David Rosenberg 00:00:04 What we did very differently than insurance companies is we hired environmental engineers and taught them insurance skills rather than hiring insurance people who had no idea how to underwrite an environmental risk and the way the business scaled is it scaled pretty significantly from being 13 people to when we sold the business in 1999, we had well over five people.

Ryan Newman 00:00:48 This is dare to disrupt a podcast about Penn state alumni, who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host Ryan Newman. And on the show today is David Rosenberg. David Rosenberg was a principal and the executive vice president at environmental compliance services. ECS ECS was an international provider of environmental risk management services. Employing 500 people at ECS. David was responsible for all corporate marketing, public relations and government affair activities. David and his two partners grew ECS from a small 12 person, 5 million in annual written premium agency to a 500 person, 200 million annual written premium agency, and a leader in the environmental insurance business. ECS was sold to exhale capital, a publicly held company in 1999. Now David is a full-time father, grandfather, and philanthropist utilizing his past business experiences as a board member assisting a variety of non-profits. He graduated from Penn state with a degree in individual and family studies. Well, David, thank you so much for joining us today. I'll start this interview as we normally like to, which is to start at the beginning, which is where you grew up. Although the ironic thing is I know where you grew up cuz when you and I first met, we learned after a pretty lengthy conversation that we actually grew up in the same area went to the same high school. But for all of our listeners, you wouldn't mind starting from the beginning of where it all started for you.

David Rosenberg 00:02:29 Sure. Well, thanks Ryan for the invitation very much appreciated. So it started with me in the Yardley Ville area and graduate of Pennsbury high school in 1970 and, and made by way to the university park, starting in the, in the summer session.

Ryan Newman 00:02:45 Well, shout out to the Pennsbury Falcons. When you made your way to Penn state, what were your initial impressions or what are the initial things of why you selected Penn state in the first place?

David Rosenberg 00:02:56 Well, it was a little different times back then when you were I applying the college, so paying your own freight to college, my choices were temple Penn state and university of Pittsburgh. And I remember seems like yesterday making my way across the state with my folks, looking at all three schools, not knowing much about any of them really, but being a Penn state football follower for some time. And when you're comparing temple and university of Pittsburgh, at least at that time, and you're looking at state college happy valley, you know, there's only one choice that mattered to me and that was Penn state university park. **Ryan Newman 00:03:32** So you arrive on the scene at Penn state and you're, what are you thinking in terms of career college life? What were some of your earliest thoughts around what you had an inkling of what you wanted to do?

David Rosenberg 00:03:43 Well, it was pretty fascinating. I really didn't have an inkling. I certainly was not like students today who were very much career oriented and very focused. I'm a product of the seventies, but I was really kind of lost. I remember arriving at east halls, residence, Snyder halls and never was a camper. Never really went away from home and, and kind of sitting there and saying, you know, well, what do I, what do I do now? And made my way down to the quad ended up meeting my currently best friend, Sheldon Pincus who extended his hand in the summer of 1970 and said, hi, I'm Shelly Pincus. What's your name? You want to have dinner? And, uh, Shelly ended up being my best friend. I was at his wedding. He was at my wedding. He'd been fast, found friends, pledge of things, paternity and you know, the rest is kind of history.

Ryan Newman 00:04:36 Great. So you graduate from Penn state or as you approach graduation for Penn state, what were you initially thinking at that point?

David Rosenberg 00:04:44 <laugh> still a little bit unfocused, quite honestly, Ryan and I was thinking, what does a community development major do --

-- in 1974? And a bunch of my friends were heading to Washington and a number of them were applying to law school. And I said, well, you know, that doesn't sound like a bad deal. You know, another three years. And I really didn't have the urge to be a lawyer, but honestly I really didn't know what I wanted to do. So I applied to a number of law schools in Washington, George Washington, Georgetown American in Howard university. And I was accepted to American George Washington in Howard. And again paying my own freight. Howard offered me a full scholarship. And so I found myself at Howard university, which was a fascinating educational experience, spent three years in Washington and subsequently practicing law.

