

Keith Girouard

Berkshire regional office, Massachusetts
Small Business Development Center Network

EXECUTIVE SPOTLIGHT

By TONY DOBROWOLSKI
The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — Keith Girouard never had seriously hiked before he walked the entire Appalachian Trail in 110 days shortly after graduating from the University of Connecticut in 1977.

That's an impressive feat for any hiker, let alone a relative novice. That 2,190-mile journey along the East Coast between Maine and Georgia takes the typical hiker five to seven months to complete, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

"It taught me about the power of persistence," Girouard said. "In my case, how numerous steps can carry you a great distance."

Girouard said he applies what he learned then to what he does now. As regional director of the Berkshire regional office of the Massachusetts Small Business Development Center Network in Pittsfield, Girouard and his two colleagues, senior business

adviser Mark Avnet and client services coordinator Jayne Bellora, help aspiring entrepreneurs through the process of turning their dreams of opening a small business into reality.

We spoke with the East Hartford, Conn., native recently about how he became a business consultant, the services the Small Business Development Center provides, the outlook for small businesses in the Berkshires coming out of the coronavirus pandemic, and why he still likes to hike.

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Founded: The statewide network, a program of the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, was founded in 1980. The Berkshire office became a development center in 2009.

Mission: Provides free, confidential, one-to-one business assistance and free or low-cost educational training programs to prospective and existing small businesses in Berkshire County.

Employees: Three

Q I noticed that you majored in English at UConn. How did you pivot to working with small businesses?

A I'd like to think that it was a happy discovery. It's not something that I planned for.

Many years ago [in the mid-to-late 1980s] I signed up for a start-your-own business workshop. At the time, it was held on the 13th floor of the [then] J. Crowne Plaza in Pittsfield. When I stepped in the elevator, there was no 13th-floor button to push.

Atop the button column, over the number 12, was written "ETC" [the letters stood for Executives Travel Club]. So, I thought, that's kind of hopeful, so, I pushed it. I ended up at the workshop. Years later, I just regarded the pushing of that button as a good omen because it started me on my way here to thinking about businesses and business in general.

Q Did you switch gears right away?

A The first roll-up-your-sleeves moment actually began years later.

I was a task force member charged with doing community development. So, I did my own windshield survey and noticed that there were a lot of businesses wherever I would drive. I thought that's probably a pretty good place to be.

I became a co-chair of a small-business development committee and then realized that this is where the action is because you can't get more essential than the demonstrated boldness and self-determination of just leaning into the world and looking for people to buy what you're willing to offer, and putting your livelihood on the line, and wrapping your hopes and your dreams as part of that.

That's what's drew me in. ... As I have done several times in my life, I have taken a step towards something that I didn't know much or anything about that just sort of interested me, and it just seemed like good timing.

Q How did you end up at the Small Business Development Center?

A I saw an ad in the paper. I thought, "That's kind of interesting," and I applied [in 2007].

Q What does the center do?

A I have my own take on that. Very simply, I see it as increasing the probability of success in starting and growing and managing a small business.

That involves a couple of things; an exquisite execution of the tools, frameworks and best practices that go with that and this idea of merging intuitions and insights with fact-based decision-making. ... I think what distinguishes us is, we look to develop competencies. ... What I like to say is, we're helping the founders become the CEOs of the companies that we're creating, which is a different skill set.

Q What's the most rewarding part of your job?

A Almost everything. I know that sounds kind of corny, but every day I just feel very privileged to be part of and witness the struggles people go through and just grateful to see the resiliency that people have and the willingness that people have and the willingness for them to risk things. ... I have to say it's the best job I've ever had, by far.

Q What's the most frustrating part?

A Currently, the most frustrating is the unpredictability of so many things. It's also exciting in that it creates a great opportunity for creating, but it can be frustrating because things can change so quickly.

When we were going through the early stages of the pandemic and getting directives and information from a variety of sources, things were changing so rapidly that what I was saying in the morning was no longer pertinent in the afternoon. The way we like to say it is, everybody was jumping off this cliff and we were building our airplane on the way down and then learning how to fly it.

Q How do you see small businesses in the Berkshires coming out of the pandemic?

A I think it's going to be different for different businesses and different industries. The hardest hit are those businesses that rely on daily transactions and the circulation of money. ... The relief efforts by so many people and so many entities have supported cash flow and bought time for businesses to recover and recalibrate and to search for supplemental revenues.

Those folks who are most successful at that are going to be the ones that, I think, are going to be able to adapt. ... Those people who continued to do a white-knuckle thing and hold on to what it was before the pandemic ... I expect that those are the ones who perhaps are not going to be as successful.

Q When things go back to whatever the new normal is, do you think they'll go back to the way they used to be?

A It's not going to go back to what it used to be. I think the technologies that people are using and getting more and more committed to ... they're realizing the benefits of how it can go across time, how it can go across geographic restrictions in different ways of doing business.

Everything that I've looked at talks about how there's going to be a footprint that's going to linger for a while and that it's going to actually shift things. ... There's definitely more emphasis on having a digital footprint, an online presence. And it's not just having one, it's having a curated one and understanding the leveraging of technology.

Q Your bio states that when you hiked the Appalachian Trail, you averaged 20 miles a day. Did you really do that?

A I did. How did I do that? I hiked and hiked and hiked. ... In a funny way, hiking helped prepare me and taught me a lot in terms of small business. It taught me about the power of persistence, and how numerous small steps can carry you a great distance. ... It was a very personal experience for me. I like to think of it as the gift that keeps on giving.

Q Do you still hike?

A Oh, I do, yes. It's my way of clearing my head. ... Nature doesn't lie. It gives you honest results for honest work.



BEN GARVER — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Keith Girouard, regional director of the Berkshire regional office of the Massachusetts Small Business Development Center Network in Pittsfield, says that hiking the Appalachian Trail helped prepare him and taught him a lot in terms of small business. "It taught me about the power of persistence, and how numerous small steps can carry you a great distance. ... It was a very personal experience for me," Girouard says. "I like to think of it as the gift that keeps on giving."