



Episode 8: Ferol Vernon (CAS'03), Written Word Media Founder & COO

Host: Jeff Murphy (Questrom'06), BU Alumni Relations

From computer science to classical civilizations, Ferol Vernon's (CAS'03) path to success as an entrepreneur is anything but ordinary. Today, Ferol combines his love of literature with his passion for technology as the Founder and Chief Operating Officer at Written Word Media. His company is focused on connecting readers with their next great book and providing a high-tech platform to help authors and publishers reach new audiences.

Podcast Transcript:

Jeff Murphy: I'm Jeff Murphy from Boston University Alumni Relations and I'm your host for an interview series showcasing the career paths of our most interesting and accomplished alumni. Welcome to the Proud to BU Podcast. My guest today is Ferol Vernon, the Founder and Chief Operating Officer of Written Word Media. His company is dedicated to empowering authors and publishers to reach their audience and helping readers find their next great book. Ferol earned his degree in classical civilizations from CAS in 2003. We talked about his work beyond BU and the ways in which he's built a career, combining his love of books and his passion for technology.

Well, thanks for being with us today. I always like to start off by just knowing about where you grew up. Where do you say that you're from? And if you could tell me a little bit about how you found yourself in Boston.

Ferol Vernon: Yeah. So, I grew up outside of DC in the suburbs on the Virginia side, a town called Falls Church. It was a great little place to grow up, but very suburban. So we drove everywhere, there was a mall, there were house, house, house, church, school, that kind of stuff. And so when I started looking at colleges and I sort of was just driving around the country or flying around the country with my mom and my dad. We came to BU and I was kind of like, "Whoa, this is cool. This is different from what I grew up in." So I think for me, while BU you had a lot of the sort of academic things that I was looking for, the fact that it was in the heart of this city, Boston was a huge draw for me. It was just so different from what I experienced growing up and that's kind of how I found myself there.

Jeff Murphy: And so you mentioned you majored in classical civilizations, you said the history side.

Ferol Vernon: Correct.

Jeff Murphy: So had you grown up with a love of history and books and reading? Can you tell us a little bit about why you decided to study that?

Ferol Vernon: Yeah. So it's interesting. So I got accepted to BU to do computer engineering. I've always been into technology and I sort of went into the intro, orientation or whatever. I realized I had to take chemistry and biology and all these sort of engineering disciplines and I didn't want to do that. So I switched to computer science and then I was undecided for a while

after I sort of left computer science and I'd always had kind of a mythological love. Like I'd always read those books and I read a lot of science fiction and a lot of fantasy novels. And so, classical civilization was something that sort of spoke to me during the period of time when I was kind of undecided. Which is really where I spent actually the bulk of my BU career as sort of trying to figure out where I was going to land. And so classics was something that kind of spoke to me as something that was familiar and ended up being really useful sort of later on in my life. But, immediately after graduation it was maybe not as useful as some other things could have been.

Jeff Murphy: So, I'm curious, I mean you've got this love for reading and books but you mentioned sci-fi and that seems like it might be an intersection for also your love of technology. So knowing where you are now, and we'll certainly talk more about how you got to Written Word Media and starting a company, but early on as a kid in high school or at BU, it sounds like there probably were some signs that you might end up as a tech entrepreneur.

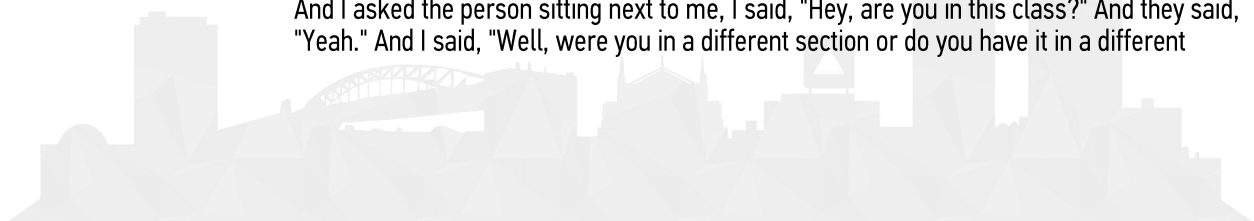
Ferol Vernon: Yeah, there were definitely some signs. I mean, I started my first company when I was 15. I was mowing lawns and so I would go around door to door and ask people if they needed help with their lawn. And you know, we had like 11 lawns. I had a partner who is a friend of mine. So I was always kind of a sort of a hustler in that way. Like I was always just trying and starting businesses, making money. That stuff sort of always made sense to me. And so that was certainly an early sign of that. And when I was at school, I used to, this is kind of a throwback. Do you remember Winamp, which was one of the early players?