Ryan Newman 00:05:47 So wanna ask more about the law career, but before we get there community development major, you're gonna have to unpack that for us. I don't know if that major existed anymore. David,

David Rosenberg 00:05:57 I knew you were gonna <laugh> I knew you were gonna ask that question and it's not gonna sound really great to your audience, but I was a political science major and in political science at the time, I'm I don't know if it's currently like this as well. You had to take a language foreign language. And when we were learning language at Pennsbury high school, Ryan, maybe different than when you were learning language, we were strapped into a language lab and I was taking French. And the way we learned a foreign language was that you had to a CTE, a re listen and repeat and they played a tape. And so I was bright enough to be able to regurgitate the tape, but knew nothing about how to study a foreign language. And when I enrolled in French, one in as a political science major, I knew that that was just not going to work. So I found an analogous major where I was able to take the same courses and not have to take a language. <laugh>

Ryan Newman 00:07:05 Good for you. Well, this is clearly a, a great example of early your career of, of navigating the bureaucracy. How about that? <laugh>

David Rosenberg 00:07:12 Absolutely. And being entrepreneurial

Ryan Newman 00:07:15 <laugh> exactly well said. So one of the other things I know about you is that every time when we first met or every time I would mention the fact that, oh, you're a lawyer or, oh, you practice law. You were, you would very quickly distance yourself and say, no, no, no, I'm an entrepreneur Ryan. So talk to us for a minute about, you know, you've sort of outlined why you went to law school. It sounded like it was a way to kind of buy more time, get a little more development on the one hand. But on the other hand, did you have that, that deep feeling of distancing wanting to already distance yourself from the law career or at least initially you needed more to learn first?

David Rosenberg 00:07:47 Well, I, I knew that I never had a burning desire to practice law, but honestly I owed myself a sense of obligation to at least try it, having a legal degree and being a member of the bar Pennsylvania. So I migrated my way back to Philadelphia recognizing that those were some of my best connections. My Penn state connections ended up working for a small personal injury firm in Bala Kenwood a little bit later on. And really, I just knew that it wasn't a thing that I wanted to pursue long term.

Ryan Newman 00:08:17 So you find yourself working at a law firm with a legal degree, lot of education behind you at this point. And what's the next thought what got you into whatever you did next?

David Rosenberg 00:08:29 So, you know, you make your own breaks. And certainly one has to be lucky in life. And I really believe that fully. And so I befriended someone in and he lived outside of Philadelphia and Mike was an entrepreneur and he had just recently opened up a environmental insurance business. And Mike and I were single at the time and were ping around the city. And Mike became so tired of me complaining about how miserable I was in practicing law. That Mike was the type of guy that just said, you know, Hey, leave the practice law, come do some private practice for me. Let me teach you the insurance business and stop complaining. Let's go on

from there. And honestly, you know, that seemed pretty appealing to me. I was a young man. I didn't really have a family at the time. And I looked at my father's life who was in the retail business and had to feed a family of two and never had the opportunity to really ste --

-- p out and take a risk. And I decided that that was what I was going to do, you know, step out and take a risk and try to be entrepreneurial in the process.

Ryan Newman 00:09:39 So take us into the inside of the business in the early days. What was it like, uh, right at the start, you know, where were you working? How many employees did you have? What was that? Those really kind of early days of trying to really get this thing off the ground?

David Rosenberg 00:09:51 So the early days was around 19 80, 19 79. I was a 13th employee that was hired at the company and the business was really an offshoot of some federal regulations that were established, particularly the federal motor carrier act of 1980 and what the federal motor carrier act did is it implemented financial responsibility regulations for a certain carriage of business, principally hazardous waste, transporters, hazardous materials, transporters, and similar to the fact that the state requires you and I as a licensed driver to demonstrate financial responsibility. And we go out into the insurance market and purchase an insurance policy that class of carriage, hazardous materials, transporters, and hazardous waste transporters had to do the same for protection of the public in the event of an accident or an incident. So Mike went to an insurance carrier that happened to be national union fire insurance company at that time AIG company and said, look, this whole business has been created by the government. Let's put together a program of insurance for hazardous waste transporters to then treatment storage and disposal facilities, contractors, and we were often running.

Ryan Newman 00:11:15 And what service were you actually providing by the way? It's really fascinating to think that there was that negotiation of trying to sort of create the space. I mean, in some ways you were creating a category of business that didn't previously exist, which is pioneering in itself. But then beyond that, how did you actually carve out the niche of what service you were offering and how that service model actually worked?

