

WASHINGTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

**THE
OTHER
GUY**

He's not
Steve Case.

He's not
Ted Leonsis.

But this is
why you
need to know
DONN DAVIS.

Top 50 business schools in America
Entrepreneur
BE YOUR OWN BOSS
Advice from
online pioneer and
business advocate
Steve Case

The Business of Happiness
TED LEONISIS

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MONEY & TECH EXTRA

An in-depth look at the economy, technology, startups, VC, housing and financial services

HAAAAAAVE YOU MET DONN?

He may work in the shadows of Washington's flashiest business names, but he's the glue that holds together one of the region's biggest VC firms

BY ANDY MEDICI | AMEDICI@BIZJOURNALS.COM | @WBJANDY

In any other world, you would have heard of him by now. At age 29, he became the youngest chief legal counsel at the time in Major League Baseball. He later brokered an early investment in AOL for the venture capital arm of then-Tribune Co. Today, the 54-year-old is a vital partner and founder of mega-VC fund Revolution LLC.

He even designed the Revolution's D.C. offices near Dupont Circle himself, from the high glass walls that separate the key executives to the soft woods of the floors and light brown and gold colors of the carpeting.

And he was integral in building Revolution into the nationally known, billion-dollar investment powerhouse it is today with brands such as CustomInk, Framebridge, Otoro, sweetgreen and Brainscope in its portfolio and its companies bought by the likes of Morningstar, American Express, Towers Watson and Oracle.

To be clear, this profile is not about AOL founder and billionaire Steve Case. Or Monumental Sports & Entertainment owner Ted Leonsis. It's time to meet the man behind Washington's most famous businessmen.

It's time to meet Donn Davis. Finally.

You've undoubtedly seen him around. He's not tall, but not short. He's got short brown hair, thin wire-frame glasses and a newly installed beard (his wife convinced him to grow it out). He's the guy who's always throwing out some sports metaphor or that funny joke.

To say Davis is often — nay, almost always — overlooked in the swirl of publicity, excitement and energy that surround Case and Leonsis is like describing the Grand Canyon as “pretty” or the Marianas Trench as “deep.” It fails to fully encapsulate their enormity and scale. And yet, Davis, who just turned 54, is perhaps the glue who holds the operations together, especially as Case is traveling the country as part of his frequent Rise of the Rest investment bus tour, and as Leonsis also oversees a sports and entertainment empire full time in the Verizon Center, Washington Wizards, Washington Capitals and Washington Mystics.

He is in charge of the day-to-day operations of the company, making sure they are in full compliance with

the law and working with the hundreds of investors who make up their extensive partnerships. His work has helped build Revolution into the regional financial force it is today.

“It's almost like you are in a band and you have a lead singer and a lead guitarist — and there is a drummer,” Leonsis said. “The band is really great because everyone plays their role and plays their part. But it's important for the lead singer and the lead guitarist to let the drummer do some solo work.”

He's under the radar

It was Nov. 29, 2011. Leonsis, Case and Davis together announced the creation of Revolution Growth with its first \$450 million fund.

The next day, the headline for the accompanying Washington Post article read, “Case and Leonsis launch Revolution Growth Fund.” Another article in The New York Times is headlined with “Steve Case Raises \$450 Million Venture Fund.”

In Revolution's own offices, one

hallway displays dozens of article reprints, covers and photos of the venture firm's media coverage over the years. Case on the cover of Entrepreneur magazine. Case in Fortune magazine, Forbes, The New York Times, People. Leonsis on the cover of his book, “The Business of Happiness” — with a cover blurb by Case. Leonsis on CNBC, Leonsis on the cover of Washington Life magazine.

Along that stretch, only two pieces feature Davis. One is a company-sponsored headshot, the other is Davis addressing the crowd at Revolution's annual investor conference.

Now go to Wikipedia and type in “Steve Case,” and you get a robust article on his life, career and accomplishments, along with 32 footnotes. Type in “Ted Leonsis” and a magnum opus appears covering his career, sports holdings, life and investments, followed by 100 footnotes to back it up.

Type in “Donn Davis,” and you get ... well ... nothing.

