Robert Struble

Potential

Sitting in the guidance office as a junior at St. Francis High School outside Buffalo, New York, Robert Struble had plenty to pull his mind away from school. Raised largely by a single mother with two younger siblings, his family struggled to make ends meet. And although the days of welfare checks and food stamps were behind them, the impact of these struggles and the challenges they continued to face were ever present. Bob witnessed his mother give up her passion for teaching in order to take an unfulfilling and menial

administrative position with the county government. Bob's father, who suffered from alcohol abuse, had not been in the picture since he and Bob's mother divorced a decade earlier. But just as Bob's mother refused to be crushed circumstance for the sake her family, so did Bob persist, and her example her determined parenting and with infused him the same perseverance.

Bob's mother strongly encouraged education in her

children, and his hopes for the future included college, but not beyond the insular world of upstate New York around Buffalo. Mostly he yearned for the money he never had. Male role models, few and far between, included his mother's uncle Tony, an electrician and ex-marine. When Tony wasn't traveling wherever he could find work, he was a stand-in father figure for Bob and his siblings, and for his mother's sisters' families too. Perhaps a trade was in Bob's future. From the day he turned sixteen, he went to work bussing tables, cleaning toilets, and laboring in a plant producing commercial china. Even younger, there was never a shortage of snow to shovel in Buffalo, or grass to cut, or leaves to rake. Bob was used to working hard. What would his future hold? How would he become a man and provide for himself and his future family?

Sitting in the guidance office that day, it's

hard to say what exactly was running through his mind. But across the desk in front of him sat his guidance counselor, Father Pat. Bob's life experience, his mother's example of hard work, her determination, and his natural talent and gifted mind represented a tremendous potential—a potential that Bob wasn't quite aware existed, but that Father Pat could see clearly.

"I knew I was a good student," Bob recalls today. "I did very well in math and science, but I really didn't have my sights set very high at all in

terms of college. This was the 70s, and a lot of kids didn't go to college, or they went to local community schools. My mother made education a priority with all of us kids, and I knew I would be going somewhere, but I couldn't have known how far."

Father Pat understood that Bob was meant for greater things. "He told me I should really be thinking about MIT," Bob says. "I didn't even know what MIT was. I had never been to Boston. I had never been on a plane. But I did apply to

MIT, and I got in. Father Pat took an interest in me and opened my eyes to something I wouldn't have considered otherwise, and that set off a series of events that altered the course of my life."

MIT led to a broadening of horizons that took Bob to Europe, business school, and eventually to Westinghouse Electric Corporation. Now, three decades after that fateful meeting in the guidance office, Bob is the CEO of iBiquity Digital Corporation, a technology company responsible for the invention and implementation of HD Radio technology, which is approved by the Federal Communications Commission to upgrade AM/FM broadcasting from analog to digital—a great improvement for broadcasters and listeners. Distinct from satellite radio, which is a new, nationwide service, HD Radio technology upgrades the local AM/FM stations most have listened to all their lives, delivering digital-quality

sound and additional data such as artist information, album art, and real time traffic and weather updates.

"HD Radio technology is the digital upgrade to analog broadcasting," Bob explains. "Everyone knows AM and FM radio. It's the last remaining analog medium. HD Radio technology is how we will bring this much loved, one hundred year old technology into the digital age."

This story of a young man emerging from a modest background who ultimately finds great success is a familiar one. Yet it is sometimes too easy to overlook the harsh reality of those beginnings, and also the features of the story that make such an experience so uniquely American. Bob persisted despite both financial challenges and family instability, and strands of family, mentorship, safety nets and meritocracy run through it all.

Bob's parents divorced when he was six years old. Bob's father was a gifted engineer, but he suffered from alcoholism and he was unable to be responsible for his family. When his father left their lives, Bob, his mother and his two siblings struggled to make ends meet. As the oldest child, Bob found himself stepping up.

"I don't think there was a conscious decision," Bob says. "But the need to adjust to those circumstances as a young child certainly laid the groundwork for what would come later on. Over the next few years I assumed more of a leadership role in the family and elsewhere. I felt a real need to think about financial circumstances. I started to work early and learned the value of money and dedication."

Bob's pull toward leadership expressed itself not only in work, but also in play. "It's a bit different today with video games and social media," Bob says, "but back then, kids were playing out on the street all the time. And we had the best fun playing sports and games and all kinds of stuff. It turned out that I was really good at organizing these things, and I really enjoyed it." Bob wouldn't just organize leagues and games with kids in the neighborhood; he decided to track statistics and other details of the games they played. He had natural ability in science and math along with his developing talent for leadership, and his friends followed him. They were happy to join in on activities under his leadership.