David Rosenberg 00:11:36 So in insurance terminology, there's a space that's called managing general agent. And what a managing general agent does for an insurance carrier is they assume all of the underwriting, all of the risk evaluation, all of the premium pricing, the collection of premium, one thing they don't do is bear risk. So they lay off the risk to the insurance carrier and a managing general agency really acts as a middleman between the insurance agent and their client and the insurance carrier. So we performed all of that underwriting function, acting as an agent for the national union, bringing them the business and then doing all of the premium calculation. All of the meeting with the insurance brokers who are actually our clients and then remitting the premiums to the insurance carrier,

Ryan Newman 00:12:32 Sounds like a tremendous amount of administration, coordination and communication to be successful. How did the business actually scale and grow?

David Rosenberg 00:12:41 Well, the business started in, in transportation business. As I said, if you can recall, you're probably a little bit too young, but if you recall back then, there was a period of time where insurance companies just felt that the environmental liability exposure in their certain class of businesses was just not insurable. And that was the result of love canal at a Buffalo, where there was a member of love

Ryan Newman 00:13:05 Canal, just teach us about love canal.

David Rosenberg 00:13:07 So love canal was a surface impoundment in Buffalo, if I'm correct in my knowledge of this or recollection at of Buffalo, New York and the landfill or surface, I empowerment began to leak into the aquifer. And so as a result of that, there was extensive litigation involving love canal for many, many years. And the insurance industry kind of pulled away from writing environmental liability insurance. We did something very different in the analyzing our business and what we did very differently than insurance companies is we hired environmental engineers and taught them insurance skills rather than hiring insurance people who had no idea how to underwrite an environmental risk and the way the business scaled is it scaled pretty significantly from being 13 people to when w --

-- e sold the business in 1999, we had well over 500 people.

Ryan Newman 00:14:15 Incredible. And that's actually what you've just revealed is actually incredibly clever on the part of you and your partners in the sense that you hired environmental engineers who didn't know anything about insurance and then taught them the insurance business, as opposed to hiring insurance folks and then trying to teach them about environmental engineering. Was that something that occurred to you instantly, or is that something that you really learned by trial and error? Because that seems like that was really the magic Elixer if you will, that led to that fueled growth based on the insights that those individuals had, that you were able to hire.

David Rosenberg 00:14:50 Yeah, correct. We learned that over the course of time, we learned that in when we hired insurance underwriters and the difficulties that we were having in analyzing risk. And so in analyzing risk, what we would do is we would hire engineers to help the insurance underwriters understand the nuances of the risk that they were evaluating. And then we just said, well, wait a second, we're doing this kind of backwards. Why don't we just hire engineers and teach them? Insurance skills seem to be a little bit easier in the proper analyzation of risk and pricing insurance policies. And then we went one step further Ryan, and in our evaluation of risk, we started a separate consulting business consisting of environmental engineers that would actually go out and inspect the risk prior to us offering a policy of insurance.

Ryan Newman 00:15:49 Fascinating reminds me of like the mold business, where you'll have a mold inspector come in. And then if there is mold, then there's a separate company. That's mold remediation. And many times these businesses are related or have some sort of connectivity. So in some cases, one of your business served as the lead generator for your other business.

David Rosenberg 00:16:05 That's correct. That's correct. And it was proper insurance underwriting. Our philosophy was you can share anything if you collect the proper amount of premium and rather than pricing it incorrectly, you know, we would go out and have our separate eyes. Our eyes were on the risk and we would go out and perform a risk assessment and saying, Hey, you know, here's what you need to do to improve the risk. Here's where some of your underwriting deficiencies lie. If you want to secure a policy of insurance, here's what you need to do to improve your risk. And then we would go revisit over the course of time because the insurance broker who's bringing us business has a self-served interest in underwriting the account. They're collecting a commission based on the business that they're providing, but we want our own eyes on the wrist to properly assess the liability.

Ryan Newman 00:16:54 So what's so interesting about this is that it seemed like you were at this juncture early on where you needed, you had two different skill sets. One was the insurance underwriting. The second was the environmental awareness. And in some ways you had a choice to say, which was the higher skill, which is the harder skill to attain. And it sounds like you all determined that it was the environmental skill that was harder to attain. You could teach the underwriting, but without that environmental piece, it would've never really taken off the way that it did.