Aside from a reference in Revolution's own article, Davis does not have a Wikipedia entry at all. And I will wait while you go confirm this for yourself.

Why, you ask? Part of this might be due to Davis' intentional low profile — he has avoided participating in any profiles for more than 20 years (until now, that is). But it probably has more to do with the long shadows cast by his high-profile co-workers.

“To me, it's similar to DreamWorks, where Spielberg, Geffen and Katzenberg all came together. They all could have done different things on their own and they are all different people with unique expertise and different Rolodexes,” Davis said. “But they all shared a common vision of working together and that together, they can do bigger and better and more interesting things.”

And that doesn't bother a man who sees his primary role as making sure the figurative trains run on time — instead of shielding his eyes from the spotlight like the omnipresent Case and his continued thought leadership



Donn Davis is a big part of growing and maintaining Revolution's portfolio, meeting with hundreds of investors.

JOANNE S. LAWTON / STAFF

► CLOSER LOOK

DONN DAVIS

Co-founder, Revolution LLC; managing partner, Revolution Growth

Age: 54

Education: Bachelor's in economics, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio; law degree, University of Michigan

Past jobs: Attorney for Sidley Austin LLP, president of Tribune Ventures, legal counsel for the Chicago Cubs, president and COO of AOL's interactive properties group.

Board member: Zipcar, Everyday Health, Miraval, Exclusive Resorts

Residence: Great Falls

Family: Wife Sharon, sons Cameron and Cooper, daughter Tess

First job: Working the skill games at Kings Island amusement park

or the energetic Leonsis and his continued forays into emerging sports and technologies.

“I know they are the star attractions. They are the Derek Jeters of the Yankees or they are the Tom Bradys of the Patriots,” Davis said. “That doesn't mean that winning with the Yankees or winning with the Patriots is not better than being on another team, or not more fun or not more impactful.”

He's a detail man

The sports analogies are a recurring theme with Davis, whose office on the 10th floor of 1717 Rhode Island Ave. NW is sprinkled liberally with signed sports artifacts from his earlier tenures with the Chicago Cubs and from his later D.C. athletic connections.

There are a pair of hockey stocks signed by the Capitals, several autographed footballs and even a small statue of former Wizard Gilbert Arenas, peeking over the chair in a sitting area inside his office. On a table to one side sits, encased in Lucite, all of the business cards from each and every job he has held, from a lawyer negotiating ballplayer salaries to AOL executive.

At Revolution and Revolution Growth, the venture firm's large-scale investment operation, Davis handles what Leonsis only half-jokingly describes as “hundreds and hundreds of meetings.”

It's Davis' extreme focus and attention to detail — along with what many point to as a sort of Midwestern-style charm and approachability — that helps fuel his success, according to friends and colleagues. Designing the office spaces for Revolution or guiding the renovations on his own Great Falls home are just part of what people see as a discerning eye and keen memory.

So, it's no surprise that Davis planned his wife Sharon's recent 50th birthday party by taking two days off

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MONEY & TECH EXTRA

WHAT HE SAID

DONN DAVIS ON ...



▶ THE ADVANCE OF TECHNOLOGY AND STARTING A COMPANY:

"The cost and ease of starting a company has gone down so dramatically that companies are starting everywhere. So right now if you have two friends and \$50,000 from friends and family, you can start a great tech company. It used to take \$5 million and 25 people. But with cloud computing and the cost of dispersed technology and the ability for simple coding and viral marketing: What it means is that people are starting companies in Cincinnati. All these cities are filled with young entrepreneurs."



▶ DIVERSITY WITHIN THE TECH COMMUNITY:

"If you break it down in different parts, it helps you understand where there is good progress and where there is less progress. In the entrepreneurial community, there is a lot of diversity. Even in our portfolio, we have over 12 companies — two of the CEOs are women. So they are not just on the management team, they are the founders and CEOs of those companies. Where there has been less diversity is on the institutions that serve that. Investment banks. Law firms. Venture capital firms. Boards of directors. Everybody has discussed what to do about that and what it is. But to me the most important aspect of the tech ecosystem is the entrepreneur. Without the entrepreneur, the rest of the ecosystem doesn't exist. If you could pick a spot where you want to have the most diversity and the most meritocracy, that is where it would be. Because that's the beginning of change everywhere else."



