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Rubber Meets the Road

Retired senior VP gives back.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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When Richard Gates, BS BA '64, says he likes a challenge, he doesn't just mean solving a tough problem at the office or sailing on a windy day near his home in Naples, Fla. Gates, who was raised on a farm in northwest Missouri, has a daredevil streak that propelled him forward from a young age.

The summer after his freshman year at MU in 1961, Gates worked in an auto thrill show, first in manual labor, setting up ramps and moving props, and then in the show, performing stunts and risking his health and his life. After a few rounds as the show's Human Battering Ram in which he was strapped to the hood of a car and driven through a flaming wooden barrier, Gates turned in his helmet.

He and his brothers —the late George Gates, BS Ag

'61, and James Gates, BS Ag '66, put themselves through school, operating the hay crew for local farmers. His brothers eventually returned to the farm, but Gates wasn't interested.

"It looked like a lot of banging your head against a wall," Gates says.

Instead, Gates pursued a business degree, and following graduation in 1964, he moved to New York.

"I packed up everything I had in my sports car — a Triumph TR3 — and there was still room left over," Gates says.

He quickly moved up the ranks in a few companies before landing at Rubbermaid where he spent 25 years, first as an assistant controller and eventually as senior vice president.

"With my background, I didn't know much about business," says Gates, referring to his small-town, farm boy upbringing. "I really wanted challenge more than anything else. Everything was a learning experience. I liked to learn and then move on and do something else."

As senior VP, Gates also served as the president of the philanthropic arm of the business, the Rubbermaid Foundation. From converting an abandoned school into a center for arts and donating land to build a new



Richard Gates, left, sails with one of the participants in an adaptive sailing program in Naples, Fla. Gates has been volunteering with the program, which provides sailing instruction for people with physical and mental challenges, for the past seven years. Photo courtesy of Richard Gates.

high school, Gates oversaw community-building projects in Rubbermaid's headquarters in Wooster, Ohio.

Gates in particular recalls one experience. The Rubbermaid Foundation had helped a local school for kids with special needs secure a Touch Talker, a speech device for students who can't vocalize. Gates stopped by the office of the device's manufacture to see how students would be using the tool.

Distracted by a business call, Gates was shocked to hear a student screaming.



Gates stands with his plane — an RV-8 tandem two-seat, single-engine aircraft — he built from scratch using a kit. Gates, who owns three airplanes, got his pilot's license in 2006. Photo courtesy Richard Gates.

“I turned to see this little boy in a wheel chair taking a girl for a ride,” Gates recalls. “She was standing on the back of a wheel chair having a really good time. I thought, ‘Here are people with perfectly good minds stuck in a lousy body.

Someday I want to have the chance to do something with people who are physically and mentally challenged but not just sit on the

board and donate money.’ ”

Something was missing.

“I want to be hands on.”

When Gates retired from Rubbermaid in 1998 at age 55, his daredevil side re-emerged. He sailed up and

down the East Coast from Maine to South America, captained a boat from Thailand to Spain and completed The Great Loop (a route from the East Coast to the Erie Canal down the Mississippi arriving in Mobile, Ala.). He earned his pilot's license, buying two planes and building a two-seat, single-engine aircraft.

But for the past seven years, Gates has been volunteering in an adaptive sailing program that teaches people who are physically and mentally challenged how to sail.

“I sailed with this man for three years side by side,” Gates says. “This year, he sailed by himself. He was totally, ‘I can’t believe I’m doing this.’ But he was doing it and doing a really good job at it. He learned to sail. It was so rewarding.”

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