David Rosenberg 00:17:20 That's correct. And there was a non environmental piece too. I mean, with the environmental piece, came a property exposure, an office that has their business. So, you know, there was a non environmental piece as well that your typical insurance underwriter could very well handle and underwrite properly.

Ryan Newman 00:17:36 You know, it's really interesting to think about the way that the entire industry of environmental services has grown and just expanded any thoughts just on, in general, how that as a total addressable market, when you think about the size of that market today, versus what it was, it seems like it was really a function of this change of approach where people feeling like there was, these were just uninsurable risks to then being insurable. Is that something that is a function of just the passage of time and people seeing a lack of risk occur in the environmental environment, or is it more of a, a matter of people really realizing that we just have to find a way to ensure --

-- everything because otherwise we just can't proceed as a business in general and, and as a society, quite frankly,

David Rosenberg 00:18:22 Well, I think it's more the latter than the former. I think that once the industry got their arms around this type of exposure, and once they realize by the way, the entire industry today, it consists of environmental engineers, underwriting coverages for the environmental business. So I'm proud to say that we created that industry and the change of how to properly evaluate an environmental risk.

Ryan Newman 00:18:52 What's really amazing about that is the idea that you had a small business that was new to the industry, figuring out a way to really do everything differently, which as you're saying is now become the industry grown to become the industry standard. **David Rosenberg 00:19:07** Yes. Yeah. Really proud of that.

AD 00:19:11The Pennsylvania technical assistance program also known as pen a supports small to midsize enterprises across the state of Pennsylvania by providing facility energy and operational assessments, leveraging community resources, supporting grant applications and driving workforce and business development. To learn more about how pen a is supporting small business sustainability across the Commonwealth visit penta.psu.edu for more information.

Ryan Newman 00:19:46 So David, as the business was growing in scaling, what was your role in the business? How did your role evolve and were you using that legal degree at all when you were in there?

Ryan Newman 00:20:52 So you're running this phenomenal business. You've got other partners, obviously in, in the leadership of the company and you get to a certain point. And what happens, is it an unsolicited offer that arrives in your doorstep one day? Is it a predetermined decision that you wanna exit the business? How did that all come about?

David Rosenberg 00:21:08 Well, there was a little bit of upset in the insurance industry business. And what transpired is we, we actually trained our insurance carriers from AIG to reliance insurance company. Reliance insurance company was headed by the Steinberg brothers, Bob and SA Steinberg. They got into a little bit of financial difficulties with, at reliance and we got wind that they probably were not going to be able to continue with their business. So we were in a position where we are looking for an insurance carrier and then my two other partners. And I decided, you know, well maybe this is a really good time since the business is on an uptick to look for companies to acquire the business. So at the same time we were looking for an insurance carrier, we were looking for a company to acquire our business. And XL capital came along, a company out of Bermuda, said, we like the business. We like the exposure. We like what you've done. We'd like your underwriting standards let's talk. And the rest is history.

Ryan Newman 00:22:10 I mean, if you think about for an entrepreneur, usually that that peak moment of your entrepreneurial journey is having some sort of transformational liquidity event or some sort of whether it's ringing the bell in New York stock exchange or the NASDAQ, or having a sale to a public company. I mean, this is sort of the dream and wish and hope of every leading entrepreneur. I shouldn't say every but many leading entrepreneurs was that moment for you just take us into that moment. Was it exciting? Bittersweet?

David Rosenberg 00:22:39 So it was a little bit of both. We started the business, uh, when I was a little bit, you know, a li --

-- ttle bit later in my life. And I started a family later in my life. And my father being in the retail business really never had the opportunity to see him other than dinner and back to work. And so for me, this was an opportunity to grow my family a little bit differently than he grew his family. The bittersweetness was wow. You know, this is my baby that I'm giving up. We grew this from 13 people to over 500 people and now I'm just gonna walk out and let somebody else handle it. We were really, really service oriented and we were, we felt like a, you know, a really big, big family. We did a lot of community work. We had a daycare center for our employees that our employees dropped off their kids at the daycare center and, and lunchtime went across the street to see their kids. So it really was like a big family and I felt very nostalgic and it was difficult to give that up. But the upside in terms of the time that I would be able to spend with family and the time that I would be able to devote to my next challenge, which was philanthropy was more than made up for leaving our business.

