

Interview with Phil Saunders (part 1)

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SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Call, Nicole Pease, Phil Saunders

Nicole Pease 00:00

All right, today is Monday, October 24, 2022. I am Nicole Pease, Project Archivist and with me is Elizabeth Call, RIT University Archivist and we are interviewing Phil Saunders. Good morning, Mr. Saunders, thank you for taking the time to share some of your stories with us today. Do we have your consent to record this interview?



Phil Saunders 00:26

Yes.

Nicole Pease 00:27

Great, thanks. Why don't we start with when and where you were born?

Phil Saunders 00:30

In Rochester, New York 1937, at Highland Hospital and was first, first lived on Ambrose Street off of Dewey Avenue.

Nicole Pease 00:46

And what was the community like where you grew up?

Phil Saunders 00:50

Well, I left there when I was like a year old and we moved to Ludington Drive which is in Gates. Lived there for first, second grade and then we moved to Livonia. And really, that's what I remember growing up as growing up in the Livonia, nice, firm community, nice school system, lot of good friends, and played a lot of sports and enjoyed it very much.

Nicole Pease 01:21

Do you have any favorite childhood memories?

Phil Saunders 01:23

Oh, I have so many that would be hard to, but we grew up on Conesus Lake so we did a lot of water skiing and ski jumping on the lake, so on and so forth. And then playing sports in high school was a big part of my, if it wasn't for sports, I probably wouldn't have stayed in school. That was always a big part of my life growing up.

Nicole Pease 01:49

Is it that you didn't enjoy school very much?

Phil Saunders 01:51

I think it was a little ADD. It was a hardship to keep myself concentrating on anything. But when I had to, I could do it. I struggled in English and spelling, I always struggled, but always got 100 in math, which became pretty important in my life.

Nicole Pease 02:13

Right. Can you tell us a little bit about your family?

Phil Saunders 02:18

Yeah, I had a mother and a father, obviously. And I had a brother and a sister. Brother was a year and a half younger and my sister about 10 years younger. We grew up all together in this house on Conesus Lake and we were always good friends. My brother and I shared the same bedroom for I guess 15 years. And of course our sister came along a little bit later in life, was sort of a family surprise. We thought we were done having children and all of a sudden my dad arrives home with with mom with a baby. We obviously knew she had a bump so we knew it was coming but, um, and we had a lot of great times with my sister growing up. We would babysit for her after school and she was always a joy to be around and she is very athletic minded also, tougher than nails. So she was, in which is good because growing up with a couple of brothers, it was a good thing that she was tough, tough girl. Had a great career as a horseback rider and was almost in the US Olympics, but she hurt her back, so it wasn't able to compete when she was 18. And then the next Olympics she was married and started to have children and stuff so she missed it, but...

Nicole Pease 03:50

Was your brother athletic too?

Phil Saunders 03:52

Not as much but he was a very good tennis player in high school and he was the the punter on our football team until he got injured; somebody tackled him when he was punting and blew his leg out so that sort of ended his career. And he also was on our basketball team. So he was, he was an average athlete. Didn't, I don't think, he had the really, the killer-type competitive experience with his brother, but he was, he definitely was talented.

Elizabeth Call 04:28

What sports did you play?

Phil Saunders 04:31

Baseball, basketball, football, and track.

Elizabeth Call 04:36

Any favorites?

Phil Saunders 04:42

Well, I was best at baseball. Had to, had a record batting average, which I think still stands in Livonia at .489. And as a junior pitched a no-hitter, but did not play baseball in my senior year, which is another story for later on. So that was what sport I was best at, but I really liked basketball the best. And football the best, they were more of a team sport. Baseball, it always felt to be more of an individual sport. And the same with track, which I was decent in. In track too, I was, ran the low hurdles, which you wouldn't expect a short person, run the low hurdles, but I won the county track meet in the low hurdles. But again, it wasn't a, it wasn't a team sport like basketball or football. Those two things you were always, it was a team thing all the way, baseball - okay, you get up, you hit the ball, you get on first base, and you know that your teammate is batting next and you say, okay, let's get a hit but you know, if he, he might get one, he might not get one, who knows? You know? It just doesn't have that team element that the other sports do. And that I like really, we had we had two championship football teams that I was on. And we, I was in school in Livonia when we had some great athletic teams and they still do. It's one of the better schools in this area for constantly putting out good athletes. I think it was a farming community. A lot of tough, hard working boys.