"I've always wanted to lead something," Bob says. "To run something. To direct something." As a child, he and his mother led his younger siblings in making ends meet and being a family, and he led his neighborhood in sports and games. But as he got older, that drive evolved to a greater desire: a yearning to occupy that corner office and make the big decisions. And leaving upstate New York to go to MIT was the first giant step toward achieving that goal.

"My flight to Boston was the second time I had ever been on a plane," Bob recalls. "You go from a very insular town to an international institution like that, and my goodness, everything opens up. We joke about it now, but I had never met a Jewish kid before I went to school. Half my fraternity would be Jewish. I had never spoken another language. At MIT there were tons of foreign nationals. It was eye opening on a number of different levels. And there are kids coming from prep schools and from well-known schools in New York City. There's that moment of doubt: do I belong here? Can I do this? But if you're truly at that level, you hunker down and you do that work. And it becomes a growth experience."

Bob's perseverance thrust him through MIT and to further broadenings. As a junior he studied abroad in London. When he graduated, his excellent grades together with connections he made in London led directly to being hired for a job with the Belgian chemical company Solvay. "The president of Solvay was an MIT graduate himself," Bob explains, "and he was looking to build a stable of U.S. talent, with the ultimate goal of expanding their position in America."

After a brief stint in Houston, Bob then relocated to Belgium for what would become two years as a young man in a French speaking office and country. And there he found his first postgraduate mentor. "He was this prince of a man," Bob recalls, "named Pierre Ruelle. He was Belgian, but he worked all over the world. He was a great guy. He would have me over to his house for dinner. He knew I was struggling with the language, so every day he would take fifteen minutes to speak French slowly to me."

A year into his two-year tenure at Solvay, Bob determined that given his resume and record, he could get into a top business school. He applied to Harvard Business School and several other MBA programs, all of which required recommendations, so he went to Pierre.

"This was a little dicey," Bob says, "because although Pierre was always good to me,

Solvay had wanted me to stay with them for a long time. And when I went to him for the recommendation, he was as resistant as I had expected he would be. But he was also baffled." Pierre told Bob that he didn't understand. He reminded Bob that he was in an elite program, that the world was in front of him and that he would go on to do outstanding things. Why would he consider leaving?

"And then he said, It's not like you're going to go run your own company or something," Bob remembers. "He was saying it matter-of-factly, because in his part of the world, those opportunities are not open to you if you're not from the right background. Living and working in Europe was eye-opening. What I wanted to do was very much in an American spirit and American character. That's really an advantage we have over many other places, and as I heard him speak those words, suddenly a light bulb went off for me. That was exactly what I was going to do!"

With Solvay's recommendation, Bob was accepted to Harvard Business School, where he would become a Baker Scholar, representing the top 5 percent of his class. After Harvard, he was recruited by another Buffalo native, Rick Hadala, to join McKinsey & Company in Cleveland.

"When I was in school my goal was to come out and start and run a meaningful business," Bob says. "McKinsey is a world class firm where I learned so much and where I made lifelong friends. It is top shelf in every way. But I soon realized I didn't want to be a consultant because I didn't want to tell people how to do things; I wanted to do things."

For Bob, McKinsey represented a postgraduate education and a way to pay down debt accumulated while at Harvard. He ended up jumping at close to the first opportunity that presented itself to work for a plastics company in Cleveland. But before long, the same Rick Hadala approached him again, this time for a position at Westinghouse Electric Corporation, the venerable manufacturing company which would eventually purchase and become CBS Corporation.

"Starting a small company was a longstanding desire," Bob says. "As opposed to caretaking something that already exists, I have always wanted to create something. At the time, Westinghouse was experiencing a lot of turmoil. Michael Jordan of PepsiCo was brought in to fix it, and Rick was one of the guys brought in for

strategy. He called me up and said they were doing interesting and cool things. It was a great American name, so I came on." Bob worked mergers and acquisitions, helping selling off defense subsidiaries in the post-Reagan industry drawdown. "I kept pushing through," Bob says, "but I never stopped expressing my desire to build a business."

Finally the opportunities began to roll in, and with them the seed of HD Radio, the business he could shepherd from conception to execution. "They gave me a set of cats-and-dogs small defense businesses to run," Bob says. "These defense technologies they were trying to convert to commercial offerings. Among these seven or eight different projects was digital radio." Before Bob became associated with the project, several forward-looking broadcasters saw that with the coming digital age, radio too would need to transition in a way that made sense both for broadcasters and for listeners. Around the same time Bob was put in charge of the digital radio project, Westinghouse acquired CBS, and was becoming largely a media company. It was the ideal time for them to take a look at digital radio, and Bob was at the head of the project. In 1996, Bob and his team were called in to the CBS headquarters to present the idea.

