

## **North Brookfield Spawns Another Entrepreneur**

By Peter S. Cohan WALL & MAIN

When I was growing up in Worcester, I had never even heard of North Brookfield. But in the last few years, I have learned of two interesting startups founded by natives of the 4,626-citizen Worcester County town. All I need is one more to reach the conclusion that North Brookfield as an entrepreneurial spawning ground is a trend.

The entrepreneur I met in September 2013 is Nicole Ledoux, a Harvard Business School graduate. Her husband, a former Babson College MBA student of mine, Rob Dalton, helped inspire her to start 88 Acres, a food company named after the North Brookfield farm where she grew up.

On Nov. 18, I interviewed Aaron Portnoy, who had moved to North Brookfield when he was a child. He helped start Exodus Intelligence in Austin, Texas, a consulting firm that fights so-called zero-day information security threats. Mr. Portnoy spoke at the Worcester Economic Club on Nov. 19.

Ms. Ledoux started her venture after Mr. Dalton, then her boyfriend, nearly died on their fourth date.

She said she had left the farm "for UMass Amherst, went to Boston and London, then earned an MBA from Harvard Business School in 2008 and started a career in finance." Until February 2012, she was an interest rate options trader at State Street Bank.

"Three years ago, I met Rob," she said. "He was the first person I had met with food allergies and on our fourth date, he almost died. He ordered a meal and the restaurant said it had no nuts. The meal had nuts and his reaction was almost immediate. We were in Boston and I drove him to Beth Israel Hospital at 80 miles an hour. They gave him prednisone and epinephrine."

In a Sept. 25, 2013, interview, Mr. Dalton recalled how he and Nicole were married in July 2013 and on Sept. 22, 2013, "we moved from one major life event to another with the launch of our company, 88 Acres (88-acres.com), that creates healthy snack foods free of the top eight food allergens, that are crafted with simple ingredients and designed for all to enjoy."

Their company raised \$20,000 in a Kickstarter and was working out of MassChallenge in Boston. Last July, Mr. Dalton told me that 88 Acres was raising a larger round of financing.

I met Mr. Portnoy through Steve Rothschild, CEO of Applied Interactive, which sponsored

Mr. Portnoy's appearance in Worcester. He described Mr. Portnoy as "a world-renowned cybersecurity expert who was recently featured on the cover of Time and now is the guest speaker at the Worcester Economic Club."

The July Time article noted how Mr. Portnoy got kicked out of high school in Worcester for hacking into its computer system. As Time wrote, "Aaron Portnoy started his hacking career when he was still in high school, at the Massachusetts Academy of Math & Science in Worcester, which not coincidentally was the institution he hacked."

Mr. Portnoy said that getting kicked out of Mass. Academy cost him a spot at MIT. He went to Northeastern instead. After an internship in Austin, he dropped out of Northeastern and worked at TippingPoint, a Hewlett-Packard computer network intrusion detector. He and his team left in 2012 to form Exodus Intelligence.

Mr. Portnoy said he thinks Austin is a great place for a startup: "It offers tax breaks to startups, cheap interns are available from the University of Texas, Austin, the weather is nice, there are lots of (pillar) companies like Google, Dell, and Cisco, and the quality of life is great."

If Worcester had all these things, maybe he would come back.

Meanwhile, if you're a North Brookfield native who has started a business, please let me know.

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