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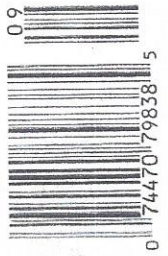
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September 1995

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GIDEONS' GAMBLE

Fledgling entrepreneur Derek Gideons, owner of an environmental testing start-up, talks about his first year as CEO.

BY TOM HENDERSON

Photo: Tom Henderson.

Derek Gideons is a gambler. But it's not Windsor that attracts him, nor is he interested in rolling the dice in Greektown. Gideons has gambled every dime he accumulated in eight years of hard work on the premise that he is the right person with the right skills in the right place at the right time.

The right time? The era of a resurgent Detroit.

The right place? The fledgling company Gideons owns, the Envirolytic Group, Inc., located in the old Kresge building near the Masonic Temple, is smack-dab in the middle of the Empowerment Zone.

The right skills? Gideons, 32, is a chemist whose company specializes in testing for environmental contamination at commercial and industrial sites, and then designs clean-up and remediation processes. And if it's one thing the Empowerment Zone does not lack for, it's old industrial and commercial property in need of environmental testing before any anticipated rebirth and rebuilding can begin.

As a struggling businessman hoping to line up contracts with the City of Detroit and Wayne County, Gideons is also betting on the fact that being a minority vendor will help open a door or two.

In addition to gambling his life savings, he has had to make major adjustments to his lifestyle. To cut his expenses since he started his business last April, Gideons moved from an apartment in Farmington Hills to a small studio apartment in Detroit and traded in his Jeep for an Escort.

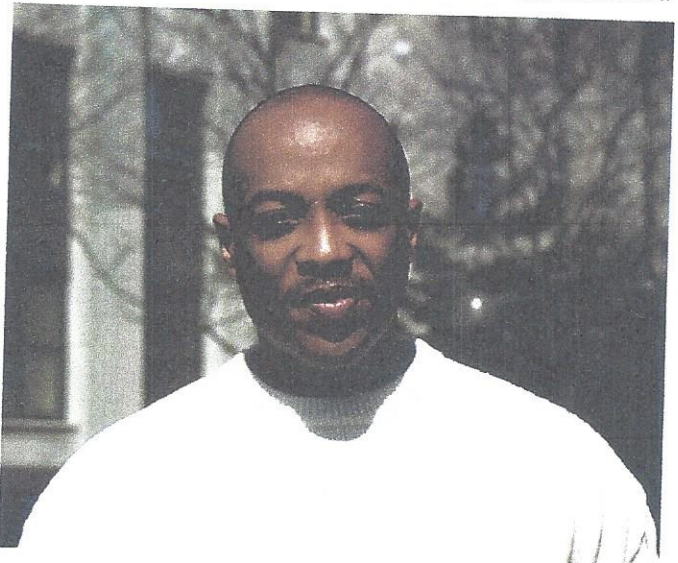
For the first few months, Gideons operated his start-up out of his suburban apartment. Then, early this year, he became a tenant of the Michigan Center for High Tech in a bit of fortuitous coincidence. He had come into a Small Business Administration office for help on a busi-

ness plan. By good fortune, the SBA office was on the ground floor of the same Wayne State-owned building shared by MCHT. An SBA official suggested his business might be a natural for the high-tech incubator. A meeting was arranged with MCHT officials, and soon Gideons was moving into a 20-by-30-foot lab on the third floor.

A gradual evolution building towards his own business has pretty much been the pattern with Gideons. Many entrepreneurs come from a family tradition of business ownership — while others just seem to have a calling. Gideons is one of those who heard a call, an irresistible urge that eventually made working for others an impossibility. (His family tradition was that of blue-collar work, highly paid, but blue collar, nonetheless. His dad could have gotten him into the GM plant where he worked, but Gideons wasn't tempted. He says he had a clear picture of what that kind of job would have meant to him: He envisioned life as a cone, its possibilities narrowing to a point as he grew older.)

His path was distinctly different. After graduating from the University of Dayton, Gideons went to work for ETC Environmental in Lansing, working his way up the ranks and the pay scales during his five years there. He began as an analytical chemist and ultimately wound up first as lab manager and then project manager.

From there he went to Techna Corp. in Plymouth, working on projects involving leaking underground storage tanks, and



Derek Gideons.

then to Growth Environmental Services in Farmington Hills.

But despite his consistent upwardly mobile climb and increasing salary, something kept gnawing at him. "I needed a new challenge," he says. Starting his own business was calling — a subliminal siren's song, at first, then a quiet refrain that he could still ignore, but finally a chorus so loud that he had to respond.

Thinking initially he was merely bored and needed a change, he applied to graduate school, planning to get a master's in occupational health. He was accepted at the University of Pittsburgh and at Ohio State, and even considered going on to medical school. Good money. High prestige. But the more he thought about it, he realized it was neither money nor prestige he really wanted: He wanted to be his own boss. Have his own business.

