

Explore It! Feat. David Fatula

Music: Enters

Caitlyn: Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next,” a showcase for the stories, talents, and thoughtful insights of our university’s current and future alumni. I’m your host, Caitlyn, a current D’Amore-McKim graduate student.

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Caitlyn: Today, I’m here with Dave Fatula. Dave graduated from Northeastern in 2001 with degrees in entrepreneurship and finance. Dave landed a job upon graduation from Northeastern, working as an accountant. Then, he transitioned to commercial real estate and eventually opened his own commercial real estate investment in an advisory business. In November 2021, Dave made a career pivot and decided to pursue his passions of the outdoors and entrepreneurship when he launched his latest venture, in an adventure company, an outdoor guided hiking business. Welcome, Dave!

Dave: Thank you. It’s great to be here.

Caitlyn: So, Dave, it seems like you always had a real entrepreneurial spirit. How did you identify it was a passion of yours when you were at Northeastern and what were those initial entrepreneurship classes you took like?

Dave: It’s funny, I kind of thought entrepreneurship would be for me ever since I was a young kid because my dad actually started his own accounting firm when he was young. I think I was five or six years old when he left the institutional space and started his own practice. So, I kind of had that in my family anyway from my dad’s experience.

Then, when I was applying to Northeastern, I actually applied for the physical therapy program as my first choice and entrepreneurship as my second choice because I figured it was more sort of, well, either way it’s going to be a great, well-rounded education. Anywhere where someone is teaching you or a school is teaching you how to successfully start your own business seemed like something positive for me. When I did not get accepted into the school of physical therapy, I was actually happier to go the entrepreneurship route. It was sort of exactly what I wanted.

You get a little bit—earlier on, as a freshman of course—of each part of what that business environment looks like. You’re getting marketing, finance, organizational behavior, and you’re being taught by folks who really know what’s going on by professors at Northeastern who were actually business owners or angel investors or people who have been in the entrepreneurship space for their careers. Everything I did during my time at Northeastern really helped fuel the fire. My co-ops were primarily with small businesses that were started by individuals or families who were very entrepreneurial. The only one that wasn’t was...I did take a co-op at Gillette, which is obviously a huge company, but I worked in a specific position that was kind of in between the designers and the engineers and I had to really foster a lot of communication and

kind of connect the pieces for the management team and the designers and the engineers. Even though it was a huge firm, my specific role felt like it was managing a small business because I had to connect the dots for so many different groups in what we had was a very small setting even though the business itself was obviously huge.

Yeah, everything I did at Northeastern really continued to fuel that entrepreneurial spirit and made me want to do something that eventually would be my own.

Caitlyn: I love that. So, in addition to your entrepreneurial passions, I understand you always had a passion for the outdoors. How did you get to the point of realizing that working as an accountant is maybe not for me, commercial real estate investment maybe not for me, but this guided hiking business idea, this can be something that could actually be profitable and can be something you can do long-term?

Dave: Yeah, so I never wanted to be an accountant. I fell into the accounting role just because I had to pay my rent. So, moving from the accounting role to the finance and transaction role—in the commercial real estate world—was a big step for me because I never wanted to be an accountant. In the commercial real estate world, I ran my own business and, ultimately, partnered up with somebody else in the private equity business, managing a lot of great investments, and I loved what I did. I loved the transaction world, a lot of that has to do with communication and being able to meet new people, travel, see places, all these things were why I loved what I did.

And, when COVID hit, we were continuing to manage the assets that we owned but we couldn't really go out and source the capital for new investments because the world pretty much shut down. So, during that time, I had an inner dialogue about what do I really want to do for the rest of my life, where do I want to be professionally, what do I want to do with my career, and what do I want to do holistically? And the three things that came out of the internal dialogue were that I no longer want to sit behind a desk, I no longer want to work indoors—I want to work outdoors—and I wanted to be able help people. So, those three things, you know, I always had this idea of being able to be outdoors, whether it was adventure racing, some form of team building, or guiding.

I've been guiding traverses and tracks and been on my own in the wilderness with friends or been helping other people I knew—like gym owners guide hikes—for a long time just recreationally. I thought, "Hm, I wonder if this is something I could do professionally." So, I talked to my wife about it, and she thought it was a good idea but neither one of us was sure if it could be profitable because one of the great things about getting into nature is that you can just pick up your stuff and go, right? It can be free and an experience where you are exploring and individually doing stuff on your own.

