



FLO AND DICK ('62) GADOMSKI
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It's Not Rocket Science.

Dick Gadomski ('62) wasn't "college material" when he started at CBU. Since then he's followed a career path that's ranged from booster rockets to high fructose corn syrup. Now he's turning his entrepreneurial spirit and acumen to keeping the mission of the Christian Brothers alive. BY AIMEE LEWIS ('92)

Founder and CEO of PSI Group. Projects in 35 states and eight foreign countries. More than \$100 million in annual sales. Inductee into the Society of Entrepreneurs. Affiliated member of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Philanthropist. Friend and family man. But not college material?

"I graduated [high school] with less than a 'C' average. I never thought I was college material," says Richard "Dick" Gadomski ('62).

Growing up as an inner-city kid in Northwest Chicago, Gadomski had what he describes as a traditional, parochial, Catholic, immigrant upbringing. A second-generation American on both sides of his family—his father's parents were from Poland and his mother's from Italy—he learned early a strong work ethic. Though his father later became successful in his own business enterprises, an illness he incurred in World War II forced Gadomski's mother to fill the role of the family's sole provider for several years. In his last years of high school, Gadomski worked 32 hours a week at a Chinese restaurant and turned his paycheck over to his mother. "I did keep my tips and got all I could eat—which is a lot for a teenage boy," he laughs.

Gadomski credits three Christian Brothers at Chicago's St. Patrick High School with forever changing

his life. Brother Philip Hogan (who has since left the vocation) was his high school chemistry teacher—the only subject he really loved—and made the subject fun and exciting. Gadomski had planned to go into the Navy but Brother Cyprian Moriarty, who had gone to Christian Brothers High School, convinced Gadomski to make a recruiting trip to CBU (then Christian Brothers College). When he arrived in Memphis, Gadomski was impressed with all of the new facilities and the number of St. Pat's graduates who were here, so he decided to give college a try. But he almost blew his chance with the very same Brother. On a senior class trip just six weeks prior to graduation, Brother Cyprian caught Gadomski and some of his classmates drinking, a violation of the school's alcohol policy, and recommended expulsion. St. Patrick's principal, Brother L. Paul McGinnis (who has also since left the vocation), stepped in and allowed the boys to graduate.

Once at CBU Gadomski experienced a few academic bumps but worked hard, taking some classes again, and got himself back on track. He also became involved in campus life. CBU was much smaller than his high school so there were many more opportunities for leadership. "I got a lot of exposure to working with groups of people and I think that prepared me for what

Richard Gadomski (circled) in 1960 as a member of an intramural basketball team at CBC, the “Parish’s Poopers.”



I did eventually in life,” he says. “If you can get a bunch of volunteers organized and be successful in the effort, you can generally lead and manage things.”

During this time Gadomski also met Dolores Sabbatini, a student at Siena College (CBU’s sister school). “I was on scholastic probation and she was valedictorian of her senior class and on a full-ride scholarship to school, so opposites do attract,” says Gadomski. “She had her act together and got me serious about life.”

Not so serious that Gadomski wasn’t in on a caper or two. In his sophomore year, he acquired a vial of isovaleric acid, which smells like vomit, from the organic chemistry lab and left it open in the suite of two students who were known pranksters. When the odor began to permeate other suites and students congregated on the balconies of Maurelian Hall, Gadomski knew the joke had gotten out of hand and feared he’d be thrown out of school. He never confessed his involvement until he spoke at the funeral service for Brother I. Leo O’Donnell, his college organic chemistry teacher, in 1994.

Gadomski and Sabbatini married in his senior year and he began to look for work, but graduate school was a new priority. Of the hundred resumes Gadomski sent out, he garnered six job offers at companies like Firestone, DuPont, NASA, and North American Aviation. North American Aviation also offered a graduate school reimbursement program and was near the University of Southern California, so that’s where Gadomski and his new wife went.

