

Chapter 1

Against All Odds

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“**Y**ou’re the next Internet billionaire,” asserted Neil Cavuto at the start of his 1999 Fox television news show. Although I wasn’t yet convinced I was destined to be a billionaire, hearing Neil Cavuto say it on air somehow made it more real. Most of Micro-workz’s employees, like many of their Silicon Valley brethren, had bought into the hype that they would soon be millionaires. We were on top of the world and at the peak of the dot-com era. The buzz was that Microworkz was onto something really big; everyone was now just wondering if we could deliver on all the hype.

The Internet was the modern-day gold rush and Microworkz was in the thick of it. Of course, as the conceiver-in-chief, I was certain things would go as planned and we would be huge. Even from a young age, I was overly confident of my abilities and eventual success, despite the odds I had overcome to get there. In my mind it was a forgone conclusion that we would succeed, and along the way revolutionize what I saw as the backward business model of selling hardware, rather than the benefits that the computer could provide to users.

Overnight Upheaval

Growing up in a two-parent household in the San Fernando Valley of California, I became independent very early in life. My father was a professional baseball player turned entrepreneur—except that instead of building success in business, he seemed to have a knack for finding ways to struggle. He sold pots and pans but quit when the company owner raised his prices. He owned a retail Hallmark store, but the store went out of business when the mall burned down and his insurance didn’t cover smoke damage. He then bought a pub, which actually did so well that he sold it. So he took the money he had made and bought a disco. Only one problem—he bought a place called Sticky Fingers, complete with an illuminated dance floor long after the 1970s dance

craze had ended (picture the Bee Gees or the movie *Stayin' Alive*). The disco had failed a few times before it was my dad's, and even after investing everything the family had, it failed again.

Having an M.I.A. father was okay with me in elementary school, and even into middle school, because I spent most of my waking moments outside school with my friends in the neighborhood. My mother did an amazing job of raising my brother Nat and me, and my memories of early life were the kind you used to see on *Ozzie and Harriet*. Well, maybe without Ozzie around so much. We lived in a fairly well-to-do suburb called Northridge, which is a bedroom community of Los Angeles, and all of my friends lived within a block of our house.

Rarely did a day go by when all of us weren't outside playing Wiffle ball or touch football on the street directly in front of my house. If it got really hot, as happens in the San Fernando Valley quite often, we had a pool in the backyard and everyone swam. My biggest worry at the time was how quickly I could get my homework done so I could go back outside. Seriously, if my life had been a movie script it couldn't have been more perfect.

If I had a paternal role model in my early life, it was my grandfather on my mother's side, Leon Schwab. My grandfather ran Schwab's Pharmacy, an institution in Hollywood that served a celebrity clientèle. I think he tried to be a stand-in father figure and was probably better at it than my dad. The fact that my grandfather seemed tremendously successful was comforting, too, not that I ever expected any less for me. Without a doubt, I idolized his life, his success, and his spirit of invention. Tillie and Leon Schwab were, and are, everything to me, even though they passed away a very long time ago.

As in all too-good-to-be-true stories, my normal childhood began to unravel all at once at age 13. That was the year my first girlfriend, Judy Schiff, died suddenly. I was told of her death by way of a hysterical voicemail from her sister. Because she lived out of state, I didn't have the opportunity to attend a funeral and never heard from the family again. It was utterly devastating. We had met at summer camp when I was 10, and we talked every day from that point on.

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My parents didn't know about her, I believe, but letters flew back and forth and phone calls were long and intense. She was my best friend and only real confidant at that time.

Before her passing I had proudly brought Judy as my date to my Bar Mitzvah and that was the last time I saw her. I felt very alone without her. I still have a picture of Judy on my computer and when I look at it, even 30 years later, it makes me smile. First love never dies, I guess, and her memory never will.

