Dr. David C. Munson, Jr.: Hello RIT alumni and friends. This is President Dave Munson here once again. I'm in New England this week on a leg of my alumni tiger tour, visiting the greater Boston area. Today I'm talking with RIT alumnus Jim Salzano from the class of 1987. Jim is a seasoned footwear executive with over 30 years of retail and wholesale experience. He's been CEO of the women's shoe company, Easy Spirit, where he led a rapid turnaround that culminated in the sale of the company to Mark Fisher Footwear last year. Before Easy Spirit, Jim spent several years at Clarke's where he was president of Clarke's America with just under 4,000 employees.

Most recently, Jim has shifted his attention to advisory roles with various startups, venture capital firms, and foundations. He's also very active in the footwear industry and in his community. Some of the boards he currently serves on are iVEDiX, a Rochester-based firm focused on analytics and work flow solutions, Jones & Vining Incorporated which provides parts and tooling to footwear companies, and Witness a global human rights organization. Jim is an avid supporter of RIT, who has hired RIT co-ops, spoken to MBA classes, and routinely participates in alumni events. He has served on the President's Roundtable since 2013. Jim, you were just in Rochester for a President's Roundtable meeting and it's great to see you here again in Boston.

Jim Salzano: Thanks very much. It's great to be here Dr. Munson.

Munson: I've got some questions for you. First of all, you've had a stellar career. I'm curious about what it is that drew you to the footwear industry and what about that industry kept you captivated for so much of your career.

Salzano: Well it's a family story. I was drawn into the footwear industry by my dad, who took me as a seven-year-old, around to the stores in Rochester, New York. He was employed by Altiers Shoes, which was an independent footwear retailer around the Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse area.

Munson: Oh, okay. I didn't know that.
**Salzano:** Yeah. So that's where I got my start. As my dad would visit the store managers, I'd find my way into the backroom, sweep up or do something to keep busy, and then we'd go to the next store.

**Munson:** And then did you think you could somehow design or manufacture a shoe better than somebody else, or what?

**Salzano:** Well, you know I was anxious to get back into it, so at 14 I took a stock clerk job at Altiers Shoes in Midtown Plaza, which is something different now, but that was the beginning of it.

**Munson:** Wow. You moved up the ladder a long way since then.

**Salzano:** Yeah.

**Munson:** So what are you most passionate about career wise and what enabled you to better discover your passion, as well as maybe cultivate it?

**Salzano:** Well, what I enjoy most about what I've done in the footwear industry, and I've held a lot of different roles, is being part of teams that build successful cultures. By that, I mean success in two ways. One, commercially for owners, but also a culture that people really care about. It's amazing what happens with teams when you have a real healthy, engaged culture. People begin to treat what they do during the day as something really important and precious, and magic starts to happen. Our Clarke's story was a great success story. We took a company from under 40 million dollars to just over a billion dollars in a period of just under 20 years. I have to say that was all about the fact that everybody from the distribution, to the retail stores, to the people selling Macy's, to the people designing shoes and working in factories around the world, cared about the company in a very similar way.

**Munson:** Wow. That's remarkable. Now, with these teams you speak about, did you mostly inherit teams that you had to work with to function at the highest level, or were you creating these teams?

**Salzano:** Well at the start, in every experience I've had, I've inherited a team. It's not the same team that we've ended up with, but I'm really proud to say that a lot of the people that ended up on the team that built the success story at Clarke's or Easy Spirit, many of those people are the people that I inherited. I think that it's really important to give people an opportunity to develop and find their own passion in a business. I've really enjoyed kind of helping people do that,
liberating them from a management that they didn't respond to very well, to management that they responded to much better.

**Munson:** Great. So you certainly already talked about a really big success. On the other side, what do you think has been your biggest challenge in your career?

**Salzano:** I think the biggest challenge was going from one form of ownership. It's very tactical. I wish I had a more strategic and theoretical story for you but, going from a company that was 185 years old, owned by a family, who wasn't very interested in taking a lot out of it. Instead, they were interested in putting a lot into it, which is one model, to the model in New York, which was a private equity led model. And that model is completely different, where it's all about getting value out of the investments to the investors.

