

Top 25: Entrepreneurs

Virginia is home to innovative startups and national brands

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CarMax. Lumber Liquidators. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. These are a few of the national brands born or nurtured to prominence in the Old Dominion. Whether it's revolutionizing the used car industry, selling hardwood flooring or running America's best-known circus, Virginia does not lack for business visionaries.

As part of our silver-anniversary salute, we put together a list of some of Virginia's most notable entrepreneurs during the past quarter century. It includes seasoned leaders and newer entrepreneurs whose businesses are off and running.

Mindful of the different economic environments during that time span, we divided the alphabetical list into two parts: the people whose companies rose to prominence during the 1980s and '90s and those whose companies began their climb within the last decade.

— The Editors

1980s-1990s

William E. Conway, Jr., Daniel A. D'Aniello, David Rubenstein

The Carlyle Group LP, Washington, D.C

Conway, D'Aniello and Rubenstein have run the show since 1995 at one of the world's largest and most politically influential private equity firms. Carlyle has interests in industries as varied as aerospace, retailing and telecommunications. It manages nearly \$98 billion from more than 1,300 investors in 73 nations.

William G. "Bill" Crutchfield Jr.

Crutchfield Corp., Charlottesville

Consumer Electronics Hall of Fame inductee Bill Crutchfield began his car stereo and home entertainment catalog business in 1974 from his mother's basement. The 1965 U.Va. graduate now employs about 480 people at call centers in Norton and Charlottesville, the website and retail outlets in Charlottesville and Harrisonburg.

Helen E. Dragas

The Dragas Cos., Virginia Beach

She's been president and CEO for 15 years at the real estate development firm founded by her father in 1968. Today, the company is the largest homebuilder in Hampton Roads. In 2009, it was named as one of America's Best Builders by Builder Magazine. Dragas focuses on moderately priced homes for first-time buyers.

Robey W. Estes Jr.

Estes Express Lines Inc., Richmond

Since 1990, Estes, the chairman, CEO and president, has led the trucking company started by his grandfather. Under his leadership, the business has evolved into the country's seventh-largest multiple-load carrier. One of the largest private companies in Virginia, it employs more than 12,000 people at 200 terminals in the U.S.

Kenneth Feld

Feld Entertainment, Vienna

Feld is the son of company founder Irvin Feld, who purchased the rights to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1967. He joined his father in 1970 and today heads the largest live-entertainment company in the world. In addition to properties like "The Greatest Show on Earth," the company recently added the Arena Cross indoor motorcycle racing series and Monster Jam truck competitions.

Daniel A. Hoffer

Armada Hoffer, Virginia Beach

Hoffer started his company in 1979, armed with a \$2.5 million loan from a friend. Soon the chairman of one of Virginia's largest commercial real estate developers began buying up tracts of undeveloped land in Chesapeake and Virginia Beach. Over the last three decades, Armada Hoffer has helped transform skylines from Virginia Beach to Richmond and Washington, D.C.

Harry H. Hunt III

HHHunt Corp., Blacksburg

The real estate and development company founded by Harry Hunt built its first apartment project in 1966 to house Virginia Tech students and faculty. Since then the company has expanded to 1,800 employees and has communities of single-family houses, apartment complexes, golf courses and assisted living facilities across Virginia and in surrounding states.

Jack and Stan Lanford

Lanford Bros. Co., Roanoke

Their father — a construction worker who died young in 1955 — wanted his sons to be dentists or doctors. But the brothers got their engineering degrees, stuck with the family business and started their own company in 1960. In 1999, the Lanford family endowed a memorial scholarship fund, which became a national model for providing post high-school financial assistance to the children of highways workers killed or permanently disabled on the job. In November, the American Road & Transportation Builders Association inducted them into its Transportation Development Hall of Fame.

Stanley F. Pauley

Carpenter Co., Richmond

The longtime chairman, CEO and owner of one of Virginia's largest private companies is credited with growing it into a billion-dollar-a-year enterprise. Founded in 1948, it makes products for the automotive, bedding and furniture industries. The company employs more than 5,000 people and has facilities throughout North America and Europe.

The Rev. M.G. "Pat" Robertson

Christian Broadcasting Network, Virginia Beach

In December 2007 the televangelist stepped down from the Christian Broadcasting Network that he began with the 1960 purchase of a defunct Portsmouth UHF television station. Revenue and donations to the nation's largest religious broadcaster helped Robertson fund conservative political organizations and establish Regent University. Robertson retired as president in July but continues to serve as the university's chancellor.

Michael J. Saylor

MicroStrategy Inc., Vienna

In 1989, at age 24, the MIT graduate co-founded what is now one of the world's fastest-growing business intelligence software makers. The company went public in 1998. Saylor is perhaps most famous for losing nearly \$6 billion in personal net worth in a single day in March 2000 after company shares plummeted in the wake of SEC sanctions for inaccurate reporting of his company's financial performance. Since then, he and the company have bounced back. MicroStrategy recently moved into new digs and posted its highest quarterly revenues ever, \$139.1 million, during the fourth quarter of 2010.

Richard L. Sharp

CarMax Inc., Richmond

A retail legend in Virginia, Sharp helped lead the team that launched CarMax in 1993 while serving as chairman and CEO of Circuit City. CarMax revolutionized the used car industry by introducing the concept of well-maintained "pre-owned" vehicles, "no-haggle" prices and 30-day warranties. Sharp's most recent venture is Colorado-based footwear and apparel manufacturer Crocs Inc., which opened for business in 2005.

