportunity to start brand new, and that was very defining."

Poised at the intersection of consulting and medicine, Trenor gained a nuanced understanding of the personality characteristics that make physicians good consultants. It takes natural humility and the kind of 360-degree perspective that has become rare in today's siloed medical scene. It's about mentality over specialty. It's about emotional intelligence as much as it's about specialized training and core skills in specialized technology. It's about acute problem solving, facilitating meetings, and working with executives and broad community stakeholders alike to achieve a healthcare goal. "Being a good consultant is about helping clients see all the

solutions,” he affirms. “It’s about painting the entire picture.”

After HealthLink, Trenor worked as a consultant for Deloitte for several years and refined his perspective on physician development. “What we’re trying to do now is develop a curriculum and support structure that helps our physicians and consultants develop skills on an ongoing basis, creating an institution of learning and knowledge,” Trenor affirms.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Trenor, who was named by *Modern Healthcare* as one of the top 100 most influential people in healthcare, stresses the importance of remaining open to opportunities. “I’m living proof that, as long as you’re delivering and working hard and learning, veering off the traditional path will create even more opportunities for you,” he says. “The path to success doesn’t have to be linear. I believe the people who are open to broader opportunities can reach even greater heights, so don’t limit yourself to preconceived notions of what you think you should do.”

Today, Clinovations works with some of the top pharmaceutical companies in the world, as well as with the Department of Defense and the VA, as they develop cutting edge informatics plans. They work with payers and provide clinical services around Accountable Care Organizations, and with big technology companies who have the tools and solutions but need that extra push to deliver their strategies effectively in a health system. Thanks to this success, which all ties back to the company’s core strength of care delivery, *Washington Business Journal* named Clinovations one of the fastest growing companies in the D.C. area, and Inc 500 put them at number 175. “To me, these recognitions are a testament to what we’ve built and what our people deliver every day,” says Trenor. “To be effective in the future with the

expansion of healthcare, you have to get out of your comfort zone in terms of who you partner with and what you do, and I think our company has really excelled at that.”

Effectiveness in this arena also entails thinking outside the box, and even outside the business—something Trenor, Sara, and the Clinovations team do through their philanthropic support of organizations like DC Greens and Share Our Strength, which expand access to fresh food, food education, and school meals. “We make the effort to give back through our intellectual capital as well as through fiscal support to create scalable solutions across the country,” he explains. “It’s just another way to bet on ourselves and our ability to effect far-reaching change in the future, and that’s what drives us.” Indeed, by betting on himself and always walking confidently along the path he felt was right, Trenor has magnified his impact a hundred fold, changing the way care is delivered in America and changing lives now just as his legacy promises to do years into the future.

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