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Work with Purpose, Passion and Profit

# worthwhile



## When the Dream Changes

Photography by Allison Shirreffs



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He was No. 2 at Cisco, then CEO of OpenWave.  
But Don Listwin chunked it all for what he wants:

to help cure cancer.

Paul B. Carroll on the transformation.

Don Listwin was a driven, successful executive – even anchorman-handsome, just for good measure. He had risen to be the No. 2 executive at Cisco Systems, making a fortune along the way. He got his chance to be a CEO when he left in 2000 to run a high-profile technology startup.

Then his mother, Grace, was diagnosed with late-stage ovarian cancer. After she died, Listwin decided the fight against cancer mattered more than the fight for market share. So, at the end of last year, at age 45, he walked away from his career to devote his considerable finances – and even more considerable energy – to cancer research.

Trying to provoke progress through a foundation that he established and through personal donations that have thus far totaled more than \$15 million, Listwin hopes to help marry the life sciences with computer science to detect cancer sooner. Within 10 years, he expects people will have annual blood tests that will be screened for thousands of indicators of cancer, using inexpensive computer chips. He says the chips will identify cancer at a far earlier stage than is now possible – a stage at which treatment can be much less intrusive and much more effective. If his mother had had access to such a chip, she might still be alive.

Experts say Listwin may well be onto something. "I believe there's an opportunity," says Michael Milken, the former financier, who has been financing medical research for three decades and who has driven new approaches to cancer research. Listwin has "a very realistic goal."

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As I drive toward Listwin's house in Woodside, Calif., I enter what locals call "mink and manure" country. "Mink," because the heavily forested hills above Silicon Valley are home to many of the area's titans, such as Oracle Chairman Larry Ellison. "Manure," because of the miles of horse trails that meander through the woods, because so many residents keep horses on their estates, and because the small downtown has hitching posts in some parking lots. On the right is one of the icons of Silicon Valley: Buck's, a restaurant that would be just another hole in the wall except that if you sail a flapjack in any direction you're sure to hit a venture capitalist hatching some megadeal.

Up the road, I pull through the gate into Listwin's yard. A 300-year-old oak, stands of towering, centuries-old redwoods and a glittering stream cloak the mustard-colored, French country mansion in a cool grandeur.

Dressed in jeans and a cotton, short-sleeve shirt, Listwin ushers me through some vaguely medieval, massive wooden doors and into his family room, where a fire crackles in a huge fireplace. He is slender but carries himself like an athlete. As he closes his laptop – the modern man, he has been doing email by the fire – and begins to tell me his story, it becomes clear that his bearing is well-earned.

As a child growing up in Saskatchewan, Listwin was the provincial junior champion in table tennis. He played volleyball in high school and at the University of Saskatchewan "despite being 5'10" on a tall day," as he puts it. Even his senior project for his engineering degree had a sports twist: He designed a device that simulated blockers on a volleyball court, so players could practice spiking the ball.

Listwin's initial exposure to business came through a sequence of small companies his family owned – a drycleaner, a beer distributor, a water distributor, a grocery business, a Pepsi franchise. After college, he went to work for a computer networking company and soon found his way to Silicon Valley.

In 1990, a friend called to say that he'd started working for a great little company and that Listwin should come on over. That company was Cisco.

Listwin liked the company so much that he took a 50 percent pay cut to work there, beginning as a product manager. His timing was impeccable: He was one of the first 100 professional employees. Working conditions, though, weren't always so great. Cisco focused so much on pinching pennies that it had its headquarters in East Palo Alto, Calif., where office space was almost given away because the city's drug wars produced more murders per capita than in any other city in the country. Listwin recalls the FBI staging two major drug raids on neighboring buildings while he worked.

As Cisco grew, Listwin led the development of three businesses that each generated billions of dollars of annual revenue. One, selling equipment to "service providers" – principally, telephone companies and Internet service providers – accounted at its peak for more than half the company's revenue.

