Interview by Howie Rhee.

Our Conversation with Brooks Bell

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about your time at Duke. Did you do entrepreneurial things while you were still in school?

**BB:** When I was a finishing up my freshman year, I was recruited by Tuition Painters to hire a team of Durham-based painters and paint house interiors and exteriors for the summer. I was so excited to be an 'entrepreneur', hire, manage a team and learn to market and sell my painting services. I drove a 70's "Chinook" truck, called it a "Paintmobile" and jumped headfirst into 'entrepreneurship' with enthusiasm. Even though the franchisers described profits of $5000-$10,000 over the summer, it didn't work out as well as I envisioned. Since they were owed 25% of my gross revenue, I quickly learned an important two financial lesson: revenue is not the same as profit, and try not to be the last to get paid.

After I finished my Tuition Painter debacle, I waited tables to pay off my painting debt and eventually discovered the CED (Council for Entrepreneurial Development). I got my hands on one of their member directories. I started cold-calling all of the startups in the directory, and encouraged them to hire me as an intern. I eventually landed a job at AuctionRover.com, and started the same week they announced their acquisition by GoTo.com. I helped them manage their affiliate program, and I investigated and shut down fraudulent accounts, saving AuctionRover over $15,000. It was an amazing experience to be part of a successful start-up. Plus, after my Tuition Painter experience painting in 100 degree summer weather, I was grateful to have my own air conditioned office cube.

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about the companies that you've started.

**BB:** I've started two companies: novelProjects and Brooks Bell Interactive. novelProjects was a web site company that I co-founded with Jesse Lipson as junior at Duke. My summer internship at Red Hat had fallen through, and Jesse and I had been thinking about starting a company together. Neither of us knew how to design or code HTML, but a few initial experiences led us to believe that we could be successful at it. We had some great early momentum with novelProjects, and won a few major projects at Duke and other area start-ups. However, partner issues eventually led us to reorganize novelProjects under new management, and also led me to start Brooks Bell Interactive. My first client at Brooks Bell Interactive was AOL, and I grew to 8 employees within the first 18 months.

**Duke I&E:** Was it a hard decision to stay with the company as opposed to take a "traditional" job? What was a key milestone where you realized that you could be an entrepreneur as a living?

**BB:** We started making enough money to live on almost immediately. Getting a small salary was such an incredible luxury compared to the poverty of being a college student,
and since we could afford salaries early on, I didn't realize there was any other way. We sort of fell into entrepreneurship before we even knew what we were attempting to do. We never looked back. It was natural from day one.

**Duke I&E:** What advice do you have for students who have a specific idea for starting a company, but unsure of what to do first? Should they build the product or service, raise money, write a business plan, recruit their friends or what?

**BB:** I advise them to start with a service: pick something they already know how to do or can learn quickly. We encourage them to really think closely about what they already know how to do: it could be simple as focusing on services for the college market. Start small. Learn how to set up payroll, get health benefits in place, jump in and try to get your first client. Get a website created. Hire your first employee. Find something that someone will pay you to do. That's it. Then, have a growth mindset. Think about yourself as a leader, not a freelancer, and seek opportunities to start to hire, scale and expand. Think small at first, but assume that you'll get big. There are so many foundational, basic skills they need to master before the 'idea' even matters. If they can't execute on the most basic operations, their business will never get off the ground.

**Duke I&E:** Do you have specific advice for women who are thinking of starting a company?

**BB:** Get a life partner who really truly supports you. They should be willing to compromise their own career momentum for you (even if they don't ever need to). Starting a company will take years of hard work, long hours and undying commitment. Like any founder, a woman needs an incredible amount of support and encouragement to get her through it.

And, regarding children: it's a true choice. If you want to start a company, it's wise to do it in your 20s, before you start a family. Your company needs to be at a certain maturity and scale to be able withstand the changing priorities that a young family will bring.

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about Brooks Bell Interactive. How did it start, and where is it today?

**BB:** Brooks Bell Interactive started by focusing on the needs on our first client, AOL. We realized that online marketing was fundamentally different business than website design (which is what novelProjects was all about). AOL was focused on A/B testing and conversion path optimization. We learned a lot about direct online marketing through our experiences servicing AOL, which set the foundation for what our business is today. As we attracted more clients, we realized how uncommon A/B testing was. We made it our primary focus to bring A/B testing and analytics-based marketing to the rest of the enterprise market. Things are going well now. We are working with several major brands, and have enabled them to see some incredible lifts in marketing performance.

**Duke I&E:** What advice do you have for students who wonder "how can I start a company like that if I have no expertise"?

**BB:** Every student has some expertise. They may just not know it. More important than
expertise however, is their personality. They need a certain impatience, confidence, self awareness, and drive. They need a "it can't be that hard" attitude, and an enthusiasm to try things they've never done before. A fear of saying "no" to opportunity, resilience to failures and bouncing back from mistakes. And a tendency to experience a real 'high' when they get a client to say "yes." Expertise is something they'll naturally gain over time.

**Duke I&E:** You and Jesse both have successful companies, and yet entrepreneurship can be stressful on relationships. What is the key to keeping your relationship healthy?

**BB:** All marriages take work, but I think Jesse and I have both rapidly matured to be able to support each other while still doing what it needs to be done to prioritize our own needs. For the first few years, we really needed each other's complementary skills in each other's companies (I needed his technical skill; he needed my design skill). But, we recognized the key moment when we were starting to get in each other's way and replaced that role with our executive teams. It allowed us to then restore some autonomy in our relationship, and separate the "what's good for our marriage" from "what's good for our companies". We still carpool to work and try to get lunch together at least once or twice a week. I'm really proud of how well we've navigated all the classic pitfalls of a married couple working together on entrepreneurship.

**Duke I&E:** Let's say a student doesn't have a startup idea, but wants to prepare to be an entrepreneur in the future. What advice would you give?

**BB:** They should start planning their escape from the corporate world right away, or else they may never do it. Start building useful business relationships, start planting seeds in other people's minds that you'll be going out on your own. Start learning skills that will be helpful, start reading books on entrepreneurship, marketing, accounting. Start a small company on the side. Show people that you're serious about it, so that they won't be surprised when you take the leap, and they'll be there to support you.

**Duke I&E:** What does the future hold for you and Brooks Bell Interactive?

**BB:** We continue to grow quickly. 2011 has been a very strong year - In fact, we've hired 6 people in 6 weeks. We're constantly striving for ways to increase revenue, profit, effectiveness, happiness, client impact, expertise, and accountability. We have several big initiatives underway that we'll hopefully be able to announce soon, so stay tuned. It's a constant evolution, and a fascinating journey!