Interview with Cody Hanson

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IN: Cody, how are you doing today?

CH: Good man, how are you doing?

IN: Good, I had the privilege of getting to know you, I played football with you for a couple years here at Northern, but what I'm going to talk to you about mostly today is 906 Technologies which you helped start up, and your job here at NMU. Could you give us a little background about yourself, growing up, where you were born and raised?

CH: I was born and raised half in Chicago and half in the Upper Peninsula. I lived in Chicago, Blue Island, Illinois, which is a south suburb, until the age of 12. Then, we moved up here to our summer place and I resumed my academic career here. I went to Northern after I graduated from Westwood. I came to Northern to pursue a computer science degree while playing football here. Throughout my years… I started programming when I was about 14, just random side projects, teachers getting me into things, and it's just blossomed from there. My main field of programming would be web development and database management.

IN: Would you say 14 was about the age you started realizing you were pretty interested in programming and you had a pretty good skill at it?

CH: I actually knew when I was about four or five because when we lived in Chicago my dad worked on the stock market and he had one of those old IBMs, and the only way to get it to run would be to manually type in everything on the command prompt. So, if I wanted to play games I would have to put in the disk and actually manually get them to run. Ever since then I've always had a link with technology, I've always been good with… you name it.

IN: Alright, so what was your major? Computer programming?

CH: Computer science here at Northern, near the end I changed it to network computing because computer science is more math based and they deal with programming languages that deal with operating systems, games and stuff like that, and my focus was more the web aspect. I wanted to make products for people on the web that could help them internationally. So, I changed my major to network computing because that deals more with pretty much everything in the web world.

IN: Okay, and what year did you graduate?

CH: I came here in the fall of '03 and I graduated in the winter of '07.

IN: Okay, and now you're a programmer for the university… at Northern?

CH: Yup, while I worked at Northern I worked a full student job at micro repair which deals with all the laptops and technology services on campus. I was at first just a laptop technician, and then they moved me up to PC technician, and I would go out and perform whatever work orders on campus had to be done, so I already had my foot in the door. Then, we started 906 technologies in the winter of '06, January, so I would do both jobs. Then, when I graduated from Northern I could no longer hold my

student job so I went fulltime with 906 and built that company up for a year, and lucky for me a job opened up at micro repair and I was able to get it because they knew what kind of work habits I had.

IN: Talking about 906 technologies, could you give me a little background on what that company does, and what you guys have been focusing on the last couple of years?

CH: It initially started out as just a group of four of us that knew a lot about computers and we wanted to make some side cash, so we decided we could start a PC repair company, IT consulting, and just help people around the community. It started out with four guys and it just branched out so rapidly… it just expanded so rapidly, so we had to get a bunch of new employees and we then branched out into software engineering and web programming. So, there's me and two other programmers that deal with all the websites, and initially we started out with small time $500 local websites and now we're to the point where we only deal with big name contracts out of like Chicago, Dallas, Miami, a couple out of LA, and we only take… there such big projects and time consuming that we usually only take anywhere from 6-10 on a year.

IN: Oh wow, so you've got your 906 job and you're the programmer here at Northern, what aside from the web design is an example of what you've got going on now for 906?

CH: Well, since everything's moved up I pulled myself out of the hardware part of 906 just because there's only so much time and I don't have time to do that stuff. So, I only do web programs now and an example of something I'm working on now is a company called VIO Labs based out of Chicago, and they are a partner company of SAP Technology, and basically what we're building for them is a huge information database where they can supply content guides, and remote expert services, and various things like that. They need a content management system that can allow them to manage all their different user accounts. We built them almost like a credit card type thing for their business which they're monitoring. There's just so many different things, but basically we build everything on the back end and allow them to manage their business from anywhere in the world.

IN: So, you said you guys started out small, with just four people, and now you're taking in contracts from Dallas and Chicago. How does the name spread so far? How do you think you guys got out there so quickly?

