First in Class

Marc Gaucher was the very first student to graduate from Gustavson—and he’s been in the lead ever since

by Stacey McLachlan

For Marc Gaucher, MBA ’93, enrolling in the University of Victoria’s MBA program back in 1991 wasn’t just a chance to become an entrepreneur. It was an opportunity to be a pioneer—and take home the school’s first-ever business graduate degree.

He had already experienced UVic’s charms as an undergrad. And after using his Bachelors of Education degree to teach high school for a few years, he found himself back on the campus—this time, as staff, working as a coordinator of residences and student affairs. But when he tried to hop to a director opportunity at the University of Calgary, Gaucher realized that maybe his days as a student weren’t quite over. He lost out on the job there because he didn’t have a graduate degree. And so, Gaucher headed back to UVic and its brand new masters of business program.

“I realized I was going to be held back in my career if I didn’t complete a grad program,” says Gaucher. An MBA was also a chance for him to see where his budding entrepreneurial interest might take him. Teaching had been fine, but seeing friends around him start small businesses stoked a true passion. “The idea of starting something from scratch, building it in the direction I wanted, just had enough of lectures from my undergraduate degree.”

While he enjoyed the program, Gaucher was keen to start applying those skills in the real world. So when most of his peers went to Malaysia for a class trip, Gaucher sped up his program wrapping up his projects and courses early... making him the very first to graduate with his MBA from UVic, in the fall of 1993.

He hit the ground running. After graduation, Gaucher started in management consulting, working with firms in Canada and the US, including big companies like Ernst & Young and KPMG. His education had prepared him to walk into those board rooms with confidence, and grow from the experience he gained going toe to toe with the C-suite. Whether he found himself at a chemical manufacturing firm or a bank, with his degree in hand, he was ready for whatever came his way. “You’re not coming out of school 100 per cent prepared, but you’re getting the idea of starting something from scratch, building it in the direction I wanted, really appealed to me,” he says.

But being in the very first class of a brand new program was particularly intriguing for someone with that entrepreneurial spirit. The foundation was unlike many of the other business schools Gaucher had considered—UVic’s MBA was built and designed around soft skills, teamwork and the integrated support of the local business community. The students had mentors who were part of the fabric of the city, like Thrifty Foods’ Alex Campbell Sr. and David Black of Black Press. Frequent case studies brought the opportunity to think critically about real-world business dilemmas. Then there were the offsite trips and opportunities to meet with program partners in areas such as management, international business and communication skills. Guest lecturers came with serious pedigrees—including a presenter who had been part of peace talks between the US and USSR during the Cold War. “It was great to be part of a program that was so experiential and cross-purpose,” says Gaucher. “I had had enough of lectures from my undergraduate degree.”

The company’s stability is certainly helped by the fact that he’s made it a priority over the years to keep cash reserves strong and his company staffed with the best and brightest. “You have to weather the ups and downs that any small business experiences. Just hire the very best people. Spend more than you wanted or planned to, treat them well, support them with processes, systems and targets and make sure they have autonomy and fun,” he advises. It’s why much of his team has been there for over a decade—and why Metro Group is well suited to weather this strange storm.

Gaucher may be (slightly) further removed from the lecture hall than his MBA cohort, but the lessons he learned in grad school are still with him today. “I’ve been able to apply analytical, managerial and communication skills that other firms have to hire external consultants to do,” he says. “I can present value on investment, build spreadsheets, build models, think strategically. I’ve got those core skills. I couldn’t have asked for more bang for my buck from my UVic MBA.”