That, and "I want to be able to provide a job for my daughters when they come out of college. And I wanted to be an inspiration to them," says Gideons, showing in the

process that he is nothing if not a long-term planner. (Alisa is 10 and Olivia merely 20 months.)

If challenge was what he needed, entrepreneurship has been a satisfying route. He no longer lacks for challenges, he says. Cash flow is a trickle in good weeks, as dry as the Gobi in bad. "Last week was horrid," he says to an office visitor, his voice deep and well-modulated. "But it's perking up this week. There's definitely more money going out than coming in at this point. Creative financing is the rule."

As if on cue, the phone rings. It is a Wayne County official Gideons has been hoping to hear from. He explains his business. The official is very encouraging. Gideons hangs up with a smile so broad it links his ears. It isn't a contract. It isn't a big check arriving in the mail. But at this point, it's enough to make this a good day, and it's only morning.

Gideons swivels back around from the phone to face a visitor. As he talks, sitting on a chair with his back to the desk that's flush against the wall, he faces the large lab table that occupies the center of the room. Spread out on the lab table are outstanding bills, awaiting payment. Gideons points to them. "You get used to problems with cash

flow. You get used to pressure and stress and accept it as normal. I can bite the bullet for now and see what happens."

In front of him are the bills; behind him, on the wall over the desk, is a motto: "Carpe diem." Seize the day. Gideons adopted it as his own when he saw the movie *Dead Poets Society*. (His other axioms for life have come from books; Gideons is an avid reader of biographies and autobiographies, seeking patterns of success and emulating them.)

Has Gideons ever had any regrets? Days when he wishes he were still collecting a regular paycheck and ennui was his biggest worry? "Every day you're glad you did it, but some days you don't know if it was the right time. But, then, I don't think there's any such thing as the right time."

More than a year of a drastically reduced lifestyle has not tempered his enthusiasm and optimism, a necessity for the would-be entrepreneur.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm here — until I can't borrow another dime. I'll keep the doors open as long as I can," he says. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I think I'm going to make it. It won't be overnight. If I have to go back to work for somebody for a while,

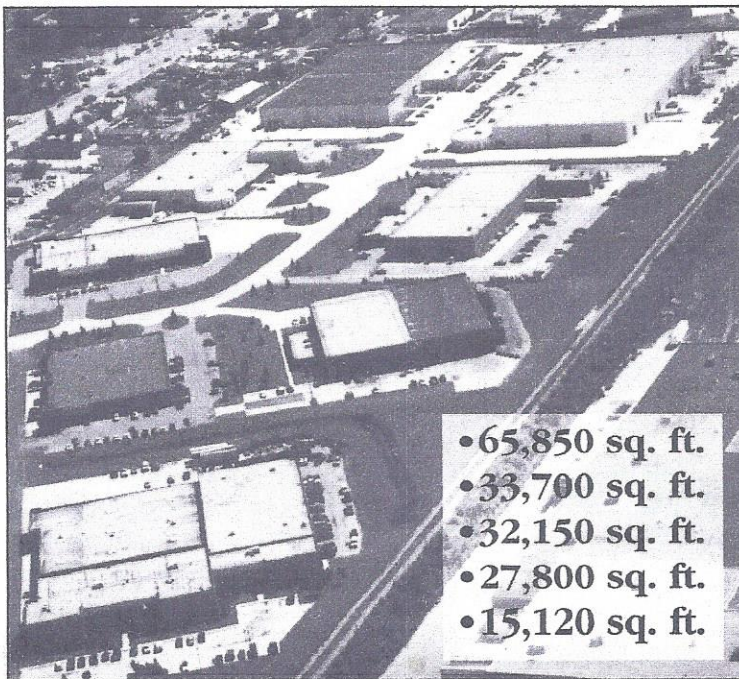
I will. But I'll never give up on the dream of owning my own company."

Even if there weren't an Empowerment Zone. Gideons figures he'd still be in the right place. Inside and outside of the zone, there are thousands of acres of underpriced land that will be developed sooner or later, as market conditions warrant. (Gideons' role in that development is to sample air trapped in soil, testing for such volatile organic compounds as toluene, ethyl benzene and xylene).

As land in the suburbs becomes too expensive, or as the suburbs themselves get farther and farther out from railheads and ports, inner-city land becomes more attractive. There is also a changing sensibility in development that calls for more preservation of greenfields and more redevelopment of brownfields. All of which makes it seem clear to Gideons that Envirolytic will prevail.

"Detroit reminds me a lot of Cleveland," says Gideons of his home town. "For years, Cleveland was just a hole. I haven't lived there for 14 years, but when I go back to visit, it's totally different. And it happened to Baltimore, too. It's all coming together here. I think I'm here at the crux." ■

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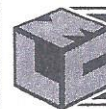
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