Nicole Pease 06:40

What was your relationship with your parents?

Phil Saunders 06:46

Well, that's a little, my parents were very smart, intelligent people. My mother was a great mother, but became an alcoholic. And my dad was a heavy drinker. So it was my brother and my sister and I had a trying time growing up in our, in our house and I got out of the house a little quicker than they did. And I think they suffered with it longer than I did. But in the end not to put my parents down, they were wonderful people, but they had a, they had a problem, which was one that they never really were able to solve in their lifetime. We took them to clinics, and they were they went to places but they always would go back to having problems. My dad, my dad was an excellent businessman had a business in Rochester, very successful. He was president of the school board in Livonia. And he was a very, I guess, you would call him a very functioning alcoholic. My mother, I would say wasn't a functioning

alcoholic. When she was drinking there was nothing else in the world that was more important than drinking.

Elizabeth Call 08:09

You mentioned you left the house earlier than your brother. When did you leave the house and why?

Phil Saunders 08:16

Well, in my senior year, my wife, who's still my wife today, got pregnant. And my dad was President of the school board. And he decided that they needed to set an example in the school. So after football season, he came home from one of the board meetings, had had a few drinks, and said you don't need to go to school in the morning, we kicked you out of school tonight. And your brother will bring your books home. And that was the end of it. It was really, and so I didn't get to play basketball, baseball, or track my senior year, I went to East High School in Rochester, night school finished up in the city here. So...

Elizabeth Call 09:06

Where did you move to?

Phil Saunders 09:08

Moved.... My my wife's parents owned a little, the hotel in Livonia, the commercial hotel of Livonia, which is an old-style hotel with a few rooms upstairs and with a common bathroom in the hallway. And so we stayed there. My wife's parents were great to me. And we stayed there for until I went to college. Then when I went to college, I lived on, we lived on a dairy farm about 20 miles from college and did morning chores there for free board. It wasn't the nicest apartment and wasn't probably the best place for my wife to be, got a few mice running around the place on occasion. But it, it saved us money, you know.

Elizabeth Call 10:04

Where did you go to college?

Phil Saunders 10:07

Hobart in Geneva. When I was there for a year and a half and um, went there really to play baseball, but between work and the night shift on the New York State Thruway, doing morning chores at this farm, I was doing pretty bad in school. So after a year and a half, it was time for me to go find a job, you know.

Elizabeth Call 10:37

What job? Where'd you go to work?

Phil Saunders 10:38

Well, by then, my father had started a truck stop here in Rochester, on Jefferson Road, it was a small truck stop that was attached to the Genesee Valley Regional Market. So, working on the New York State Thruway on the night shift, these drivers would come in and the Thruway had just opened up. Back then, when I worked, the night shift, there might be 10 cars an hour that would go down that

Thruway and maybe three trucks. Totally different to the traffic today. But the drivers would come in and they say, you know, they built this place, there's nothing for us truckers, we need rooms to stay in, we need a place to get our trucks worked on, we need diesel fuel, we need to get tires fixed, so on and so forth. So I'm home at Thanksgiving time and the truckstop, it opened up here and they weren't, they were doing terrible, the place was doing terrible. And my dad says, well, you you're so smart about this stuff, once you come back and run this thing. So I came back to Rochester and started running it. And over a period of time I bought out, there were three partners in it, I bought out two of them. And then my dad kept his third until his death in 1971. But it gave me the opportunity, once I got the one in Rochester profitable then I started, you know, building a chain around the country, which is a whole different story.

Nicole Pease 12:06

Why did you decide to invest in your father's company?

Phil Saunders 12:11

Well, really, I guess I first looked at it as a job. And secondly, when I started to make it profitable, two of the partners were interested in getting, they were absentee partners didn't have anything to really do with the business at all. And they were and it hadn't made them any money. So they were happy to get out. So they gave me the opportunity to buy them out, which was, again, cost me very much because the place had a deficit net worth and wasn't making any money, so it didn't have much value.

Nicole Pease 12:49

What year was that, that you invested?

Phil Saunders 12:51

That was 1960, no, no, I'm sorry, got out of school... it would have been 1958.

Nicole Pease 13:23

Can you describe some of your other business ventures?