Ryan Newman 00:23:48 Well, let's talk about that because I've come to know you as a philanthropist, as a very active board member, always full of ideas, full of energy and passion in many leading the charge and pushing those around you to, to do better and achieve more as you began to kind of repurpose your experience much of which is centered around Penn state, by the way, for which the university. Thanks you. How did you think about carving your path of involvement and impact in this next stage of life as a philanthropist, along with your wife, Margie?

David Rosenberg 00:24:16 Well, I appreciate all those comments. Thank you. I kind of looked at the world then. And I looked at having three small children and I said, what type of world do I want them to grow up in and what type of value system and what type of character do I want them to have? And so, you know, Mar and I talked about that a lot and we decided to start a small family foundation and that has become our vehicle. Forgiving, had become our vehicle for teaching our children, the value and benefits of philanthropy.

Ryan Newman 00:24:46 What's so amazing though, is that you, you know, some people will stop at the check, you know, they'll write the check and then they'll go on their way. But for you, your real impact, I think, has been in the boardroom and in, in the way you've led and developed. And so what are some of the passions that you have where you're serving in a board member capacity, or as a volunteer, I should say for Penn state, then the things you're passionate about?

David Rosenberg 00:25:09 Well, you're spot on. I mean, I think the easy thing to do in philanthropy is just write a check and move on, and we want it to be a little bit more than that. We want I and RG as well. And even the kids, to some extent, kids, 30, 29 and 26 now, you know, wanna be involved. And I think that that just is so much more beneficial to be involved in your philanthropies, in your giving. So, honestly, I didn't know how to go about doing that at the time, but having three children, I was very grateful that we never had a hospital experience in living in the Villanova area, in the Philadelphia area. I knew that children's hospital, Philadelphia was an incredible resource. And I said, well, let me call down a children's hospital and see what I can do there. And those were the times where people actually answered the phone.

David Rosenberg 00:25:54 And so I called down a children's hospital 25 years ago and got somebody on the phone and a very astute receptionist turned me on to a development person who said, would you be interested in coming down and taking a tour? And so I did. So it's only 25 minutes from the home. And this Institute development person took me through a tour through the NICU and crying, just unbelievably emotional experience for me. And I've been a volunteer at children's hospital ever since. And then I said, well, let me see what I could do at Penn state, you know, loved Penn state, loved my experience there loved my education and became involved actually at Penn state Brandi wine, one of the Commonwealth campuses. And, you know, although I was a university park graduate, Penn state, Brandi wine is my community campus. And I really wanted to be involved more with community. And while we give to university park and while I certainly make trips to u --

-- niversity park, most of my giving and my experiences has been with our local campus at Penn state brand new

Ryan Newman 00:26:50 One. Well, that's that community centeredness coming through David. So a lot of our listeners are students or graduates that are thinking about taking that leap of starting an entrepreneurial journey, but maybe they're just, they're hesitant. There's one thing standing in the way or one fear. They can't just overcome. What advice do you have for future aspiring entrepreneurs? Who've not yet really taken that big leap.

David Rosenberg 00:27:16 Well, you know, I have to say that when I took that leap, everything was on the line. I mean, all my bank accounts, my home was a little different time obviously than it is today, but it's easy to tip your toe in the water. It's a little bit difficult to take a full dive in. And my advice, my counsel to those people listening would be similar to the Nike commercial, just do it. And you could always pull back my questioning about whether I was doing the right thing at the time. I really never hesitated. It was all about evaluating the risk. What can I do to fall back on if the risk did not transpire in the manner that I thought? And I always felt Ryan that I could fall back on that legal career, not necessarily something that I wanted to do, but again, you know, I had one mouth to feed. I didn't have a family and I felt fairly confident in my ability to take care of myself if things should go south. So my comment would just go in carefully, evaluate your risk and your downside. Look at the potential upside, make a proper evaluation and just do it.