"It was one of those seminal meetings," Bob recalls. "It was at the Black Rock Building, down the street from 30 Rock. All the CBS senior execs were there. Their strategy guys were saying that they'd looked at this, and radio probably needed to go digital. I got called on, and said that the technology needed work but was full of potential, and that there was no reason it couldn't work with a lot of effort. By the end of the meeting everybody agreed that we had to do it. They told me to drop or sell off all the other things I was managing, take this, and go make it work. I was CEO from day one."

The technology development was completed, and what began as a project on the chopping block became a subsidiary. The subsidiary became a spin-off, and today, iBiquity has 100 employees and annual revenue over \$30 million, with rapid growth forecasted. In a market that represents every single radio station in the country, HD Radio technology is on two thousand radio stations out of fifteen thousand. Out of fifteen million cars sold last year, HD Radio technology was installed in three million. Of thirty

consumer electronics devices sold each year, close to a million are HD Radio enabled. And the market opportunity outside the United States is two to three times the United States, itself. "We have a ways to go before we even approach a saturation point," Bob says. "We started with nothing but an idea. And on the power of that idea and our collective efforts, the folks on our team have built a business that has impacted several different industries in powerful ways. And we are just at the beginning."

The company's tremendous success is due in large part to the thought-based company culture that Bob stresses. "Our average employee has an engineering degree or an advanced degree," he explains. "We have a lot of very bright, driven and accomplished folks, and our team represents an exceptionally powerful resource. But in order to harness that resource, those smart people need to feel like they can speak up. There was an expression at McKinsey-intellectual hierarchy. The belief was that while there was a management hierarchy, there was not an intellectual hierarchy. When you get into a room and you're trying to solve a problem, everybody's ideas are good. If you really believe something and you can back it up, then as a first year associate you can tell the director he's full of crap. This is the culture I try to encourage at iBiquity. And if it's not happening enough, I tell people to challenge me more."

Bob says that his single proudest accomplishment at iBiquity is not the business they've built, but the team that they've built together. "This is a tremendous collection of folks who are all dedicated, committed and talented," he affirms.

And while building a company from scratch into a multi-million dollar enterprise at the cutting edge of radio broadcasting approaches a dream fulfilled for Bob, he doesn't forget that, at the end of the day, there are things more fundamental. "Such as the basic needs of putting food on the table, paying the mortgage, and providing for the children I have with the love of my life," he says. Bob's wife, Stephanie, is also a Harvard Business School graduate and a McKinsey alum. The first day she walked into business school, Bob knew he had to get to know her. "After twenty years, everything we felt at the beginning is still there," Bob says.

His wife's skill, training and business knowledge have also been immeasurable to Bob

throughout his career. "Stephanie's influence has been fundamental," he avows. "She was the best sounding board early on. When I would go through ups and downs or doubts, I would ask why I left McKinsey, thinking of the more predictable career path I could have chosen. She would say no, that wasn't me, so be quiet and get back to work."

Bob and Stephanie's eldest child is on her way to college next year, and his nephew is a recent graduate of Columbia, and Bob's biggest piece of advice to any young person is the same that he emphasizes in his own family. "Don't make the big mistake," he says. "You can make a lot of mistakes, but you can't make the big mistake. Make as many small mistakes as it takes to learn and to succeed. But don't get in the car with the drunk driver. Don't get pregnant before you're ready. We were not great kids growing up. I can point to any number of different times when, by nothing else but luck, I avoided the big mistake."

Today, Bob serves with his church in Catholic prison ministry once a month. Stephanie also devotes considerable time to church ministries, recently winning an award as youth ministry volunteer of the year. She organizes confirmation, takes kids on retreats, and leads other church activities. "We are lifetime Catholics," Bob says, "and we find this work really rewarding."

Bob's greatest hope for his legacy is to be remembered as a great father, husband and friend. But he is nowhere near finished with iBiquity. "If we achieve our vision," he says, "everybody in the country and around the world will be using our technology when they tune their radio dial. When you drive into a new city and find station after station of HD Radio programs, that's us. If you rent a new car, you'll see our HD logo. That's the legacy there. I can tell my grandkids when they turn on the radio: that was our design. We did that." Indeed, he did it because someone saw potential in him, and because he then believed enough in the potential he saw around him to turn it into real success.

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