But when I started talking to other people who didn't have as much experience in the back country or—even the simplest things—weren't sure where to park, weren't sure what the rules were for the trails, weren't sure what kind of stuff they needed and were like, "I don't know, I

never done that before, can I go with running shoes or do I need specific footwear?” There were a lot of people who weren’t certain about things that I have a lot of certainty around from my experience. So, I thought that’s got to be something people would enjoy.

So, I pulled together the financial side of the business first, just making sure that I thought we could break even or be profitable based on assumptions about expenses, assumptions about how many trips I would need to do and what those trips would cost. And just my base case break even performer, looked like it would work. It was kind of that simple, once we figured that out and the next step was handling transportation, which during COVID was really tough, and I bought my first van. I think it was December 2021 when I bought my first van, and we did our first hike in 2022 and so now we are in the middle of 2023. We have been around for a year and a half.

The company is doing great and it’s kind of tying all of these things together. I’m helping people get out and explore, I’ve been spending most of my time outdoors and I’m not behind a desk unless I am doing my own administrative stuff or stuff like this which is actually fun. Once my wife and I realized that this is something we could do, we could grow this business organically and have it become profitable and have it be something I can do for the rest of my life, it’s been incredible.

Caitlyn: So, generally speaking, how do you know it’s time to make a professional change? I love that you launched your own real estate company and then Guineafowl, which is, of course, so incredibly different in every sense—as you mentioned, you are not behind a desk or in an office and, of course, it’s a completely different industry. How do you personally identify when it’s time to make that leap and try something new. I know you mentioned you did a bunch of research and looked into the finances to see if it’s conceivable but I’m sure the unknown is scary but rewarding, especially when you are able to do something that you love. So, I would love to hear a little bit from you about how you know when it’s time to make that change.

Dave: Yeah, it’s tricky, right? I think a lot of it has to do with being able to be really honest with yourself about how happy you are in your environment. There’s a lot of things I learned as I continued to get older in my career and older in my life and what success means. A lot of people define success professionally as how much money they are making or how far up they have been able to move in their career—so, you start at a junior level and eventually you get to this place where you’re at a senior level or where you are a part of management. Those things define success, and they certainly do, I’m not saying that they don’t, but I took a holistic view to look at my success, I spent twenty years in real estate and investment finance, I’d done a lot of great things and been successful professionally but I started to feel like that wasn’t what I wanted out of life. That was a big motivator for me and a change in what I was doing.

It was more...and like you said, it wasn’t just changing jobs, it was changing lifestyles, careers industries, it was completely uprooting something I had done for so long which meant leaving my partner and business, which was hard. It meant leaving a very familiar industry, I could call

100 people, and they would all answer the phone. You build that type of relationship, network over 20 years and I had that.

To walk away from all of that, that was a really big thing. But I think that, in general, I knew that it was right because I knew that I wanted something different out of my life and I wanted to point myself in another direction. The longer you wait to do that, the harder it gets. I waited after a 20-year career, but timing is sort of a big part of it, too. When you individually, personally feel the timing is right for a change, you have to follow that gut feeling because if I tried to do this five, ten years ago, it might not have worked. I might not have been ready, I didn't have the same experience, I didn't have the same resources available to me. So, to say that you should jump in without being confident and not waiting, that's hard too. I think you can feel it in your gut that you need a change and if you need that change, no matter how much money you're making, no matter what your title is, if you really feel like you need that change, explore it. The exploration process is worthwhile just by itself.

Caitlyn: If you need that change, explore it. I really love that. Thanks for sharing that. So, because this is Northeastern Next, I always like to ask each guest what is next for you?

David: What is next for me? It's really just about growing Guineafowl, as you said when you started the conversation. We are a guided hiking company in Boston. Our mission in our company is to remove obstacles and remove barriers for people to explore nature. And what that means is we try to provide everything somebody needs—we provide round-trip transportation, backpacks, hydration, snacks, convenience items, safety items, we provide guides who have years of experience, thousands of miles of hiking, we are all safety certified at least with first aid certifications, I'm a wilderness first responder. So, anything that you would think prevents you from going out in nature and saying, "I don't want to do that", we are trying to say, "No, come do it. We take care of all of that. You just need to allow yourself to be present and enjoy your surroundings and explore nature."

