

Bill Bass

*Senior Vice President, e-Commerce
& International*

Lands End

Oral History Transcript

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Dan Morrow: This interview is being conducted by me, Dan Morrow, and I'm the executive director of the Computer World Smithsonian Program.

We're interviewing today Bill Bass, the Senior Vice President for E-Commerce and International for Lands' End, who will in June, along with his colleague, Ann Vesperman, be recognized by the Smithsonian Institution and the Computer World Smithsonian Program for his pioneering work in the use of information technology in ways that have a fundamental impact not only on the way people do business with each other, but we believe on the way human relationships and interactions are evolving in general in the information age.

Thank you, Bill, for making yourself available for this interview. And let's start by having you tell us just what you do at Lands' End.

Bill Bass: Boy, I'm on the road a lot. I'm responsible for the e-commerce section of the business, which this past year was \$138 million. And as a company that's a little over 10 percent of our sales.

And I also have responsibility for international catalog operations, which is about another \$140 million worth of our business, also about 10 percent of our sales. We have operations in Japan, U.K. and Germany. So it's how do we bring our great clothes to people around the world.

Dan Morrow: And Lands' End is at this point in the history of the Internet the largest apparel retailer?

Bill Bass: Yeah, we've been the largest now for, really probably since 1995, when we first started selling. We were as best as I know the first big apparel company to start selling online. We started selling in July of 1995, which in the--this is five years later, but that was truly the very beginning of selling online.

Dan Morrow: Well, we're going to begin by talking about how you got here. And we're going to start rather than working backwards, I'd sort of like to start at the beginning. Tell us where you were born and a little bit about your parents.

Bill Bass: Yeah, it's interesting. They had a...when the Internet came along and electronic media came along everybody said, well, let's get into non-linear storytelling, and you'll leap around and stuff like that.

And one of the things that we found early on, when I was working in the newspaper industry and trying to tell stories online, is linear works the best. [laughs] You can put technology on there--linear still works the best. Unless you're reading like Ulysses or some obscure novel.

I was born in 1962, the 2nd of November, in Lawrence, Kansas, actually. My father was a professor at the University of Kansas and my mom was working on her Ph.D. And I lived in Kansas, lived in Lawrence up through first grade. Then we moved to Manhattan, Kansas, where K State is, for my mom to finish up her Ph.D. when I was in second grade. And then I ended up in Tennessee in third grade. And then from third grade on up until I graduated from high school I was a Tennessean. And so my--if you ask me where I'm from I'll say Tennessee. But the true story is I was born in Kansas.

Dan Morrow: And up to the third grade you were in Lawrence, Kansas. Tell me about your dad. He was a professor?

Bill Bass: He is, yep. He's a forensic anthropologist. So he does bone stuff, identifies dead bodies and has all sorts of interesting jobs. Our dinnertime conversations were always pretty interesting.

He works...if you find a body that's bones--you've got to figure out who that is--they come to my dad. And so he's involved in...you know, Waco, when they burned everybody up in Waco. Or Kosovo, where they're trying to identify all the bodies there. And--

Dan Morrow: So he's involved with some of the most advanced information technology [given] DNA structure and...

Bill Bass: Yep.

Dan Morrow: And your mom, she completed her Ph.D.?

Bill Bass: She did. Uh hmm. In nutrition.

Dan Morrow: In nutrition.

Bill Bass: And she was a nutritionist and was a professor at the University of Tennessee.

So I had two professor parents, which leads to an interesting life.

Dan Morrow: Brothers, sisters?

Bill Bass: Two brothers--one older, one younger.

Dan Morrow: Tell me what it was like growing up in Lawrence, Kansas, one of the real historic cities in the United States.

Bill Bass: You know, I think when you're in, up until the time you're in first grade, you can grow up anyplace in the world as long as your family's there. Kids with bikes running around the neighborhood, blowing up things with firecrackers. I think that's a pretty typical environment, whether--

Dan Morrow: Are there early stories about stuff you did when you were a kid that gave some hint of your interest in technology?

Bill Bass: Yeah. I mean it's kind of interesting. I get to Tennessee, I'm in third grade. And I'm kind of bored with school. And so you end up, you know, if you're bored with school you find other things to do to keep your time busy.

And so you start getting involved in science and things like that. Because science to a kid is fascinating. Because if you know science and chemistry, you can make explosives. [laughs]

And there's this thing called nitrogen triiodide, which is a contact explosive that you can make out of iodine and ammonia and some household things. You pour these things together, it precipitates out in this little kind of gray, wet mulch that you then run through filter paper--coffee filter paper--and it sits there. And as long as it's wet, it's unstable. As it dries, it becomes extremely stable and it becomes a contact explosive. So literally, if you drop a feather on it, it will explode. And it'll explode in this huge explosion with this really beautiful purple iodine cloud that rises up around it.

And you know, when you're a kid, this is magic. [laughs] And not only is it magic, but you sit there and you start going, what can you do with something like this? Hey, it's gray; the chalkboards are kind of gray. It's greenish gray; the chalkboards are kind of greenish gray. So, if we take it, and we smear it on the chalkboard before the teacher comes in, and then when she starts writing or trying to erase something, she'll hit it, it'll explode, and wouldn't that be funny?

Dan Morrow: Oh no!

Bill Bass: [laughs] And so it was in the public school system--third, fourth and fifth grade--they were kind of having some problems with me. I get into fifth grade, they put me in this split fourth/fifth grade class. And we went through four teachers in the first month. And you know, we were blowing things up. And I mean, you can...we had some pretty good friends that I did this with.

And so, after my fifth grade year--

Dan Morrow: [Do you want to] name these friends [on the tape]?

Bill Bass: [laughs] [Yeah, they're going to think]-- Kenny Marvet, Bill Shorr. Bill's now at Harvard working on his Ph.D. He went off to do peace studies at...I want to say Earlham College. I went in the Army. And I used to send him t-shirts that had a helicopter gunship rolling in hot on a target that said, "Peace through superior firepower." [laughs] And he'd wear it to his classes. We had a pretty good time.

And so [we made that] fifth grade. And I didn't know this story, but my mom told me later. After fifth grade they asked me to leave. So the public school system kind of decided that I would do better not in the public school system. And so there was a private school in Knoxville that I ended up going to. I went out and I took the entrance test to get in there, and I kind of explained that I was, that I [had some] issues at school.

Dan Morrow: Some explosive--

Bill Bass: [laughs] Yeah, so... I'll tell you... Because Mr. Wilson--there's some professors there that had the same thing. We'd take old--when I got there, in science class--old sodium, bottles of sodium, which is highly reactive with water, when you pour water on it. And so we'd--usually you had to keep them in oil. So when the sodium got too old to use in experiments anymore, we had this big pond. And we'd always say, okay, we'd [set] a big event. And we'd put on all the chalkboards, "There will be an explosion conducted at 12:00 at the pond." And we'd go out there and we'd take the cap off the thing, and we'd wing this big old chunk of sodium out into the middle of the pond. And all of a sudden it'd just start foaming, then kaboom! [laughs]

Dan Morrow: Were there any teachers that actually appreciated this?

Bill Bass: Mr. Wilson appreciated it. Because he was the one that was sitting there going, "Yeah, [we could] blow up the sodium!" And everybody loved him. The science lab at my high school was--I mean that was the refuge for all the kind of criminals [laughs] around the campus to hang out.

But anyway, so I went and I took the test, and they decided they were going to skip me a couple of grades. And they originally started off thinking that they wanted to skip me two grades. So I would've gone from fifth grade into eighth grade.

Dan Morrow: [But] you started reading early? I mean--

Bill Bass: Yeah, I was a book--yeah, I read all the time.

Dan Morrow: Like first grade? Or were you reading before you started school?

Bill Bass: I don't remember. I just remember I read all the time. And I read, there was a thing called "Encyclopedia Brown," which this guy goes around and tries to get some mysteries. Kind of like the Hardy Boys but kind of the '60s and '70s versions of the Hardy Boys, instead of '40s and '50s version. Read a lot. And loved it. That was really my favorite thing to do.

Dan Morrow: I jumped in in the middle of that story. Where were we going?

Bill Bass: Oh, so I was skipping grades. So I get there in--I think what they figured was idle hands are not a good thing. [laughs] And idle minds are not a good thing. So if we put him into a really difficult environment he will then not have spare time to go out and create mischief.

And so what they ended up deciding was that going from fifth to eighth grade was going to be too hard socially. So they jumped me to seventh grade, and then in math I jumped to eighth grade. So I missed in math like...I went from long division to algebra. So I missed reciprocals, fractions--I still have problems with fractions. The best thing in the world for me is that the stock market is now going from the little fraction stuff to decimals.

So I'm all set now because it's--the whole fraction thing, sometimes you have to invert them and multiply if you're dividing them. There are like all these weird rules that I never learned.

And so then, I remember one time in calculus where I'm sitting there and they're just going through. And then of course [they didn't]...and he did some stuff up there. And I'm going, "What did you just do?" And he goes, "Well, this is just basic math." And I was going, ooh. I can handle the little calculus stuff over here, but the basic math is kind of a gaping hole--

So then for the next couple of years life kind of settled down a little bit, because that was an adjustment.