▶ THE STATE OF VENTURE CAPITAL AND STARTUPS IN GREATER WASHINGTON:

"If you look at, historically, the number of companies started and funding of those companies, Silicon Valley was No. 1 and New York and Boston were tied for No. 2. The big three have had the game to themselves for 30 years. I believe that D.C. has a better chance than any other region of being the new kid in town in a material way. I think it can be the most robust corridor outside of the historic big three. If you look a generation out, I think it can be as important as any region in the country, setting aside Silicon Valley."

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and personally putting together a 100-song dance playlist, setting up 1,000 white candles inside the house to set the mood, or by ensuring the food for the dozens of guests was a mix of her favorites, including six kinds of grilled cheese sandwiches, cupcakes and gazpacho.

Despite a packed schedule, Davis can still sit with Josh Baker, a home-builder who met the venture capitalist 20 years ago when renovating his Great Falls home, over a glass of his favorite drink — an unsweetened iced tea with lots of ice and two lemons — and offer advice on Baker's marketing materials or general current events.

"He is always being very generous with his time," said Baker, founder and co-chairman of luxury home builder and renovation company BOWA. "When I have business issues or questions that come up, he is more than willing to sit down with me."

Case describes Davis as a man who can serve as the connective tissue between Revolution and its investors, all while staying fully abreast of pop culture. "He is a huge television watcher. He always talks about different shows — and I am not a big television watcher — so he keeps me up to date on what is happening," Case said.

For Davis, the key to balancing his work and his family is a bit of unorthodox advice: Don't even try, at least on a daily basis. "If your sole goal is balance, you are never going to have any impact, no matter what career you choose," Davis said. "What I try to do is balance every year — how do I have enough time to do everything I want in a year."

While he works seven days a week, Davis said he has been to 80 of his son Cooper's baseball games this year, thanks in part to the control he has over his schedule and the technology that allows him to work remotely. "We work seven days but we don't work all hours of all days," he said. "If you want to do something great in business you have to work."

He's a family guy

Davis credits his success, at least in part, to his childhood in the village of Mariemont, a planned Ohio community in Hamilton County near Cincinnati. With a population of about 3,400, it provided Davis with friends, stability and the small-town upbringing that would help him later in life.

His parents moved to the village just a few years before he was born, in 1962, and still live there now. Even his old room is the same. It's where, when Davis and his family go back to visit nowadays, his two sons, Cameron and Cooper, sleep.

"I think I had one of those classic, Norman Rockwell happy childhoods," Davis said. "Growing up with such security and comfort of that home base meant I have always been ready to do something else without fear."

For Davis, Mariemont was sum-



A sharp attention to detail plays into both business and personal lives for Donn Davis — as in when he planned his wife's birthday party.

JOANNE S. LAWTON / STAFF

mers at the community pool and afternoons spent hanging outside Graeter's Ice Cream. It was playing second base for the Mariemont Tigers — Davis said he was not quite good enough to play shortstop — and hanging out with friends like James Renner, now principal of the same Mariemont High School where both Renner and Davis attended as teens.

Davis was the guy everyone would turn to for his quick wit and sharp thinking, Renner said. They may have been rivals on the ballfield — Renner played for the Eastern Hill Cleaners — but Renner conceded: Davis perpetually left an impression.

"Donn always seemed to know what to say," Renner said. "He just had that sort of way of making a joke, and we would all look to him."

And while Davis might not get as much notoriety as Steve Case or Ted Leonsis locally or nationally, he was treated as a guest of honor when he was picked as one of Mariemont High School's most distinguished alumni last year. He returned home to a spot in the homecoming parade and a half-time ceremony in his honor. And perhaps more importantly, his mother — the oldest living resident of Mariemont — was there to cheer him on.

"For me," Davis said, "I was happy that she got to be proud of her son."

He's persuasive

It wasn't until high school graduation, in 1981, that Davis left Mariemont.

