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MBA is good, but passions drive them to work, local execs say

By Ron Gallagher, Special to LocalTechWire

MORRISVILLE, N.C. —Successful executives know when they are embracing their passions, and that is a big part of their success, four Harvard Business School graduates – and successful Triangle executives – told a roomful of fellow Harvard alums Monday night.

"I like figuring things out," Red Hat CEO Jim Whitehurst said, giving the advent of cloud computing as his most recent example. What excites him in his Red Hat role, he said, is expanding "the power of participation" globally through open-source software that enables growth and improvement in nations around the globe.

"I can tell my kids I'm doing more than running a company," said Whitehurst, who left Boston with his Harvard-branded MBA in 1994.

John Replogle, CEO of Durham-based Burt's Bees and a 1993 MBA recipient, said he created his personal mission statement when he was 25 and has been rewriting it ever since.

"My purpose in life is to help people lead better lives," Replogle said. Noting that Burt's Bees has "been able to build the business" while attending to "the triple bottom line – people, the planet and profit."

"That's what I go to work for every day," Replogle said. "I feel pretty fulfilled right now."

Michael Jacobs, 1983 Business School graduate, is president and CEO of Jacobs Capital, which specializes in mergers and acquisitions, and he teaches corporate governance at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School. His passion, he told the group, "is taking complicated things and making them simple" so people who do not have business masters' degrees can understand them.

He said he also decided when he was a boy in Virginia that he wanted to follow the pattern of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other early Virginians and have careers in commerce, politics and education.

The self-described "middle-class kid who graduated from Sanderson High" in Raleigh, is doing two of those now. He also worked in the Treasury Department during the presidency of George H.W. Bush with what he described as a broad mandate to figure out ways to "reform the financial system to make the U.S. more competitive."

"I've enjoyed each of those worlds because I've been in the other two," Jacobs said.

Tony Frazier, senior director in marketing and project management in Media Transformation at Cisco and 1997 Harvard Business School graduate, said his passion "has always been a creative thing," and his work now lets him combine that with his undergraduate education in engineering, helping to develop "a product that changes how people work or learn."

His job also has led him to working with non-profit organizations, including one in New Orleans for which Cisco was able to leverage its communications technology for entrepreneurs there to get training from other places in how to present their ideas to potential backers.

Grace Ueng, Savvy Marketing Group CEO and a 1991 Harvard MBA, moderated the panel.