Dan Morrow: So you're skipped to the seventh or eighth grade, depending on where you are. So you approach high school much younger than everybody else in high school.

Bill Bass: Yeah.

Dan Morrow: Now where did you go to high school?

Bill Bass: So the private school I went to went from seventh grade all the way to high school. So it was the Webb School in Knoxville. And it is probably the finest academic institution I've ever attended. And it was amazing. We had 90 people in my class. We all started together in seventh grade. And we went from seventh grade all the way through twelfth grade. And my best friends in the world, absolutely the best friends in the world. Smartest people I know, the most accomplished people I know all came out of that same high school class.

Dan Morrow: Who were some of your best friends in high school?

Bill Bass: My best friend was Blair Potts. And it was interesting. Because as we went through high school we did a lot of stuff together. We ran track together. We ran on the same relay team. I would hand off the baton to him. It was pretty good because I'd led off our--we had a two-mile relay team, four by 800. And Blair's feet kind of go out like this, okay? So when he runs, he kicks up his right and his left. And when you're wearing track spikes...I mean if you're trying to pass him you've got to go out about three lanes. Otherwise you're going to get this metal spike in your leg. And he ran second.

And so I always knew that if I ran, if I was ahead of everybody coming around that, to the hand-off to Blair, nobody was going to pass him. So that was my goal. When I led off, I've got to be in front of everybody. And then nobody's going to be able to pass us.

Dan Morrow: Tell me about some of the teachers. One of my dream is--I ask this question about teachers--is to get these teachers together to talk about the guys that they taught. Mr. Wilson, you mentioned. Are there others that-

Bill Bass: Yeah. So there's Blair's mom, Mrs. Potts. Which causes a whole interesting... She was our English teacher in ninth grade, and then we also had her again in twelfth for advanced placement English. And so here's your best friend's mom who's your teacher. And it causes, you know, just a whole interesting dynamic in the class. Because, you know, Blair was as much a criminal as I was. And then we also had another one, Bill Starr--

Dan Morrow: [So you've been] bad throughout high school?

Bill Bass: Well, you know, bad's a relative term.

[laughter]

Because we were good kids. We were just creative. And we were good students. And yeah, that was the other thing that was kind of interesting about our class. We had--if you look at kind of the success in the schools that everybody went to and what they've done all along... Blair went to Yale, Bill went to Cornell for their architecture program--they have a five-year architecture program at Cornell. Mary Crossley is another one of my best friends--turned down Princeton, turned down Harvard and turned an A.B. Duke at Duke, which is a big Duke fellowship, to go to Virginia to be with her boyfriend, who was another friend of ours who went on to be a doctor. She's now a law professor.

I mean it's really amazing that in that group of people, and even on the ones around us... There was a guy two years ahead of me named Iang Jeon who was a pretty good friend of mine because I dated a woman in his class for six years. And Iang, when I got to Boston to start up the Boston Globe's Internet company, Iang was there, and he started Fidelity's Internet operation--Fidelity Investments. And it was kind of interesting that you had two people from east Tennessee who both ended up at Boston, building two of the first really major Web sites that were on the Internet.

Dan Morrow: Yeah. Sounds like an extraordinary school. Interesting that I just interviewed Gordon Moore.

Bill Bass: Uh huh.

Dan Morrow: And he tells the same story about loving to blow up stuff.

Bill Bass: Oh really? [laughs]

Dan Morrow: All right, so...high school, you make an interesting decision at the end of high school about whether or not to go straight into college.

Bill Bass: Uh huh.

Dan Morrow: Can you talk about that?

Bill Bass: Yeah. How did you hear that part?

Dan Morrow: [Robert].

Bill Bass: [laughs]

Dan Morrow: We have ways.

Bill Bass: I had an interesting--so I come through high school. And by the end of high school, it was kind of an interesting--my mother had grown up in south Alabama, rural Alabama. Chilton County, peach country, it's in between Montgomery and Birmingham. And she had nine brothers and sisters, and dirt poor. Her family was dirt poor. My mom was the only one to go to college. And to her, education was kind of the way out of the rural ghetto. And so she ended up getting a Ph.D., and to her that was the most important thing. Well, I didn't grow up in a rural ghetto. Okay? So education to me was kind of not the path out of anything, it was just kind of, yeah, something I'd do.

Dan Morrow: Professor's kids, yeah.

Bill Bass: Yeah. [laughs] And so, in school I played football, I ran track, I did they yearbook, I hung out with my friends. The actual academic part of this was a part of what I did, but by no means to me like the thing. And that really irritated my mother. Because to her the fact that I didn't finish in the top 20 percent in my high school class just galled her to no end.

Because kind of the other hooligans I hung around with, they actually all did finish [at the] top of the class, so! But they weren't really hooligans.

We were minor hooligans. Very few illegal stuff.

And so when I got there I was trying to figure out, do I really want to go to college right now or not? And what I really wanted to do was write. And I wanted to go out west and just kind of hang out and write.

Dan Morrow: Now, is this Mrs. Potts' influence, this English teacher?

Bill Bass: Mrs. Potts was by far the best English teacher I ever had. And I learned a lot from her. And I think that--but it wasn't like her direct influence. I mean if Mrs. Potts had had her choice I'd have gone straight on to school. [laughs] But I think it was just the reading and the whole creative thing. I'd been the photography editor for our yearbook the year before, and I really got into--how people kind of express themselves through art to me is absolutely fascinating. And I stole--you know, if you sit there and you look back through history, paintings on the wall and people just going to art museums and just staring at art from hundreds of years ago... I was at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. You know, and we were looking at pictures of old Dutch guys. And everybody's standing there like this.

And I'm looking around going, yeah, this is really fascinating. What is it about art that taps something deep, deep, deep inside of people? That...

Dan Morrow: What is it? What do you think is that--

Bill Bass: I have no idea. And that's what I want to try and figure--you know, to me, it's like I want to try and figure that out. I mean what is it that makes people want to represent the way they see the world in some fashion of art and photography, dance.

I ended up--I was one course short of a minor in dance in college. And how do people express themselves around this stuff? It's kind of interesting, because I decided I didn't want to go to school. I kind of--my parents were gone. I decided to join the Army to pay my own way through college because I didn't want my parents to pay my way through college. Because I knew if my parents paid my way through college I would feel obligated to do well. [laughs] Whereas if I paid my way through college it's like, hey, that's my money. I can do well or not do well. It's like, you know, that's my own choice.

Dan Morrow: So how did you reach that decision? I mean--

Bill Bass: About paying my way through?

Dan Morrow: Not, not about paying your way through. I can understand that. But there are lots of ways you could've done that.

Bill Bass: Not Princeton. And I wanted to go to Princeton. And I wanted to go to Princeton because Albert Einstein had taught there.

So there was actually two things that happened. I wanted to go to Princeton because Albert Einstein had taught there. And then when I went up and visited colleges, the day I got to Princeton--I went to MIT and had a...visited MIT. Great institution. My friend Iang who started the Fidelity thing was there. So I stayed with him. And it was one of those where I was around extremely, extremely bright people, who, it would've been an honor academically to be in school with them. But when the end of the day came, boy. You know, it's like, "Hey, let's go throw a football." "You mean that oblong spheroid that tracks the trajectory like a parabola [unintelligible]."

[laughter]

"Let's turn that off!" But if you walk through the dorms at MIT, they all have chalkboards and equations written all over them. And it's like, oh man! Now, they do some pretty creative things, right? They do explosives and do all these little jokes and stuff, too. But—[laughs].

But at the end of the day, you know, that's what it was all about. It was just about academics.

I got down to Princeton. It was the first day of spring. Everybody had stereos in their window. They're out throwing Frisbee. And...

Dan Morrow: This is--

Bill Bass: This is the place! And so Princeton--

Dan Morrow: What year is this? We're talking...

Bill Bass: I graduated in '80. So it was 1980, fall of 1980 that I started college.

Dan Morrow: Started in '80. But you were getting out of high school in...when?

Bill Bass: I graduated in '80 and started that fall. But, so I graduated--I remember what happened. I applied early to Princeton, and my best friend applied early to Yale. And so we were going to find out the same day. It was like December 15th. And you know, there's this thing where if it's a thin letter you got rejected, if it's a thick letter you got accepted. So I go out to the mailbox, and I take out the envelope. And it's there. And it's thin.

And I'd done pretty--I mean I'd been a good football player and a good--we were the state champions in state track. And I'd done well on my SATs. And I'd done well in school. And so I knew they wouldn't reject me. But I figured that they had deferred me. And I was going, "Damn it!" And I'm looking at this--I hadn't even opened it yet. And I said, you know, the interesting thing that's going to happen now is people's opinions of me are going to change. I as a person will not change, whether this says accept, reject, wait list or whatever. But all of a sudden, this one little letter is going to change how other people think about me.

And I was standing at the mailbox, and I just had this kind of mental...crisis is the wrong word, but just this realization that all of a sudden other--these external things were going to change how people see me rather than just who I am as a person.

And so then I just had this huge bad attitude. I opened the letter. It starts off with "Congratulations." And I went, oh, they probably didn't congratulate me if I'm going to get wait listed. So "you've been accepted" and all the rest of this. But I was going, well, crap. Because now everybody's going to think I'm great, but you know, I could just as easily have gotten a letter that said something else and I'd be an idiot or whatever.