Phil Saunders 13:29

Well, I've got a multitude of business ventures that's for sure. The truckstop was the first and then in 1965 I opened the second one in Ashland, Virginia and then one in Roanoke and we started to build them around the country as the interstates opened up. So that was my first business. And after I sold to Ryder, stayed with them for five years. When I left there, I came back to upstate New York and within a year I acquired a small company here called Griffith Oil and rolled up a lot of small distributorships around New York and and made it into a very large company. And with that we were, they had a few gas stations and so I converted the gas stations to convenience stores which was something that was starting to, convenience stores were just starting to happen and they were a lot easier to run than a than a gas station with a repair shop and with mechanics that, that you didn't have a lot of control over. And then at the same time I bought, acquired Richardson Foods which made hot fudge sauce and different toppings and stuff for McDonald's and and then we took I took the same product and put it into the grocery stores because you couldn't get a good hot fudge sauce in the grocery stores. And so we

put it under the name Mrs. Richardson. And that's really what made Richardson foods a very successful company. And I wound up selling it to Quaker Oats.

Nicole Pease 15:14

And after that?

Phil Saunders 15:15

Well then in the '90s I sold Sugar Creek Stores and I sold Griffith Energy and wound up getting into the banking business, the Genesee Regional Bank, which I'm still on today. So those were the the major business ventures that I've had. I have five hotels now. And that's sort of a, let's say, a budding business, is the hotel business.

Elizabeth Call 15:47

Where the hotels?

Phil Saunders 15:49

Well, the new Marriott downtown in Rochester, in Lake Placid, the, the Hampton Inn in Lake Placid, New York. Two Hamptons, in Frederick, Frederick, Virginia. And in Lake Buena Vista in Florida near, near Disney.

Nicole Pease 16:14

What's been your favorite business venture?

Phil Saunders 16:16

Well, Truckstops of America. The, the drivers back when I first went in the business, all the drivers were mainly came out of, of the different wars, World War II, Korean War, and they came out of the motor pool and they were all, the drivers were incredible people, hardworking, industrious people. So, there was a great customer base. But at the same time, the owners of the companies were basically people that had got out of the service and they had been in the motor pool and learned a lot about trucking. And with the interstates opening up, it was a good time for them to come home and start doing what they had been doing in the service, running trucks. So they were great people to do business with. And I think that's why I liked it as much as I did. Plus, it was something new. The interstates were opening up and there was a need for the service around the country, so it was a race to provide the service on the interstates, which really wasn't being provided for trucks. There was gas stations for car but not what, not what the truckers needed.

Nicole Pease 17:34

What are some ways that you've marketed your companies?

Phil Saunders 17:39

You know, all my companies I tried to build a good brand on them. TA became a national brand, still is today. Griffith Energy had, had a great brand name, Sugar Creek Stores had a good brand name and you get a good brand by making sure you have clean places, good hospitality to your customers, the customer is always right, and clean, cleanliness, just doing everything, everything right, and having a

personal contact with as many of the customers as you can. And, I think, that's always been, been my, my success, very, very personable with the customers and whatever business idea and I tried to know as many of them as I could and make sure I was doing things the way that they would want things done and always, always listened to their complaints. And always tried to fix it. Trying to always stay with that theory, a customer's always right, and that is, that's hard some days, you know, because they're not always right. But they work, you work through those times.

Nicole Pease 19:03

Were there any techniques that you use to impart new life into the businesses?

Phil Saunders 19:12

Well, most of these businesses were sort of new in a way, Truckstops of America was a new industry. So the technique was to try to design a truckstop that was friendly to the truckers but also friendly to the trucking companies. Control expense, make them trust, trust you. A guy in California's letting you put fuel in his truck in Virginia. He wanted to make sure that you put all the fuel in the truck and no money went in the driver's pocket, so there was a lot of honesty that went into the truckstop business. What was the question again?

Nicole Pease 19:57

Techniques that imparted new life into businesses.