Tom Sullivan

Lumber Liquidators, Toano

Sullivan started his business in the mid-1990s from the back of a pickup truck in Massachusetts. He changed the flooring industry when he began selling directly to homeowners and small contractors. In 1999 the company moved its headquarters to Virginia. With more than 215 retail outlets and an estimated \$620 million in sales last year, it's the largest specialty retailer of hardwood flooring in the country.

Warren M. Thompson

Thompson Hospitality, Herndon

Thompson has built the family-run company he launched in 1992 into one of the largest institutional food service vendors in the nation. It employs 3,300 people and has operations in 40 states and Washington, D.C. These days, the company is expanding its restaurant business with Northern Virginia fixtures Austin Grill and American Tap Room.

James E. & Robert S. Ukrop

Ukrop's Supermarkets Inc. and First Market Bank, Richmond

For 72 years, the family-run Ukrop's chain of supermarkets established a standard for customer service and community philanthropy in the Richmond area that few companies could match. Facing growing competition from national rivals such as Wal-Mart, the brothers sold their stores to a division of Dutch supermarket giant Ahold last year. Younger brother Bobby now runs Ukrop's Homestyle Foods Inc., a prepared food business. Jim, who was chairman of First Market Bank, now sits on the board of the newly merged Union First Market Bank.

Marcus M. and Carole Weinstein

Weinstein Properties Inc., Richmond

Marcus got his start in real estate in the early 1950s, developing single-family homes. A decade later, he expanded into apartments and by 1975 created Weinstein Properties. Today, the family business owns and operates some 12,000 apartments from Harrisonburg to Hampton Roads. Marcus and his wife, Carole, are generous local philanthropists. Now semi-retired, Marcus still serves as chairman.

2000-2010

Bahman Atefi

Alion Science and Technology, McLean

In 2002, Atefi led the effort in purchasing the assets of another company, IIT Research Institute, to create Alion, an employee-owned corporation. Today, it is among the largest private companies in the greater Washington area. Alion, where Atefi is chairman and CEO, has grown from a company of 1,600 workers to nearly 3,000. It provides technical and operational services to military and commercial customers.

Magid Abraham

comScore Inc., Reston

If you want information on the digital world, this is your go-to company. Abraham founded an industry-leading company in 1999 that measures and analyzes website traffic for clients. He's considered a visionary in various forms of consumer modeling and market research. The company's financial results from the fourth quarter of 2010 showed a 52 percent increase in revenue, up to \$51.2 million, compared with the same time last year.

Shawn Boyer

SnagAJob, Henrico County

In 2000, the founder of SnagAJob.com launched what would become a household name for hourly wage job seekers. Honored in 2008 as the nation's Small Business Person of the Year by the SBA, the company now claims a client base of more than 20 million registered users.

Ashley Chen

ActioNet, Inc., Vienna

A fixture on the Virginia Chamber of Commerce's yearly Fantastic 50 list of the state's fastest-growing companies, IT services vendor ActioNet Inc. was launched in 1998 by Taiwanese immigrant Ashley Chen with a \$35 credit card payment to reserve her Internet domain. A client list that began with a \$50,000 contract from the U.S. Dept. of Transportation now includes many prominent government agencies.

Tony Jimenez

Microtechnologies LLC, Vienna

Starting a service-disabled, military veteran-owned Small Business Administration 8(a) company in 2004, U.S. Army vet Jimenez says Microtech has posted a 4,000 percent increase in revenue through 2010, the result of numerous computer contracts with all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. In December, the Mid-Atlantic Hispanic Chamber of Commerce named Jimenez its Entrepreneur of the Year.

Sheila Crump Johnson

CEO, Salamander Hospitality, Middleburg

Using the estimated \$1.5 billion she collected from the sale of Black Entertainment Television (BET), Johnson got into the luxury hotel business. Salamander Hospitality has developed properties outside Charleston, S.C., and near Tampa, Fla., and expects to open a 168-room hotel, spa and convention retreat on a portion of Johnson's Loudoun County estate in 2012. She's also a partner in Monumental Sports & Entertainment, which owns Washington, D.C.'s three major professional sports teams.

Dr. Edward G. Murphy

Carilion Clinic, Roanoke

Murphy decided in 2006 to convert the eight-hospital Carilion Health System network into a physician-led clinic. By 2007 work began on a medical school in partnership with Virginia Tech. Last August, the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine opened with a charter class of 42 students. In 2009, Murphy was among 30 U.S. health-care executives that Healthcare Magazine said "excel on the leadership side of health care in an extraordinary manner."

Connie G. Nyholm

Virginia International Speedway, Danville

The Martinsville native and former New York real estate developer returned to her native Southern Virginia in 1998. Her mission? Rebuild the Virginia International Raceway. Today, the 1,200-acre motorcycle and sports car racing resort attracts racers and vacationers from around the world, providing a boost to the area's economy.

Debra Ruh

TecAccess, Rockville

The founder and president of TecAccess has received many awards for her company's efforts to hire employees with disabilities and to equip them for employment through technology. In 2009, the company was ranked as one of the top businesses in the country by Diversity.com. Ruh has been heralded as an agent of change for recognizing that telecommuting and adaptive technologies can be used to tap into what has been a largely unused labor pool.

With contributions from Tim Loughran