And so it was... So then I had like this bad attitude all through the spring. Going, you know... And I was kind of this like, you know, screw everybody else. I'm going to be who I am and I don't care what other people think.

So that kind boiled through the spring. So then that summer I said, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to steal my mom's car. My parents were off in Mexico doing some research. And so I took my mom's car and I said, I'm just going to run away. And so I ran away.

So I got out on the interstate in Tennessee, and I was trying to figure out which way I was going, and I said, I'll just go whichever--whichever road I'll hit the [view unit], I'll end up wherever. And so I ended up going to Massachusetts. And then I was figuring I was just going to kind of work my way around across the northern part of the west and stuff like that.

But as I worked my way up I stopped off in Princeton. And don't forget it's August, so it's like pretty close before school starts. And...

Dan Morrow: And you haven't written them back saying yea or nay or anything at this stage?

Bill Bass: No, I'd already said "yea" back whenever. But then it was just like hey, you know, if I just don't show up, I just don't show up. [laughs] This can't be seen by any potential employers of mine, because they're all going to be very concerned they have a loose cannon... [laughs] ...coming down the pike! And so I...and I stopped down at Princeton, and I sat there, and I went and got a cheese steak from the local sandwich shop. And I was sitting there on the steps of the Woodrow Wilson School, which is the beautiful thing that looks like a big bike rack. [laughs]

And I was sitting there by the fountain and eating this sandwich. And I thought, yeah, this really is a nice place, I could see myself here. So then I ended up, okay, I'll drive back home, reduce the angst in my parents' life and go ahead and go to college.

And so I put off taking a break. I should've taken a break. Because when I got to college then, I had a very bad attitude through college. And the biggest regret of my life is that I did not take better advantage of the opportunities at Princeton. Because it's a great institution. Really smart people there. Smart professors. And I had a bad attitude.

So I make it through my junior year, get in a fight with a... Decide I'm going to major in English. And have a professor named Gail Gibson who I take a medieval English course from. And I just fall absolutely in love with medieval English. And so Gail agrees to be my advisor my junior and senior years, to work with me on my junior papers and my thesis.

Halfway through my junior year, she leaves to go to Davidson, to be the head of the English department at Davidson.

So now the problem is you kind of hook up with your advisors at the beginning of your junior year, so now I'm this kind of free radical floating around, and I can go only to--and so then it's like who's got an empty space? Well, the only people that have empty spaces are the people that nobody wants them as an advisor. But okay, there really is a hole. Here's the, you know, thing--we've got to stick it out in the open hole.

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"Okay, what are you working on?" "I'm working on medieval English."
"No, I don't want you to do that." "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "I want you to work on 20th century poetry." I go, "I don't want to work on 20th century poetry, I want to work on medieval English." He goes, "I don't want to do medieval English." And he hadn't gotten tenure, and so he had a bad attitude. So you now had two people with bad attitudes kind of colliding here. And I'll never forget this. He goes...I said, "Well, if I can't do medieval English then I want to do the creative writing program. I want to go do writing photography." And he goes, "No, but you had to apply before your junior year to do that." I go, "Well, I didn't know that I was going to end up with some jerk like you last year!" [laughs] And he goes, "Oh, you can't do that." It's kind of like one of those bureaucrats. I hate bureaucracies drive me absolutely bananas.

Dan Morrow: Fabulous. Time out.

Bill Bass: Uh huh.

Dan Morrow: Right there. Because we have to change tapes. This is a great tale. This is a great tale.

Bill Bass: I'm being non-linear though. See, that's the problem. We're trying to be linear.

Dan Morrow: Okay. We're rolling. And when we interrupted this we were talking about -

Bill Bass: Remind me to tell you about my friend Tim Creamer, the astronaut. Now that you said, "We have ignition." [laughter]

Dan Morrow: We'll ask about Tim.

Anyway, we were talking about medieval English and 20th century poetry and losing an advisor and...

Bill Bass: And going to somebody who was not a good teacher. And it's really amazing to me how impactful a single teacher can be, and how--both positively and negatively. I don't think there is a better thing in the world than getting a great teacher. And there is nothing more destructive than getting an idiot. Or a malicious idiot, or a bureaucrat, or...you know, there's just..it's a...

Dan Morrow: True in school, true in business as well.

Bill Bass: True in school and true in business. You know, it's funny. I've been really lucky in business to have great bosses. I have learned stuff from every single boss I ever had. But when we were in..I've been in programs where people talk about their bosses, and some people go, "Man, I've never had a good boss." And I'm going, what a sad life that is. I mean it's like oh! Because if you can't learn something from your boss, I mean go do something different.

Dan Morrow: But before you'd gotten to Princeton, though--we were talking about linear...you were talking about chronology here...

Bill Bass: Yeah.

Dan Morrow: Tell me about this stint you spent in the United States Army.

Bill Bass: Well, it was after Princeton I went in the Army.

Dan Morrow: After Princeton?

Bill Bass: Yeah.

Dan Morrow: I thought it was before.

Bill Bass: Yeah, no. See, so I did Princeton on an Army scholarship. Great deal. The Army pays you to go to school, and then pays you when you get out. It's kind of like going to West Point, except you're going to Princeton. [laughs] And so nobody's yelling at you, you're not having to do push-ups, everybody treats you real nice!

Dan Morrow: This is a great program. Ah! So you got your degree in English from Princeton.

Bill Bass: Because the nice thing is, I knew I was going to be in the Army when I got out. And so I could major in anything I wanted. I didn't have to sit there and say, okay, what do I need to do to be employable when I get out? Maybe I should take economics or whatever. So I'm there, and I can major in anything I want. So I'm going, okay, boring economics textbooks, great works of literature. I'll choose the great works of literature for homework.

And then I started taking dance. Because I was playing football while I was at college. I played football at Princeton. And one of the things I wanted to do off-season was keep doing something. And I said, oh, I'll start taking dance. I absolutely fell in love with dance. Dance is a pass/fail course that I spent more time on than any other courses I was getting grades for. Because if you sit there and you write an English paper or you turn in an assignment in your economics class, the only person that sees that's your professor. And it's not really a reflection of you, it's kind of your...it's very external to you. With dance, you choreograph something and you go up and perform it, and it's all your peers that are sitting there watching you perform it. And that's like raw you. [laughs] And it's very stressful. So I—

Dan Morrow: Who was your dance teacher at Princeton?

Bill Bass: I had Zeva Cohen while I was there. And she was phenomenal. Very graceful. And then we had some other people...

Dan Morrow: How was your recital? Tell me...

Bill Bass: How was my recital?

Dan Morrow: Yeah, tell me about...can you describe it?

Bill Bass: Yeah. I did a great dance. It got written up in the Trenton Times. But you know, the dance people, they're all really cool about it. They would use my combat boots as props at their dances, and stuff like that. It was pretty amusing.

In the Army days I had my Army tactical advisor, he was a captain, he'd been a Green Beret, hardcore, beady-eyed killer, knife-in-the-teeth type guy.

Dan Morrow: This was...

Bill Bass: This was 1983. And at this time, I'm also in charge of the ROTC program at Princeton. So I was the cadet commander of the ROTC program. So we had about a hundred people there, and I was like the head little cadet. And so I spent a lot of time working with the advisor, Lee Duffy, Captain Duffy.

And Captain Duffy pulled me aside after one class and he goes, "I'm disturbed about something." He goes, "Tell me, there's this rumor going around that you're wearing tights under your uniform there." He says, "Please tell me this isn't true."

And I look him in the eye and go, "Sir, I can neither confirm or deny that rumor." And he's just going, "Princeton, I can't believe I'm at Princeton."

I mean to him, having been a hardcore Green Beret, it drove him bananas because we invaded Grenada during that period of time. And he was just climbing the walls. It was like, you know, people were off in combat and here he is at Princeton with a bunch of people wearing tights under their uniforms.

[laughter]

He was like, "This is killing me." But anyway. So one of the interesting stories, so the professor I got in a fight with about my junior paper, I just told him, "Look, I ain't going to write it." And he goes, "If you don't write it, I'm going to give you an F." And I said, "I don't care." And he goes, "What do you mean you don't care, you get an F?" And I go, "I don't care, I get an F. Because I'm paying my way through school."

Because he said, "What are your parents going to think?" And I go, "I don't care what my parents think. I'm paying my own way through school." It's like being in a fight with somebody that doesn't care if they get hurt. You never want to be in a fight with somebody that doesn't care if they get hurt because you can't fight them.

So he gave me an F, he gave me another F, and so I couldn't come back my senior year until I got rid of those Fs. And my idea was that, I said, "Screw it, I'm going to go..." You might have to edit out some of the language here.

[laughter]

That's one thing, I'm a soldier, and it keeps on coming back sometimes. I said, "Screw it, I'm going to take next year off and I'm going to go out west and do what I should have done after I came out of high school. Take time off, write, do photography, I will turn in a creative junior project." And even though I hadn't applied for the creative program on time, Princeton is pretty good about wanting to get you through. Once you get in, they want to get you through.

Dan Morrow: [Unintelligible].