**Munson:** Right. Every quarter.

**Salzano:** Every quarter. What I tell my friends is that, at Clarke's they were interested in us putting the dividends back into the business. In New York, we could have a meeting and somebody would look up and say "How much can we get for that picture on the wall?" But it's not a judgment. It's just a different model.

**Munson:** Different mindset.

**Salzano:** Fortunately for me, I had a chance to see both. They're really bookends to the way businesses can be run. New York was like a ten year experience in 18 months. It was fast paced and very challenging but extremely enlightening for me. I walked out of that with some extremely good friends.

**Munson:** Great. Great. So looking back, what about your time at RIT do you think helped you prepare for your career?

**Salzano:** You know, as I led up to having a chance to speak with you today and at the event tonight, I thought about it. And I think what prepared me at RIT actually dawned on me at the roundtable last week. I wasn't about any particular event going on in the classroom or any instruction, but when you walk around RIT, you're immersed in a diverse community.

**Munson:** Yeah, for sure.
Salzano: Not only the people, the faculty, the admin. A community that really took an interest in me. The fact that I got exposed to ideas in different colleges on the campus, I think prepared me to head out of RIT with a new tool set, but this idea that collaborating with lots of different people was going to be the way we were going to create success. And everything I've done to date has always been about a team. It's always been about having the footing and the grounded nature to be able to take input, to help selling ideas, negotiate ideas, have teams come together. And I really think that came from the experience I had at RIT.

Munson: Okay. So would you have any advice for our current students on campus?

Salzano: My advice for students would be to really immerse themselves in the community, take advantage of the opportunities to meet with faculty outside of the classroom, but also participate. Be prepared to participate. Don't be afraid to participate in classrooms. I was that student that sat up front. I was there 15 minutes early, had all my pencils sharpened. At the time we actually wrote notes instead of put them into a computer. It's a short period in your life. Make the most of it. Make it a full experience but really take advantage of the fact that there are a lot of people who will respond to you when you need help, when you're interested in learning, when you're interested in evolving. So it's faculty. It's admin and it's other students. It's just a rich opportunity that goes by quickly. And I always say this to people: you're going to be there four or five years, make the most of it. Be disciplined about really learning and immersing yourself and willing to ask questions when you're struggling. Find time for fun, but again, it's a quick four years and just a little more effort can make a huge difference.

Munson: Yeah, right. When you're a freshman, it's hard to believe but it goes by so quickly. It's over before you know it.

Salzano: That's really the toughest. It's a tough concept to grasp, especially at that age.

Munson: So let's think about our alums just a bit. What advice would you have for fellow alums and how they might connect to RIT?

Salzano: From that perspective of being an alum, I think you have to look at this as a great relationship that you should take a lot of pride in. If you haven't been back to the campus, take a visit to the campus and see what's going on. I'm there quite a bit and there isn't a time that I don't walk up from that parking lot with goosebumps, and just watching what's going on, and seeing the energy. So make an effort to input some energy into this relationship and you'll be amazed at what you get out of it. I'd start with a tour. Then I'd start by offering to mentor. I'd encourage people to get involved in their events around the cities that we have, when people visit. Like this event here in Boston. I think it's such a missed opportunity if you don't reunite with RIT and make something out of that relationship.
Munson: And in your case, you've been serving on the President's Roundtable, which I take it you must enjoy?

Salzano: Yeah. It's been a lot of fun. I guess they say that we're the fun group and the trustees are the real serious ones. We don't have to vote. We don't have a governance role, but it's a lot of fun. I've met some great people. It feels substantial because we're talking about things that really affect the RIT community.

Munson: Yeah. You're talking a lot about the future, which is great. Well thanks so much. Today we're talking with Jim Salzano, who is one of the shining examples for our students and our alumni. And we're very thankful that he could spend a few minutes with us. So take care, Jim.

Salzano: Thank you very much.