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Nick Vita '91

The Disruptive Innovator

by Lori Ferguson

By all appearances, Nicholas Vita had little reason to deviate from his existing career path. A seasoned executive and entrepreneur, Vita had enjoyed more than two decades working as an investment manager in health-care and finance for such industry heavy hitters as S.G. Warburg and Goldman Sachs. Then in 2013—in what he characterizes as a series of lucky circumstances—everything changed, and Vita found himself spearheading the creation of Columbia Care, a medical cannabis company. Asked to explain what prompted such a shift, he modestly avers, “I realized it’s more interesting and challenging to build a business from scratch.”

There is, admittedly, a bit of a back story. Before launching the venture, Vita witnessed the palliative effects of medical marijuana firsthand when his mother sought relief from the debilitating pain of rheumatoid arthritis. Traditional pharmaceuticals had failed to mitigate her suffering and carried unwelcome side effects, so a friend recommended that Vita’s mother try cannabis oil. The topical treatment proved effective and got Vita thinking. When an opportunity to join several partners

in applying for licensure to operate a medical cannabis facility in Washington, DC, presented itself, he jumped. “We succeeded,” says Vita, “and quickly realized that not only was there significant economic opportunity, but also a huge medical need.”

Five years later, Vita finds himself the CEO and Vice Chairman of one of the largest, fully-integrated medical cannabis companies in the United States. Since its inception, Columbia Care has experienced exponential growth, and it shows no signs of wavering. “We started with one employee, today we have 375, and by the end of the year, we anticipate having 800 to 850 people working for us,” Vita observes. The company is currently licensed in 12 states, with over 25 facilities operating and 50 more in development. “Since opening, we’ve had over 700,000 successful patient interactions, and based on the demand we’re experiencing, we expect the company to double in size every year for the next five years.”

The need for medical cannabis is profound, Vita explains, not only because of its demonstrated health benefits but also for the alternative it offers to opioids. “When we started the company, we created the first patient registry, and what we learned was startling,” says Vita. Over half the patients who responded were HIV positive; others had



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neuropathy [weakness, numbness and pain from nerve damage, usually in the hands and feet]; and over half were using opioids and benzodiazepines. Many reported that they had turned to medical marijuana to save money and avoid the multiple negative side effects of opiates; 90 percent said they subsequently discovered that medical marijuana not only offered better pain management, but also a significant improvement in their quality of life. "It was enormously enlightening," says Vita, "and convinced us that we could have a profound impact on many lives."

Today, Columbia Care cultivates and dispenses products that cover 25 different focus areas, most of which are palliative, Vita continues. "We provide medical cannabis to patients to relieve pain, inflammation, anxiety, stress, and nausea." The company focuses on manufacturing pharmaceutical-quality products made of the purest ingredients and rigorously tested to ensure consistent outcomes, Vita notes, and offers products in formats from topicals, to tablets, to inhaled vaporizers.

Public acceptance of medical marijuana is moving ahead more quickly than expected, says Vita, creating an ongoing struggle to keep up with demand. He is quick to point out, however, that public education is an ongoing process and the need to differentiate Columbia Care's products from recreational marijuana a constant. "Larger industries remain leery of medical marijuana, but we remain focused on our patients. We are working constantly to elevate the conversation above opinion and focus on actual results."

In April, Vita was named a Tribeca Disruptive Innovation Award winner, an honor bestowed on those who have "challenged the status quo and broken the mold to create world-changing

impact." Vita says he is honored and humbled to be thought of in such a way. "I'm very proud of the fact that Columbia Care has become a strong voice in the battle against the opioid crisis. Our products are strong and positive alternatives to the opiates that have become a standard of care that has plagued this country . . . and it is a plague. Standing in front of a crowd and telling people that we are here to offer a pain relief alternative they can rely on is personally one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had."

The journey hasn't always been easy, Vita concedes, but the traditional values he learned while at Deerfield have carried him through. "Deerfield offers a unique culture of support as well as competitiveness, but you also learn that there are certain things you just don't sacrifice to win," he observes.

Vita also readily confesses he wasn't the best student, but says Deerfield nevertheless embraced his efforts. "Deerfield looks at the whole person. I remember the lessons I learned there and the individuals, both teachers and classmates, who were so warm and welcoming to me, which was what I needed at that age."

And although Vita remains grateful for the education he received at Deerfield, it is the personal interactions with people such as lacrosse Coach Chip Davis and football Coach Jim Smith that continue to resonate down through the years. "Those relationships are the sort of thing you go to Deerfield for," he observes.

"'Be worthy of your heritage'—that's something of a self-fulfilling prophesy," Vita concludes. "Embrace gratitude for the people who have opened doors for you. If the company I've helped to build lives by these rules, I'll have succeeded in my life." //

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Deerfield Academy | PO Box 87 | Deerfield, MA | 01342

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June 6, 2018 marked the 100th anniversary of the death of Thomas Ashley, Class of 1911, in the battle of Château Thierry-Belleau Woods during World War I. Before enlisting in the Marine Corps in April of 1917, Tom had devoted all his energy to the Academy, preparing campus plans and writing a catalog and description of the school's mission. His educational philosophy for Deerfield still rings true today: Intellectual development, a desire to do service thru influence, and a high standard of character. //