And it wasn't until he landed a job at prestigious law firm Sidley Austin LLP that he cut his teeth on building companies.

He started with more modest clients, ones looking to buy and sell counterparts. Instead of being lawyer No. 17 on the mammoth AT&T deal or gravitating toward larger clients like other young lawyers, Davis focused on smaller deals where he could work directly with CEOs and other key figures.

By the time one of the firm's biggest clients, Tribune Co., needed someone to lead its acquisition efforts, Davis convinced the newspaper and media company to give the then-29-year-old a try. For the next 30 months, Davis led about 30 acquisitions or strategic investments in small papers, TV stations and other pieces of the media empire.

And when Tribune's Chicago Cubs lost its chief legal counsel after a botched negotiation with pitcher Greg Maddux, who ended up leaving the team for the Atlanta Braves, Davis asked for that job as well. His reasoning today for such a bold move is straightforward: Why not?

His weekdays were spent overseeing Tribune's acquisition efforts. His weekends started at 7 a.m. and were spent at a small cubicle at Wrigley Field. Sometimes he would duck out to see a few innings of a game and eat a quick hot dog before getting back to work.

He negotiated his first salary contract with first baseman Mark Grace, with the two parties pushing back and forth between \$4.4 million or \$4.5 million. After they finalized the deal, Grace sent him a signed baseball bat with a simple inscription that still stands in his Revolution office today: "Donn. \$4.4 million. I gave you a break."

In 1994, Davis went to Tribune's then-CEO John Madigan and made the case that the company needed to invest in early-stage internet companies. Thus, Tribune Ventures was born. Davis became its co-founder and president.

It was there that Davis first met a younger Ted Leonsis, at the time president of a nascent internet company named America Online. The two companies started a joint effort called "Digital Cities" to put newspaper content online in local markets. Both served on the board. The two also worked at search engine precursor Excite.

In his time at Tribune Ventures, Davis invested in a number of companies, including AOL, e-commerce platform CheckFree Corp. and online grocer Peapod.

"He tended to be transparent, straightforward and fact-based. Honest. But he also had a joy like he just thought, 'Isn't this unbelievable and a great time to be alive?'" Leonsis said. "The excitement was palpable with him."

Case met Davis shortly afterward, and their attempts to recruit him to the

Dulles-based AOL began.

For several years, Davis resisted. But one day, in 1998, he decided the future was the internet, and not his nearly 150-year-old publishing and media company, so he reached back out to Case to see if he still had an opening.

"I sent him an email and said, 'I am an idiot,'" Davis said. A few weeks later, he was working with Case and Leonsis at AOL. "I have always been interested in the next big thing. If it was the 1950s, I would have done TV, but it was the '90s, and the big thing was the internet."

He's learned how to bounce back At AOL, perhaps the most defining tech juggernaut in the Washington region's history, Davis lived through the highs and lows.

He held a number of roles, first as chief operating officer for AOL's interactive properties group before rising to its president. He later served as a chief of staff of sorts for Case, who was then chairman, during the disastrous merger with Time Warner Inc., where Davis learned in perhaps the toughest way possible about the importance of culture — and what happens when there's no cultural common ground.

Case said Davis was a big help, serving as a liaison between him and the bulk of AOL that had shifted north to New York. "Things didn't work out the way we hoped, and I ended up resigning," Case said. "But he was helpful in building those relationships and

building those bridges."

After he builds them, he manages to keep them. Business associates say it's because he's jovial and, yes, selfless when it comes to gratifying his ego. Ed Mathias, managing director at The Carlyle Group, has known Davis for close to 20 years and they meet every six to eight weeks, usually for lunch at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, D.C. The topics? Anything from current events and pop culture or their respective families. Of course, there's also a bit of friendly competition over who gets to their mutual meetups first, each one arriving just a little bit earlier than the other.

"In the business, you see a lot of one-dimensional people," Mathias said. "I think he is intellectually curious. He likes the game."