By 2000, Cisco's revenue had reached \$19 billion, almost 300 times what it was when Listwin joined 10 years earlier. The former product manager was now one of two executive vice presidents, with 15,000 people working for him. He was often trotted out in public, where securities analysts described him as smart, aggressive, a marketing whiz. He was frequently mentioned as heir apparent to CEO John Chambers.



But Chambers was only 50 years old. He wasn't going anywhere soon. So, in September 2000, Listwin left to become CEO of OpenWave, putting himself in position to lead a wave of technological innovation. The "mobile Internet" – connecting to the Internet from cell phones and other mobile devices – was all the rage, and OpenWave was best-positioned to dominate the area because it had generated many of the key innovations and owned numerous important patents.

Yet the Internet bubble had already begun to burst, and Listwin says the four years he spent as CEO turned out to be the hardest of his life. "I had to lay off half my 2,500 employees. I got divorced. And my mom died," Listwin says. "Other than that, I had a great time."

In September 2001, Listwin received what he calls "a perspective phone call." He was at the hospital, near Vancouver, where his mom had died less than an hour earlier. His father and sister had just arrived, and the mourning process had begun in earnest. Just as a nurse came into the room and asked if the family would donate Grace Listwin's corneas, Listwin's mobile phone rang. It was OpenWave's CFO, reporting in that they had missed their numbers for the quarter. The hard-charging executive says he quietly told the CFO, "Thanks for telling me, but at the moment that's just going to have to take a back seat."

Listwin hunkered down, among other things cutting his annual salary to a single dollar until OpenWave returned to profitability. By the second half of 2004, black ink had returned, and OpenWave was growing again, even though the slow development of mobile uses of the Internet laid waste to virtually every competitor.

But Listwin had had enough. Not only had his mother died

of cancer, but his father had survived colon cancer. Listwin says, "There is quite a bit of history of cancer in my family." Listwin decided to devote himself full time to the war on cancer.

While that might have been jarring to colleagues, the move wasn't as much of a left turn as it might have appeared. Years earlier, Cisco had helped introduce Listwin to philanthropy. Even though Cisco's early CEO, John Morgridge, was famously tight-fisted, he believed in corporate charity and was shrewd about finding money to donate. Listwin recalls that when Cisco would generate an extraordinary gain, Morgridge went to the board and argued that the gain wouldn't benefit the stock price because it wouldn't be seen as an indicator of future earnings. Morgridge offered to split the gain, letting the business keep half the cash and using the other half to build a charitable foundation.

As Listwin rose at Cisco, he became the point man for the company's high-profile partnership with the United Nations that launched NetAid in 1998 – an attempt to use the Internet to rally people around the world to fight poverty.

When Listwin decided to embark on his personal crusade, he had at his disposal the kind of fortune that comes from being one of the top executives at a business that goes from being a startup to having one of the biggest market capitalizations of any company in the world. (Cisco's market value topped out at more than half a trillion dollars in 2000.) Executives leaving Cisco are required to cash in their options, so Listwin did – right before the stock crashed.

He also had some ideas. Viewing personal computers as "the first platform" and the Internet as the second, he felt that a combination of computer technology and medicine could create what

he calls "the third platform" and usher in a new era of health care. Basically, the idea is to let medicine piggyback on Moore's Law, which says that a unit of computing power drops in price by half roughly every 18 months and which means that computing prices plunge some 98 percent every decade. The connection is showing up in some areas – for instance, Milken says the cost of sequencing a single gene was \$150 million in the 1970s but has fallen to roughly \$4 today and soon will drop to perhaps 3 cents. Listwin, given his background in the high-tech world, thinks he can help marshal the right resources to broaden the connections between computers and medicine.

"I'm giving more than my money," Listwin says. "I'm giving my time and, I hope, some of the skills I've developed. It's easy to write big checks if you have a big bank account."