So, what's next for me is to grow that idea and continue to grow Guineafowl. Doing that and lots of different verticals. Our local youth programming through non-profits, private schools, and community resources here in the greater Boston area. Growing our youth program is huge to me because I think it is so important to get kids connected or reconnected to nature. We are also just growing in our general online hikes, and we are growing in our private outings and corporate events as well. Just sort of taking the three main verticals and continuing to grow Guineafowl to a place where we are reaching as many people as possible and getting as many people reconnected to nature as we can. I think that is what is next for me. Hopefully for the foreseeable future, short-term and long-term.

Caitlyn: Great. I mean, I know personally, I'm someone who did some hiking during COVID, really dabbled in it. I always liked and enjoyed being outside, haven't spent a whole lot of time hiking but I definitely had those questions of do I have to go out and buy hiking boots? Can I just wear my sneakers? Do I need to go buy a water bottle? Backpack? What do I need for a hike that

is X distance or X hours? So, that's super cool that you were able to solve all of those questions and be that resource and also, of course, go out with anyone who is hiking.

David: Yeah, it's pretty fun. It really is incredible. I think I said this to other folks when I talked about the business but when I'm waking up at 5:00 am and hopping into the van at 6:00 am on my way to pick up clients to go hiking, still half-tired, drinking my second cup of coffee, but I'm like, what is there to be upset about? Literally hiking for a living and it's great we have already helped a lot of people get out who wouldn't have gotten out. I've got lots of repeat clients that have come back and really want to continue to grow in their hiking experience and explore more. And, again, the youth program side of it has been so rewarding to get kids out and to experience that sensation of kids exploring and seeing things for the first time and them being like, "Wow, I really want to do more of this" is the best part of what I do right now.

Caitlyn: That's incredible. So, Dave, if someone wanted to book a hike with you, how can they do that?

David: Yeah, you can go to our website. That's the easiest way to see all of our hikes and our website is—it's a mouthful—guineafowladventure.com. The name of the business is Guineafowl Adventure, named after the bird, guineafowl. So guineafowladventure.com, you can click on the "book a hike" link there and you will see a bunch of different things. You will see our calendar, which shows you what we are doing on a monthly basis, and then you can also scroll down and see our easy, moderate, and strenuous hikes and you can browse through those and see if there is one that specifically sticks out to you or, again, if you want an easy hike, you can see all of our easy hikes and then click on those and see which ones we are doing but I always tell people what we show on our website is basically a menu of examples of the types of hikes we offer.

We can hike any trail, anywhere, and we can kind of customize hikes for you or your group or the types of things you are looking to do—whether it be up in the White Mountains, which is what is advertised on our website, but also we hike locally here in the greater Boston area. We can also hike up and down Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine. If there was something you were looking to do, we have experience in all of those areas and continue to guide folks everywhere. If there is not something you see on our website, if there is something that you specifically want, you can also reach out to us by filling out our "contact us" block on our website or just emailing info@guineafowladventure.com and somebody will get back to you if there is a specific need or question you have.

Caitlyn: All right. Well, if someone wants to go and book a hike, browse a site, see what you have to offer or just get into contact with you, they can go and visit that website. Thanks so much, Dave, for joining today. This is awesome, so happy to get to chat with you and hear all about this company. That's so incredible that you just get to get outdoors, do something you love, and you have been able to really figure out a way to take your hobby—really a passion, not just a hobby—and monetize it, create a whole business out of it. Super cool, really inspiring.

David: Yeah, thank you for having me on the podcast today, Caitlyn. It's really great to be able to share what we are doing and relate it back to how Northeastern was really pivotal in getting me to a place where I could go out and do this even though it's 20 years after I graduated. I've had that spirit since I was at school and to have it manifest itself this way—again, even 20 years later—it all came from the initial stuff I did at Northeastern and kind of wanting to be who I am. So, I'm so happy to talk to you and thanks for showcasing Guineafowl.

Music: Enters

Caitlyn: Thanks for listening to this episode of "Northeastern Next." If this episode brought back some great memories, check out our HuskyStarter page online to support current student endeavors or reach out to us via our email at alumni@northeastern.edu or on Instagram @northeastern_alumni to point us in a direction of a great story either from you or a friend. Lastly, don't forget to hit that subscribe button so you can hear a new episode in your feed every other Wednesday. Remember, once a Husky, always a Husky. See you the week after next.

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