Around the same time, shortly after my Bar Mitzvah at 13, my parents announced they were splitting up. Then, in a stroke of pure genius, they told me they had “hung on” for my special day. Great. Now my “special day,” my “becoming a man” ceremony, was now also the “whew, we got through that!” day. Not only had I known this was coming for years, I felt incredibly guilty because my mom had to go through even one extra day of unhappiness because of me.

The separation wasn't a bad thing for us, but it changed my family's—meaning, primarily my mother's—financial situation. She could no longer be a stay-at-home mom, available to my older brother and me 24/7. To support us, she had to go back to work, which was fine because she liked working. She took a job in retail, first as a security officer and later in sales. I really don't know the financial details, but as is usually the case, our family home had to be sold so that the cash could be split up in the divorce. That meant we had to move and Mom decided our next home would be in Chatsworth, California, which is about 20 miles from Northridge.

Moving 20 miles away might as well have been a cross-country relocation. The house itself was newer and appeared to be a step up from where we had been living, which probably felt good to my mom. I couldn't blame her for wanting something more attractive to live in, but the reason my now-single mother could afford to rent this newer home was that it was on the edge of an arid mountain range. Chatsworth was hot and dry and we had no pool. On top of that, it had no restaurants to speak of, my allergies went crazy from the dust and the wind, and there were no kids anywhere nearby. Mind you, this was 1978 and there were no cell phones, no texting, no Skype, no

e-mail, and boys still didn't write letters to boys. Every friend I ever had was essentially gone, and when I later ran into some of them in high school, they had clearly moved on with their lives. I was alone in every sense of the word, living in the sticks. I felt like I was in a bad episode of *The Twilight Zone*, everything was so foreign.

Life just kept getting worse.

Growing Independence

It was a long time before things got better. To help me cope with the trauma of the divorce, my mother had me see a psychologist. Of course, the divorce was nothing compared to the despair I felt from being totally separated from my friends, but I couldn't say that. And I didn't want to share my deepest feelings with a shrink I didn't know. So when he asked how I was doing, I always told him, "Fine." That was my code for "I don't want to talk about it with you." and he either didn't care enough to explore what I really was feeling or I was already mastering my powers of persuasion. Either way, I was soon through with going to the psychologist and was given a clean mental bill of health.

Having no one—literally—to talk to about my feelings and experiences, I became very introspective. I changed from being a well-adjusted, very social middle schooler with many friends into a loner uninterested in knowing anyone. What was the point?

I became a latchkey kid, responsible for myself during most of my hours spent outside of school. For me, this unsupervised time fostered my independence and allowed me to focus on my interests, which, at that time, were reading and current events. I was a self-guided learner, seeking out new skills to master, but I wasn't necessarily a good student. Actually, I was a terrible student. It wasn't that I *couldn't* do the work, I just didn't want to. It wasn't challenging or interesting.

Even in elementary school, I was generally bored with the curriculum. Our class was divided into three groups based on ability: remedial, regular, and gifted. I was one of three boys classified as gifted and

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given different work, which I never did. Being labeled as gifted was perhaps one of the worst things to ever happen to me. My parents told me I was brilliant, but having the school confirm it boosted my confidence and ego far beyond where it should have been in elementary school. If I was so smart, it followed that I really didn't need to listen to my teachers, didn't need to do the work, didn't need to study. The work I was given just wasn't appealing enough to hold my attention, and my teachers seemed to be okay with that. I could talk my way out of anything, it seemed. I became the epitome of cocky.

With an active mind and lots of free time, other kids would have gotten into drugs, but not me. I was the kid, at 14, who religiously recorded the ABC News nightly radio broadcast every evening at 8:00 P.M. so I wouldn't miss a nugget of information about what was going on in the world. I was hungry for information. I heard people refer to me as a genius a lot, which felt good. I liked being a genius.

I had always been the smartest kid I knew. I'm not saying that to brag, just to share how I perceived myself. When I was nine, I began reading the *Wall Street Journal* to try to understand business. I was interested in how companies worked even back then, and I was dissecting corporate strategy and decision making from business reports to figure out how companies ticked.

