Our Conversation with Chris Duke

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about your time at Duke. What did you study and what were you involved in? Did you do anything entrepreneurial while you were here?

**CD:** I came to Fuqua in 1985 after working as a pharmaceutical rep for three years out of undergraduate school. I had a double major in Accounting and Management and while I was with a great company, I had a long time interest in furthering my business education. I was heavily involved in Junior Achievement in high school and Fuqua offered me a very nice scholarship tied to this program. Duke just felt like the right place for me at the right time.

If I had to pick areas of focus at Fuqua, it would have been marketing, operations and entrepreneurship. Dean Bill Boulding, Joe Mazzola, and Elaine Romanelli were all very influential in my experience at Fuqua. Not that other professors like Doug Breeden, Blair Shepard, Helmy Baligh, Dan Laughun, and many more were not top shelf – the professors at Fuqua all added to an experience that shaped my life and career.

In my final semester, I was taking an entrepreneurship class where we created and presented products and our company idea. Jeff Sparks, Mark Ferguson and I worked together on a project. We were focused on creating computers that looked different. We created a prototype of a red computer and a wood cabinet that covered the computer, monitor and the keyboard.

I had some job interviews and a nice offer from a large pharmaceutical company, but a chance meeting with a fellow student, Luis Gutierrez, who offered seed money to start a company which sealed the deal for us. We launched Casica to build cabinets for PC's that were made in North Carolina and designed to make PCs look like fine furniture.

We worked hard for two years, attended major trade shows and despite some success, like having our product on the set of the TV show Family Ties and being in the Apple Company Store, sales simply were not enough to sustain the company. So we closed it down.

**Duke I&E:** You started Anna’s Gourmet Goodies. Tell us the story of how it got started.

**CD:** The seed for Anna's Gourmet Goodies was planted when I was crowned Grand Champion at a cheesecake bakeoff contest at the company where I worked, SciQuest. I made an Apple Bourbon Cheesecake based on my Mom’s recipe, it was really good.

Afterwards, a few people in the office encouraged me to sell the product. I resisted as this was not in my ‘career plan’ at the time. Eventually I checked out the regulatory
requirements, setup a small operation, and baked a sample for a chef at a local restaurant. He agreed to try it.

His customers loved it, so he ordered another. Then another. We started slowly, building the business by word of mouth and seeking out local restaurants and venues that wanted to carry our products.

The business grew and in late 2002 we decided to build a commercial bakery. By late 2003, we had customers, sales and decided it was time to take a leap of faith and pursue the business. I left SciQuest in November 2003 to focus on Anna’s Gourmet Goodies full time.

**Duke I&E: The company has done well and you have been in business for over thirteen years. Tell us what your business is like these days. What do you spend your time on, and who is your target customer?**

**CD:** Anna’s Gourmet Goodies shifted focus away from our original products, wholesale desserts for restaurants, to cookies and brownies as gifts. Doing this allowed us to use the same equipment, but sell products with a much higher margin, to a broader audience.

Today, Anna’s Gourmet Goodies is an eCommerce business focused on baking and shipping cookies and brownies as gifts. We have individuals as customers, as well as businesses of all sizes. We ship our gifts to destinations throughout the United States and to Military bases around the world.

Anyone can go to our website ([AnnasGourmetGoodies.com](http://AnnasGourmetGoodies.com)) and place an order for a gift. For businesses, we have a well developed process for managing and sending gifts that are branded with their logo and custom note card. While the Holiday Season is a large part of this market, we also have managed gift services for companies sending gifts throughout the year to clients or employees as a thank you, for birthdays and work anniversaries. This has been a growth area for our business.

**Duke I&E: As you reflect back on the years since you've started, what are some of the things you've learned that you wished you’d known when you were starting.**

**CD:** When starting a business, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that ‘anyone with a pulse’ is your customer. It is true that sometimes, you won’t really understand your customer profile until you get out there, so you’ll have to spend some time learning.

One of my favorite lessons came from a TED talk by Simon Sinek. In it, he reveals his formula for ‘The Golden Circle’ and why the most successful leaders, personal and business, focus on understanding and communicating why they do what they do, as opposed to what or how. I wrote a blog post about this and how it relates to our cookie business.

As someone who is driven by authenticity, making an impact and delivering real value, this concept really set off a light bulb for me. The noise level in our world is deafening. Despite the next greatest social media tool, getting someone’s real attention is getting harder and harder. The fastest way to get your product to the market, and the most satisfying, is to concentrate on selling to the people who buy from you based on what you believe, not just what you are selling. When that happens, the outcome is pretty sweet.

**Duke I&E:** Thinking back to when you were a student, were there things you wished you’d done differently to prepare for being an entrepreneur?  
**CD:** If I could go back and have a conversation with myself, I’d tell Chris to focus on building a broader network of contacts while at school. Fuqua was an intense experience when I was there. The amount of work was overwhelming and I focused a great deal of my energy on grades and doing well in classes. We had some great times and I still keep in contact with some of my classmates, realize that the personal connections are a significant part of the unique value of the Fuqua experience.

You never know who can help you at some point in your life. I would encourage students to spend time reaching out, getting to know classmates, and helping them as much as possible while you are there. The Fuqua network is very powerful and continues to gain strength and momentum. Ultimately, it is one of the largest assets you’ll carry with you for the rest of your life.

**Duke I&E:** And what did you do as a student that you are glad you did?  
**CD:** One thing that stands out from my experience was learning to build teams and work together to accomplish a goal. This is critical for success in any business and thankfully, is a part of the DNA at Fuqua. I’ve said many times that when I was in school, there was more work to get done than was humanly possible by a single person. The only solution was to work together as a team.

To succeed in business, you have to be able to find, retain and motivate people to help you, whether they are employees, contractors, suppliers and yes, even customers.

**Duke I&E:** For students that are thinking of starting a company, but thinking about getting work experience first, how would you help them analyze that decision? What is driving you?  
**CD:** Getting to an authentic answer for this question is not easy, but essential. It requires personal reflection and facing the truth about where you are in your journey, and where you want to go. Money, recognition, personal satisfaction, passion – these are some divers for decisions, but maybe not yours. Once you understand your primary driver for wanting to start a business, you must fully own the outcome of that decision, 100%.

**Duke I&E:** What is your personal financial situation?  
**CD:** This is an individual choice, so please don’t make the mistake of comparing yourself to anyone else. We all have different levels of needs and wants, combined with a tolerance for
risk. That will change over time. If you are single, you'll likely have a different risk profile that someone who is married with children and more on the way.

It is true that some people succeed in their own business when they are out of other options. However, I recommend that you do whatever you can to give yourself the longest ‘runway’ possible. A large measure of success is simply surviving when others quit or fail.

Starting a business reminds me of the time when I learned to rappel off a cliff. My instructor was trained by the US Military and an expert climber. Despite the fact that the ropes were secure, my harness was tight, and he was at the bottom controlling my descent, everything in my head was screaming not to go blindly backwards off the shear face of that rock wall. But at some point, you have to go. Plan as best you can, understand the risks, and enjoy the ride.

**Duke I&E: How will you measure success?**

**CD:** When it comes to measuring if you are successful or not, in wherever life or business takes you, I'd encourage you to find your own yardstick. Understanding what success means to you is important in starting any business. If you don't, you might achieve it and never realize that you did.