

# Alumni SPOTLIGHT



**ERIC GANTZ '06**

DEGREE: MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

TITLE OF CURRENT POSITION: CONTROLLER AT PEPSI DUBUQUE;  
CO-FOUNDER OF VERENA STREET® COFFEE CO.,  
CO-OWNER AT VENDORS UNLIMITED CORP.

CITY AND STATE: DUBUQUE, IOWA

Eric Gantz was driven to further his education. He was drawn to the idea of working in his family business (Pepsi-Cola of Dubuque) and pursuing an MBA degree at the same time. Eric wanted enough education to support a strong career in lieu of the family business, should he ever need it. He also wanted enough educational experience to be a well-rounded business person and someday help run the family business.

“The Clarke MBA program revisited all of the business areas of study (marketing, economics, finance, etc.) and went more in-depth in other areas that I had only taken prerequisite classes in my undergrad,” said Eric.

“I feel that the MBA program at Clarke gave me a well-rounded business acumen and trained me to think more strategically.”

After Eric earned his MBA from Clarke, he became a controller at Pepsi Dubuque, co-founder of Verena Street® Coffee Co., and co-owner at Vendors Unlimited Corp. These were not his first roles with the family business. He started at Pepsi Dubuque when he was 12 years old doing odd jobs in the warehouse like repackaging damaged products. Eventually, he began working in all the other departments while in high school and college doing tasks such as stocking store shelves, building pallets in the warehouse, running vending routes at Vendors Unlimited, driving a tractor-trailer delivering Pepsi, acting as interim warehouse manager, overseeing the merchandising department, and spending time on a sales route. When a permanent controller position that Eric was suited for became available, he moved into his current position. Eric is also responsible for the HR and IT functions of all three businesses.

Eric soon realized that his family’s successful Pepsi business had already gained the majority market share in its territory, so there was not much room left for additional growth. Plus, the soft drink business is changing dramatically as people drink fewer soft drinks and there is now a greater variety of alternative beverages with many more competitors. They were looking to diversify so they explored acquiring different types of businesses.

“Our vending business has sold coffee for more than 50 years and in 2007 we expanded into convenience store coffee and had more than 70 convenience store customers in which we installed an upgraded coffee program called Coremill Coffee,” said Eric. “My cousin Michael who is also in the Pepsi business was interested in starting a coffee roasting business to supply the coffee we were already distributing. This would give us more control over the quality of our product and he felt the opportunity was lucrative.”

After visiting several existing roasters that were for sale in 2008-2009, they felt most were overvalued and decided to start their own roasting business. They developed their Verena Street® coffee brand which is now their primary focus and is sold in over 700 grocery stores, club stores and warehouse stores.

“When we started developing Verena Street® we debated whether we should play down our Dubuque roots or if we should highlight them,” said Eric. “When we were growing up here, Dubuque used to be a ‘dirty river town’ in most people’s eyes. As a child I remember thinking larger Iowa towns had much more going for them and a lot of people my age were desperate to get out of the area.”

Eric and his cousin eventually decided that Dubuque has come a long way since their childhood and they wanted to help be a part of that continued effort, so they decided to highlight their heritage and make Dubuque a core part of their branding.



Eric Gantz '06, co-founder of Verena Street® Coffee Co. shows off the popular Julien's Breakfast Blend.

“I’ve personally worked sampling events for our coffees in cities like Omaha, Chicago, Madison, Davenport, Cedar Rapids, Iowa City and Des Moines and we constantly find people thrilled to hear that we are from Dubuque,” said Eric.

They wanted most of the coffee names to be relevant to Dubuque. For instance, Julien's Breakfast Blend is named

after the founder of Dubuque; Lock & Dam 11 is named after the lock and dam that is less than a mile from their facility; Nine Mile Sunset is named after Nine Mile Island; Shot Tower Espresso is named after the historic Dubuque shot tower; and Mississippi Grogg is their most popular flavored coffee and people are constantly intrigued by that name.


“We sort of followed the craft beer marketing theme,” said Eric. “Just like the craft beer movement, people are looking for higher quality coffees and everyone prefers local brands these days or brands that have some kind of story or personality behind them.”

Eric consistently receives positive feedback from customers who are thrilled with his brand and product quality. People often say it is the best coffee they have ever had. Chuck Isenhardt contacted them earlier this year to get samples for the Iowa House of Representatives and thereafter wrote a letter of recommendation expressing his support of Verena Street® becoming their coffee supplier.

As for Verena Street®, they recently expanded their facility and also started distributing Keurig-compatible single cup coffees which is a whole new opportunity for them. Additionally, they have gained several new channels of business including their coffee being distributed by the Fareway Foods warehouse to 100 percent of their stores versus the 40 percent Verena Street® was self-distributing to before. They also just began selling at all Jewel-Osco stores in the Chicagoland.

Put the kettle on because Eric is brewing up some additional plans for Verena Street®.

“We have already outgrown our facility expansion and are currently looking to recapitalize the business and purchase more equipment and move to a larger facility to accommodate future growth,” said Eric.

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