Dr. David C. Munson, Jr.: Hello, RIT Alumni and friends. This is again, President Dave Munson today, and I'm in sunny Orlando, Florida, which is my latest stop on the Alumni Tiger Tour. Joining me today is Eric Kuckhoff, a 1984 alumnus having graduated with a master’s degree in chemistry. After leaving RIT, Eric began his career in chemical manufacturing with industry heavy hitters, The Dow Chemical Company and Sytech Industries.

In 2002, Eric started his own company, Polystar, LLC. The industrial chemicals manufacturer quickly grew to a $50 million business in just 10 years. Eric is currently vice president and general manager for North America at Cargill Inc., which acquired Polystar back in 2012.

Eric is a very important member of the RIT family, having served as president of RIT's alumni association, where he represented the alumni association on RIT’s board of trustees. In addition to his work with the RIT Alumni Association, Eric volunteers as a career mentor in the chemistry department and serves as an alumni judge for undergraduate research symposia.

He was named the Distinguished Alumnus for the College of Science in 2016, which is the highest honor that an RIT college can grant to one of its alumni. This evening, it is an honor to be speaking with Eric today, and Eric, thanks for joining me.

Eric Kuckhoff: Thank you David. That's a fairly impressive introduction. I hope we know that person.

Munson: Well, I know that person. That person is you. I've got a set of questions I'd like to run through Eric, and just pick up a little bit on your background. You just recently, as I mentioned ... Actually I didn't say this, but you recently completed your two year term as president of the alumni association. Having served in that unique position within the university, what did you learn about RIT and its alumni during those two years?

Kuckhoff: That's a great question, David. There's really a couple thing I've learned. First, is I really got to see and understand how the university operates and works. I'm just incredibly impressed at the depth and focus to create a really special student-centric experience. To not just educate the individual from an academic standpoint, but to start to broaden them as people. The diversity of the education that's available, the programs, the facilities are just tremendous.
From an alumni standpoint, I continue to be impressed by just the depth of the alumni. You know, we're up to 125,000 alumni now, that've graduated from RIT and just the experiences and the richness all these people can continue to bring to RIT as they progress through their life, just is very impressive and makes me really glad to be part of the RIT community.

Munson: Well, we're happy to hear that and this folds a little bit into my next question I ask a lot of guests on this podcast, but I think it's especially relevant for you. What advice would you have for a fellow alumni on how best to remain connected to the university?

Kuckhoff: Well, that's kind of a warm spot in my heart. We have a program at RIT, called RIT for Life. It's really the effort by the university to connect from the university, from the graduate level till people continue to like to keep that lifelong relationship with RIT. We have like these really great incredible programs. We have the edX programs. We have different certificate programs, cybersecurity, big data—

Munson: Right, we do.

Kuckhoff: ...which are really exciting. We have the OSHA training programs, which are available to RIT alumni to get their OSHA certification versus having to do that on their own and on their own dime.

So there's a lot of things like that, but there's also alumni events. I encourage people to get involved with their local chapters, to get to know and understand what's available, and then call the Alumni Office and find out. We seek more involvement from our alumni and we seek greater engagement, so we really encourage people to pick up the phone or fire an email.

Munson: You've certainly done that and I should add that in all of the largest major metro areas in the US, we have alumni chapters and so there are ways to get directly involved locally. Well let me move on to what I believe is another one of your passions; that being entrepreneurship. Eric, tell me, how does one build a $50 million business in just 10 years and what spurred you to start Polystar in the first place?

Kuckhoff: Well you know, I think those are kind of two questions. First is the question about entrepreneurship, and the second question is what caused me to do this.

Munson: Yes.
**Kuckhoff:** The first question is really entrepreneurship. And, you know, my definition of entrepreneurship is a little different than a textbook definition. That is, someone can de-risk an otherwise very risky situation. So it's somebody who can take something and find a way to navigate the road or the waters and create or find a solution that's not necessarily obvious or easy to accomplish.

So entrepreneurship is something that needs to be embraced everywhere. At the university, major corporations, small corporations, so entrepreneurship is something that's necessary in an important skillset. Now saying that, what caused me to start Polystar? I didn't wake up one day and say, "Oh, I want to have my own chemical company." And, you know, the idea of owning large tankfuls of federally regulated, highly hazardous chemicals, wasn't something that I just woke up one day saying, "Boy, I have to have that."

But rather, it was kind of two things that came together at the same time. I had a really good job at Sytech. I had global responsibility for a business and it was very rewarding, but I was traveling all the time. I literally was gone four out of five weeks a month. My kids are growing up without me. I was home, after traveling for two weeks, you kind of come home and it's all you can do to drag yourself out of bed in time to get back on a plane on Sunday night.

**Munson:** Yeah. Just all consuming.

**Kuckhoff:** So it was that in conjunction with a need I saw in the marketplace. It was really not addressed to the middle markets where big companies were focused on large companies and distributors were dealing with everyone else. But there was a middle part of the market that was just ignored. So since I felt so smart with my fancy RIT education, I said, "I think I can make something happen here," so that's what caused me to start Polystar.

**Munson:** That's terrific, Eric. By the way, I like your definition of entrepreneurship. What would you say has been your biggest challenge as an entrepreneur? It may have been at Polystar or even entrepreneurial things you've done within a bigger company.