CH: Well, when I worked at micro repair I knew a guy named Rath Bennett. Rath was from Chicago and he had a great idea for this thing called Newstep, and basically what it was, was a 3D virtual walkthrough. He puts a camera on top of a little go-kart, goes through these businesses, and takes virtual 3D mapping of everything in there; and he came to us with this idea and he goes "I've got the funding, but I need someone to program it." So, we designed him a flash engine web base that will display his walkthroughs with hotspots and video ads and all this awesome stuff. Once we did that, he knew that we were capable of doing the programming he needed, and he has a lot of connections out of Chicago. He started getting us one small project at a time, and as we kept coming through big for these companies at a low rate, our name kept getting out there and now it's at the point where we have to turn people down.

IN: Oh really? So this is obviously going pretty well for you. As far as the field and the profession, I know I wouldn't be able to do any of the things you do, is there a larger number of people getting involved in the type of programming that you're doing, or are you guys kind of specialized?

CH: This is the way that I think things are going. There's a lot of people doing web programming which is why it doesn't bother companies when they come to us with a project and we say we just can't handle it right now, because our companies are a dime a dozen out there, but we do know that our services are very secure, and they're backed by everything, which you can't get at a lot of other companies.

IN: And you said you had worked with a lot of companies in the UP and Marquette, what are some of those businesses you had worked with?

CH: Some companies in our portfolio include Vantage Training, Jean Kay's Pasties & Subs where they have online ordering and they ship pasties nationwide, Utopia Tanning, a couple Alltell Companies that got merged up by Verizon, Construction Management Software that was developed by a guy at Northern that came to us with the idea that he wanted to make a web based version because his was simply PC based. So, we did that for him and that seems to be taking off pretty good for him.

IN: So when you said you started in the UP, these weren't necessarily small local businesses, a lot of this stuff was nationwide business that you guys were doing right from the get go there. So, based off this where do you see 906 going? Do you plan on sticking with it for the long run or…?

CH: Maybe not 906, because even though I was a cofounder right now I don't have any ties to the company, I'm an independent contractor. I phased myself out of that, but the two guys that I program with, Dave Bayles and Nate Lampi, I've known since 7th grade. They've been through everything with me, they're my team, and I can't do what I do without them because we each complement each other so well. We would like to start our own web company, branch out, and just pick up big name contracts, like we've been doing, only under a different and just work on those. Because we only need to take on six or eight of things a year to do a salary that a fulltime position at a university can do.

IN: So those are the things that you've been working on, what would be a dream job for you to work on if someone presented the opportunity?

CH: My dream job would be pretty much what I'm doing now just… more security. We have multiple side-projects that are great ideas, we just don't have the programmers to program it and the funding to fund it. So, we're always talking with a lot of the companies that we do business with, a lot of the guys are big investors and they like to take gambles on things, so my dream job would probably be to have one or two of them pick up the funding for one or two of those projects and just carry along with it and basically create a company out of that one website.

IN: Alright.

IN: You guys are still based in the UP obviously, the name 906 technologies, as far as you guys being a company from the UP, is there any other business starting something like this in the UP, or have you guys kind of put the Upper Peninsula on the map as far as technology, and web design, and getting your name out there.

CH: In terms of getting our name out there, in Chicago and select cities I believe that we are the first ones because half of our companies didn't even know that we existed up here, but in terms of putting the UP on the map I couldn't make that claim.

IN: So, you say you're from Chicago originally and moved up here to the UP, is this a place that you plan on staying? Do you plan on relocating, going back to Chicago possibly, what are your plans for the future?

CH: Right now I'm just going with the flow I have way too much here at Northern right now to take off, especially with our current economic situation, but I'm always looking for something bigger and better. If I could not work at the university and just go with my business full time I'd do it in a heartbeat. I love the concept of creating my own hours and working from home. My work schedule is very sporadic. I try to get in anywhere from six to eight hours of programming a day, and that includes weekends.

IN: So this is a job that never stops either, there's always something to work on.

CH: There's always something to do, I'm never done, because even when now I have websites that are two or three years old and I've come so far in terms of my programming in two years that I see things where I recognize that "Man, that's not secure, why did I do it that way? This way is so much better." I'm always going back and updating things, especially when I'm doing security vulnerabilities, I have to go back and change those, but I mean if I'm not working on something with Northern and I'm not working on my business there's always side projects. I always like to expand my knowledge so I take on little things like things that I don't think can be done, and I like to achieve them, things I don't know how to do. The only way to learn it is to just do it. So, I pick it up, put my time and effort into it, and I finish it up.

