

# Marc Seriff

BA '71, ONE OF THE FIRST DOZEN PEOPLE AT TELENET COMMUNICATIONS, A PIONEERING COMPANY IN THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY; FOUNDING CTO OF AMERICA ONLINE; ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE CREATION OF THE DELL JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER; FORMER TRUSTEE FOR THE LONG CENTER; FORMER BOARD PRESIDENT OF AUSTIN MUSICAL THEATRE; SERVES ON THE COMMISSION OF 125 AND ADVISORY COUNCILS FOR THE COLLEGE OF NATURAL SCIENCES, DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER SCIENCE, AND LONGHORN FOUNDATION; CO-FOUNDER AND TRUSTEE OF THE SERIFF FOUNDATION; BOARD MEMBER OF THE HIGHLAND LAKES LEGACY FUND AND THE AUSTIN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



**I** BELIEVE THAT IF YOU WAKE UP IN THE MORNING and you're looking forward to the day, and you go to bed at night and you're happy with the way the day has gone — most of the time — then you're successful.

To reach that success, I think you need to be fearless. Successful people are willing to do things whether or not the odds are in their favor. Also, successful people work very hard at understanding what they're capable of. That's another way to say they're self-aware — both of themselves and of any organization they're a part of. I have yet to meet any person or organization that is self-sufficient, so understanding the places where you need help induces you to go plug the holes with other people and organizations. We still say that the primary reason AOL was successful is because we found the right partners, and we did that over and over and over again. I believe that's true both professionally and personally.

Most of the people I look at who are successful love what they do. It's very hard to be successful — to put in the kind of effort necessary, both physically and emotionally — if you don't like what you're doing.

I do believe that luck plays a huge role in success, especially on the negative side. I've seen too many people who were smarter than me, worked harder than me, and still weren't successful financially. In other words, you can do everything right and still not get there. But you certainly are not going to get there by doing everything wrong and counting on luck to pull you through.

My success has a lot to do with meeting two key people in my life when I was young and unformed, both of whom have legitimate claims to being the father of the Internet. One, J.C.R. Licklider, was a professor of mine in graduate school at MIT. Lick was one of the first to say that computers might be good for something other than number crunching. He wrote a seminal paper in the late 1950s titled, "Man Computer Symbiosis." He was the one who taught me that technical elegance in the absence of usefulness wasn't particularly interesting and helped

me understand that engineering work actually had to solve a real need.

When Lick left MIT to go back to ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency within the Dept. of Defense) to manage the ARPAnet, the predecessor of the Internet, I made the decision to leave school. Lick encouraged me to jump into the game at exactly the right time. In 1974, I went to work for Telenet, one of the first data communications companies in the world. There I met and worked for Larry Roberts. In the scientific community Larry gets the credit for being father of the ARPAnet, and through that the Internet. When the ARPAnet was being developed, Larry was head of the information-processing division of ARPA, so he not only had the brains and the concepts but also the checkbook. He funded the initial sites that did network research and formed the backbone of the new network.

Larry could easily be the smartest guy I ever met, and he got me to the next step, which was understanding that, in business, being elegant is relatively unimportant; being useful and usable is pretty important; but having something that someone would profitably pay for is really important. We did some great stuff at Telenet: we built the first commercially successful e-mail system, and we were a big part of X25 development, an early communications protocol. Telenet was a company that was profitable, went public, and was acquired by a huge company. I was lucky to be a part of that and to learn those lessons early.

The first piece of advice I give to kids graduating from college is to find something they really love to do, and then go find out how to make a living at it. And the second is don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to jump off a cliff, to take chances, or to change careers. Without that fearlessness, the odds of success are, in my opinion, pretty low. It doesn't matter whether jumping off a cliff means starting a business, pushing for a promotion, having children, starting a nonprofit — just jump!

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*The "Success to Me" series is prepared by Aruni Gunasegaram, BBA '92, MBA '98, an entrepreneur, and Pam Losefsky, an Austin writer and editor.*