Dr. David C. Munson, Jr.: Hello RIT alumni and friends. This, once again, is President Dave Munson, and today I'm joined by alumna Kassidy Gerber. We are in Seattle, Washington, the latest stop on my Alumni Tiger Tour. Kassidy is a 2004 alumna from RIT's Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences, graduating with a degree in software engineering. She currently serves as a business development manager for gaming giant Valve Corporation. Both a video game developer and a digital distribution company, Valve is known for its award-winning game franchises like *Half-Life*, *Left for Dead*, and *Counter-Strike*.

At Valve, Kassidy also serves on the leadership team for Steam, which I'm sure the gamers out there are very familiar with, as it's the largest online gaming platform in the world. Early this year, Steam reached 80 million active monthly worldwide users, a very impressive number to say the least. Prior to joining Valve in 2012, Kassidy had software engineering roles with Microsoft Solutions IQ, Coco Communications, and Advanced Micro Devices. She also interned at IBM. RIT has been fortunate to have Kassidy return to the university to speak to students involved with the Society of Software Engineers and the Women in Computing program. And I'm fortunate to have you here speaking with me today, Kassidy. Thank you for joining me.

Kassidy Gerber: Thank you, President Munson.

Munson: Let me start with some questions, as we always do. The first is, Kassidy, I learned that when you attended RIT, you were a young mother. So can you tell us a little bit about how you juggled the responsibilities of being a parent and a student, and how did you manage it all?

Gerber: That's a great question. It certainly wasn't easy. When I moved to Rochester, my son had just turned two, and I had never actually set foot in the state of New York. So it was...I had just moved there a few days before fall quarter in 2000, and found an apartment and, you know, was sort of figuring things out. I didn't even really have any family or friends when I moved there, so, you know, I wasn't set up with a great infrastructure when I got to New York.

Munson: It doesn't sound like that, yeah.

Gerber: But a big part of my decision to attend RIT was actually because they had Margaret's House on campus.
Munson: Oh, okay. Yes. So for those that don't know, that is our on-campus daycare facility.

Gerber: Yeah. I was looking… The thing that drew me to RIT in the first place was the computer engineering program at the time. And I had been accepted to a number of pretty prestigious engineering programs around the country, but Margaret's House really made RIT stand out, because a lot of the other institutions didn't offer childcare.

Munson: Yeah, not a surprise.

Gerber: And if they did, it was more geared toward faculty. So there were long wait list, or it was very expensive. And, you know, along with my acceptance to RIT came acceptance to Margaret's House for my son, and actually a scholarship. So, you know, back to your question about how was I able to juggle it, Margaret's House and the staff there, and the student workers were actually a big part of how I was able to do it. You know, I'd drop Drew off, my son is Drew.

Munson: Yes.

Gerber: I'd drop him off first thing in the morning, I'd, you know, go to class or I'd study, or you know, depending on my schedule. I'd work my on-campus job, I'd, you know, do my lab work that I had to do, you know, actually in the lab, and then at the end of the day and, you know, throughout all of this, I'm not worrying about Drew because I know at the end of the day, I'll go in there, I'll pick him up. He'll have learned some new signs from the NTID student workers, or he will have… I'll be presented with photographs, like beautiful portraits of my son that, you know, one of the photography majors has—

Munson: Oh, that's great. Yeah, yeah.

Gerber: … Taken of Drew and his buddies. And so it was really, I think, a special thing for me. And as more institutions are thinking about how they can attract and retain women in STEM, I think more institutions are recognizing that this is an important component to attracting and retaining women.

Munson: Right, yeah. I agree, I agree.

Gerber: So I think RIT was ahead of the curve, even back in 2000.
Munson: Well, that's great to hear. But now you would pick up Drew end of the afternoon or early evening, and then I guess what's the trick? You've got to spend some time with your son and then did you try to get him to bed as early as possible so you can study? Or...how does this work?

Gerber: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I mean yeah, it was drive back to, I lived in Irondequoit at the time—

Munson: Oh, okay.

Gerber: ...So pick him up, make the trek back to Irondequoit, and, you know, dinner time, bath time, bed time, study time.

Munson: Then study time.

Gerber: And then at the end of the night when I was finally ready to turn in, one, two o'clock in the morning, I'd grab him from his bed and bring him into my bed. And that was our...

Munson: That's sweet, that's really sweet.

Gerber: I'm sure he loves that I'm sharing this.

Munson: Except for that latter part, your schedule sounds like being an athlete, where everything just has to be very regimented.