Davis ended up leaving AOL in 2003, the same year as Case. For the next four years, he was CEO of luxury vacation and travel club Exclusive Resorts, growing the startup to more than \$1 billion in residential properties. But well before then, on Case's last day at AOL, he had reached out to Davis with a proposition: Invest in interesting, out-of-the-way companies. In the subsequent months, they crafted their investment strategies.

"So we didn't have an office and we didn't have any people. We sat down at the California Pizza Kitchen and what we crafted that day in 2004 is kind of what we do now," Davis said.

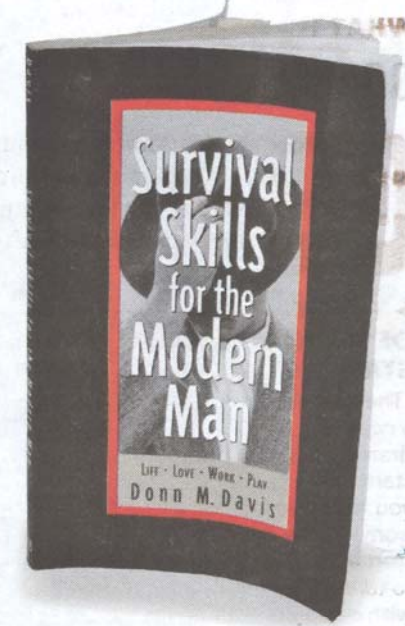
By 2005, they officially founded Revolution LLC along with former Time Warner executive Tige Savage (his Wikipedia entry has 20 footnotes). Leonsis, who took some time off to become a sports and real estate magnate, joined them for the formation of Revolution Growth in 2011.

Both Leonsis and Case credit Davis in large part for the successful raise earlier this year of its latest \$525 million fund, saying he met with investors and traveled the country extensively to help put it together.

That doesn't surprise Davis' peers in the least. "If he had been a football player he would be like the nose tackle, clogging up the middle and making sure that the run game is stopped — but every so often, breaking through and making a spectacular sack at an important time," said Russ Ramsey, owner and manager of Ramsey Asset Management and head of the Washington 2024 effort to bring the Olympic Games here. "Frankly, every great entrepreneur and every great set of businesses have somebody like Donn Davis, who is not necessarily front and center."

Davis said he is happy to remain at Revolution, which has helped satiate his appetite for the newest and greatest technologies. For a man who is always interested in the next chapter, he is content to write his life story at Revolution.

"What I love about what we do is that it's permanently changing," he said. "Each company is like one of your own kids — they are so different." ■



WHAT HE WROTE

A MODERN MAN

It probably comes as no surprise that Steve Case and Ted Leonsis have each written books, whether it's Case's recent "The Third Wave" or Leonsis' "The Business of Happiness: 6 Secrets to Extraordinary Success in Life and Work."

But Donn Davis also has a little-known credit to his name. "Survival Skills for the Modern Man" was published in 1998 and features a mixture of serious and humorous advice for a man just graduating from college.

So how does Davis feel about it now? "Well, most things you write in your late 20s, you would not write in your early 50s, whatever it would be," Davis said. "I think it has aged pretty well."

He notes that there are now hundreds of these type of guides sold in stores across the country, so he might have been ahead of the curve.

The dedication reads: To Sharon, who rescued me from the throes of bachelorhood.

Here is some advice straight from the pages of the book:

▶ **"How to clean your bathroom for guests in five minutes:"** This takes what is nearly a universal stress-inducing moment and guarantees you can clean in less time than it takes to listen to "American Pie" by Don McLean, or "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" by Meatloaf. Make sure to shake your bath rug out the window, spray the entire toilet and hide all of those toiletries and stray hairs.

▶ **"Stocking your home bar like a pro:"** This lists how much alcohol you need for a 50-person party (spoiler alert: a ton) and just what liquors and spirits you should have on hand if company arrives unexpectedly. Start off with brand names and then switch to cheaper stuff once people get buzzed and can't taste the difference.

▶ **"Golfing with the boss:"** Davis helps keep you focused on what this five-hour outing really means — making sure you are easy to get along with and a good sport. Davis lays out the "Game of Thrones"-style maneuvering that could show who's in favor (who rides in the cart with the big boss) and what not to do (bringing a date or asking for a gimme).