Jeff Murphy: I was a big Winamp fan when music on the Internet was the wild wild west.

Ferol Vernon: Exactly. So it was crazy because I started BU at '99', which is right when Napster was coming out and right when mp3s were really taking over and that whole industry was changing. And I used to spend a lot of time making my own skins. You could actually use photo shop and you could design a version of this mp3 player that was yours. And so I spent a lot of time doing that. And I think in a lot of ways I wish somebody had talked to me and said, "Hey, you know you don't have to be a complete engineer. You could also do something artistic and engineering." There are ways to combine those two things, sort of in the real world instead of just doing it as a hobby. And so I think there are a lot of things like that that sort of led me to sort of end up where I ended up.

Jeff Murphy: So you mentioned wishing that you had that person in your life that helped you kind of navigate your interests and turn that into a career. I'm guessing you had assigned academic advisors and things like that when you were at the College of Arts and Sciences, but were there professors or other people on campus that really stood out to you or particular classes that you really remember now that had an impact on your eventual career?

Ferol Vernon: Yeah, so there's definitely one. So I was, as I mentioned I was doing computer science for about the first year I was at BU and I was taking, I don't remember what the class was, but I was taking one of these sort of secondary level computer science courses. Not like the intro course, but whatever came right after that. And I was in a classroom, I think there was about 20 to 30 students that would show up typically for the class, I remember thinking like, "This is hard." But I felt like I was getting it, right. And so I worked pretty hard and we did all these projects and all this stuff. And then towards the end of the semester we had the exam and I walked in, it was in a different classroom and I thought that was weird. I'm like, "Why is it in a different classroom?" So, I enter the classroom and there's 200 students in there. And I asked the person sitting next to me, I said, "Hey, are you in this class?" And they said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, were you in a different section or do you have it in a different



time?" And no, all these students were in my class. They just didn't even have to go to class to be passing it. And it was that sort of moment where I was like, "Maybe computer science is not where I'm supposed to be." And I remember that experience very clearly and it actually informed a lot of what I did later in my career. I've worked in the music industry, building technology, and had to hire a lot of people and that experience was really formative. Because I was able to understand the difference between a great engineer and a mediocre engineer is cavernous, it's huge. And so that experience that I had when I was 19 years old, really stayed with me for the entire time.

Jeff Murphy: So you have this BU experience where you have an opportunity to study some, what I think some people would see as pretty disparate topics with interests that you have in your life, you graduate, you walk across that stage, you get your diploma. And you know, that time for so many recent graduates of the university is so pivotal and can be so stressful. Did you feel like you had a bunch of decisions in front of you that you could take on which path that you went on? And how did that go for you? How did you make your plan right after graduation?

