I had two major epiphanies in my life that led to where I am today. The first happened at Nevada when I was a graduate student in physics. I worked for a summer at the Desert Research Institute where, rather than working on my laboratory project, I spent my time asking people about how the operation worked and how they received grant money from the government. I was more interested in the management side of science, instead of actually doing the sciences. My uncle, a professor at Pomona College (Claremont, Calif), advised me to apply to business school. Although shocked at my decision to pursue business, my physics adviser, Dr. Philip Altick, wrote a recommendation for me. I applied to Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, Wharton and MIT, and was accepted at four of the five schools. I attended Harvard, earning an MBA. At Nevada, I realized I had other aptitudes, such as people and organizational skills, which led me on a career path that would make me happy. My wife, Susan, thought she was marrying a nuclear physicist, but I was not fulfilled working in a lab all day.

After graduating from Harvard, I held a variety of sales and marketing positions for companies in the scientific, medical and industrial fields. I received several promotions and helped improve sales at most of these companies, but I also got fired three times. My second epiphany came after the third firing when I realized I didn’t do well working for other people and needed to go into business for myself. In the early 1980s, Susan and I bought a small aviation component company in Rockford, Ill., with our life savings of $50,000, a second mortgage on our house, and a $8 million loan.

Susan and I experienced hairy times, especially getting into and later expanding the business during recessions. I learned that, to survive a recession, you just cannot give up, especially if you still view your business to be the right thing. You have to follow your plan and give it a period of time to work. Giving up is the easy way out and many people get frustrated when tough times happen. One of my Sontag rules is that I gave myself three days to cry and grieve, and then I got on with the program, since I had a family and mortgage. Even during tough economic times, there can be successful entrepreneurial ventures that require having a person with good ideas, executing them well and some luck.

There is no doubt that I would not have succeeded in business without my strong partnership with Susan. She once considered law school, but when we got married, she decided to get into a position to help earn money. She worked as a freelance court reporter for a service that allowed her to work from wherever we lived (i.e. Reno, Boston). From the start, Susan’s financial support got us through the tough times. She put me through Harvard and worked during the times I was fired. She ran the household and raised our kids. She was even my assistant for a while during the early years of our company.

By 2002, we had built our company into an international market leader with $200 million in sales. The day we sold the company to General Electric, we started The Sontag Foundation to fund medical research and “self-help” organizations. In 1994, Susan had been diagnosed with brain cancer and her battle with the disease inspired the formation of our foundation. Today, our foundation is the largest private funder of brain cancer research in the U.S. We also support rheumatoid arthritis research, as my mother died from complications from this disease. In addition, our support of charitable causes in northeast Florida range from battered women’s shelters to disadvantaged youth centers. We also advise nonprofits on how to operate their businesses. Now, I have the most fun being philanthropic.

Our recent gift to Nevada to establish the annual Sontag Entrepreneurship Award was something I had wanted to do for a long time. The award will provide $50,000 to a student or group of students who demonstrate an ability and intention to start or expand a business. I hope it encourages the entrepreneurial spirit in Nevada’s students and drives them to want to succeed, no matter the cost. So many times, opportunities are sitting in front of us that only require the decision to do them. If Susan and I can inspire people by our story to do something worthwhile, then we’ve done our job.

From a conversation in September with Kristen Kennedy, College of Business development director, and Crystal Parish, director of foundation operations, Sontag earned a bachelor’s in physics from Harvey Mudd College, a master’s in physics from Nevada, and an MBA from Harvard Business School. He is president of Spring Bay Companies, a venture capital firm, and board president of The Sontag Foundation. For 22 years, he headed Unison Industries, a market leader in aviation engine components, which he sold to General Electric in 2002. His wife, Susan, graduated from Pomona College with a bachelor’s in government. Diagnosed in 1994 with brain cancer, she is a 17-year cancer survivor and the inspiration for the formation of The Sontag Foundation through which the Sontags support medical research and “self-help” organizations, and have given generously to their alma maters, including a recent $1 million gift to Nevada to establish the annual Sontag Entrepreneurship Award.
Entrepreneur

College of Business Philanthropist

Venture Capitalist