Gerber: Yup, maybe.

Munson: Wow, what a story. Well RIT was just named the number five school in the nation for game design at the undergraduate level, and number seven for its graduate degree in game design by The Princeton Review. This is a distinction we're proud of, and one that I think we've earned, in part, because of very successful alumni like you who've been working in industry. And the question for you is what would you say are some of the tools for your success? Perhaps some of those you've probably picked up at RIT.
Gerber: Absolutely, that's a great question. I have to confess that I wasn't really focused on a career in the games industry while I was at RIT. You know, I mentioned that I was attracted to RIT in the first place for the computer engineering program. I actually ended up switching to software engineering after my first year. I discovered that I was, after I took circuits, that it wasn't really my thing, but I did love the computer science classes. So I talked to advisors and to my professors, and learned about the software engineering program. And I was really, sort of, drawn to the software engineering curriculum because it was, you know, I think another example of how RIT was ahead of the curve. It was a degree focused on the process of software development instead of maybe, you know, algorithms or operating systems. It was really about working on a team to deliver real world software solutions.

And so, I think that, and working on teams to deliver actual functioning software, more than anything, prepared me to sort of be thrown into any code-based, any language, any industry really, and figure out how to solve problems and ask the right questions. And I think that software engineering program really got that right, and was the reason I chose the degree in the first place. I think, I don't know if they still do this, but I remember SE1, Software Engineering 1, the project that we had to deliver at the end of the, you know, quarter was a ticket master system. I don't know, is that still the big project?

Munson: Oh okay, I doubt it, but I'll need to check. I haven't been on campus long enough myself to be able to answer that.

Gerber: And, that was my first introduction, the first, sort of, realization that I had that I was only going to really pick up so much from the lectures and the textbooks, and, you know, it was the really actually building something as part of a team and all the things that go into that that I think was what made, you know, my education at RIT stand out. And then obviously, the co-op program really continued to drive that home for me. So that, yeah.

Munson: Okay, that's wonderful to hear. Now as you were just talking, you started your career as a software engineer, but now you work in business development. So how were you able to make that transition?

Gerber: Well it was very intentional. I think after almost 10 years as a software programmer, I reached a point where I felt like I was ready to influence more what we were building as opposed to, you know, only—

Munson: Instead of actually building it.

Gerber: Yeah, instead of just being able to focus on the process around building it. And so, you know, I started looking for options within Microsoft. I was a dev at Microsoft at the time on
XBOX, and I started looking for opportunities outside of Microsoft and within Microsoft, and I even considered getting my MBA. And then actually, another RIT alum reached out to me about the opportunity at Valve as a technical account manager. So it was like a halfway step between, you know, a true biz dev role. I was able to get the job at Valve, largely based on, you know, my technical ability, but it allowed me to start working more around strategic business decisions, or people making strategic business decisions. You know, I did my fair share of explaining how the Steam STK works to other companies, but I also had some pretty great mentors that helped me move into, sort of, gravitate more toward a true biz dev role.

Munson: Okay, well as you and I were speaking beforehand, it's very common for engineers to move into the business realm, and I guess it's a slippery slope. You get started, and you go further and further, and certainly you've done very, very well at that. I'm sure that many gamers out there are curious to know what's a typical day in the life at Valve Corporation? What does it feel like to be there, what do you do during the day?

Gerber: That's a good question. In preparing for tonight's talk, I thought about this because I know it's a question I've gotten before. Valve is a pretty small company, less than...fewer than 350 employees in the entire company. I think, as you mentioned, we do a lot of stuff with those 350. We actually have no formal org chart, so I don't have a boss and I don't have reports. And it's all sort of...the org is very ad hoc.

Munson: This is a pretty big company for that style. This is amazing.

Gerber: Yeah, so, you know, one of the things to know about Valve is because of our ad hoc organization, we really tend to hire more mid- to late-career professionals. We don't have a lot of...you know, I can't imagine being there as a co-op because you don't get a ton of guidance, and so when we bring people in, we really trust them...we want to trust their decision making. So, you know, I give you that context because the variety of things that I do in a day varies pretty drastically. I might start off my day talking to a CEO of a major publisher about their strategy over the next few years for their PC gaming, or their catalog of games and how we maximize the revenue on Steam, and how we use their PC games to maximize their revenue across all of their catalog on other platforms.