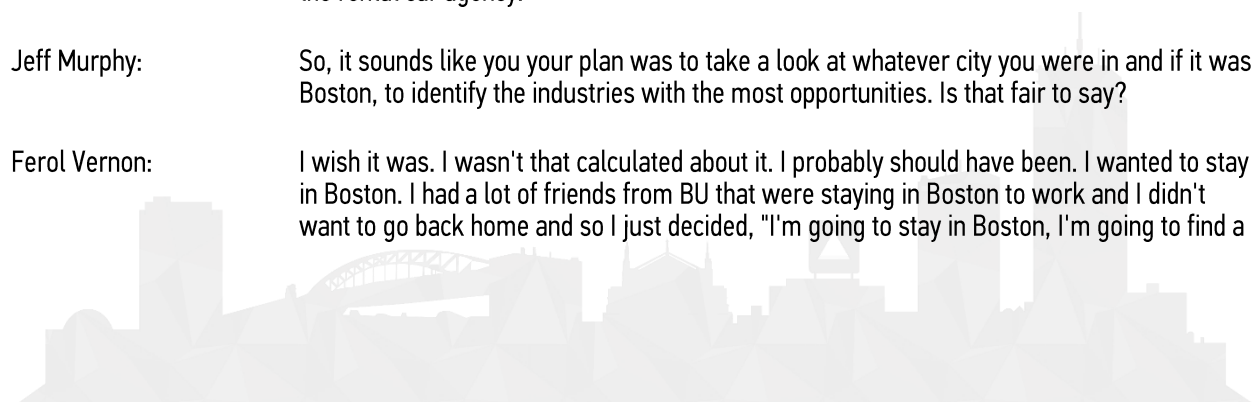
Ferol Vernon: So yes, I think I handled it may be different than a lot of other students might. I wasn't worried about getting a job. I actually had a job, so I was renting cars. I was a car rental agent, at Budget Rent a Car in Central Square, right between Harvard and MIT. I don't know if it's still there or not, but I had this job part time. That's how I was sort of making money while I was going to school. And so when I graduated I just started working there full time until I figured out what job I had so I had less financial stress because I was making money, I was good at that and so that part wasn't worrisome and I never really worried about what I was going to do. It wasn't so much like, "Oh my gosh, am I trying to find meaning?" I was looking for sort of a job. And so I think I had a little bit different. And also I graduated in three and a half years. I took some classes during the summer and so I graduated in December and so I remember you mentioned sort of walking across the stage, it was a lot less climactic for me because I drove over to the university office during my lunch break and just picked up my diploma through it in my car and drove home. So I didn't walk and do the whole, the ceremony of it. Which maybe was a mistake, but that's what I did. And so then what happened is I actually got a job from at Massachusetts General Hospital in a research lab and what happened is people would come up to rent cars and I had been talking to a few friends and friends of friends trying to figure out how to get a job, what's a good job to get. And people are like, "The hospital system in Boston is amazing." And so, this woman walked in to rent a car and I saw that she had an MGH id in her wallet. And I said, "Hey, I heard that's a great place to work. Are you looking for anybody to work there?" And she said, "Actually I am." And I took her name and I sent her my resume and I got that job. And that's how I got the job.

Jeff Murphy: Wow that is incredible. [laughing]

Ferol Vernon: And so, for me that was just kind of like what made sense and a lot of other people were following different tracks, which just didn't feel right to me. So the way I got my job is the way I got my job. That's kind of where I started my professional career, is that moment in the rental car agency.

Jeff Murphy: So, it sounds like you your plan was to take a look at whatever city you were in and if it was Boston, to identify the industries with the most opportunities. Is that fair to say?

Ferol Vernon: I wish it was. I wasn't that calculated about it. I probably should have been. I wanted to stay in Boston. I had a lot of friends from BU that were staying in Boston to work and I didn't want to go back home and so I just decided, "I'm going to stay in Boston, I'm going to find a



job here." And so, maybe if I'd said, "Okay, this is the industry I want to be in, maybe this city makes sense or this city makes sense." I didn't do any of that planning. I was just sort of taking things as they came to me and it worked out really well. But, I wasn't very sort of calculated about it at all.

Jeff Murphy: So what happens at MGH? How long were you there, what are you working on and how does that lead to your next job?

Ferol Vernon: [laughing] So I took a job working at this place called the Center for Integration of Medicine and Innovative Technology, which is a mouthful. But basically it was a lab that tried to connect doctors and scientists from MGH and MIT and have them come up with brilliant ideas. And it was a really cool lab. And basically we worked on a medical simulators. So they're fake bodies that you practice surgery on and so I was working in an office building but there were body parts everywhere and fake blood and the guys that I was working with were just fabulously intelligent. And, I was sort of the low man on the totem pole. So I would arrange the conferences, I would order supplies so I was ordering skeletons and fake skin and stuff like that. So it was sort of a weird first job, but it exposed me to a lot of different things and I met some people there that were really formative in kind of what I decided to do next. But I was there for about four years and it was great experience.

Jeff Murphy: I know you felt like you were low man on the totem pole, but was it satisfying your interest in technology and innovation just by sort of being a part of that?

