

Nancy Benovich Gilby

Entrepreneur x 10



Nancy Benovich Gilby
Serial Entrepreneur
BSE CE '85, MSE CSE '87

The day her uncle, an engineer at General Motors, brought home an early calculator, she saw it, loved it, and wanted one of her own. She wanted to know what made it tick. She was in first grade, and although she didn't yet realize it, she was on the path to becoming not only an engineer, but a prolific entrepreneur.

Nancy observed the energy and planning that preceded this great leap, and she was invited to sit in on meetings with potential vendors for new computing platforms, which included early workstation company Apollo and Steve Jobs of Apple. Afterwards, she evaluated the demo systems and provided input. The direction of computing suggested by these encounters and the exposure to powerful entrepreneurial thinking had a deep impact on her.

Infected by the examples she found at Michigan, Nancy undertook her own journey to make change through entrepreneurial endeavor. Today, she's at her tenth startup and continues to have a strong interest in innovation and getting the early adopters of new technologies and solutions "across the chasm."

Nancy's first gig at a startup, in 1988, was working for Mitch Kapur, who had previously founded Lotus. The company developed On Location, the first desktop search program, and Meeting Maker, a desktop calendaring system that is still in use today.

Nancy next became a founder at Component Software, again working with Kapur, where they built the precursor to Java and sold it to Sun.

Over the next two decades, Nancy headed efforts to design and develop a stream of innovative products that opened or addressed new markets. Many plowed the ground for the more recognizable names that would follow, sometimes years later.

At Wildfire, she led development of voice recognition and navigation for pre-smartphone, analog mobile phones. At Firefly, she helped to build the first community website with preference-based matching and advertising characteristics. At MarketSoft, she developed enterprise software for marketing and lead management. She built additional products at companies that developed cloud and service solutions for mobile operators. Time and again, these startups were acquired by companies including IBM, Microsoft, Nuance, and Asurion.

Nancy Benovich Gilby grew up in working class Warren, Michigan. Although she excelled in math, would become class valedictorian, and played trumpet in marching band, she didn't consider the possibility of attending the University of Michigan until a math teacher pushed her to apply.

"I'm so glad that I took that step. When I was accepted into Michigan, that was one of the happiest days of my life: I thought it would be so cool to be at Michigan, to be in engineering, and to play in the marching band. And I was very fortunate to be able to do all of those things, and more."

Nancy made the cut for the Michigan marching band, which just a handful of years previously had begun accepting female musicians. A highlight was the opportunity to play at two Rose Bowl parades and games.

While an engineering student, Nancy landed a job in Dean James Duderstadt's office that would ultimately bring her path into focus. The college leadership was planning a computing transition under which all users would move from large multi-user, mainframe systems to next-generation computing workstations.

"I've had many successes, but it was my education and experiences at Michigan that brought all of the right elements together to make it possible."

Most recently, Nancy has joined the Maker Movement and is using computer-controlled micro manufacturing to build personalized, photorealistic, recycled glass-tiled mosaics. Her company, Starry Night Mosaics, builds custom art from 4mm segments of glass, which can be displayed as traditional art or built into indoor or outdoor installations.

Since 2006, Nancy has shared her experience with students through the Center for Entrepreneurship. She visits campus regularly as a speaker and is currently the mentor for a Michigan

I-Corps innovation team. “It sounds a little weird,” she says, “but I get as much out of this as the students do. Their passion is inspiring, and Michigan’s program on entrepreneurship is absolutely unmatched elsewhere.”

In reflecting on her days at Michigan, Nancy said, “I’ve had many successes, but it was my education and experiences at Michigan that brought all of the right elements together to make it possible. You can have all the passion you want, but without the right catalyst it may never happen.”



A large outdoor mosaic made by Starry Night Mosaics.

A Timeline of Ten Ventures