But then I might end my day talking to, you know, the security engineer at the same company on how to best, you know, the best practices for making sure their metadata on the Steam backend is, you know, properly protected, and that, you know, they're giving people within their company access to the right things at the right time. It's, you know, a pretty broad spectrum of what I end up doing, and I think because of the nature of the company, there's really no limit to how much work you can take on, so it takes a lot of, sort of...you have to be smart about how much you commit to.

Munson: It sounds like to some extent, the job is almost what you make it.
Gerber: Yeah, yep.

Munson: Because you go in, you're a jack of all trades, and you work on things, I guess, that you think the company most needs.

Gerber: Yeah

Munson: Yeah that's wonderful. Let me change gears just a little bit. As you know, RIT has a really strong commitment to growing the number of women in STEM disciplines. That is science, technology, engineering, and math. And I mentioned previously that you have spoken to groups like women in computing. So my question is what advice do you give to young women who are forging their own path in STEM when you meet up with them?

Gerber: That's a good question. There's definitely been moments in my…when I was getting my education at RIT and then, you know, as an engineer working as a developer at Microsoft and other companies where I felt like I had made a bad choice, and, sort of, this wasn't right for me, and I should just do something else. I think a lot of those moments were really, at the root of them, were times where I felt like I couldn't keep up. And I think it's important to remember, I remember my first...when I was buying my books for CS1, my first quarter at RIT, I bought the Harley Hans UNIX book, and, another, a Java textbook. Back then, you couldn't have told me what a UNIX or Java...I had no idea what a UNIX or what a Java was. I didn't know anything about programming language or operating systems, and all the guys in my CS1 lab were like, "I've written code before," and they were...they knew everything. That was one of those—

Munson: At least it seemed like that.

Gerber: Yes, and that was one of those moments where I was like I don't know what I did, I don't know what my mom was thinking. Why did she tell me to major in computers? This is a terrible idea. And by the end of the quarter, I had an A, and a lot of those guys didn't even pass the class.

Munson: Yeah, you had figured it out.

Gerber: Yeah and so I think I tell that story because I wouldn't over-index on what you think the other guys around you know. I would really just sort of focus on taking it back to what you can do, and working hard because tech is a really great starting off point. A degree in engineering and a career as a developer is an awesome career, and I think there's a lot of growth. And you'll
always… I think it's a pretty safe bet for having a job long-term, but it's also a great launching point for if you want to do other things.

**Munson:** I think you're offering a great message, that when you find yourself in a situation where maybe you have some doubts, you haven't done it before, everybody else may seem more qualified, more knowledgeable, don't back off. Especially if you're a woman in the classroom with a bunch of guys, don't let it throw you. You can probably do it, and you did it, so congratulations to you, Kassidy. Let me just conclude with one last question. It's kind of a fun one. What aspect of RIT do you think that I should be sure to discover as I continue getting to know the university?

**Gerber:** First, I have a question for you.

**Munson:** Oh no, that's not allowed.

**Gerber:** Have you spent any winters in Rochester yet?

**Munson:** Well, so this last winter was my first winter in Rochester. I think it was pretty typical, it was very white and pretty chilly.

**Gerber:** Have you discovered the tunnels that connect the buildings?

**Munson:** I have discovered some of the tunnels, but I admit that I have a long way to go in learning just where those might take me.

**Gerber:** I think those tunnels are key to getting through winters in Rochester as an RIT, I guess, faculty. So I would encourage you to get to know those tunnels.

**Munson:** So get to know the tunnel system.

**Gerber:** Yes.
Munson: Okay. You know, that might prompt me to actually do that, Kassidy. I'd like to actually be able to give visitors tours of the tunnel system, and I guess at that point, you know, I would've accomplished something.

Gerber: You could also maybe invest in connecting all of the buildings with the tunnels, because there are some spots.

Munson: There are a few outliers, that's right. Now since you're on this subject of cold weather and tunnels, what do you think about the quarter mile?

Gerber: The quarter mile is the reason you need the tunnels. I mean when I was there, it seemed like to funnel the wind through my soul.

Munson: Okay, I hear this so often from our alums, but somehow they're proud of it. And so I guess it's okay.

Gerber: Yeah absolutely. I never lived on campus, so I didn't have that long walk from the dorms—

Munson: Okay, you didn't have to do so much, yeah—

Gerber: ...All the way to the engineering building, but I did use the gym back in the day. So I had to make a decent trek from there.

Munson: Well you survived, and you've done so well. Let me conclude, Kassidy, by thanking you for your time today. I hope that we'll be able to see you soon back on campus. I want to thank our listeners for once again tuning in, and as always, Go Tigers!