

Dr. Stephen Hicks, Cultivator of the Entrepreneurial Spirit

By Virginia Murr

The United States of America created a garden for the entrepreneurial spirit through the fertile soil of respect for every individual's inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Grasping the unique freedom to forge their own lives, the early Americans began to build, to innovate, and to create. Thus the American entrepreneur was born. And, while other nations have existed for thousands of years, these American entrepreneurs helped to thrust our country to the forefront of the modern world in a fraction of the time. In my youth, I looked up to these early American entrepreneurs. I admired the qualities of character that these early Americans exhibited on their path to prosperity: self-responsibility, initiative, determination, creativity, and, above all, I admired their optimism. By the time I entered college, I was determined to follow their lead; I was ready to grab the eagle by the wings.

However, my entrepreneurial spirit was quickly quashed by pessimism in the academic world. In a variety of fields, there was a persistent message that to prosper was greedy at best and destructive at worst. At its philosophical roots, this message claims that you cannot get ahead in life unless you step on others. Yet, this is not what I wanted; I didn't want to hurt anyone. I simply wanted to bring joy to myself and prosperity to my family by tapping into the qualities that drive the entrepreneurial spirit. Could it be that my goal of personal success obtained by providing beneficial products and services to others was predicated upon a lie? Could it be that as an entrepreneur I could never be ethical? When pessimism of the entrepreneurial spirit started to gain a foothold in my malleable mind, I met Dr. Stephen Hicks. As a professor, non-profit director, and business owner, Dr. Hicks has begun to reinvigorate the entrepreneurial spirit in the world of academia.

Dr. Hicks received his B.A. (honors) and M.A. degrees from the University of Guelph, Canada, and his Ph.D. in philosophy from Indiana University, USA in 1991. Currently, he is a professor of philosophy at

Rockford College, Rockford, Illinois. Through his position as a professor, he shares his knowledge in an objective, balanced format that allows students to experience a variety of historical and contemporary philosophical perspectives in such subjects as Business and Ethics. Far from inundating students with just one point-of-view, Dr. Hicks requires students to study opposing theories. From Rousseau to Rand and Marx to Mises, Dr. Hicks' students confront opposing world-views so that they can make independent, educated assessments of the theories. By encouraging students to think independently, Dr. Hicks also gives students the intellectual wherewithal to objectively examine their perceptions of themselves and the world they inhabit.

Even more striking than his academic successes, however, Dr. Hicks has become a cultivator of the entrepreneurial spirit through the creation of the non-profit Center for Ethics and Entrepreneurship (CEE). In 2007, Dr. Hicks was granted nearly a million dollars by the BB&T Charitable Foundation to establish CEE. As Dr. Hicks stated in an interview with Roger Donway in *The New Individualist*, the focus of CEE "will be to make a difference inside the academic world." Dr. Hicks has remained true to this focus; he is making a difference in the world of academia by examining the morality of capitalism and the ethical foundations of entrepreneurship, rather than rejecting them out-of-hand. In just two short years, CEE has become a multi-faceted organization that promotes the intellectual and ethical foundations of the entrepreneurial spirit within the academic world.

At its core, CEE conveys Dr. Hicks' optimistic view that Man's capacity for greatness is embodied in the entrepreneurial spirit. Dr. Hicks' optimism is evidenced on his personal weblog, where he states, "American business success depends on individuals who are self-starting go-getters, who enjoy going the extra mile, those committed to achievement and excellence" (Hicks). Successful entrepreneurship, then, requires more than business acumen—it requires excellence of character. So, instead of discouraging students with the pessimistic idea that entrepreneurs must inevitably exploit others in

order to succeed, CEE emphasizes the qualities of character necessary to succeed as an entrepreneur. And, through independent assessment, students are able to see that these qualities of character bring mutual benefit, not exploitation, to a free society. CEE's emphasis on the ethical nature of entrepreneurship encourages business-minded students to expand their energetic, creative spirits without guilt and without shame.

Entrepreneurship classes are a key component of CEE's program. Dr. Hicks has obtained the expertise of instructors from the fields of Philosophy, Political Science, Business, Economics, and Accounting to take students on an expansive journey into the historical, ethical, and practical aspects of entrepreneurship. A few of the classes offered include: Entrepreneurship, Business and Economic Ethics, Capitalism in the Modern World, and Entrepreneurship and Ethics. By integrating a variety of academic disciplines, CEE's entrepreneurship classes offer a broad intellectual perspective that enables students to learn from the successes and failures of history as well as from the contemporary world, and they learn to apply these lessons to their futures.

Another important facet of CEE's program is the use of guest speakers. Guest speakers have included such notable people as Dr. Eric Mack on Harvard political philosopher Robert Nozick's theory of entitlement; Dr. David Schweickart on Marx's critique of capitalism; and, Dr. David Kelley on Ayn Rand's moral defense of capitalism. This spring (2009), guest speakers will include C. Bradley Thompson, the author of *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (University Press of Kansas, 1998), and David Mayer, author of *The Constitutional Thought of Thomas Jefferson* (University Press of Virginia, 1994). CEE's guest lecturers share their expertise and experience with the students; and, they provide the students with the rare opportunity to interact directly with experts from across the country. Experiences such as these are irreplaceable in a student's academic career.