Ryan Newman 00:28:34 What can be better than hearing from a former insurance, environmental industry, executive talking about risk <laugh>. Uh, David, thank you so much, uh, for taking the time to share your entrepreneurial journey with me. Uh, now we'd like to turn and hand things over to a current Penn state student who is in the midst of his own entrepreneurial journey and is very active within the Penn state entrepreneurial ecosystem. Ion is a senior at Penn state studying industrial engineering. He co-founded reach.ai, which developed AI to analyze public data in rural Pennsylvania to bridge racial and ethnic health, inequity, and disparity. He's also the founder of mills, which is building India's largest community of family owned, small textile businesses. Uh, Ariana now hand the interview over to you.

Aryan Modi 00:29:27 Hello David.

David Rosenberg 00:29:28 Hi Arian. I'm thanks for joining us. Yep.

Aryan Modi 00:29:31 So to start things off, my first question to you is what advice, if you had to go back in time, back to when you just graduated out of what advice would you give Dr. 20 something self?

David Rosenberg 00:29:45 What advice would I give to my 20 something? Self? My advice to my 20 something self would be to pursue your passion would be to make certain that happiness is part of that equation to do something that you really care about to be passionate in the pursuit of your career, to be astute, to listen attentively. I think we have a tendency to speak more than we listen and to make connection in today's society is not a technological connection. Connection is a personal connection.

Aryan Modi 00:30:31 Right? Thanks for that. Uh, what, what is something that you took from Penn state that really impacted your journey so far?

David Rosenberg 00:30:42 Well, I think that Penn Staters are really passionate people. We're passionate about our university. We're passionate about our college experiences. We're passionate about the people that we have met along the way. We're passionate about the successes of the university and we want the university to succeed. So I think that passion would be a really good word for my experiences at Penn state and my continued experiences at Penn state.

Aryan Modi 00:31:12 Sure. Now I'd like to talk to you about a question that relates directly to what I'm trying to do in India. Just to give you a little brief. So essentially what I'm trying to do is build this platform between small textile businesses, where people across the world can just directly place orders. How the global textile supply chain work site now is that we have so many moving pieces and intermediaries. A lot of them do happen to be on the Indian side of this business is where like we manufacture a lot of floats, but we are not allowed to sell them. S --

-- o we sell them to the middle guys. They call themselves export houses. And most of them are, let's say not good people. They have sort of connections with the government. And let's say, if I manufacture my own, t-shirt from my company's brand name, let's say a Y Z, what they'll do is they'll buy it from me.

Aryan Modi 00:32:02 They'll replace the label of my company with their company's label. And then I'll send it to, let's say, American buyers. They have. And that's sort of how for the last three decades it's worked where people don't know across the world where the products are being made really there's this whole gangster change of distribution with mills, I'm trying to do is we're trying to make a platform which is going to make it super, super, super easy for business across the world to directly place order to these small holding businesses that manufacture deck loads have some form of accountability so they can track their orders, trace their shipments. And basically just in general, make it a bit more transparent, the whole process. So I see that you were into the environmental, you know, you were got into the environmental insurance industry pretty much when there was a lack of awareness about, you know, the whole sustainability environmental aspect in the world. So I'm sure there were a lot of challenges and obstacles you faced. How did you overcome those barriers? Is there some sort of advice you have for me on them?

David Rosenberg 00:33:03 Well, Arian, congratulations. First on all that you're doing, I'm always so enamored by the skill and the intellect of Penn state students and the creativity of Penn state students. So congratulations for all you're doing and your successes today in my career. I never, I rarely took no for an answer. And so I always tried to find a way to make it work. You know, whether that would be underwriting a particular count, whether that would be dealing with a particular employee, whatever it was. So I'm a fairly persistent person. My advices would be to stick to it. Your failures long term are your successes. Everybody has failed down the road, you know, and you need to be able to pick yourself up and to move on and to learn from all of your failures and to keep a really positive attitude moving forward. I know that's easier said than done, but in the back of your mind, you always have to believe that you're a better person for your failures and you always have to learn from them and continue to move forward.

Aryan Modi 00:34:32 Sure. Thanks a lot. That was great advice.

David Rosenberg 00:34:34 Thank you.

Ryan Newman 00:34:41 That was David Rosenberg, former executive vice president at environmental compliance services. If you haven't already be sure to subscribe dare to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.