Bill Bass: Yeah, but that's a bureaucracy like other bureaucracies. And so that was my plan. And so that summer, I had left and I was kicked out of Princeton essentially. I couldn't come back until I did this. I went to my Army summer camp. I did really well in Army summer camp. And so then the Army kind of made me an offer I couldn't refuse. They said, "If you come back for your senior year, we'll put you in charge of the ROTC program. We'll give you your choice of any assignment that you want in the Army, and whatever you want to do." And they go, "We can't guarantee you that if you wait a year."

Because when I went to summer camp, there's 4,500 cadets at summer camp. They take them from all over the country and put them all together.

Dan Morrow: Where is this?

Bill Bass: This is in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and it's very hot. [laughs]

Dan Morrow: I'm from Chapel Hill.

Bill Bass: Oh really, oh yeah, yeah, yeah. So I ended up getting stationed back there after, but I'll tell you, it's like hot in the summertime.

So they put them all in there in order to get an idea of where you rank compared to everybody else. Because otherwise, you know, you could tell where you rank--there were 20 other ROTC cadets at Princeton in my class. So you can get an order of merit list there. But what you want to do for the Army is figure out where everybody fits. And so I went to summer camp, and I ended up tied for second out of the 4,500 cadets. And so then the Army says, "Quit screwing around with this stuff. Go ahead and finish up your school."

And so a friend of mine, Joe Fiveash, who was my roommate, we made a deal that after I got back from summer camp. He was going to come through from Virginia driving, and we were going to drive out to San Francisco and see a Grateful Dead concert. And that was going to be our big go travel across the country thing.

So I come back from summer camp, the Army calls me and says, "This is the deal." I now have three days before Joe picks me up to go out to California. And I have to do my junior papers before I can get back in for my senior year.

So I stay up, I mean literally all night, three nights in a row working on finishing up two 30-page junior papers. And I do one, I caved. I did them on 20th century poetry. [laughter]

Just get them out the door. Wrote about--Robert Penn Warren was one of them, a great Southern poet. And Fed Exed them in. Joe shows up. I said, "Give me one more day." So the next morning, I have them all typed out. I Fed Ex them in, and we head out to California to go see the Grateful Dead.

I ended up getting Bs on my papers, I think they were B minuses, which is kind of amazing. Joe is irritated the whole time because he worked like five months on his junior papers and he got B plusses, and I worked like four days and I got Bs. But the F stayed on my record. And so when I went back to apply for grad school, I mean it was a very interesting thing trying to explain.

When you start averaging in zeros into your major, it's a huge impact. I'm pretty decent in math, but I still didn't have a grasp until I actually did the math of what two zeros did to your GPA. So then I had to explain that, I had to tell that same story in an essay to Stanford. And then I'm going, "Boy, okay now I'm on the admissions committee. Do I want somebody like this coming to my school?"

Anyway, so then off to the Army.

Dan Morrow: Senior year at Princeton?

Bill Bass: Senior year at Princeton is doing a lot of dance and waiting to get in the Army. Working on my thesis, which I did get to do my thesis on medieval literature. It wasn't a very good thesis, but--

Dan Morrow: So you graduate, caps and gowns, tights, and then to the Army. Tell me about going into the Army first.

Bill Bass: I went down, I volunteered, and was going to be a pilot. And so I went into aviation. Aviation had just become its own branch in the Army. And what happens when you go in the Army, you go through ROTC and you learn to be an officer. And then they teach you how to be an officer in the area that you're going to go into.

So if you're going to go be an artillery guy, you go and learn how to shoot cannons and stuff. Well, aviation had just become its own branch, and so they had just started an aviation basic course. And I asked not to go to that. I actually asked to go to the infantry school. Because I said, "If I'm going to be a pilot, I'm going to be flying in support of the guys on the ground."

And I want to go through the exact same experiences that they're going through so that I can know what it's like, so I can help them better when I'm flying." So I go to Fort Banning.

And I go to Fort Benning, all my friends in college and everything go to Europe, okay? And I'm in Fort Benning. And I tell you, infantry school is pretty interesting. We killed one guy. Almost killed a couple others. You're doing live fire exercises, you're running around with bayonets, guys are tripping, "Aw, I cut off my ear!" It's pretty amazing stuff.

There was one guy, we were doing a live fire, going up the side of--

Dan Morrow: It's an advantage to follow me, right?

Bill Bass: That's right, well, I don't know, because then they're shooting you in the back, you can't see what they're doing. We had one guy who was a total idiot. We're practicing this maneuver where we're running up a hill and capturing a hill. Doing a live fire, and there are little targets that are popping up as you're running up the hill. And so we had everybody on the line. Well, they put him on the right hand side.

Well, when you run with a rifle, if you're right handed, you run like, it's carried across your body like this, not up like that. So the line of people is going down that way, and his rifle is pointed down this way where you're supposed to keep it on safety until you're like ready to shoot. Well, that's if you're smart. But he's stupid, and we all knew he was stupid, and we still put him on the right hand side.

Running along, running along, we're up there, two of my friends right there, I'm right here. All of a sudden, kapow! The round comes down, hits right between these two guys. It spins off. They turn around with their guns, ready to shoot him. I'm in the middle just going, "Princeton did not prepare me for this." [laughter]

It was pretty amazing. So you get great stories about going through school. And so we go through the stuff, all my friends, it's sitting there, it's raining, you haven't had a shower in three days. The mail call comes through, I get these postcards, "We're having a great time over here in Paris." And stuff like that.

And then from there, I then went to flight school.

Dan Morrow: Where did you go to flight school?

Bill Bass: In Fort Rucker, Alabama. This was probably one of the, up until grad school, that was the greatest year of my life, going through flight school. Because here you have a bunch of kids, right out of college, young 20s, flying multi-gazillion dollar aircraft around.

Dan Morrow: What were you flying?

Bill Bass: I ended up flying Cobras, helicopter gun ships. Because you go through flight school, kind of like the same thing where they put you on this big order merit list, and then they give you your assignment based upon wherever you fall on that.

In flight school you start off, I flew Hughes 300s to learn how to fly. And then went into Hueys. Did my basic training in Hueys, and then volunteered to go into Aeroscouts.

Now, Aeroscouts are kind of interesting because those are, they're Bell Jet Rangers. And your job is, they're unarmed, and you're trying to find where the bad guys are. So what you do is you kind of go, fly around until you get somebody to shoot at you. And then you call back to the helicopter gun ships and tell them where the bad guys are.

So it's a little bit like, "Okay, we know there are some bad guys out there. Run across the parking lot and I'll see where they're shooting." I want to be one of the guys running across the parking lot.

And so to be--and it's kind of interesting, because in flight school at that time, you had to be in the top quarter of your class to go into Aeroscouts because it's more complex flying. But you're not carrying anybody around. So all the stupid guys in the class are the ones that go into troop carrying helicopters.

So then every time something happened, when they fly into the side of a hill, they kill 30 people. So after a while, after I got out of flight school, they kind of realized that wasn't the smartest thing to do. You want some of your smart pilots carrying people and all the rest of that.

Anyway, in flight school, I ended up graduating first in my class in flight school. So I got my choice of assignment, and what I could go fly and stuff like that. And I said, "As long as I'm going to be in the Army."

And the only reason I went in the Army was to pay for college. And I was planning on being in for four years and getting out.

I said, "As long as I'm going to be in the Army, by God, I might as well be in the Army and do Army stuff that I can't do anywhere else." So I volunteered to fly helicopter gun ships. So I flew Cobras, AH1 Cobras, and I volunteered to go to the 82nd Airborne Division and be a paratrooper because that was one, jumping out of airplanes is the biggest adrenalin rush in the world. And two, that was the front unit in the Army. So if anybody was going to go into combat, that was the unit that was going to go.

And I said, "You know, if anything happens, I want to be there where it happens." So I went off to Fort Bragg with the 82nd Airborne Division.

And I was really, when you start talking about technology, that was the first time I was going to start doing technology.

I knew when I was going through college that I was going to fly, which was a very technological thing, right? There's no better technology than what you put in military aircraft. And one of the things, then, that allowed me to major in English, because I said, "I know I'm going to get my technology background by flying and working on those systems. And so let me major in something different over here with English."

And it was kind of interesting because when I was going through flight school, my two roommates, one had grown up on a farm in Illinois, Harley Thorell. And the other one had been a geology major at the University of Pennsylvania, Jeff McCurdy. Jeff was a great guy.

And we'd come back from flying and our impressions of the flight were completely driven by our background. And so Jeff would come back and go, "Man, I saw some amazing oxbow lakes today." He's looking at the geographical, I mean geological things happening around. And Harley would come back and go, "Man, they're putting into winter wheat now."

[laughter]

"I can't believe it! I saw some farmers out there putting in winter wheat."
I'd come back and go, "I'll write a poem about this. Let me do my
dance." Oh, I forgot to tell you about my dance.

So the dance, so I'd gone to jump school that year before. And so then I
came back my senior year kind of under duress. And so for my dance, I
choreographed a parachute jump. Because when you jump from an
aircraft, you get hit with about 150 mile an hour wind when you come
out, and your body just gets thrown into all sorts of amazing contortions.
And then when you come down and you hit the ground, also your body
goes through some amazing contortions. And I said, "You know, when
you start talking about movement and things like that, I mean there are
some fairly interesting things that are going on here." And so I
choreographed a parachute jump.

