

Chippewa Valley grad and Menlo founder Sheridan stresses 'business joy'

By Nicole Tuttle For MediaNews Group **The Macomb Daily**
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Menlo Innovations CEO Rich Sheridan visited Chippewa Valley High School in Clinton Township on Oct. 2 to discuss his Ann Arbor company's unique business approach with students and teachers.

NICOLE TUTTLE -- FOR THE MACOMB DAILY

Who says you can't go home?

Not Menlo Innovations CEO Rich Sheridan, who looked around the Chippewa Valley High School Ninth Grade Center with a distinct air of nostalgia.

"We would be in here until midnight," Sheridan said, examining a small room at the Clinton Township school that once held a computer lab for the first class to take a computer science course at the school, "And the janitors would go to the principal the next day and say, 'There's these kids...' and his attitude was, 'They're fine. Let them stay.'"

Sheridan is a member of the Chippewa Valley High School class of 1975, a time when the district consisted only of what is now a nearby building that now houses the school's Ninth Grade Center and the International Academy of Macomb. He remembers meeting his future wife at the school and gaining interest in his future career in software design at the school.

It was chance that brought him back to the school on Oct. 2, this time with something to teach both students and staff: The importance of an innovative workplace. Sheridan visited a cybersecurity class, a marketing class and a teacher cadet class. He then held a presentation for the school's teachers after school.

Sheridan's journey back to Chippewa Valley High began last August. Twenty schools were represented by teachers and administrators at a professional development workshop held at Menlo Innovations, Inc. in Ann Arbor. The day included a keynote from Sheridan and focused on bringing a culture of joy into schools, the kind of culture Sheridan strove to create when he founded the software design and development company in 2001.

The day also included a raffle in which a school could win a visit from Sheridan to have him speak to students and teachers about his company and his culture. The school that won the raffle turned out to be 62-year-old Sheridan's own alma mater.

"The first time Chippewa Valley Schools ever offered computer science was 1971," Sheridan said to the cybersecurity class. "Is that hard to imagine? So we were learning to program - in the other building, because that was the old high school - but at Chippewa Valley in 1971. And all the computers were up at the Macomb Intermediate School District up on Garfield there. We had terminals, not computers. They worked on paper over dial up modems."

Macomb County was one of the first three counties in the nation to offer computer science at the high school level at the time, Sheridan recalled.

"So we were part of a very pioneering group of people. And I typed in a two line program into a computer," Sheridan said. "And it clacked out on a roll of paper, 'Hi Rich.' Because that is what I told it to do. And for whatever reason, at 13 years old, I knew what I was going to do the rest of my days."

A 1973 win of the gaming category in an international programming contest got Sheridan hired into his first programming job at the MISD. The program Sheridan made that won the contest involved an early type of fantasy baseball, as he typed in all of the major league baseball players with their stats into a computer so he and friends could play favorite teams against each other.

His job at the MISD paid \$3 per hour and he was 16 years old. Sheridan's work created an early e-mail system in Macomb County schools.

He attended the University of Michigan for his bachelor's degree in computer science. In 1982 he graduated from U-M with a master's degree in computer engineering, not long after PCs began to become a major industry force.

After graduating from U-M, at one point he began working at Ann Arbor company Manufacturing Data Systems Inc. A woman named Gloria Page was a programmer at the company that Sheridan befriended. The woman sometimes brought her son, about age 10, to work with her. That child, Larry Page, went on to become a founder of Google.

Eventually Sheridan became a vice president of software development at Interface Systems in Ann Arbor, making a six-figure salary. He began to experience some employment disillusionment while in his 30s and sought to reimagine the corporate culture in his workplace. In 2001 he was let go from the company during a recession.

"While everything was taken away from me in 2001, they could not take away what I had learned in those two years when I reinvented that public company called Interface Systems," Sheridan said.

He was 43 when he began his entrepreneurship that same year, naming his new software company in honor of Thomas Edison's Menlo Park Laboratory. Menlo Innovations is a software and IT consulting firm that designs and develops software for other companies.

"We want to end human suffering in the world as it relates to technology. And we actually use the opposite word. Maybe it is somewhere on our website. And we talk about joy in relationship to software. We want to delight the people we intend to serve with stuff that we build," Sheridan said.

Sheridan has authored several books on creating a better business culture and learning organization, which he mentioned during his presentation to teachers at Chippewa Valley High School. They include “Chief Joy Officer: How Great Leaders Elevate Human Energy and Eliminate Fear” and “Joy Inc. : How We Built a Workplace People Love.” His workplace ideas are put into practice at Menlo. For example, Sheridan refers to meetings as “mind-numbing, spirit-sucking, energy draining devices” and so he keeps them short and to the point.

He advocates for less fear, less bureaucracy and more human energy. Menlo employees work in pairs, two to a computer. They work on the same task at the same time all day. Pairs are switched every five days and work in a large open room.

Sheridan also advised students as to what he’s looking for in employees: Technical skills, critical thinking skills, presentation skills and high marks on their Kindergarten report cards.

So what we look for, first and foremost in our interviewing process is good Kindergarten skills. Do you play well with others? Do you not hit, bite, scratch, swear, run through the room with scissors over your head? Do you share? Do you support the person sitting next to you? So when we interview, we actually interview in pairs, with two candidates,” Sheridan said.