Ferol Vernon: Yeah, it definitely was and I was able to learn a lot by osmosis and I was able to learn some things about just basic office politics, stuff like that, that I just hadn't been exposed to before. And I think as I started slowly accumulating more and more information and learning more about what was going on around me, I realized that the nonprofit world just really wasn't for me. It moved too slow. It didn't seem to make sense to me why people did the things they did. It makes sense to me now, but I don't agree with it. And so we were building these prototypes that were supposed to help military medics. It was mostly funded by the military. And everybody's talking about commercialization, actually getting these things to where you could sell them to the army so that the medics, who were mostly 18 year old guys with very little training, could actually use them and level up. And they just never got out of the prototype phase, nobody took it and I didn't really understand why. And it was really frustrating to me and I think there are plenty of good reasons why that I understand now. But the pace at which things moved and the sort of a chain of approvals required to get anything done a really turned me off from the world of nonprofit and I think opened my eyes to sort of private enterprise and how that was definitely going to be my path.

Jeff Murphy: So, is it at that time that you decide that you're going to go back to school. I know from talking with you before that you went on for an MBA.

Ferol Vernon: It was, yeah. So it was about that time. Actually, I was in a bad car accident looking for an apartment in Boston and so I couldn't walk for about six weeks. And so I was in Spaulding Rehab Hospital and what I will say is "Try not to get in a car accident." But if you ever have the opportunity in your life to sit and just sort of reflect for a few weeks, [laughing] it really helps you get some clarity on some things. So as I was sitting in a hospital bed, I was thinking about what I wanted to do with my life, what my next steps were going to be and I came out of there with a lot of clarity and I decided business school is definitely where I was going. I didn't know that I was gonna end up at Duke, but I had sort of made that decision



very firmly where before I was a little wishy washy about it. And so that was a huge sort of pivotal point in my life where I decided to kind of move forward.

Jeff Murphy: And I'll need to ask us to move through the next phase a little bit quickly, so great experience with your MBA and then I know you said you got into sort of music and art for a while and the merger with technology. So tell us a little bit about that.

Ferol Vernon: So yeah. So while I was at business school, I was introduced to a local entrepreneur who started this company called Reverb Nation and I did an internship there, I loved it, I worked there full time. When I started there was sort of 10 people. When I left there was a 100 and it was a great ride and so that company basically built software for musicians. So for bands not for listeners, and it was a wild ride, it was fun. It's where I learned how to build technology quickly. I learned modern, sort of software development techniques. I learned how to manage people, hire people, how to fire people. I really kind of cut my teeth there and then after about six and change years, I decided to take the leap and start this company actually with my wife. And so we had talked for a long time about running a company to get there so that we could wrap our lives around work and instead of the other way around. And so we really made a go of it and it's grown very quickly. And now, we've got four full time people, six including us. And, we're growing, expanding and it's been a great ride.

Jeff Murphy: So was it during Reverb Nation that you first had the inclinations about starting your own company or were you even thinking about it during your MBA?

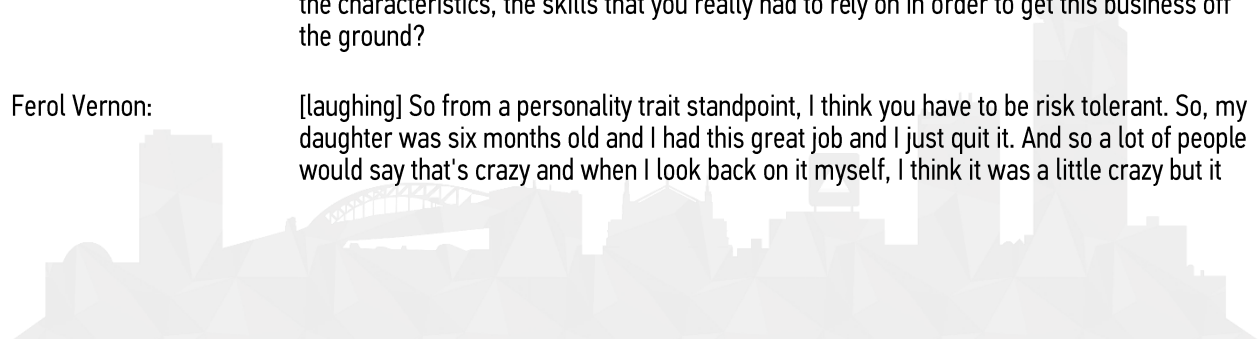
Ferol Vernon: Yeah, I was always thinking about it. So during my MBA I think I was kind of the weird one that was working for this small technology company. I wasn't looking to go into banking or consulting or marketing or any of the big sort of MBA fields. And so people kind of didn't know what to do with me, but that was fine with me. It's kind of always been my way. And so I was with sort of a small group of people that were all into entrepreneurship and were thinking about starting companies, working for small companies, that kind of thing. And I was very fortunate to meet some great people and really fortunate with timing too. Because, we spoke about it before the podcast started, Durham, North Carolina has exploded with the startup scene and I was here 10 years ago, right when it was kind of getting started. And so it's been a great ride. A ton of companies have come out of here, a couple of big acquisitions and so the area has grown. And I've been sort of really fortunate to grow with it.