## LISTWIN'S LIST: WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A NONPROFIT

1. **Passion.** You can feel it on the website or hear it in the voices of those who work there. Passionate people are more effective.
2. **Effectiveness.** Does the organization deliver tangible, measurable results? In other words, don't confuse effort with results.
3. **Efficiency.** Nonprofits should generally spend 10 percent to 20 percent of their funds on overhead and fundraising (with smaller organizations toward the low end of the range). Obviously, if the figure is too high, your money is going to overhead, not programs. But if it's too low, the organization usually doesn't have a real plan to grow effectively.
4. **Transparency.** Make sure the measures of effectiveness and efficiency are reported frequently. For larger organizations, look for the audit.
5. **References.** Try to find some for the organization from someone like yourself.
6. **Feedback.** Look for an organization that gives you plenty. Too many get your money, then stop communicating.
7. **Volunteer.** Don't just donate money; donate your time and skill.



Listwin says that what he calls, in his business lingo, "the cancer industry" has done enough basic research that it has moved into a domain where he is comfortable. The industry can move into what he thinks of as product development, solving the kinds of complex engineering problems that groups at Cisco face all the time.

The subject matter may be intimidating, but the cancer world seems to be welcoming this outsider. Listwin says he confessed to one eminent researcher that he got a B in high school biology and says the scientist replied, "That's OK. Most of what they taught you was wrong."

After some research, Listwin chose to focus on early detection of cancer. That is, no doubt, partly because ovarian cancer is hard to diagnose, and his mother's cancer wasn't discovered until it was too late. In addition, Listwin felt that the cancer world wasn't focused enough on the problem. The reason: The money is being made from treatment, not from detection.

As he cast around for ways to help researchers improve detection, he concluded — like some others before him — that the process for awarding grants was too slow. Researchers might spend a year writing a proposal, then wait a year to find out whether they received it. They then might spend a year or two doing their work, after which they'd write up their results and wait for an academic journal to review and publish them. Only at that point would other researchers be able to formulate new ideas based on that research and start applying for new grants.

Milken says that people tend to view "science as a fast train, and science can, in fact, go 300 mph. But the average train goes 50 mph because the infrastructure is the same as it was 100 years ago."

Listwin looked for a research group that shared his view of the world and found the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Group, known as "the Hutch," in Seattle. Drawing on the advice of the Hutch's director, Lee Hartwell, who won the 2001 Nobel Prize in Medicine, Listwin formed the Canary Fund to hand out money quickly and require that beneficiaries share results in real time — one of the first donations, decided on with what Dr. Hartwell calls "lightning speed," was a \$10 million check to the Hutch. The Canary Fund also is set up to encourage researchers to collaborate across disciplines, rather than just work with others in their specialty. In addition, the foundation focuses on less-established researchers and riskier ideas — the kinds of people and ideas that typically have been passed over by traditional sources of funds.

Listwin has begun trying to raise other donations for the Canary Fund, though he views it mostly as a catalyst; he hopes to raise \$250 million to \$300 million to pursue his approach to cancer research over five to seven years, but doesn't care whether



Listwin visits his mother's grave.

the money flows through his fund or takes some other route.

Typically, Listwin isn't relying just on traditional channels. He has set up a for-profit sister venture, Canary Enterprises, whose earnings will go to the Canary Fund. Thinking big, Listwin has decided that Canary Enterprises' first effort will be to bring a Grand Prix race to San Jose, a huge undertaking Listwin hopes could eventually be for the Canary Fund what Newman's Own food products are for children with life-threatening diseases.

Listwin also is pursuing normal channels, sort of. In the best tradition of the cocktail-party fundraiser, he invited many friends to the launch of the Canary Fund late last year at his home. When the guests passed through the front gate, they saw Grand Prix race cars parked among the three dozen redwoods. Huey Lewis and the News were playing loudly.

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As for Listwin personally, he says he's gained 10 pounds since leaving OpenWave because his friends are calling to say, "Let's do breakfast." He says he's having trouble finding a rhythm; his career was so much a part of his life, and now it's gone. He says he sometimes wakes up in the morning and thinks, "What the hell am I doing?"

I wonder at our first meeting whether, at some point, he won't be tempted by some big-money, high-profile job and get back in the game. But each time we talk over the space of almost two months he ticks off his latest accomplishments and sounds ever more excited.

"If I can find a rhythm here and feel like I'm making a contribution," he says, "I won't go back." ■

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