Better Late Than Never
Greg Porter’s Detour to Success

Greg and Mason Porter on their shared graduation day.

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

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 20s 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 recent graduate of BYU, his vision for what could happen.

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; any one 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 handling 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 small 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. "I was liking each other enough to go into the meeting "fantastic, open, and warm.""

Porter says of the life-changing experience, "It was just a candid moment," adding that his 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 support, and I was 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 reflects, "I was thinking of 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."