

# Better Late Than Never

Greg Porter's Detour to Success



GREG PORTER, PSYCHOLOGY, 2019

BY  
BAYLIE DUCE

Entrepreneur Greg Porter left BYU 30 years ago just three credits short of a degree in psychology to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities, but he was always nervous about his lack of a degree. "Whenever people would talk about college degrees, I had to make it an issue to say I didn't graduate or hope the topic didn't come up," he says. Even without a bachelor's degree, he found success in his 30s developing PowerSchool, currently the largest student information system in the world, which was acquired by Apple Inc. in 2001.

In 2019, Greg Porter was invited back to BYU as the convocation speaker for the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences. But he was not only the speaker, but also a graduate. He finally earned his diploma after finishing his last psychology class and was able to graduate on the same day as his oldest son, Mason. During his convocation speech, Porter said his graduation after a three-decade detour was "better late than never." As a successful entrepreneur, he recognized that unexpected routes can still result in success and that "being forced to make a detour while heading for a planned destination can lead to an even better place than you had planned."

**FROM BYU DROP-OUT TO A VP AT APPLE, GREG PORTER'S UNCONVENTIONAL PATH EVENTUALLY LED HIM BACK TO BYU.**

Porter's experience as an entrepreneur started back in his days as student body president at Fremont High School in California. As a senior, he worked closely with administration and became aware of the challenges in recording student attendance and communicating that information across the district's networks. To solve the issue, Porter and a friend developed an entirely new student information system and sold it to the high school and the local district. His products took on a life of their own and continued to sell while he studied at BYU and served a mission in Ecuador.

Porter decided he wanted to pursue his own path and left BYU. In college he had started to program on a Mac, and he used these programming skills to cofound an internet shopping site. "That's where I learned about what the internet could really do," he said.

Porter's next project would become his most successful. Using his knowledge of the internet and his newly enhanced programming skills he started the first web-based educational technology platform. That platform became PowerSchool, which now has over 40 million users in over 70 countries. But his success did not come without sacrifice. Porter started this venture working without a salary for almost two years. He was living in California at the time but decided to move back to Utah to help run his program at the

first school to use PowerSchool, Mound Fort Junior High School in Ogden.

Porter understood that at the time there was little demand for his product. Every school district in the country already had a records management system. What made PowerSchool different was that it was the first web-based system, so it didn't matter if schools had Macs or PCs; anyone with internet could access records immediately. Porter said that through the online system, "If a student was marked absent in third period, a parent could find out five minutes later."

Porter's one-man company started to get more business, and he attributed the rapid company growth to the speed of his software corrections. As his first customers used the program, they would often find bugs. Instead of making his customers wait several months for the release of a software update like many large companies do, Porter would have the bug fixed by the next day. As a one-man company, Porter took on all roles: "I was writing software and manuals at night, I was doing tech support, and I was making presentations to school district purchasing committees during the day." After a while Porter became burned out, and he decided to hire more employees. He remembers, "I was closing sales, but I just couldn't handle doing it alone."

The company continued to expand until it was acquired by Apple in 2001. Porter says that the fate of the entire company, hundreds of employees, and his own future hinged on a single pitch meeting between him and Steve Jobs. Porter grew up in Silicon Valley, California, and read about Steve Jobs every time he was in the paper or in a magazine. "I knew everything about him," Porter says. "He was my personal business idol and inspiration."

Jobs's opening comment to Porter was, "So tell me about yourself." Porter replied, "I went to Fremont High School right in town

here. Jobs responded with "Hey! I went to Homestead High school, which is right down the road!" Porter was so nervous about meeting his personal hero that he responded with "Oh really?" although he knew where Jobs went to high school and pretty much everything else about him. Porter paused and replied, "Actually, Steve, I'm not sure why I



Greg and Mason Porter on their shared graduation day.

said that. I knew what high school you went to." That's when Jobs broke out laughing and said, "I like this guy." All of this happened within 60 seconds, and Porter said the rest of the meeting was "fantastic, open, and warm."

Porter says of the life-changing experience, "It was just a candid moment," adding that his honest admission showed Jobs that he was a sincere person. "We're taught to be honest in the Church and at BYU, and living these core values has proved to be very helpful to me in business." Apple acquired PowerSchool for \$62 million in stocks, and Porter became the vice president over the PowerSchool division.

Porter reflects back on his time at BYU with appreciation. As an undergraduate, he enjoyed being exposed to so many different people and meeting people who inspired him to take risks. He says, "They helped expand my vision for what could happen."

During his convocation speech, Porter shared a proverb to encourage BYU students to live without regret, saying, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now." Porter encouraged students to start right now doing whatever it is they thought to do earlier. He said, "Today is a new day, and it's the right time to take a step in the direction you want, regardless of what has happened in the past."

Although Porter finally received his degree in psychology in 2019, he recognizes that he has been using what he learned at BYU throughout his professional career. He has a passion for business and entrepreneurship, yet he recognized the importance of interacting with people. "In the end, it's people sitting down and liking each other enough to go into a business deal together," he says.

Throughout his career, Porter has overcome not only professional challenges but personal trials as well. In 2011, he was diagnosed with stage-four kidney cancer, and at the time, his prognosis determined he

had less than a 10 percent chance of living past five years. Porter has since recovered and is now cancer free. During his convocation address he shared that the true key to happiness is to appreciate the moment and "spend as little time as possible thinking I'll be happy as soon as I achieve x, y, z."

Porter has definitely achieved x, y, z, and then some, following an unconventional path. As a recent graduate of BYU, Porter reminds us all, "Point yourself in the direction you would like to go, decide beforehand that you're going to say yes to adventure, and remember it's all going to work out." **C**

COURTESY PORTER FAMILY (3)