Jeff Murphy: It's so impressive to me that you found a way to combine your love of technology with your love of books and reading and Written Word Media, I think you pretty clearly stated, I think I read it on your LinkedIn page that the whole idea is about empowering and supporting authors.

Ferol Vernon: Yep.

Jeff Murphy: So can you talk a little bit more about starting your own company and being able to look back now on those early days. What were the skills, what were the characteristics, I mean obviously you're doing this in partnership with your wife, but what are the personality traits, the characteristics, the skills that you really had to rely on in order to get this business off the ground?

Ferol Vernon: [laughing] So from a personality trait standpoint, I think you have to be risk tolerant. So, my daughter was six months old and I had this great job and I just quit it. And so a lot of people would say that's crazy and when I look back on it myself, I think it was a little crazy but it



worked. And so I think risk tolerance. I think you have to have also tolerance for self-doubt. There are days when you're starting something small where your friends have big jobs and you're trying to start this company and you think to yourself, "Is this the right thing? Is this going to happen?" And, it can be very lonely. So, you don't have a whole lot of people to commiserate with. You don't have coworkers, you don't have peers. And so, I think you have to be able to weather all those things. And so, that's sort of on the personality traits side. On the skill side, I think what's really helpful is having some specialized skills but also being sort of a generalist. So I was able to do some of the design stuff, some technology stuff. I was able to do interviews like this, I was able to hire people. And so both of us, my wife and I, had strong and sort of broad skillsets and I think that's required. Because, one day you're trying to find a real estate, trying to find a place for your people to work and the next day you're dealing with technical issue and the following day maybe you're dealing with sort of a soft like personnel issue, motivating people and you've got to be able to sort of bounce around a lot. And it's not what your role dictates because the buck stops with you. It's anything that happens you need to be ready to deal with. And so I think if you get frustrated doing something that's not your core competency or the thing that you consider yourself really good at, entrepreneurship can be really tough because one day you're dealing with ordering the water and snacks or something like that. And if you feel like that's beneath you or that's not the right thing to be spending your time on, that's fine but those things need to get done. And it's up to you to figure out how to get everything done.

Jeff Murphy: So, you are a COO, but really what I think I'm hearing you say is you're the wearer of all hats for your company. You mentioned having to order snacks, handle HR issues, anything and everything. What are the specific activities that make you the most happy or the most fulfilled about running your company?

Ferol Vernon: Yeah. And so I think what you just said about wearing all the hats is accurate. I think my role would probably be much more accurately a CTO, sort of the technology pieces is really what I drive forward, but I do a little bit of everything. So I think the things that make me most happiest is building stuff and that's always been the case even since I was a little kid, making movies, making designs, making things. And when you're in technology and software, you get to make stuff and it gets to sort of be exposed to a lot of people just by virtue of the Internet. So, the thing that really gets me going is building something and then launching it and then two days later thousands of our users are using it or seeing it or interacting with it. And the data tells you whether it was good or bad. There's no boss to say, "Okay, you did a good job or you did a bad job." The data tells you. And that's what I love. If profits are going up, if click through rates are going up, the numbers are going up, then you're doing a good job and there's no opinion of it. And so that is very humbling sometimes because we all make mistakes, but at the same time it's incredibly rewarding when you get it right.

Jeff Murphy: So, one of the things I think is interesting about your work is media has changed so much with the advancement of technology. You've been a part of that for a long, long time and in a lot of ways technology is changing the media industry. So for folks who are interested in careers or maybe even starting their own company at the intersection of media and technology, if you were to have to come back to a class at BU, whether it was entrepreneurship or maybe an engineering class, technology, what advice do you have to share with folks who at 22 have aspirations of starting their own company?