Dan Morrow: Did you tape it? Is it taped?

Bill Bass: It's not taped. I still have the newspaper article that got written up about
it.

Dan Morrow: So how long did you fly gun choppers?

Bill Bass: I was at Fort Bragg for three years, met my wife. The plan was I'm going to get back out. Met her in church. We were in the same church. Played on softball teams.

Dan Morrow: Is she from North Carolina?

Bill Bass: She's from North Carolina, and she's a school psychologist. She's from Clinton, North Carolina, which is this tiny town between Raleigh and Wilmington. And so I met her at church, and we ended up getting married.

And the plan was, okay, I'm going to do my four years in the Army, pay back what I owed them from school, and then get out and go back to be a lawyer or be a business guy, do something. But I'm kind of loving the Army. [laughter]

Dan Morrow: You're what? First lieutenant?

Bill Bass: Yeah, first lieutenant then, yeah. I was a platoon leader of a helicopter gun ship unit in the 82nd Airborne Division's Air Cavalry unit.

So our job was, "Here's gas, here's bullets, fly out and find the bad guys and then figure out what to do." Total freedom. I mean freedom like you never have in normal businesses because there's no way for them to control what you're doing. I mean it's just, "Lieutenant, you're in charge. Here's ten aircraft and go out and get bad guys." And--

Dan Morrow: This is just working up to the Gulf War, right?

Bill Bass: Yeah, this is from 1985 to 1988. And in 1988, so I missed Grenada, but in 82nd you're on two-hour recall so you carry little beepers. And I'll never forget this. We'd been married three months. I got married in December of '87. So in March of '88 my beeper goes off. "Oh, this is interesting." Pam's at work. And you're not allowed, when your beeper goes off, to call your spouses because they can pick up the increase in telephone traffic, they can tie up on the phones. And it's kind of interesting because the Russians, at that time, the Russians were bad guys. And they had satellites going over, so you had to make sure that you were loading your aircraft and stuff when the satellites weren't overhead. And it's fairly intriguing, if you like operations, the military's pretty fascinating.

Anyway, so I have to leave her this note, and I thought we were going to go to Panama because we'd been having some problems down in Panama. So I left her this note: "Dear Pam, going to have to work late the next couple of nights." [laughter]

I'm laughing, I'm patting myself on the back. This is the greatest letter ever! She's not going to appreciate this. "Don't tell anybody I'm gone. Watch the news. Call mom and dad and tell them I love them when the news breaks but don't call them before that."

And so it turns out we went down to Honduras. The Nicaraguans had come across the border in Honduras. And so we loaded the aircraft up, flew down to Honduras, and when we got down there, the Nicaraguans pulled back across the border. And we spent a couple of weeks flying the border down in Honduras. Greatest flying I've ever had. Absolutely gorgeous country.

We're down there--this is the true story of what hardcore Army guys do when you're off. You take your little photo cameras, and you're going, "Wow! Man! Look at that! Indians in dug-out canoes!" It's sightseeing flights with the government paying for all the gas.

[laughter] It was pretty wild. Oh, but anyway, so my wife, so I'm planning on getting out, but I'm loving it. The Army calls up one day at work for me and says, "Hey, we'd like you to go down and teach at the flight school and be an instructor pilot." And if you're a young pilot in the Army, there's like God, then instructor pilots. But I'm not sure actually what the relative ranking is between those two. Because instructor pilots, they're as close to God as you get.

Dan Morrow: This makes a promotion probably, too.

Bill Bass: Yeah, yeah, you get promoted, but it's more the job you're going to do is the job that everybody wants to have. And so they called me and I said, "But when would you want me to do this?" They said, "We'd need to have you down there in two weeks." Well, my wife's thinking we're going to get out of the Army. And she likes living in North Carolina and all the rest of this. And they go, "It would be a three-year assignment." And so as I'm driving home, I'm trying to figure out, "Okay, how do I pitch this to my wife?" And I'm coming up with exactly how I'm going to say it. And all the rest of that stuff.

And I walk in the door, and she's there, and she's going, "Some guy from the Army left a message on the answering machine saying they want you down in Alabama in two weeks? And they're planning on you moving there?"

And I was like, well, so much for my marketing plan that I was developing coming down here. But she agreed to let me go do that. So we moved to Alabama. Because it was one of those, if I don't do this, all the rest of my life I'm going to wonder what if.

Dan Morrow: So you were an instructor there?

Bill Bass: Yep, so I was an instructor pilot. Ended up being second in command of Cobra Hall where we taught all the Cobra pilots. And then I ended up running the instructor pilot training program. So I was in charge of taking people and teaching them how to be instructor pilots for all our guys.

Dan Morrow: Okay, this sounds like a beginning spot. You absolutely love the Army. It sounds like the beginnings of a long-term career. You go to Stanford. How did that happen?

Bill Bass: We, my next assignment--and this is where the technology, the computer stuff, so I'll try and work some computer stuff into this, too. But I bought a computer because I said, back in 1986, I missed that coming out of college. Computers were not a big thing in college. It was still typewriters. And I mean literally, it was like, plink, plink, "Damn it!" Erase, erase, erase. I mean I was a terrible typist.

And so but I saw when I was a senior the Mac had just started coming out, and stuff. Computers were just starting getting going. So I bought myself a computer and started doing some stuff. I got down to the flight school and I'd taught myself how to use spreadsheets. At that time it was Lotus 123.

Dan Morrow: How old was your first computer?

Bill Bass: It was a Leading Edge, it was out of Korea. Yeah, you know that? I went to Consumer Reports. I'm a big Consumer Reports fan, and Consumer Reports had ranked them number one. Didn't have a hard drive. Had two floppy drives. And a little, orange, it wasn't a color terminal, it was just an orange screen.

And I taught myself to use Lotus 123 and word processing. And I got down to the flight school and it was an interesting thing we were going through. The Army had just really ramped up the number of people who were teaching to fly Cobras.

So when I went through flight school, you learned to fly Hueys all through flight school. Or the small group of the class went over to fly Scouts. And then if you were going to fly any advanced aircraft, you learned that after flight school in a thing afterwards.

Well, the Army decided, no, let's move all the advanced aircraft training much earlier. So once you learn how to fly instruments, we'll go ahead and start training you right in your advanced aircraft. Which then meant we had a lot more students we had to run through Cobra Hall. And they were there a lot longer.

And so I got down there, and I'll never forget this. These walls were filled with graph paper where they were trying to figure out, so you have classes going through doing days, nights, gunnery, all this stuff.

We have different air fields, different classes coming in at different times, with different numbers of people. And they were really trying to run these kind of optimization problems on using aircraft, which ones were set up for gunnery, which ones were set up to fly nights.

Dan Morrow: Doing it manually?

Bill Bass: Doing it manually. Okay, we can't do this. Tear out, let's redo the graph paper. Do it this way. I'm looking around and I go, "There's a program we could use to do this." So I put that all up on Lotus 123 and it amazed people. And the efficiency gain that we had right there was just unbelievable.

It was funny though, because when I went back to business school, and we started to learn how to do linear programming, which is exactly built for this, there's ways we could have just done it all in one whack, rather than... I mean what this made it easy to do was to make changes and see how changes fall through the things. But you start to make the changes, you started to look at it, and try and solve the puzzle yourself. And then when I got to business school, I said, "Man, this could have really helped five years ago.

Anyway, so we go through flight school. I'm having a great time. My commander at the flight school was the deputy commander of our special operations helicopter unit--dark, sneaky guys. And he goes, "You've got to go to the task force." They're the ones that fly Delta Force around and stuff like that. And I was going, "Oh man, that sounds great! I'd love to go to the task force. But you know what? There's no way in hell my wife is going to let me do this."

And my colonel, I'll never forget this, Chuck Gant, great guy, he goes, "I'll have my wife, Vicky, take Pam out to lunch, and Vicky will tell her how much she liked it when I was in the task force." And I'll never forget, I give this like zero percent of, I had no hope for this until he told me that. And I was going, "Hey, my wife likes Vicky Gant." I go, "You know, if Vicky really didn't think it was that bad of a thing, maybe Pam will believe this."

So they go to lunch, I come home, I go, "How did it go?" She goes, "Well, here's the thing." I said, "How was it when Chuck was in the task force?" And Vicky goes, "It was miserable, I hated every moment of it."

He was gone 250 days out of the year. I'd call up, we'd have dinner plans, he wouldn't show up. I'd call the base. They'd say, I'm sorry, Colonel Gant is going to be unavailable for an indefinite period of time. I wouldn't see him for 30 days. He'd show up one day and have all these dirty clothes. I'd wash them--next day, same thing. He'd be gone." That unit has, there are casualties and stuff that happen, so then as a commander's wife, you've got to take care of the families that are back. And she just went through this litany of things.

And my wife is telling me this stuff, and I mean I'm just going, my hopes, I mean they're just taking fire, just going down. And she goes, at the end, she goes, "You know the worst thing about this is? Not that she was miserable, because I knew she would be miserable. The worst thing is that Chuck Gant didn't know how miserable his wife was because he was having such a good time off playing soldier. " And she's looking right at me and she goes, "You know what? You'd be exactly the same way." And I looked at her and I said, "You're right. I would be exactly the same way." And I would have been exactly the same way because it's fun. You put on night vision goggles, you're landing on aircraft carriers, there's a lot of fun things you can do. But it really is not about family.

