

BRIGHTLIGHTS

[Latane Meade ('01)]

Finance major gets national Entrepreneur of the Year nod

BY JAMES IRWIN ('06)

Latane Meade's 6-foot-5 frame and shock-top blonde hair guarantee that he stands out wherever he goes. His jock looks are backed by a sharp business acumen, so he's hard to categorize. Meade's vision for life and business are uniquely intertwined. His company, a booming sports and social club, is about as traditional as its owner — a Ping-Pong playing, trucker-hat wearing free spirit with one goal in mind: Bring fun to life.

A 2001 JMU alumnus and member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, Meade is president of VAVi Sport & Social Club in San Diego, Calif. This past year he was one of the top five finalists for *Entrepreneur Magazine's* Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year Award, presented by the UPS Store.

Meade is finding accolades and success by doing things his way — letting the results speak for themselves and allowing the world to see what a little energy boost can do for a growing business.

The JMU College of Business alumnus left Washington, D.C., — and a promising position at PricewaterhouseCoopers — in 2003 and set out for the West Coast to chase entrepreneur dreams. He hooked up with VAVi (at the time a start-up) shortly after arriving in San Diego. Meade, who

'The most rewarding thing is having a vision and figuring out how to make it work.'

— LATANE MEADE ('01)

majored in finance and concentrated in marketing information systems as an undergraduate, relied on his background to help guide VAVi through its formative years.



Latane Meade ('01) president of VAVi Sports & Social Club is named one of the top five finalists for *Entrepreneur Magazine's* Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year.

"As a JMU student, I wasn't sure what exact field I wanted to enter," admits Meade. "I was interested in starting my own thing, and JMU professors were supportive. Classes were very engaging. It wasn't just about teaching; it was about allowing students to work with others."

Citing his COB 300 class, Meade believes his Madison Experience armed him with the tools to tackle a project as massive as helping start a business like VAVi from scratch. There were realistic challenges to face — namely how long it would take to cultivate relationships with clients and partners. For Meade, that meant looking at the total landscape of a sport and social club in the greater San Diego area, pinpointing a target audience and finding the right balance of services to provide.

Fast-forward eight years. Now, VAVi serves more than 50,000 participants, and in 2011 netted \$3.05 million in revenue. The company hosts numerous sports leagues and large events and has expanded to include dance, cardio classes and adventure fitness. The company also hosts a race series. VAVi staff also encourage members and clients to participate public-service events like San Diego Serve-a-thon opportunities through the local Ronald McDonald Charity House and the county chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters.

"We weren't creating something new" in building VAVi, Meade explains. "But we certainly were doing it our way."

That's a recurring theme for Meade, who — in addition to moving out west and jumping in to help start a company at age 23 — also decided to take a different approach with his final entry video for *Entrepreneur Magazine's* Emerging Entrepreneur Award.

Not 30 seconds in, Meade — wearing a black T-Shirt and playing Ping-Pong — admits to ignoring the advice of a public relations expert who told him to be "very professional" in the video. Meade pokes fun at himself for being too tall for most clothes and challenges the audience to ask themselves "if a little craziness is a bad or good way to run a business."

The answer — based on VAVi's success and Meade's emergence in the industry — is obvious. "The most rewarding thing is having a vision and figuring out how to make it work," Meade says. **M**

*** Watch Latane Meade's entry video for the Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year Award at www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7jlhIQB4-s. Learn more about Meade ('01) at www.jmu.edu/alumni/awards/centennial.shtml on the "100 Days, 100 Dukes" entry for Day 93.**