IN: So you're clearly sort of a perfectionist, not necessarily a perfectionist, but you want your name to go along with quality.

CH: I want people to be very satisfied with my products and I don't want them to ever even doubt the value of the work they're getting.

IN: You said you're one of four brothers, you have your oldest brother who is living down in Chicago still?

CH: Yup, he is getting his masters in sports marketing at Northwestern right now, and he is a residential director I believe down there.

IN: Oh okay, and you have two younger brothers, is anybody else getting involved in programming or computers?

CH: My second youngest brother Drew tried it out for a while, he's very good at technology and the hardware aspect of computers, but when it came to the software the dots just didn't connect. My youngest brother Brett did a stint in PC hardware as well, but he moved on to other things.

IN: So this obviously isn't a field for everybody, it's a lot of work, a lot of trial and error. You have to have the patience and the mind to do it. If you could, would you do anything different with 906 from the start to where you are at this point? Would you guys have attacked anything differently, advertised more?

CH: I would have done a couple of things differently, nothing in terms of advertising and all of that stuff, because I never really handled all of that, I let the main guy who founded it take care of all that stuff. Some of the things I would change would probably be some business lessons that I learned just from being naïve, for example, we had a website a couple years ago, a potentially multimillion dollar

investment that we were going to get funding from, and we had a guy who kept telling us "Get this done, we'll give you the funding" and we worked steady six-months on this thing, night and day, and all-nighters, I think we put in about between three programmers about 20,000 hours, we wrote over 500,000 lines of code just for this website, and then last second he dropped us. There was never a contract and just… "I don't think it's a good investment idea"… "Blah, blah, blah…"

IN: After you had done all of this work for him?

CH: Mhmm, so it's just little business mistakes that we learned the hard way.

IN: Right.

IN: So you mentioned briefly how you had played football here at Northern; have you gotten the opportunity, or would you like the opportunity if it came across, to maybe take your background in both subjects, the programming and the sports where maybe you could design a website or a program for an athletic team? Would that be something that you'd like to get involved with?

CH: Yeah, there was a past idea that we never really got to build too much on was for a website that dealt with the NCAA and all types of recruiting for all their sanctioned sports, and it would basically be almost like a networking sight where kids who don't know that much about the NCAA recruiting process, or anything about the sport process could go on there and learn everything about it, learn what' legal and not legal, they could put up highlight films, they could put up their stats and what not, and it would just be a huge networking tool for colleges, but that obviously was something we just didn't have time to do. Another thing I noticed throughout my career here was that everything is still on a paper trail here at Northern in terms of the Athletic Department, so I proposed the idea a couple years ago to the department head that we create an athletic management system that could track everything, all kinds of information, anything from grades to…

IN: NCAA clearing house?

CH: NCAA clearing house, then you could even go deeper into it where, as of right now, everything on our website in terms of players bios, height, weight, is all manually entered by each person. If we could create a record system it would display it automatically. You could eliminate a $40,000 a year job for updating those things as long as you just put it into a content management system. A lot of things like that… I always wanted to help out the football program in terms of workouts. I remember when I was working out I wanted to go back and see what my lifts were from a year ago, you'd have to go get those sheets from the coaches, but it was a paper trail. They didn't know where half of those sheets are and if they do they don't want to go look for them. If we could keep everything electronically you could always reach that stuff.

IN: Yup, that'd be a pretty interesting thing. As far as a clearing house, and grades, and transcripts, I know there's been times in my experience here at Northern where a recruit that was brought in either lied or had false information that with what you're talking about, they could just click a button and all the information would be right there for them, is that what you're saying?

CH: Yup.

IN: That'd be pretty interesting, but for now you're 25 years old, you've got two good gigs going for you, I look forward to seeing what comes out of you in the future. Good luck, and thanks for the interview, I hope you have a good holidays.

CH: You too man, thanks for having me.