The Professor

As told to Jason Ankeny

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Ted Rappaport: Teacher, researcher and entrepreneur. Launched start-ups TSR Technologies and Wireless Valley while on faculty of Virginia Tech. Now guiding next-gen innovators as director of University of Texas' Wireless Networking Communications Group.

I was at Purdue University in the late 1970s when the cellular industry was in its formative stage in the U.S. As professors would tell us about it, I knew wireless would become as revolutionary as pen and paper. The cellular industry was just coming online in 1987 when I graduated, and I knew I wanted to be a professor — I knew that as a faculty member you could help change the world in a positive way pretty quickly. I had seen that firsthand.

I've always believed that the most successful faculty members are those who are entrepreneurial. If you look historically at the faculty who have made the largest impact in the world, you find that it's pretty typical that they are able to create products and inventions that can improve the industry they serve while simultaneously bringing that knowledge into the classroom. It's why I stay in academia. I've never looked at it as a hardship — I've always viewed the entrepreneurial process as a basic ingredient to being a useful professor.

TSR started in the basement of my house. A couple of really great students and I worked in the evenings and developed one of the first software radios — it was a device that could intercept cellular and paging signals of many different standards. This was a company started by myself and my wife, Brenda, and a handful of graduate students who built the circuit boards on a ping-pong table that we converted into a manufacturing bench. It was a great education on how to build a business and how an idea and good students can together create something of value.

I've been very blessed to work with students who share my enthusiasm and interest in wireless. You really do better when you work with people who share your values and commitment to excellence and honesty and candor. It's easy to make a huge impact when you work with a team of students and faculty who are honest and open and have a common goal: creating something that's great and useful to others.

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