Ferol Vernon: Yeah, so I would say a few things. One, don't discount personality when you're doing these things. So a lot of people are worried about, "Do I have the skills to do this?" And really sort of confidence and risk taking are huge attributes that should not be undervalued. So if you have those things, feel good about it even if you're not doing well in class A or class B or

whatever it is. Second is, especially in technology, the thing that's terrific about it is that everything can be measured. So when something happens, you can see a number and so whatever quantitative classes you're taking, take more, take statistics, take it seriously, take, take more of it. Because the tracking things, statistical significance, the numbers that are part of marketing technology these days are critical. And so everybody is looking for people with hard quantitative skills. Even if you consider yourself an online marketer, which some people think of marketing as kind of a soft thing, it's not at all accurate, especially not in technology. So hard skills are required and you can learn them. A lot of people will be like, "Well it's really hard. I don't do that." You can learn it. But I would just say to anybody that's looking to get into these fields double down on your math. It's only gonna get more important.

Jeff Murphy: It makes a lot of sense. I know Written Word Media manages several different online sites, where can our listeners go to sort of see some of your products, for lack of a better term?

Ferol Vernon: So as a media company, you can think of Written Word Media like you think of Turner Networks. So Turner Networks has CNN, the Cartoon Network, Turner Classic Movies, these are all TV channels, but they have different audiences. Written Word Media has different websites that help people find books, but they're all catered to a slightly different audience. So you can check out a variety of websites. I'll run through them very quickly. Freebooksy, which specializes in free books are absolutely free. Bargain Booksy, which specializes in books under \$5. New In Books, which is targeted at new releases or brand new books that are going to be sort of household names. Red Feather Romance, which is exclusively for romance titles. And, readingstacks.com, which is for people that have subscriptions like kindle unlimited, which is kind of like the Netflix for books. And so those are our websites, we manage all of them with the same technology stack on the backend, but the branding that the reader sees when one of you goes to visit one of those sites is different on each site. But what's happening in the background is in technology that we've developed that is handling all the nuts and bolts of running them.

Jeff Murphy: So, I feel like throughout my conversations with you I can just tell that you've got this incredible entrepreneurial piece of your life. Are there other projects you've got cooking, things that you hope to accomplish in the next 5 to 10 years or are you just sort of focused on family and Written Word Media for now?

Ferol Vernon: So there's always something, right? And so right now we actually just started, we spun off a new company called Hidden Key Publishing and Hidden Key Publishing is going to be creating books. So right now Written Word Media markets other people's books, so authors pay us to advertise their books on our websites. Hidden Key Publishing is going to be writing books, so we're commissioning stories, we're working with authors to actually get books written. It's really, really exciting. It's in the very early stages. You can think about what Netflix did with House of Cards, right? They had the service that reached a lot of viewers and they decided to make their own content to put in front of those viewers instead of just showing other people's content. We're doing the same thing. And so Hidden Key Publishing is going to be the way that we're doing that and that has been incredibly rewarding, very difficult experience so far. We've been doing it for a few months and so for the next five years that's really what I'm most excited about is being able to bring stories to life, being able to write books and get them to people that are going to consume our characters and look for opportunities beyond just books. I think if you look at the major movies right now, books are what's driving a lot of it. It is where a lot of these things started. Game of thrones, Harry Potter, these things all started as books. And so I see books as the low cost way to test a story and we're hoping to be innovators in that arena.



Jeff Murphy: Well, best of luck with that project over the next few years. And speaking of telling stories, thank you so much for sharing yours with the BU community. We really appreciate your time.

Ferol Vernon: Absolutely, pleasure to be here.

Jeff Murphy: Thanks again to Ferol for joining me on the podcast. It was a real pleasure hearing about the pivotal moments of his career at this interesting intersection of arts and technology. If you'd like to learn more about Ferol's company Written Word Media, visit the website, writtenwordmedia.com. Thanks again for listening to the Proud to BU Podcast. If you like what we're doing, please be sure to subscribe, rate, and review Proud to BU wherever you download your episodes. I'm Jeff Murphy and no matter where your path takes you, be Proud to BU. The Proud to BU Podcast is produced by Boston University Alumni Relations. Our theme is from Jump and APM music. To learn more about Proud to BU, visit bu.edu/alumni/podcast.

