

Taking the UNEXPECTED PATH

Elevation Burger CEO Hans Hess Knows Life is More than Just One Discipline

BY CATHY ENNS

It's not every day you meet someone whose career path has gone from studying physics to becoming founder and CEO of a chain of successful restaurants. But you probably won't be surprised to learn the story of Hans Hess and Elevation Burger started at Cal Poly.

Hess (B.S., Physics, 1994) was drawn to Cal Poly's strong physics program and the variety of fields of study the university offers.

Interested in pursuits as diverse as architecture, photography and theology, Hess got serious about studying physics in part because of the mentorship of (now) Professor Emeritus Ron Zammit of the College of Science and Mathematics — and learned from Zammit the value of cross-disciplinary interests. "He never let himself become pigeonholed into just one area," says

Hess. "That was very encouraging to see in someone I had a deep respect for."

Hess graduated with no career in mind but with a keen sense of confidence in his abil-

ities. After Cal Poly, he earned a master's degree in Christian theology and then moved to Washington, D.C., to serve as a legislative aide for a Michigan congressman. Later, Hess worked as an analyst with a real estate firm specializing in university housing projects and dining halls. He even played a role in developing Poly Canyon Village.

In 2002, Hess married his wife, April, and began planning a family. That's when he had the idea to open a different kind of restaurant to "elevate" fast food. Launched in 2005, Elevation Burger features free-range, grass-fed, freshly ground beef, a vegetarian and a vegan burger and other healthy choices. The restaurant sources fresh, sustainable, local foods for its menu, uses olive oil in cooking and avoids trans fats.

Elevation Burger garnered immediate positive reviews, and Hess began franchising in 2008. Today Elevation Burger is a rapidly growing, \$50 million business with 31 locations in the U.S. and seven in the Middle East.

Hess said Cal Poly has outstanding programs for students who have a passion for a particular field and want to specialize. He also said the university is a great place to get exposure to a wide range of interesting subjects. He suggests students focus on developing core skills and seize the opportunity to "go from thing to thing and figure out how to tie it together later."

For a longer version of this story, visit Cal Poly Magazine online at www.magazine.calpoly.edu.

Elevation Burger founder and Cal Poly alumnus Hans Hess (right) with Oliver Mead, fellow alumnus and supply chain analyst for the company.

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