

Ray Hearn's story is as much about passion, persistence and patience as it is about designing golf courses. Hearn, 41, founded his Michigan-based golf architecture business, Raymond Hearn Golf Designs, about six years ago. His road to success was long, but it is a model path for those looking to get into architecture or golf course maintenance.

Hearn grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in St. Clair Shores, Mich., a suburb of Detroit. When he was a young man, the bookish Hearn received a scholarship to any Michigan university he desired. When he chose Michigan State University and its landscape architecture program over the University of Michigan and its medical and law programs, his mother and father flipped. "They thought I was wacko for wanting to study turfgrass science," Hearn says.

They should have known it was coming. Hearn was the kid who often chose gardening over playing ball. He was 12 when he designed his first golf course, a nine-hole layout encompassing seven of his neighbors' yards. "We used wiffle golf balls and real irons," Hearn recalls, still enthusiastic about the track. "We had to hit shots over fences, gardens and pools."

When other boys his age were plotting how to score dates, the 16-year-old Hearn was scheming his career as an architect. Hearn's high-school counselor advised him to contact an architect on the phone and grill him about the business.

At that time, Robert Trent Jones was the biggest name in the business. Hearn dialed his number in New Jersey. "I kept calling his office, but I could never get through to him," Hearn says, assuming Jones was screening his calls.

One day, after Hearn had left umpteen messages, Jones picked up. Gruffly, he told Hearn that his continuous calls were nothing short of badgering.

"I was shaking, and my voice was cracking," Hearn says. "I said, 'Mr. Jones, I just need a little of your time.' He said, 'You've got four minutes.'"

If Hearn wanted to be an architect, Jones told him to attend Michigan State to get a four-year degree in turfgrass science and a minor degree in soil science. After that, Jones told Hearn to get some agronomic experience as a superintendent. And then after that, he told Hearn to return to

A (Long) Model Road to Success

BY LARRY AYLWARD



PASSION AND
PERSISTENCE
PAY OFF FOR
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school to get a landscape architecture degree with a minor in urban planning.

It was nearly a 10-year plan. Some students would have ditched their dreams after hearing they'd have to devote that much time and effort to the process. Hearn, however, followed Jones' blueprint precisely. He obtained the first degree after receiving the scholarship, worked as an assistant superintendent at the Country Club of Detroit for two years and returned to MSU to obtain the landscape architecture degree, which Jones told him was the backbone for understanding design.

Hearn admits it was bittersweet talking to Jones. Bitter because Jones was so brusque with him. Sweet because Jones' passion for the business was infectious. "His passion got me even more fired up," Hearn says.

Hearn willingly committed 9.5 years of his life to become an architect. After earning his second degree, he joined Matthews and Associates, a top firm in Michigan. He worked there for 10 years before opening his own firm in 1996. That year, Hearn was also accepted into the prestigious American Society of Golf Course Architects.

It's been a long haul. When Hearn tells people how long he spent readying himself to become an architect, some ask him why he didn't just go to medical school to become a brain surgeon. But Hearn, who probably had the smarts to do so, couldn't be happier with his career choice.

And Hearn is proud of the time he invested to become an architect. "I don't want to sound like I'm bragging, but I've probably had the most difficult road of anyone," he says.

Even if others have had a longer quest, there's no denying that Hearn's passion, persistence and patience is exemplary. An up-and-comer in the business might just want to call *him* for advice.

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