

MSP SUCCESS

MAGAZINE

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Special Edition: Winter 2022

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Cohen Barnes, President Of SundogIT, Inc.

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Business Feature**
Cohen Barnes

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How The Military Inspired Cohen Barnes To Create A Bigger Impact As CEO Of The Top IT Services Provider In Northern Illinois

For Cohen Barnes, the military helped him realize a much bigger vision and had an enduring impact that forever altered the way he approached his life and community.

In high school, Cohen was focused on goofing off with buddies and was on the verge of out of not graduating. He spent mornings, lunch and after school in detention to make up for all the school he missed. So, at 17 years old, Cohen convinced his parents to sign a consent for him to join the Army. Initially, he joined the Army, becoming an Airborne Infantryman, so he could “blow stuff up, jump out of planes and travel the world.” While serving, he became a voracious reader, devouring great works of fiction. But because he’d missed so much school, he discovered there were many words he didn’t know the meaning of, so he began looking up every word he didn’t know and placed a small mark by each of these words in his dictionary. “I was reading Edgar Allan Poe and there was a quote I’ll never forget,” Cohen says. “‘A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser.’ Now imagine the high school ‘flunk-out,’ trying to figure out what the hell that means. And I couldn’t. So, I bought a dictionary, and I looked it up. Every page of that dictionary has one to 10 marks next to every word I had to look up. That’s how far behind I was.”

While reading made Cohen realize he’d made some poor choices, it was getting called up for Operation Desert Storm that caused him to think about his life purpose. After earning the National Defense Ribbon for active duty, an honor his great-grandfather, two grandfathers and son also earned, Cohen reflected on his family. “Both of my grandfathers served in World War II in combat,” Cohen says. “One grandfather also served in the Korean War and my great-grandfather went after Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa. It caused me to have some self-introspection about who I was, what my goals were, how I’d lived my life to that point and what my future was going to be. It made me realize that I wasn’t being a contributing member of society. And that maybe there’s more I should be thinking about and more I should be doing to become a better version of me.”

After being honorably discharged, Cohen set out to make up for the years he felt he’d squandered. Looking for how he could make the biggest impact, he thought back to his introduction to serving others in the Boy Scouts of America, where he’d risen to the rank of Eagle Scout. He decided to become an English teacher to help mold young minds. But after purchasing a computer in his junior year at Northern Illinois University, he saw how he could change the world with technology.

Cohen began developing his skills, taking his computer apart to make it run faster and even figuring out how to modify his operating system, rearranging the code to say “becoming self-aware” when his computer turned on and hacking into the university library’s Internet system to gain access to it. “I was obsessed with it,” Cohen says. “It was all I thought of and all I wanted to do. If I was not going to class, I was in front of a computer, either messing with it, hacking it, fixing it or gaming on it. I loved being faced with a challenge and coming up with a solution.”

After college, he landed a job at a cutting-edge technology company doing tech support for companies such as NASA. The engineers at the company also tapped into Cohen’s knack for finding flaws in the next-generation technology they were developing. “To find out where it could break, I was the guy they’d come to,” Cohen says.

A year into the job, he met his future business partner, Dan,



Cohen Barnes - President

who started a computer company called TBC (now Sundog) out of his basement in 1989. Bonding over their mutual enthusiasm for computers and seeing the potential of universal Internet access, Cohen left his dream tech job to work with Dan at a fraction of what he had been making. But two weeks into his new job, Cohen found out TBC was going under. Believing in the company's mission, he learned everything he could about the business and began generating money to keep paying the bills. Together he and Dan established the first commercial Internet service provider (ISP) and became the first technology company in DeKalb County. After four years of sweat equity, Cohen became a 50/50 partner.

The partners manufactured laptops, desktops and servers and built infrastructure. They started a fiber optic company and a domain name hosting company, becoming the first broadband provider, first fiber optic provider and first to provide Office 365 in DeKalb County. By 2012, with infrastructure in place, the company shifted away from Internet services to offer managed IT services and support to assist clients in getting the best use out of their technology, and they rebranded as Sundog.

In 2015, Cohen became a 100% owner of Sundog while Dan took over running the fiber optic company 100%. They remain partners in the third company to this day.

A Culture Based On Passion For People, Technology And The Community

What started as volunteerism has developed into a philanthropic strategy. Cohen has developed a company culture rooted in his passion for people, and provides technology that organizations can thrive on. He hires based on this culture too. "Our team is driven to excel and is competitive, but also has people of incredibly good character," Cohen says.

An accomplished leader in managed services, Microsoft cloud computing and cyber security, and a Microsoft Silver Partner, Cohen is singularly focused on his mission to help small and medium-sized businesses in Northern Illinois create a bigger impact by maximizing their mission through optimizing their efficiency and improving their performance through technology. "We may not be able to help the homeless community directly, but we can provide great technology to the homeless shelters so they, in turn, accomplish their mission to help those in need," Cohen explains. "The more organizations we can help through technology, the larger the impact we can have on our community."

Since Cohen took over, the organization has doubled in size and experienced double-digit growth year over year. Today Sundog is the only technology firm in Northern Illinois with over 30 years' experience and 100% of their engineers industry-certified.

With a strong desire to make up for his misspent youth, Cohen has gone about serving the community with a zest that's only become greater over the years. Each year Sundog budgets money to contribute to and sponsor

numerous nonprofits. Plus, over half of the Sundog team volunteers for organizations in the community.

Amid Cohen's successful career, he's also a dedicated servant leader in the community. In 2021, he was elected mayor of DeKalb, and he's dedicated time to serve as president or chairman of many organizations. Cohen created a lasting impact on the community while serving as president of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corporation – his initiatives have produced wins such as helping bring in over a billion dollars of new business investment and creating over 1,100 new jobs in DeKalb. He co-chaired a \$110 million referendum to build new schools in DeKalb, the largest referendum ever to pass in his home community. And while on the school board, he led and facilitated the 1:1 plan responsible for funding over 6,000 pieces of new technology for students.

"I loved being faced with a challenge and coming up with a solution."

A Commitment To Veterans

He's also proved to be a groundbreaking employer, pledging a commitment to support veterans and citizen warriors through the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. Currently, 25% of the Sundog team are veterans of active-duty service and current members of the US National Guard and Reserves, including his service manager, who is a captain in the US National Guard. In recognition of this support, Cohen received the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award.

Cohen has received many awards for his military service, career and philanthropic work, including being inducted into the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce Hall of Fame, twice receiving the DeKalb Business of the Year award and being listed multiple times on the Inc. 5000.

As a cyber security expert with more than 25 years' experience, he's been featured on TV and as a speaker throughout Illinois. His book on cyber security is due out later this year.

Today Cohen's marked-up Webster's dictionary sits in his office, serving as a humble reminder of just how far he's come. He spends all his free time on community service. "Every day I actively try to figure out how to contribute and move society forward, so by the time I draw my last breath, the imprints I've made on the organizations Sundog serves and in the community are something to be proud of," he says.

For more information on Sundog, Inc., visit www.sundogit.com. ■