So it kind of came down to you can be married, or you can go be a soldier. And to me it was more important to be married. So then at that point, and I knew there wasn't going to be any big war. Russians, walls come down, they're our best buddies, no big wars coming. So this is early part of 1990. So I put in my paperwork to get out. Because I was a regular Army officer which meant I was tenured for 20 years, basically. And so I had to ask to get out.

Dan Morrow: Right on the eve.

Bill Bass: Well, but you don't know it's the eve, right? You're like going, it's going to be boring. Unless you're going to go do sneaky stuff, it's going to be boring. So I put in my paperwork, I applied back to schools. I applied to Duke, Dartmouth and Stanford and got in all three, and decided to go to Stanford. And I'm due to get out of the Army August 30th. Pam's pregnant. She's due August 10th, okay?

August 2nd, Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait! And so it's the funniest thing. So I start, so Pam's due like on the 10th. She goes into labor on the 16th of August. I'd taken my last flight.

I'm turning in my flight gear, and the chaplain, so Pam's going through labor, and she's going to end up having to have a c-section. So I'm taking all the soft music and stuff you do, taking that out and putting it in the car and the chaplain shows up and he goes, "Hey, I know..." I say, "Hey Chaplin, I really appreciate you being here." And he goes, "Well, I understand this can be a real stressful time for you." And I'm going, "I know, but it's really nice." And he goes, "Yeah, and if there's anything that you need me to do for your family or your new baby while you're over in the desert, you just let me know." I go, "Desert, nope, not desert, I'm going to California. There are deserts in California, but I'm going to the nice part of California where there are hot tubs and stuff like that." And he goes, "Oh, you haven't heard?" He goes, "You're going to Kuwait. You're going over to Saudi." And I go, "No, I'm getting out of the Army." He goes, "Oh man, I'm sorry, I didn't realize you didn't know but your name just came out on the list this morning because there was a shortage of instructor pilots over there to get people ready to go to combat." And I'm looking at him and I'm going, "Wow!" And then I go, "Are you sure you're not thinking of Mark Bass?" Who's this other pilot in this other unit. And he goes, "Oh, that's it!"

So then, I was going, I need to share this with my wife. So I come back in and I go, they're wheeling her into the operation and I go, "Guess who's going to Saudi Arabia?" [laughter]

"But the chaplain says he'll take good care of you while I'm gone." I go, "It's really Mark Bass that's going, but didn't that take your mind off it?"

Here I was a lieutenant--this is when I was in Fort Bragg. I was a lieutenant in the Army. And so I explained to her, "Is there any way I can get our guys so we can train off an aircraft carrier?" She goes, "Oh sure, when do you want it?" I'm going, "Oh cool, does this date fit?" She goes, "Yeah, okay, just go fly into Norfolk, and then we'll have you fly out to the carrier. From there, we'll even let you spend the night on the carrier while you're doing your little stuff." And I was going, this is great!

And in the 82nd, everybody's going, "Wow! That's really cool. How did you order a carrier?" You just do it. You don't ask people if you can do it, you just talk to the person and then they do it.

And then once you get the carrier, then everything else kind of falls into place. Then everybody says, "Yeah, that's a great idea, let's go do that."

[laughter]

That was one of the greatest nights ever, too, because we spent the night on the carrier and--

Dan Morrow: So you flew to Norfolk?

Bill Bass: Yeah. You have to go through dunker training.

Dan Morrow: What's the name of the carrier?

Bill Bass: We ended up doing it three times, so I was on three. It was on the Iwo Jima and the Guadalcanal and the Okinawa. And I don't remember which one we did first. Because once we did it that first year, then we set it up so that we continued to do it. It was on one of those three the first time.

They're called LPHs. They're carriers for helicopters and the Harrier jump jets, VTOLs. They're still big. They're not as big as the nuclear powered carriers, but they're still really good sized.

I remember the night we're there, and the Navy is all concerned that you're going to crash on their boat and burn them all up, okay? Big carrier, huge thing to land on. We're used to night vision goggles, flying through trees, dodging telephone wires, high stress stuff, and they have this huge deck, and they're, "Be careful!" And you're going, "Any knucklehead could land on this thing." But it is true that if you crash, it's not just you that goes down. I mean you really do burn up the whole boat and everybody buys [a prop]. But that night, I'll never forget, they have--

Dan Morrow: Then you'd be responsible--

Bill Bass: That's right, I'd be responsible for burning up one of the carriers. I don't want to do that. We, if you want to hear some more stories, there's another one about [Murray Totum]. We were trying to shoot speed boats to practice going to the Gulf. The Iranians were coming out, take with speed boats and shooting up oil tankers.

And the Marines, this is another one where I called up and the Marines had this really nice remote control speed boat, like a \$150,000 thing, that would tow a target behind it.

They'd be zigging along, and you could practice doing gun runs on them. So I had my guys down doing that. I'm on the radios and they're going, "Roger, I understand I'm clear to shoot at the tow boat." And I'm going, "No, no, the towed boat." And they're going, "Roger, the tow boat." "And I'm going, "No, no!" Because the woman who owned the boat, the Marine person, she's going, "Do not shoot at the \$150,000 boat." And I'm just watching this guy with their rockets going out towards this thing. I'm going, "NOT THAT ONE!"

Dan Morrow: This is true.

Bill Bass: But anyway, you're sitting there, you've got popcorn machines, Coke machines on these Navy ships. We're used to digging holes and sleeping in holes. I'm going, "This Navy life is pretty good."

So we go up, we get popcorn and Coke, it's pitch black, there's no moon.

We climb up on the deck. Because I go, "Let's go sit up on the bow and eat popcorn." Well, you're not allowed up on the flight deck at night, right? And we knew that, but we figured there was plausible deniability that we knew that. [laughter]

We were Army guys. And our aircraft they'd strapped down on the deck, instead of putting it down underneath. And so we figured if worse came to worst, we'd tell them we were up inspecting the aircraft. Pitch black but no clouds. And stars everywhere.

And you know, it's like being in the desert. We were 150 miles off the coast of North Carolina. It was like being in space. Well, we're walking along, you can't see the deck, and all I could see is the silhouettes of the aircraft as we're passing them, but I really want to go sit on the front edge of the bow.

Well, I get to the last one--you can't see where the deck ends. I'm going, "Okay, I was a Scout. I'll sit here." I get down on my knees, I'm feeling in front of me while somebody else is holding my popcorn and I'm holding my Coke.

Finally, we get up to the edge of the deck. We're at the very front end of the aircraft carrier on the flight deck. And we all sit there and I mean, you're up, maybe 15 stories, something like that. And we're going through the water, "Phssss." You see the water going up, because you can see a little bit of light where the anchor is coming through the thing. And the ship is running blacked out. And there's like six, seven of us lieutenants just sitting there dangling our feet off the end of this aircraft carrier steaming through, eating popcorn, drinking Coke. And we laid back on the flight deck which was still warm, because the sun had been coming down all day. And we were watching satellites going over, and just telling stories and just getting to know each other, and it was a blast.

Dan Morrow: Okay, let's get you to Stanford--these are just great tales. You know you're getting out of the Army. Your wife's pregnant. You apply to, you get an MA?

Bill Bass: Yeah, the MA actually came second. So I get there to the business school. The day I sign out of the Army is the last day they let people out of the Army.

So if I'd actually put in my paperwork to get out one day later, I wouldn't have been able to get out. They put in what's called a stop loss. Drive out to California with my now two-week old baby. [laughs] And we get out there at Stanford, and I go into the reserves, and I end up working in the psychological operations unit. The Army reserves are the most worthless organization imaginable. It is a crime for our public dollars to be going to them, just to put that out there. It was really bad.

But anyway, so I'm in the reserves in the psychological operations unit, and going to school. So I go through the first year of school. We have a little bit of a problem in that our psychological operations unit, which has German and Czech linguists--excuse me, Russian and Czech linguists, because we are dedicated to one of the armor divisions that's on the East German border. So we have Russian and Czech linguists, that's the thing. And our thing is to do propaganda against Russians and Czechs.

Well, our tank unit gets shipped down to Saudi Arabia. So literally, at mid-terms, in our winter quarter, my phone rings. And they said, "Captain Bass, you need to get your unit ready to go to Saudi Arabia. You're going to be deployed." And I said, "I have Russian and Czech linguists." And they said, "Yes, but the armor unit that you support has been redeployed down there, and so now, you have to go be with them." And I go, "But we have Russian and Czech linguists." We were affiliated with them when they were going to go fight Russians and Czechs. Now that they're going to go fight Iraqis...

It's like propaganda, you need to know the thing. And they're going, "I'm sorry but..." And that's another one where I'm sitting there going, "You know, I feel like I'm back talking to that professor that wanted me to do 20th century poetry." This does not make sense.

So that was a little stressful. And then about six hours later, they called back up and they go, "Captain Bass, we've decided not to deploy your unit." And I was going, "Oh, thank God somebody realized this." So that first year was a little exciting.

But I did really well in grad school, which is kind of interesting for me, after kind of having marginally made it through high school, and then marginally made it through college.

