

“There’s No Going Back”

Williams Uses Technology to Provide Business Solutions

By Jay Buckner

During a recent visit to his hometown of Barbourville, Ky., Jess Williams, '91, gave the commencement address at his high school. “A passerby asked two construction workers what they were doing,” Williams explained to the graduates. “One responded that he was laying stone. The other stated that he was building a cathedral. So, one man had a job. The other had a mission.

“It’s important to commit yourself to excellence in your mission.”

Williams knows the importance of that commitment. “The odds were definitely against me to ever leave Barbourville—let alone become a company president at 32,” Williams recalls. “The expectations were that I would go to work in the mines and forget my dream of attending college.”

Instead, Williams came to Berea, where he majored in mathematics with an emphasis in computer science, and worked in the computer center. His technology background landed him his first job as a systems analyst at Humana Health Care in Louisville. When he was named vice president of information technology at Conseco, the worldwide insurance and financial services corporation, he was the company’s youngest vice president. He graduated at the top of his MBA class, earning his degree in strategic management from the University of Indianapolis, and is now the president of Premier Solutions, a leading technology consulting company in Indianapolis.

Behind his office desk, or on the road to meet a potential client, Williams relies on the same principle that helped him work his way out of



Photo by Todd Moore

“When we go in as consultants, we use technology, but we don’t really provide technology solutions. Our mantra is that we provide business solutions.”

poverty—intense focus on the end result. His client list includes such notable companies as Conseco, Sallie Mae, Roche Pharmaceuticals, Cummins, and Caterpillar. “When we go in as consultants, we use technology, but we don’t really provide technology solutions. Our mantra is that we provide business solutions,” Williams explains. “When technology is working well, nobody notices it, but you take that email server, fax machine, or phone line down—that’s when the

business almost shuts down.”

Williams is confident technology will continue to impact our lives for the better. “People want technology everywhere they are,” he says. “Wireless has become more real. One day, instead of having a desktop to work from, people will be wired—always connected. You’ll be scheduling appointments, contacting people, conducting meetings, and checking stocks, but not behind the computer. Speed, urgency, and quality are demanded, and technology helps us meet those demands.”

At the same time, he is concerned about less desirable results of advanced technologies. “I think it’s going to have repercussions on our social lives,” he explains. “We’re seeing a lot more introverted people who are lacking social skills. Because we are always plugged in, it’s hard to have a family dinner because there’s always white noise in the background. There is definitely a dependence on technology, but there’s no going back.”

Fifteen years ago, on a hot summer day, the sun was shining over the Knox County landfill in Barbourville where 17-year-old Williams worked. Garbage trucks rumbled to the drop site and clumsily dumped their payload as he watched the trash disappear beneath freshly-turned dirt. His job was to toss grass seeds over the newly-buried garbage. As the bulldozers retreated, Williams reached into his bag and ran his fingers through countless grass seeds. His thoughts drifted to baseball and college and away from his life of poverty and low expectations. “That day at the landfill I decided I was

going to make something happen,” Williams recalls.

As a student-athlete at Barbourville High School, he excelled in the classroom and on the baseball field. He graduated high school as valedictorian in 1987. Williams’ 90 mile-per-hour fastball earned him the reputation as a fierce competitor—which he has translated into business success. “On the field, it didn’t matter if you had money,” Williams recalls. “For me, sports leveled the playing field and gave me a measure of success. I did so well on the field, it gave me even more drive in the classroom.”

His academic success opened the first door to college when the University of Kentucky offered him a full-tuition academic scholarship. But he declined. “I got a call from a Berea College baseball player and went for a campus visit,” he says. “I knew Berea College was the right place for me. At Berea, we were family.”

After enrolling at Berea College in the fall of 1987, Williams quickly flourished on and off the baseball field. “He brought a seriousness and optimistic expectation to his class work, as if he believed something important were at stake,” says Steve Boyce, professor of mathematics at Berea. “When he engaged in activities at Berea, he seemed to do it with an intense but gentle interest and an eagerness to commit himself, to invest his time and energy.”



Tracey Payne Williams

Williams is most grateful to Berea for one thing—meeting his wife, Tracey (Payne), '93.

“Having a good home life makes all the business stuff much easier,” he says. “I probably owe Berea the most

for introducing me to my wife.”

Williams’ children, Hannah, Andrew, and Emma, will have a much different upbringing than his. “They will never have to know the hardship of growing up poor like I did,” he says.

Williams’ mission to escape poverty and low expectations does not surprise those who know first-hand his determination. “Jess represents the quintessential Berea student, given his background,” says Boyce. “I think Berea’s mission begins with identifying students—mostly Appalachian—with strong leadership potential who have grown up with limited financial resources and the constrained opportunity that’s often part of such a background. Once on campus, high expectations seem like a crucial part of the mix, and Jess was certainly one who responded well to high expectations.”

His labor position in Berea’s student work program not only taught Williams about computers, but helped him see how technology can be used to help real people solve problems. “Berea taught me that life is not black and white with yes or no answers,” he explains. “It’s not about putting things into formula and spitting out the answer. It’s more about the process.”

Whether it’s baseball or business, Williams has all his bases covered.

For more information on Premier Solutions, visit www.premiersi.com.



Photo by Todd Moore

Rand McNally Globe, ca. 1940

Rand McNally was a pioneer in making globes for schools. In 1940 this new model—the 16” physical-political with deluxe mounting—was a top quality educational tool. It served in Berea College classrooms in Draper and Frost Buildings for decades.