At 16 or 17, I started figuring out how to program computers on a Commodore 64. I even tried to use it to meet girls. The Commodore saved its hard drive on cassette tapes, so I would write a love letter on the Commodore that would scroll one line at a time, with music behind it, and save it to cassette to give away. Surprisingly, my suave cassettes of love never worked, but my love of computers was born. I spent hours, sometimes days and weeks, programming that machine while it was hooked up to the family TV. I got very good at it and started tinkering with making games and small business applications to track my baseball card collection. It was fun, required no one else's involvement and, regardless of what happened in my life, I was pretty sure my computer would never leave me.

Feeling Left Out

While I had always attended public school, my older brother, Nat, who was three grades ahead of me, attended a pricey private school on the other side of town. Montclair Prep was where he spent his days being taught how to study, how to navigate his way through polite society, how to succeed. The fact that Montclair was not an option for me was confusing. I didn't know if my parents had spent all their available funds on educating my brother, if they didn't think I needed a private education to get ahead, or if they simply didn't care as much about me as they did about my brother. The topic was never discussed, so I was left wondering why my brother deserved a vastly superior education, while I got the best schooling forced-busing could give. My life would be completely different today had I been afforded the same opportunity to attend Montclair Prep, not merely for the challenging academics, but for the chance to be mentored by people in the know. Why was I less deserving? I still wonder.

In high school I had two friends, which was an improvement over junior high. One friend became my surrogate brother. We will call him Greg Kim. Greg Kim was a photographer on the school newspaper and spoke very little English. Perhaps because of that, he was an awful student and a bit of an outcast. I tried to help but he wasn't motivated, and I soon decided I'd rather do other things than study when we hung out.

He was kind and his parents seemed to enjoy having me around, so I spent most afternoons and evenings at their house. I felt like part of their family, like I belonged, which was something I hadn't felt in a long time.

At night, I would generally go to my then-girlfriend Linda's house. No, this probably wasn't typical, but it was California, where social customs don't always apply. I spent more nights there than in my own bed, mainly because I wanted to feel close to someone again. At the time, my mother was dating, trying to sort out her life and, admittedly, I was a challenging child. She didn't know how to give me what I needed, nor did she have the resources to really explore all her

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options. So when I didn't come home at night, there may have been some sense of relief that someone else was taking care of me. Linda's father didn't exactly appreciate the arrangement, but he may have sensed I needed some stability in my life and he wanted his daughter to be happy, so he put up with me.

Crying for Attention

Don't let the fact that I had two friends in high school suggest that I didn't want more. I did. I also wanted to be popular. To become popular, it seemed to me, you had to be a badass. You had to do something to catch the attention of school administrators, and not in a good way. This became my focus during my junior and senior year. Since one of my strengths is assimilating massive quantities of information and dissecting it, I regularly questioned the fairness or logic of particular school policies, such as the lack of funding for the school newspaper.

We were expected to have a newspaper and yet the school wouldn't provide funds for it. That made no sense to me. So I decided to hold a fundraiser, but the school shut me down. Ignoring their directives, I called my cousin, who owned a T-shirt printing company, and had him print up some T-shirts that said, simply, "Class of 1984." My goal was to sell them and make some money to put toward the paper. The school found out about it, noted I had defied their orders, and suspended me. So I did what I always did when I had broken a rule, I forged a note from my mother. There were several variations on the theme, but most said something like, "I understand Ricky's been in trouble again, but he's promised never to do it again." That always did the trick.

If only I had understood that there was a system and certain rules to be followed, and that if I would only follow the rules, I would be much more successful. Somehow I had the sense that I could only be successful if I made up my own rules. I was an out-of-the-box thinker before my time.

Despite my lack of drive and ambition, and a few failing grades here and there, I was named editor-in-chief of the school newspaper in high school. I think some teachers saw the editor role as a potential way to engage me in learning. Of course, I was only interested in the position because it gave me the power to write notes excusing me from class to work on the newspaper, which I'll admit I did a little too often, which partly explains my low grades, too.