And it was fun again. I mean I literally had fun learning all this new stuff. I mean the Army was a great cleansing experience to me, because the stuff that I learned in the Army was all applicable, practical, you learn to fly, what a better thing. And so when I got back to grad school, it was really fascinating. I mean I was intellectually curious again.

And so I went through the first year, and then I realized I was doing really well. And so I found out you could do a joint degree program. And so I applied to the education school to get a Masters in education policy.

One of the things I wanted to do, because I'd been in public service now for almost all my life, I wanted to bounce back and forth between the public and private sectors. And I felt my international knowledge, having been a tool for international diplomacy, I felt that my international policy stuff was pretty decent.

And I wanted to do some domestic policy stuff. And I said, "What's the biggest problem that we're facing?" And I said, "It's education."

I mean if you sit there and you think about anything going forward, it's all about education. And so the second year, I was taking courses in the ed school and in the business school, another collision of cultures.

Because you have--the business school is all about cost benefit analysis.

The Army was all about cost benefit--"Okay, I'm going to let you two guys get killed because that way I'm going to be able to save 50 others."

You get over in the education world and they're like, "Every student has a right to unlimited funds for any reason." And you're going, "But it can't work that way." But anyway, it was a kind of interesting thing there.

So I came out with a Masters in education policy, and an MBA. I'm going through, looking at jobs to do when I get out of grad school. I'm miserable. Okay, I can go sell soap for Procter and Gamble--boy, that's not very exciting.

You know, after having been in the Army and feeling like what you were doing mattered to society on a bigger thing. I mean keeping people clean is kind of important to society, but not real important.

And so I was miserable. And I was sitting there at the end of school going, "I want to go back in the Army. Boy, do I feel stupid! Now that I got out and paid my own way through grad school." Because the Army was going to pay for me to go back to grad school, and now I want to go back in the Army.

And a friend of mine had seen Knight-Ridder come do a presentation on campus. And she said, "You know, you want to go in the private sector, but if you think about newspapers, it's like private sector, but it's a public function." It's the only thing that's in the Constitution. This is a business that we're going to try in the Constitution's freedoms.

Dan Morrow: [Unintelligible].

Bill Bass: Oh yeah, that's exactly right. And I said, "Man, yeah, the newspaper industry. Private sector, public service." So Knight-Ridder went through a fairly rigorous thing. Knight-Ridder hires a couple of MBAs a year, or used to. One from Harvard, one from Stanford, to kind of come in and be change agents in the company.

And I let my, I told Knight-Ridder, I said, "Boy, I'd really like to be able to use this education degree for a short period of time because I don't know that I'm going to have a chance to do it." So I wrote a letter to Lamar Alexander, who at that time was the Secretary of Education. I said, "Look, I'm coming out of Stanford, I have an MBA, and I have a Masters in education policy. And I'd like to come work for the Department for four or five months before going to work for the newspaper industry." And Knight-Ridder agreed to let me do that. And the nice thing is the Department of Education called back and said, "Yeah, we'd like to have you come do that."

Dan Morrow: So you went to Washington?

Bill Bass: Went to Washington. I worked in the office of post-secondary education on what's called the trio programs. And the area that I was working on was called "Upward Bound," which tries to identify, if you look at the production function of how kids, why kids go to college, and how well they do in school, the two biggest inputs are peer group influences and family influences.

So if you hang around with a bunch of kids that are going to go to college, you're more likely to go to college. If your parents went to college, you're more likely to go to college. Because they give you experiences, and really, they put expectations on you.

So the idea for Upward Bound is take kids whose parents have never been to college, so they're going to be potential first generation college kids. And who are low-income. So within 150 percent of the poverty line. And set up programs with them to give them experiences that you would not get typically. So put them around people who are putting the expectations on them that, "Yes, you're going to go to college." Take them to plays. Have them work on science projects. I mean do a lot of really good programs.

So I worked on Upward Bound--they'd just gone through a funding cycle. Some of the programs they already had funded in the past, they de-funded.

Dan Morrow: What year was this?

Bill Bass: This was 1992. Summer of 1992. And it's a three-year funding cycle. They'd de-funded some projects and so congressmen were going absolutely bananas. So I ended up being kind of in charge of these congressional relations between the departments.

And the interesting thing, there are two things about the Department of Education. One is my office was right across the street from the Air and Space Museum. And for a pilot, that's mecca. And so every day at lunch I took my lunch break and went over and spent an entire hour in one room of the Air and Space Museum. And so I could read, I've read, literally, every single word that's available to the public in the Air and Space Museum. But the other thing that was interesting about the Department of Education that I found very distressing: I never once hear a decision that we made where anybody said anything about what's the best decision for the kids? I never heard that.

I heard a lot of times, "This congressman's our friend. Let's take care of him." I've heard, "This congressman is not our friend, let's screw him." But almost all the decisions that were being made were politically driven decisions, not--and I mean politics on its basis level. And not, "Why do we have a Department of Education? We have that to take care of kids." And that never came up, it never came up. And I walked out of there very disillusioned.

And having been in the Army, I hope I never work in the Pentagon because I can still maintain this fiction that when I got sent to Central America to go shoot Nicaraguans, that there were good reasons to do that. Not the reasons I saw in the Department of Education.

I mean it was like going to the sausage factory. I was kind of going, "You know, I kinda wish I hadn't gone to the sausage factory, because I don't want to eat sausage now." So then I went to Knight-Ridder after that.

Dan Morrow: And at Knight-Ridder, you were in Miami for a while?

Bill Bass: Yeah, I started off, I got hired by corporate in Miami, and what they do is they send you on a management training program. So they send you to one of their, they like to send you to a medium sized newspaper so that you can then rotate through advertising, editorial, so I was supposed to go write for a year.

I was going to go be a reporter for a year, and then go into advertising and then circulation and production, and I was all set for that. I get to our paper in Lexington, Kentucky. I asked to go to Lexington. My mother was dying of cancer at that time. So I wanted to be close to home in Knoxville, with my daughter, get a chance to know her grandmother. And plus, Lexington is one of the best papers in the Knight-Ridder chain.

So I get there, have an absolutely great publisher, Lewis Owens. My title is assistant to the publisher. But I get there and the business side is in utter disarray. They just fired the advertising director. The general manager had just left to go be a general manager, go be a publisher at one of our other papers. So I get there and he goes, "What's the plan for you?" And I go, "I get to be a reporter for a year." And he goes, "Here's the new plan. You're going into advertising."

[laughter] It's like we've sprung a hole over here. And I go, "How about I get to be a reporter for like six months?" And he goes, "How about zero?" And I go, "How about three months?" And so I ended up negotiating three weeks over in the newsroom. Which was good, because I got to build relationships with the newsroom guys. But I got to work on one sports story. I got to go out on a photo shoot. I got to work with the editorial guys. But I didn't get a chance to be a reporter.

Dan Morrow: And over to the advertising side?

Bill Bass: Over to the advertising side. And then did advertising. And then got in to new product development and was launching books and magazines and things like that. So really trying to come up with new businesses for the newspaper industry. McKinsey had come in and done a study and said, "Guess what? The newspaper industry is going to do this. We need to come up with what's called augmentation revenue." And so did that, and then went down to Miami to work on a re-engineering project where we were trying to take computers, laptops, and put them in the hands of our sales force to improve the sales. So it was a sales force automation thing.

Dan Morrow: So the civilian world has changed tremendously between the time you left Princeton, and the first Macs were coming in. By the time you get out of Stanford and into electronic newsrooms and PCs--

Bill Bass: That's exactly right, that's exactly right. Although in the Army it had become that. But also, we'd gotten to the point, before I left Bragg I'd been promoted from platoon leader to the squadron adjutant. So I was in charge of all the personnel stuff for the squadron including all the legal stuff. All the stuff that goes on as a paper pusher. But I was still a paratrooper, so we jumped in. And we actually had computers that we jumped in with.

So when I was there, so we computerized all our records. We now had these green computers, because everything's got to be green in the Army, that we would jump in with.

Dan Morrow: What kind were they?

Bill Bass: Green computers. [laughter]

So actually, you'd seen the computerization starting to happen in the Army. But yes, you were absolutely right though. Nowhere near, not everybody had a computer on their desk. But in the civilian world, it was really starting to get that way.

That being said, my publisher didn't use a computer at all. He had one in there, but it was the old secretary [checko] thing. And so I'm at Knight-Ridder doing sales force automation. A guy there, Dave Margulius, who had been a year after me at Stanford and I'd done, when I was a second year, I did a mock interview with him to prepare him for interviews for businesses. He'd gone to the Boston Globe. And he wrote a business plan to launch an electronic publishing company for the Boston Globe, and had sent it to the New York Times. The New York Times owned the Boston Globe Company by then.

And McKinsey was getting in with the New York Times trying to figure out what should be the strategy for the New York Times. This landed right on the guy's desk as they're trying to figure this out. They go, "Hey, this is something you need to fund."

So the Times funded it for many, many, many millions of dollars.

Decided to also fund a parallel effort for the New York Times

newspaper. And so Dave's sitting there now with many millions of dollars and it's just him. And so he calls me up on the phone and he goes, "Hey, how'd you like to come up to Boston and help me launch this Internet company for the Boston Globe?" So I talked to the folks at Knight-Ridder and they're going, "That's a bad career move for you because this Internet thing's not going anywhere."