On the heels of President Kennedy’s 1961 announcement that the United States would have a man on the moon in a decade, Gadomski found himself a bona fide rocket scientist, working in the aerospace industry on Saturn second-stage boosters. “When I came out of school, I thought I knew everything,” he says. “When I arrived at North American Aviation, I

realized I knew absolutely nothing. But I looked around at the hotshots from U.C. Berkeley, M.I.T., Rensselaer Poly, Southern Cal, all these guys I’m working around, and I’ve still got a better education.”

CBU and the connections he’d made here were never far away, however. Six other CBU alumni had also moved to southern California to work in the aerospace industry. John Ofenloch (’62) and his wife, Katherine, in particular, stayed close, as their wives taught in the same elementary school and Gadomski and Ofenloch worked and attended graduate school together. They remain friends to this day.

Gadomski’s son Greg was born in California, and the young family soon moved to Huntsville, AL, for a job with Brown Engineering. Shortly after starting the job, Gadomski recruited Ofenloch to Brown as well. The Gadomski family expanded in Huntsville with the birth of daughter Regina. They returned to Memphis after learning that Dolores’ father had been diagnosed with cancer. With only two opportunities in the Memphis area to choose from—working on mechanical tuners for RCA Victor or in the fats and oils business with the Humko division of Kraft Foods—Gadomski chose Humko.

“It was a great job and really turned me on to engineering,” he reflects. “In the aerospace industry, you work in really narrow niches. I worked on engine cut-off systems and rocket engine performance systems. Now, I’m making different kinds of oils—cooking oil and frying oil and salad oil—but it was a great job because there I got to do everything.” In addition to working with the chemical processes related to the oils themselves, he began working on other engineering elements of the plant, designing foundations, equipment, tanks and instrumentation.

When his father-in-law passed away a few years later, only child Dolores was despondent, and Gadomski felt that a new environment for the family might be good.



Gadomski (at left) in 1982 as a member of the CBC Board of Trustees with Maury Wade, Brother Bernard LoCoco, Lance Forsdick, and John McCabe.

He accepted a position with the BASF Corporation in Germany to work on a plastics project and moved the whole family, his mother-in-law included, overseas. At Humko, Gadomski had been responsible for all of the automation and instrumentation of the chemical processes so his experience and versatility were ideal for the BASF project—a manufacturing plant to be built in South Carolina. The plant, however, was never built; at the same time new Occupational Safety and Health Act regulations for the environment had been enacted and there was an uproar in the South Carolina community. As a result, BASF gifted the property back to the state and Gadomski took charge of closing the project down, traveling with his family to 14 countries to do so before returning to work at BASF’s facility in New Jersey.

Gadomski began to rise in the company and within three years was managing a \$100 million project, the largest in the company’s portfolio, but his sights were set still higher. “I was 34 years old and was highly regarded, making good money,” he says. “But I felt that engineering was too restrictive. I wanted to go as far as I could go. I wanted to be president of the company.”

At the same time, BASF began to identify employees on the leadership track and hired a consultant to conduct psychological evaluations. As Gadomski tells it, “He brought me in and says, ‘Dick, you have to make a decision in the next 18 months: whether you’re going to be a corporate man for BASF or whether you’re going to start your own business.’ I almost fell off my chair. It’s what I had been thinking, but I hadn’t told anybody.”

It wasn’t long before Gadomski had his chance. Another CBU alumnus, Jim Metz (’60), contacted him when Cargill wanted Metz’s business, S & W Construction, to build a plant in Memphis. Metz’s company needed an engineer for the process plant work and suggested Gadomski put together a proposal;

if the bid was selected, they would set up a separate company and Gadomski would run it. “So I looked at it,” Gadomski says, “and it’s processing corn. I don’t know anything about processing corn, but it has pumps and tanks, evaporators and heat exchangers, and I think ‘I can learn this stuff.’”