Unfortunately, one course I should have spent more time on was Ancient Civilization. It was a course required for graduation and I, in true form, failed it. Despite the fact that I didn't care much for my high school courses, I really did care about walking with my class at graduation and showing I had made it. I wanted my parents to be proud. Unfortunately, they never got the chance to see me walk down the aisle and across the stage to receive my diploma. I received it in the mail that summer. Again, I was an outcast, a loner.

After graduating from high school with an unremarkable record, I really didn't have a clue what I was going to do with my life. College wasn't particularly appealing—I didn't know what I would study—but with few people believing I could get in, I took it as a personal dare to prove them wrong. Needing to show others I could accomplish something was an all-too-frequent scenario in my life. I would end up tackling situations or doing things just to prove to others that I could if I wanted to, even when I had no real interest in pursuing things. Take college, for example.

Talking My Way into College

I wasn't particularly motivated to go to college, but part of me wondered if I might finally be intellectually challenged there. It was attractive only as something I hadn't yet conquered. Surprisingly (to me), my first challenge was simply being admitted. My history of promise-but-poor-performance haunted me. I was rejected from the only school I applied to and I was surprised.

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Yes, I had poor grades, including a few F's, but I did have a near-perfect SAT score. I was certain I deserved to be admitted. So certain, in fact, that I drove to California State at Northridge to make my case to the admissions office. I wouldn't plead or beg, merely explain the error of their ways.

At first the admissions officer wouldn't see me. I didn't have an appointment, my application had already been reviewed and denied, case closed. So I sat in the waiting room for what seemed like hours. I couldn't imagine I was that inferior to many of the other applicants sitting in the same room, or to any of the actual students for that matter. Yes, I had a 2.25 GPA, which showcased how much I loathed the daily school routine, but I had a nearly perfect SAT score.

I sat until, finally, as the end of the day approached, the admissions officer called me into her office. Then she repeated in a very dull tone what I had already been told: "I'm sorry, Mr. Latman, we cannot admit you at this time. Your academic performance just wasn't good enough." What? Are you kidding? I remember thinking.

Since that was not the response I wanted to hear, the debate began and, unbeknownst to her, this is where I began to actually enjoy the admissions process. I explained away my poor grades and showed my SAT scores, letters of recommendation, and extracurricular activities, all the while telling my tale.

I told her the truth, which was that high school had been chaotic, boring, and full of kids who weren't there to learn and many teachers who didn't care. I had done very well in the classes with talented teachers, but the teachers who were just filling time didn't deserve my attention. I didn't feel I needed to be in their classes and my grades reflected that attitude.

She explained, "We look at your GPA because that tells us what kind of person you are. Are you a good scholastic citizen? Do you go to class?" she asked. Of course, the answer was "not always." I made the case that my situation was not normal. My SATs proved I was Ivy League-worthy, despite the fact that I might have failed some classes in

high school. I even failed English one year, yet my SAT documented that I had mastered the language.

In response, I heard, “This isn’t how admissions is usually done.” I guess that was my cue to leave, dejected, but what I heard was the possibility that in *some* cases, admissions decisions were made in a non-traditional manner. Not *usually*, but once in a while. I aimed to be one of the “once in a while” students.

“But this is an unusual case,” I responded, again emphasizing what might have been overlooked during the admissions decision process. I could see I was making progress. I loved the back-and-forth banter, which I perceived to be negotiating. She was considering my points.

Eventually she grew weary of the debate and agreed with me; this *was* an unusual situation. Maybe I had won her over. I wasn’t sure, but it would have been easier for her to say no and usher me out. She had that power but, instead, she finally said yes. I was in.

That victory was a turning point. No longer would I be the student who didn’t have the grades to graduate with his class. Nor would I be the loser, the loner. I was part of a community—a college community. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I was now on the path to success.