CEE doesn't benefit students alone, however. A broader audience benefits from *Kaizen*, CEE's per semester newsletter. Each newsletter features an interview with a successful entrepreneur. Dr. Hicks explains that CEE seeks people to interview "who are principled, thoughtful, and strategic about how they do what they do. We have a list of people who had a vision, worked hard, and made it real. The interviews with them will show how they did what they did, how they met the various challenges and difficulties, and what we can learn from them as a result of their entrepreneurial success" (Donway). Some of the past interviews in *Kaizen* have included: John Gillis on Architecture and Entrepreneurship; Michael Newberry on Art and Entrepreneurship; Anil Singh-Molares on Entrepreneurship and Global Markets; and, Ed Snider on Entrepreneurship and Sports. These informative interviews serve as contemporary examples of the successful cohesion of ethics and entrepreneurship to an audience that includes students, alumni, scholars, and professionals.

Extending its optimistic view of the entrepreneurial spirit to a national and international audience, CEE has created a website. The CEE website offers a variety of informative features, including a weblog with news on entrepreneurship, business ethics, technological innovation, and political economy (CEE). A list of archived announcements also keeps readers of the website updated on past as well as upcoming events for CEE. From conferences to lectures, essay contests to new class offerings, the announcements give ample opportunity for interested parties to become involved with CEE's program.

Precipitating inroads within the world of academia, CEE awards grants to professors for the development of courses in complementary fields, such as American Economic History, Political Philosophy of the American Revolutionary Era, and Sports Ethics. Previous winners of CEE grants include Professor Matthew Flamm for development of a course on Ethics, and Professor Fred Rezazadeh, for development of a course on Capitalism in the Modern World. These grants provide a unique incentive for professors to involve themselves creatively with the exploration of the entrepreneurial spirit. Above

all, however, the students benefit from a wider offering of classes devoted to ethics and entrepreneurship.

While Dr. Hicks' work with CEE is vital for the dissemination of ethics and entrepreneurship, he also inspires his students by example. Embarking on his own entrepreneurial initiative in 2006, Dr. Hicks formed a publishing company, Ockham's Razor Publishing, LLC. With the same optimistic foundation of CEE, Ockham's Razor "publishes and distributes scholarly and public intellectual works in philosophy, business ethics, intellectual history, and related fields" (Ockham's Razor). Ockham's Razor has published such essays as *Money Can Buy Happiness* by Tara Smith, Ph.D., *Thomas Jefferson, Man versus Myth* by David Mayer, Ph.D., *The Entrepreneurial Life and Is It Nobler to Give than to Create?* By David Kelley, Ph.D., *The Need for a New Individualism* by Edward Hudgins, Ph.D., and *Engineers and Integrity* by Gordon Stublely, Ph.D. Dr. Hicks' publication choices for Ockham's Razor show his students that entrepreneurs, regardless of their industry of choice, express their world-views through the productive choices they make. In this case, the works Dr. Hicks chooses to publish are an expression of his optimistic view of Man's capacity to reach the heights of entrepreneurial success with excellence of character.

Topping off Dr. Hicks' efforts with CEE and Ockham's Razor are his own publications. Dr. Hicks is the author of a number of books, articles, and essays, including: "Ethics and Economics" in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics* (Liberty Fund, 2008), "Ayn Rand and Contemporary Business Ethics" in *The Journal of Accounting, Ethics & Public Policy* (3.1, Winter 2003: 1-26), and he is currently working on "What Business Ethics Can Learn from Entrepreneurship" for the Spring 2009 issue of *The Journal of Private Enterprise*. Even in his written creations, Dr. Hicks speaks to the entrepreneurial spirit by emphasizing the capacity of individuals to lead ethical, productive, and prosperous lives through rational self-interest.

Now, consider for a moment what kind of message you want disseminated by our colleges and universities. Do you want them to teach that this is a dog-eat-dog world in which people can only succeed if they hurt others along the way? Do you want them to dismiss dreams of success and prosperity as greedy and selfish? Do you want them to encourage feelings of shame for achievement? Or, do you want our colleges and universities to provide a marketplace of ideas? Do you want them to provide a variety of perspectives that include the idea that the highest levels of success are obtained through the mutual benefit of trade? Do you want them to show how innovation can create value in the world? Do you want them to encourage pride in personal achievement? If you identify with the latter set of questions, then Dr. Hicks is the type of educator and entrepreneur you will appreciate having in the world of academia.

Because of my experience with the prevailing pessimistic view of entrepreneurship in the world of academia, I can attest to the herculean task Dr. Hicks undertook when he decided to present his optimistic view of the entrepreneurial spirit to his students as well as his peers. I can also attest to the benefits that Dr. Hicks offers to students who are willing to learn. Through Dr. Hicks' creation of CEE, I learned that the world is not made up of haves and have-nots; it is made up of wills and will-nots. And, I learned that the entrepreneurial spirit isn't about stagnant dreams; it is about taking action to achieve rational goals. Through Ockham's Razor's publications and Dr. Hicks' own works, I learned that ethics and entrepreneurship are not mutually exclusive; and, my personal success is not predicated on another person's failure. On the contrary, Dr. Hicks' works reminded me of my youthful admiration of the heroic qualities expressed by the early American entrepreneurs. Because, setting forth on the path of entrepreneurship, where the risks are high and failure is always an option, requires a strong, confident spirit and a high-quality character.

By tilling the soil of my fertile mind with objectivity and optimism, Dr. Hicks has helped me to find reason to hold my ideals and goals sacred; he has helped me to find reason to aspire to the heights of my abilities; and, he has helped me to find reason to embrace simultaneously the beauty of ethics and the entrepreneurial spirit. And, almost three years after graduation, I am still inspired. Individuals with the ability to convey so much knowledge and inspiration are a rare breed. Given that Dr. Hicks is a member of academia with the ability and desire to reach countless students and peers makes his work that much more valuable, and he deserves both support and appreciation for his efforts.

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