

Alex Sylvester '11S (MBA)

By Ashley Rabinovitch

Just take the leap

From Wall Street to private equity, Alex Sylvester has always found the reward to be worth the risk.

In the fall of 2001, Alex Sylvester '11S (MBA) was the only member of his analyst class at Lehman Brothers without a college degree. His knack for problem-solving in a pressure cooker, paired with an innate ability to connect with people, made him a natural on the trading desk. "Something about the combination of people and numbers worked for me," he remembers. The luster of the job would eventually wear off, catalyzing the first of several pivotal leaps that would come to define Sylvester's career path.

A native of New York City, Sylvester grew up in Germany and spent several formative years in Bahrain, where his father provided financial advisory services to U.S. military personnel. "My dad always had to hustle for business," Sylvester recalls. "I developed an interest in entrepreneurship by watching how he worked." Although Sylvester aspired to start his own company one day, he decided to learn the ropes on Wall Street as he earned a degree in finance and investments at nearby Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business.

Ultimately, Sylvester savored the adrenaline more than the uncertainty of his role at Lehman Brothers. "I didn't love having to explain to people in a corner office why I lost money for reasons outside of my control," he admits. He received a job offer from Barclay's after Lehman Brothers collapsed in the financial crisis of 2007-2008, but he interpreted the unexpected turn of events as a sign that it was time to change direction. "I realized I would be happier working in a longer-term, investment-focused role," he says, "but I needed to return to business school for the right doors to open."

Finding a community

When he first enrolled in Simon, Sylvester struggled to transition to the life of a full-time student. "I was spending all my time looking for the next job," he acknowledges. "Then I had a moment when I realized I was at the bottom of the curve." Fortunately, his professors and career advisors at Simon refused to let him fall through the cracks. "Simon really is a community," he affirms. "I had a few people sit me down and ask me what they could do to help me succeed. That was my wake-up call. I went on to graduate as a Florescue Fellow."

Like many of his peers, Sylvester found the tight-knit Simon community to be the highlight of his experience in the MBA program. "On Wall Street, I worked alone most of the time," he reflects. "I had never been assigned to teams of people, all with different personalities and different strengths, who had to solve problems together." As a result of the emphasis on collaboration at Simon, Sylvester formed ties that remain strong a decade after graduation. "I still talk often with former classmates," he shares. "We check in with each other."

Taking the next step

After graduating from Simon, Sylvester knew he wanted to build his career somewhere at the crossroads of finance and entrepreneurship. He chose private equity and ended up at Liberty Mutual Insurance's investment group, where he harnessed the entrepreneurial energy he had always possessed to help business owners develop strategies for growth.

When the opportunity arose to launch a new private equity firm with colleagues, Sylvester took his greatest leap yet. In early 2014, Ero Resource Partners (ERP) was born. For the next two years, he threw himself fully into the work of navigating complex relationships with fundraising advisors, endowments, pensions, foundations, and other capital providers to raise funding for a private equity fund focused on natural resources.

Although Sylvester found the work rewarding, ERP faced an uphill battle as a first-time fund going to market. "The crash and burn is miserable," he says. "I never thought I would be almost flat broke after business school. I was looking down the mountain." At the time, he had no way of knowing if the business would have succeeded in another 6 or 12 months, but with a growing family, he didn't have the luxury of waiting to find out.

Though his startup failed, Sylvester doesn't view the experience as a failure. "I got to create something from nothing," he says. "I got to scratch that entrepreneurial itch and learn firsthand that just as many businesses fail as succeed. And now, in my current role, I understand how to talk to startups and business owners, because I understand where they're coming from. I've been there."

With entrepreneurial experience under his belt, Sylvester moved from Boston to San Francisco to take the next step forward in his career. A prominent consulting company, Duff & Phelps, needed someone who could bridge the worlds of finance and natural resources, and Sylvester fit the bill. Ultimately, he realized he was more naturally suited to being a subject-matter expert than a consultant, so he began to look for the next opportunity when the company was acquired.

The best of all worlds

Sylvester's willingness to take chances on new opportunities paid off when he landed his current role at A3Ventures, the innovation and strategy arm of AAA Northern California, Nevada & Utah. As the Senior Director of Acquisitions at A3Ventures, he has discovered the space he was always trying to carve out. "This role brings all the best elements of past jobs together in one place," he says. His financial acumen, combined with his experience in private equity and venture capital deals, positioned him perfectly to speak the language of entrepreneurs in an investment and acquisition space. Sylvester fills such a unique niche that he enjoys a "fair amount of autonomy," he shares. "What I do is so specific that no one puts me in a box. I'm always swimming to my own tide to find the right deal."

When Sylvester reflects on the twists and turns of his path to San Francisco, he identifies an important lesson for the next generation of Simon students. "Make sure that whatever you do, you don't look back tomorrow and regret not trying," he advises. "I've talked to countless people who have thought about taking chances for their entire career, but they never do. If I hadn't tried and failed and tried again, I never would have ended up in the place I am now. Sometimes you just have to take the leap." **SB**