Gadomski called in another friend, Lance Forsdick (’61), for his input. The two had not been buddies at CBU, but their wives had been friends since first grade and the families were close. On a trip to Franklin, TN, while their wives and children were out for the day, the two men sat in a café and talked over the project. “I had started my own business the year before,” says Forsdick (currently serving as interim president of CBU), “so we sat there for hours and hammered out his business plan.”

Cargill gave them the contract, and Process Systems Incorporated (PSI) was born. “I walked out of the meeting with Woody Jenne, the general contractor, and said ‘Did we really just get this job?’” Gadomski recounts. “He said, ‘We sure did, bub, let’s go to work.’” Midway through the two-year project, Gadomski—who owned 30% of the company—submitted a proposal to the board for added benefits for employees in order to grow the business and bring in other key people. The proposal was declined, and Gadomski had no buy-out agreement. Jenne stepped in and offered to help.

“He wrote me a six-figure check to buy these guys out and said to pay him back when I could,” says Gadomski. “In two years, we’d generated enough cash to pay back the loan, because the next Cargill job was even bigger than the first.” The next Cargill job was in fructose processing, just at the time when fructose began to replace sugar in products like Coca-Cola and Pepsi.

With more business from Cargill, PSI continued to grow. “Ernie Micek [Cargill’s CEO] would come to me

Dick Gadomski's legacy at CBU: (at center) Dr. Regina Gadomski Healy ('88) and Greg Gadomski ('86), flanked by Regina's husband, Dr. Jay Healy (left), and Greg's partner, Jim Knight (right). Greg Gadomski died in 2003, and the Gregory Raymond Gadomski Triangle Scholarship has been funded in his memory by his father and Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity.



and say he had another project,” Gadomski says. “And every time we’d negotiate, we’d smoke cigars in a closed room, he’d beat me down on price, we’d shake hands, and we’d have another job.”

PSI expanded and began working for other companies but, says Gadomski, “I learned a lot, because we basically built ourselves out of business; we were doing fairly one-dimensional work. In 1982, after our most successful year in history—1981, when we worked on the largest-ever capital project for the state of Tennessee—I had to lay off 50% of my workforce. I had to come up with a strategy to start diversifying and be different from what we were.”

Diversifying meant breaking out and taking on work for more than just the chemical industry. Gadomski was approached by a former employee who now worked at Federal Express to do work there. “We do corn plants, what are you talking about?” Gadomski recalls his reply. “Well, it turned out most of their packages are carried on slider-belt conveyors, and we used slider-belt conveyors in corn milling plants. So FedEx became a regular customer.”

Gadomski began to recognize opportunities to do turn-key work, projects conceived and constructed by a developer and then sold in ready-to-use condition. In 1987, he added a construction company and a fabrication company to his existing engineering business in order to work on total design-build projects. After a reorganization of the three companies in 1992, business took off, and PSI realized 25% annual growth rates and even higher profits.

By the time Gadomski was 56 years old, his company had grown from \$30 million of volume to \$100 million, and his outside board—Forsdick, David Peck, and his brother, Bob Gadomski—encouraged him to sell the business. “It was difficult,” says Gadomski. “It was like giving up my baby. But we had this tremendous backlog of work with Fortune 500 companies like

Monsanto, DuPont, Ralston-Purina, Kellogg, Cargill, and FedEx. It was the time to sell at peak value.”

This was 2000, and six weeks after selling PSI to German company Lurgi, Gadomski found out that his beloved Dolores had breast cancer. He stayed on as president, but confessed that his heart was no longer in it. Lurgi brought in another president, and he retired in 2001.

Dolores had passed away the year before, and his grief weighed on him. “I had been married for 37 years, and Dolores was the leader of our family,” Gadomski says. “I took care of PSI, and she took care of everything else. I was lost.”