Phil Saunders 20:01

Well, with Griffith, Griffith, had been the petroleum distributor business had been a business with, that each town had a little heating oil company in it. And the technique I used was rolling them all up through New York State. And most of them were started in the '40s. And they were started by the major oil companies, because they wanted to capture this fuel oil business, because this was before natural gas. So they would take young executives in their company, and they'd say, why don't you go start one in Nunda in New York, and we'll, we'll help you build, build the storage and tanks so on and so forth. So in the late '70s, these guys were all getting to be 65 to 70, they all wanted to retire, a lot of them didn't have children. So there were a lot of opportunities to roll up with this, with this group of people that were all in, let's say, between 60 and 70. And, to have one back office do, do the accounting for, you know, 100,000 customers rather than 4,000 customers. So there were a lot of economies to scale. And the convenience store business, candidly, was sort of a brand new business at that time. So there wasn't anything unique in it other than trying to just figure out what the customer wanted and provide what the customer wanted. Today, in the banking business, we're, you know, we say we're the only local bank, owned and operated by people that live in Rochester. And we try to make it personable to that, and try to know as many of the customers as possible. So that's the only unique..., you know, you do business at Genesee Regional bank, you do get to know the, the owner, so on and so forth. Most banks in Rochester, you would never get to know any of the owners.

Nicole Pease 22:12

Your entrepreneurship journey has many chapters and so much success, what ideologies have helped guide you through that journey?

Phil Saunders 22:24

It's very important to have good people working for you. And I learned in sports in high school with that, you know, going back to teamwork and competitive spirit, so on and so forth. So I always tried to hire executives around me that were, like me competitive people, sports backgrounds, aggressive people, so on and so forth. So I think, I think my people were, were probably the biggest part of our success. They, they believed in what we were doing. They had that same competitive spirit. And I think that's really was what made things work. And it also made it fun for all of us, we all had fun when we were doing it.

Nicole Pease 23:13

How would you define success?

Phil Saunders 23:19

Well, I guess you could start with the fact that you wind up, you wind up paying the banks back when you borrow money from them to do something. So making it financially successful is part of it for sure. Creating a brand that your customers like, providing good jobs for your employees. So I think those are the key things, you know, if you have a company that's successful, obviously, it's got to be a company that's good for the people. It's got to be good for the customers. And at the end of the day, you got to be able to pay your bills and wind up having more money in your bank account at the end of the month than you had at the beginning of the month.

Nicole Pease 24:10

Is there any advice that you would give to a new entrepreneur or a founder of a start-up company?

Phil Saunders 24:18

Don't spend the money you haven't earned yet.

Nicole Pease 24:27

How would you like to be remembered? What do you want your legacy to be?

Phil Saunders 24:34

No, I don't know. That question has been asked to me before. I've never really thought about it. I just want to be known as a good person. Want to be known as a person that, that appreciated the life I've had, and that I'm, I want to give back to the community and to, just give back to the community and the people that that have helped me in a successful career. And I guess that's that's pretty much it. I just want to be known as somebody that's had a good time, a good career, been good to his people, and has wound up giving back to his community and to the people in the community.

Nicole Pease 25:31

Can you share a little bit about your philanthropic activities?

Phil Saunders 25:38

Yep. Pretty happy to. I obviously have done quite a bit in the in the college area, Paul Smith's College, University of Rochester, and RIT. I'm more today moving towards giving to hospitals and things of that

nature, not so much for the university systems, not too happy with the university systems in America today, they've gotten to social for me, RIT's an exception, I think they still have got some basic beliefs. But some of these schools have gone way off-the-rail. And so therefore, I'm not going to be supporting them, like I may be used to. However, hospitals, we'll certainly do some things with hospitals, community things that, that can help a community and a good way, we'll do things in that respect for sure. Aging people, children, things for children, so on and so forth.

Elizabeth Call 26:49

I'm sorry to interrupt. What, what made you get involved with the three universities that you did?

Phil Saunders 26:58

Well, Paul Smith's, I spent my summers up there. And a guy from Rochester was on the board and he encouraged me to get involved in them 30-some years ago, and I did, and I liked the school. And I still do actually like that school. It's a, it's a hard working school. It's a you know, for most first generation kids, they go up there to learn forestry, they learn to cook so on and so forth. It's not a what I would call a school with, where people who are going to try to be scientists or social, social experts or want to change the dynamics of America, they're just going there to learn a career. RIT, a little bit of the same way. They teach some good, good, good things over there. They, they teach good business engineering, so on and so forth. And it seems like they are kicking out some some good kids. So that's why I like RIT. University of Rochester is a little different. And I'll leave it at that.