**Kuckhoff:** Well you know, entrepreneurship to execute, you have to have clarity of vision. Then you need to get everybody to go in the same direction. You've heard the expression, "That worked fine, but it felt like herding cats." So the big thing for me, was starting a business from scratch and hiring the people that had the appetite for hard work and accountability. Plenty of people want to make more money, but the accountability of delivering the result and the plus and minuses that go with that, was actually harder for me to find than I thought.

It was probably the most difficult thing to do. The marketplace was easier, because the competitors didn't really see us coming. Then once they realized, it was too late. We were already there.
Munson: What is it that you provided to the market?

Kuckhoff: What we did, is we manufactured epoxy resins and curing agents. So if you think about the syringe of epoxy is squishing out, there's two pieces.

Munson: Have to mix them together.

Kuckhoff: It gets stirred up and then you have five minutes to get it to where it needs to go, or it turns into a rock. Well, we didn't make that. We made the warheads and we would sell those warheads to like 3M or a BASF or a PPG and they would turn it into glue or paint.

Munson: And here, when you say warhead, you're referring to what?

Kuckhoff: The reactive chemical piece. The epoxide functional piece or the amine functional piece that would react together to make it get hard or make a coating. But just the pieces alone don't possess the qualities necessary to make a good paint or a good glue. You need lots of additives and other things. So it was all business to business. All our customers were other chemical companies. We were able to move very quickly and we focused on innovating to become what I refer to as our customer's secret weapon. So we could do things for them that the other people, either weren't willing to do or not capable of.

Munson: Yeah. Very impressive, Eric. Aside from the sale of your business, which I can imagine was a really big milestone in your career, what would you say have been some of your other successes?

Kuckhoff: Well, you know, there's a few things that I'm quite proud of. One of course is being able to be part of my children's lives and raise them.

Munson: Yeah, sure.

Kuckhoff: At the same time, I had a great career and experience with that. It really afforded me the independence to be in their lives completely. You know, people talk about, "Well, you need to spend quality time." There's no definition of quality time. Quality time comes when the kids decide you're going to have quality time. It's generally only about five minutes anyway.

They've all turned out to be successful people in their own right, so I'm proud of that. And, you know, I'm proud of creating a company from nothing. I'm proud of the friends that I have and I'm
very proud to be part of RIT. My role on the alumni board, my role as a trustee has really allowed me to kind of give back to the university in a way that I felt was really important.

**Munson:** Well, on our side it is greatly appreciated, I can tell you that. If you think about our students, or maybe fellow alums, what advice would have for them if they were looking to start a business on their own?

**Kuckhoff:** Well, I think of a couple things. You know, I don't think you can read a business book without the message, "All successful people have to work really hard." You look at Austin McChord. He's put tremendous effort over the last, you know, 10 years, into developing data. You look at any successful person, you have to be willing to take the burden of it on your shoulders and completely commit yourself to it. You have to be able to work hard. You have to be comfortable with the level of risk. You know, in our case, we had to sell everything except my children and we could argue, I should have sold the dog, but we didn't. And you have to be comfortable with the level of risk that goes with that.

**Munson:** That sounds like great advice and it makes it sound like this is not very easy.

**Kuckhoff:** It isn't, but the other thing, which is the most important, is you have to have an idea that has a reason to exist. You look at anybody who starts a business, short of franchising somebody else's idea or business plan. You got to have something that has a reason to exit and you have to satisfy somebody's need in the marketplace; whatever that marketplace is. And you need to know it really well.

**Munson:** Right. They have to want it.

**Kuckhoff:** And until you know what it is you're going to do, because somebody's got to buy something. If somebody doesn't buy it, you've got nothing.

**Munson:** You have no product.

**Kuckhoff:** Right. So you gotta really understand is, it may be a great idea, but if no one's going to buy it, you don't have anything.

**Munson:** You're stuck. Yeah.
**Kuckhoff:** You are.

**Munson:** Well Eric, I've got one last question. This might be a fun one. Very short question. What is your favorite RIT memory?

**Kuckhoff:** I could tell you about going, you know, to Scorgies's downtown in the mid '80s and going to Billy Idol concerts and that sort of stuff, but that's not it.

**Munson:** Okay.

**Kuckhoff:** I was very close to the professors and the instructors who taught me when I was here and I've long attributed my success to the quality of the education. But it was really two years ago, another fellow alumni, Brian O'Shaughnessy that you know—

**Munson:** Yes, sure do.

**Kuckhoff:** Set up a dinner when I was in town with all my old professors, and we had a really wonderful dinner and I hadn't seen some of these folks in 30 years. And it really was a very strong emotional experience to see these people. They had such a profound effect on my life and I kind of had a chance to thank them for that.

**Munson:** Oh boy. That doesn't happen often enough.

**Kuckhoff:** Yeah, but it was really cool.

**Munson:** That's phenomenal.

**Kuckhoff:** So I'd say that was probably my best experience. I've got a couple second place experiences, but you know—

**Munson:** They won't top that one.

**Kuckhoff:** I don't think so.
Munson: Great, Eric. Many thanks to Eric Kuckhoff for joining me today in Orlando, and I know I'll be seeing Eric back in Rochester soon, as I often do. Many thanks to our listeners for tuning in and as always, "Go Tigers."