Gadomski slowly began to date again, and Vickie Hall, his administrative assistant of 12 years, set him up on a blind date with her favorite aunt, Florence Smith. “Vickie had talked about me and Dolores for years, so Flo felt like she knew us and was reluctant to accept,” he recalls. “She only agreed because Vicki kept pestering her.” When Flo had second thoughts and planned to cancel, Hall insisted she keep the date and even had her mother follow her aunt into town from Covington, TN, to make sure she arrived at the Peabody for their brunch.

“When I looked down the long corridor, I saw this lady in a black dress and a string of pearls, as she said she’d be dressed,” Gadomski says. “She had this beautiful smile, and I said to myself, ‘Boy, I sure hope that’s her.’ And it was Flo.” They started dating and married two years later.

AS A RESULT of his business acumen, Gadomski will be inducted this month into the Society of Entrepreneurs, an organization founded in 1991 to foster the development of the entrepreneurial spirit and to recognize the contribution of entrepreneurs to business and the community.

His philanthropic and community engagement



Dick and Flo Gadomski engulfed by nine of the 35(!) students who received scholarships to attend CBU this year through their generosity.

includes the Catholic Diocese of Memphis, Church of the Holy Spirit, United Way, March of Dimes, Memphis Regional Chamber, Renewable Fuels Association, Memphis Bioworks Foundation, and several youth sports programs. But his heart is with CBU.

Christian Brothers University has been an ever-present fact of Gadomski's life. "When I came back to Memphis, I sat on the steps of Barry Hall with a hamburger, and I said to myself 'I am back home.' That's the way I felt. I'm starting a company, and I'm here, and I just felt like I've come home, this has become my home. No matter where I went—Germany, anywhere—I had an education that left me better prepared than anyone around. I had tremendous self-confidence, but it all started here."

He became involved with the Alumni Association in the 1970s, and it wasn't long before Lance Forsdick recruited him to the Board of Trustees—where he has served three rotations over the years. In 1994, in recognition of his service and generosity, the Christian Brothers made Gadomski an Affiliate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools—their highest and rarest recognition which, in effect, makes the honoree a member of the Brothers' order (thus the AFSC designation that he may use after his name).

CBU is also a Gadomski-family affair. Gadomski's business was going well, and his children could have gone to college anywhere. They chose CBU. Greg graduated in 1986 with a degree in economics and finance; Regina graduated in 1988 with a degree in biology before going on to medical school. Gadomski, who was chair of the Board of Trustees, had the distinct honor of handing both of his children their diplomas.

The most remarkable part of Gadomski's story is his dedication and love for the people and places that shaped his life. His leadership at the board level is evident; he is on campus frequently and is a vocal

advocate for his alma mater in the community.

"I feel good about the future direction of the school," he says. "We have more alumni on the board than ever before, and you can really see the leadership." His wife, who is a regular at CBU as well, concurs: "Every time he comes back from a meeting there he's all lit up, because things have come so far and CBU continues to advance."

Buildings around campus and multiple scholarships bear testimony to Gadomski's life and influences. Sabbatini Lounge in the Thomas Center is named for Dolores and her parents; he has given endowed scholarships in memory of both Dolores and his late son, Greg; he has additionally endowed scholarships in honor of Woody Jenne and Ernie Micek, the men who helped get his start with PSI; and there are multiple annual scholarships Gadomski and his wife, Flo, make possible as well. Later this spring, Gadomski will return to St. Patrick High School in Chicago to establish an endowed scholarship program honoring the three Brothers—Philip, Cyprian, and L. Paul—who set his academic career in motion.

Gadomski sums it up best: "We've got a great group of people here at CBU. We've got gifted instructors; we've got a good leadership team. And the students, when I talk to the students today, they feel just like I did. If you ask them about what the University means to them, they say it's an extended family, the faculty knows them and cares about them. They have accessible, great teachers and they're getting a terrific education. And that's exactly the way I felt about CBU when I was here, so I invest my time and dollars here because I believe in our mission and what we're doing.

"I'm grateful for what the Christian Brothers did for me; I came out of this organization and I have to help keep that mission going for the next generation. My mission today is: I'm a Christian Brother." ■