Elizabeth Call 28:07

So, RIT. What, what was your first interaction with RIT?

Phil Saunders 28:14

I got involved, first of all, what I had the truck stop on Jefferson Road, which was three miles away, when I would, I would look for kids to work or people to work the evening and night shift and I got a lot of the kids from RIT that would come there and work and a lot of them were taking engineering, so they were mechanically inclined. So they were good at doing repairs on trucks, light repairs, changing brakes, doing oil changes, filters, so on and so forth. And they were dependable. And they all wanted to work. So I, that was my first impression. I just liked the kind of people that I was seeing in their students. And then Al Simone roped me in and he did a very good job at roping me in. And he was he was very instrumental in taking what I already knew about the students and doing something that could help the school and of course business is my main love in life. So getting involved with the business school was was easy and has been enjoyable.

Nicole Pease 29:30

What does it mean to you to have your name on the School of Business?

Phil Saunders 29:35

I really don't think much about it to be honest with you. I guess it's nice to have my name on it but I'm a pretty ordinary person and things like that don't really impress me a lot.

Nicole Pease 29:58

How do you fill your time these days? Do you work much, do you find time for hobbies?

Phil Saunders 30:04

Yeah, I have a nice farm, I enjoy working on my farm, I enjoy hunting, I enjoy fishing. I play some golf, but not, not, not a golf addict, probably play, you know, 30 times a year. I enjoy working on my farm physically, and still have enough of a business career with the bank and with the hotels and the different real estate investments I have that I like. But I seem to be able to come into the city maybe three days a week, and I could be at my farm more. But nowadays, with what's going on with the internet and stuff, it's amazing how much work you can get done without ever going here. I mean, I can get work done when I'm on the golf course. And not that I do a lot of it, but I mean it does happen. I've been in canoe races in the Adirondacks and have taken phone calls and done business in a canoe race. So, it's a it's a different world today. Probably if the world was the same way it was 30 years ago, I would still be working hard five days a week. Just, it just the way the world is today, it allows for a lot more free time.

Elizabeth Call 31:27

What do you grow on the farm?

Phil Saunders 31:29

Well, it was a dairy farm for many years. And then in the '90s I converted it over to Angus and an Angus herd. And then about 10 years ago, I leased it out to another farmer who farms most of the land. I have about 100 acres of hay ground and have between 40 and 50 beef cows that I use as lawn mowers, keep the pastures looking nice. Sorta, and that's a total hobby, but the, we have over 3,000 acres of farmland and so the, the people that run it are doing a good job and, and they're raising corn, wheat, alfalfa, soybeans, things like that.

Nicole Pease 32:26

Is your son involved with the farm?

Phil Saunders 32:27

My one son was involved in the farm for several years, Philip and Phillip's retired now. When you get to be my age, it's hard to believe you've got children that are retired and a lot of people that used to work for me I get more of my favorite executives that worked for me - they're all retired. But my son lives on a farm and I think enjoys what he does. He's got some physical ailments, so his life isn't as pleasant as I wish it would be. But he's, he's doing okay. Old age, you know, it caught up with them. Hasn't caught up with me and I'm lucky.

Nicole Pease 33:19

No plans to retire?

Phil Saunders 33:21

No, no, no.

Elizabeth Call 33:25

I'm sorry. You mentioned your son Philip, how many children do you have or had total?

Phil Saunders 33:29

I had four. The oldest was Mary Beth, who worked there at Griffith Energy, when I had it. And she got a glioblastoma brain tumor and passed away 10 years ago. And she was a real entrepreneur. And then I had another son that worked in the Sugar Creek Stores. Well, first of all, Philip is the next oldest. And he lives on a farm. Then the next one was my son Michael, who worked in the Sugar Creek Stores and was an executive and did a good job. And when I sold it he elected to take time off. And he wound up passing away four years ago. And we don't really know what happened to him. He, he was in his house alone and he passed away. Not sure what the total causes were. He apparently, had appeared to be reasonably healthy. And then my youngest, Patty, works here. And she's President of Saunders Management.

Nicole Pease 34:55

Is there anything else that you'd like to share that we haven't covered today?

Phil Saunders 35:01

No, I think you've done a good job, nope.

Nicole Pease 35:06

All right, well that's going to conclude our interview and thank you again for taking the time to speak with us.

Phil Saunders 35:11

You're welcome.