Dan Morrow: Yeah, I've heard that.

Bill Bass: Yeah, and I was going, "You know, I think this is really going to be a big thing." And they're also concerned about bench strength for the core paper. So, and one of the reasons they brought us in and sent us around to learn all the different things is because they wanted us to be publishers someday for the core paper. Not to go off and do these little things that are never going to pan out.

[laughter]

Anyway, so I ended up leaving Knight-Ridder, which is a great company, and went off to the Boston Globe to start up Boston.com. And at that

time, the Internet really had not taken off. I mean it still was not out there.

We launched Boston.com and it was one--it was the most intense experience of my life. It was one of those where the T in Boston stops running at 1:00 a.m. in the morning and I knew this. We had to start setting the alarm clocks in the office, because there was a couple of times that we realized after the T had stopped running--the T had stopped running, we'd have to pay taxis to send people home.

Dan Morrow: This is your first experience, essentially, with a pure IT base?

Bill Bass: I show up at the Globe, and it's like, "Oh, we hired this guy from Knight-Ridder, he's coming in and he's going to really help us get up on the Internet." So I get there and somebody asks me, "So like, have you been on the Internet long?" I go, "No, the first time was last week." This person's looking at me going, "Oh my gosh, what have we done?"

[laughter]

And I wasn't an IT guy. I know enough about computers, but it was all self-taught. I wasn't like a Steve Jobs that like built computers from when he was little, and that was what he was about. I was kind of a hooligan who'd flown helicopters.

Dan Morrow: So tell me about what you did at the Boston Globe.

Bill Bass: And so I ended up being in charge of the, I didn't have the IT side reporting to me, which was good. I had responsibility for the design of the site, and all of the content that was going up on the site. So what was going to be the user experience when they came in and migrated through the site. So the designers reported to me. The writers reported to me. The content developers reported to me. And then all the business side functions. The advertising, sales.

Dan Morrow: So what happened was your sense of what--the people that were going to be touched by this technology?

Bill Bass: If you sit there and you look at what I've done in the past, we'd launched magazines, did design and all of that. Did book publishing--you know, it's really what do people want out of this? Not, okay, I'm back here tinkering with the presses and making the presses run. It was much more on the consumer focus of this.

Dan Morrow: From a 100 years perspective, was there a difference between the guys working on the Boston Globe's e-project and the guy who worked on the traditional side of the newspaper?

Bill Bass: Oh, massive.

Dan Morrow: Younger?

Bill Bass: Yes, yes, yes. I mean the thing that's interesting in launching these businesses, years from now they'll all be the same. But all of this was getting started, and you're still running into this in a lot of companies. If you got off the--let me go back to the Lexington Herald Leader for a second.

You get off on the fourth floor, which is where all the executives have their office and stuff like that. You get off the elevator and you have famous front pages, and most newspapers have this, famous front pages, okay. If you look to the left, that one was from 1898 and was the Spanish-American War. And then they had the big ones. And then the last one over here on the right was the Gulf War, the end of the Gulf War.

And you looked, and it was about a 100-year spread, and it looked almost, here you had color, but other than that, it looked pretty much the same. And if you went back a hundred years ago, and you asked a reporter what they did, it would be very similar to what a reporter did here.

If you went back and talked to an advertising sales guy, or a circulator. If you get back on the production side, it would be different because the presses were different. But business models and stuff hadn't changed.

And I'll never forget this, when I was in Lexington one time, I said, "Hey, have we ever...let's try this." This was 1993-ish. "No, we've already tried that, it doesn't work." I said, "Oh really, wow. And when did we do that?" They said, "In 1968." Honest to God! And I'm going, "Well, you know, maybe the world's changed a little bit since then." But you know, if you're in the newspaper world, it really hasn't changed much since then.

And so that's kind of what you have over here in the traditional paper. And when you sit there and you think about that, newspapers are cash cows. I mean they make a lot of money. And there's a much bigger risk that you're going to screw something up and lose money than somebody's going to have a great idea and double the revenues coming in. So you put a lot of control systems in place to keep people from screwing stuff up.

Anything that you want to change, you have to have four people sign off on it. You're going to hire people, stability is their thing, not blowing things up is their thing.

So in the Boston.com we set it up as a separate, independent company. We moved it off-site into downtown Boston. We had separate hiring procedures. We had a separate pay plan. So that when these people are sitting here, I mean literally sleeping at their desks, I mean it was a completely different culture that was going on.

Dan Morrow: And you had a marvelous community in Boston to hire from. Did you hire a lot of kids?

Bill Bass: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I was 30, at that time I was maybe like 32-ish.

Dan Morrow: You were the old man?

Bill Bass: By far. By like ten years. And it was funny, because I'd go down to the Globe and talk to the senior execs at the Globe and tell them what we were doing. And they looked at me, across this generational chasm, and looked at me as like the wide-eyed, radical youth. And then I looked at my guys across a generational chasm. You know, I come in and I go, "What is that garbage you're listening to on the radio? Oh God, I'm my parents."

Like one of the best guys we had, he was a junior in high school. He was working for us for the summer.

Dan Morrow: Do you remember his name?

Bill Bass: David Dine.

Dan Morrow: David Dine.

Dan Morrow: David Divine, David Dine. Yeah, like that summer, because we were working over that summer, we had a woman, Sue Carls, who was, Susan Carls, who was in her year between business school at Harvard, right? So she was in the summer between her first and second year.

We had two people who were in graduate programs at MIT. And we had David--Dildine is what it was. And they were all phenomenal. So we talked Susan into dropping out of Harvard and staying and working for us. We talked Grady Seale into dropping out of MIT and continuing working for us.

Grady was one of our head technical guys. Susan was a [contro de vough], she's now Yahoo. Runs a bunch of sections of Yahoo, their classified stuff. She's wildly, she made a lot of money.

And so we talked those two into dropping out of school. We honest to God had a serious discussion about could we talk David into dropping out of high school. And I was going, "Ya know, okay, I did work for the Department of Education, so I feel like I have some authority to make a determination on is this...which is going to be a better education for him." But at the end of the day, we can't get him to drop out of high school. But we actually had a...and I think he would have been better off dropping out of high school, actually, and working with us for another year.

Dan Morrow: Then you go to another not too shabby group in Boston, Forrester Research. Tell me about that.

Bill Bass: Yeah, that little thing. So we go on, we launch the Web site, and--

Dan Morrow: Shall we just change the tape?

Male voice: Oh sure.

Dan Morrow: We'll change it now--we'll get you through Forrester Research and that's all.

Dan Morrow: Core businesses, like you said, where they're trying to create this whole new business model and change to be more of a complete--

Bill Bass: And for most companies, I would...

Dan Morrow: You're having a great time in Boston--

Bill Bass: Yeah, a great time.

Dan Morrow: Great people.

Bill Bass: Great people. And then, we're successful.

Dan Morrow: Uh oh.

Bill Bass: And that causes problems. And this is what happens, okay.

So the newspaper—so we're offsite and we're a New York Times-funded little operation—it's not really coming out of the Globe's budget, and so they kind of just leave us alone.

The fall of...this is 1995. Bill Gates—we launched the site October 30th. In November, Bill Gates does the big transformation of Microsoft from the Internet doesn't matter, the Internet doesn't matter, to the Internet's the most important thing in the world and I'm completely changing the focus of the company.

Well, what had happened was Bill Gates does a retreat every...it's either once a year or twice a year where he goes off by himself for a week. And his staff pulls together things that they think are happening, interesting in technology. And he goes off and looks at it

Well, one of the things his staff had pulled together for him was our site-- Boston.com. And he'd looked at it and he thought it was really cool. And then Microsoft ends up doing this whole thing that's kind of like Boston.com that ended up being a disaster for Microsoft.

But he comes out and starts making speeches around the company.

"We're changing Microsoft to be an Internet-focused company, because look at all these cool things that are happening on the Internet. There's this site in Boston called Boston.com." And he's using our site in all these examples and speeches. All of a sudden, everybody starts going, "Oh, my gosh! They've like really built something!" [laughs]

Dan Morrow: Who did that?

Dan Morrow: And the Globe does this. Then the Globe goes, oh, we really need to get involved now, because we need to make sure they're going to do this right.

And so the Globe decides that they're going to really start getting a lot more involved in what we're doing. And so what happens is there's this inverse correlation between involvement of the big parent company and the amount of fun you have in the entrepreneurial little company-- [laughs]

And so the culture changes and all the rest of that. And so then that happens. And so then Forrester decides--which had been an IT operation that developed the term "client server computing."

It did coin the term and had done a bunch for stuff on how companies use technology to work better in-house. Then they decided consumers are using technology differently now. And we need, as a company, to start helping our client companies understand how consumers' use of technology is going to change, how companies relate to consumers.

And so then they called me and they said, "Hey, we're launching this new side of the business. How'd you like to come over and help us get this thing going?" So I went to Forrester.

And there were a couple of things that I did, reasons that I did that. One is intellectually, absolutely fascinating trying to solve this. Two is every job I'd ever had had always been operational jobs. I mean it had always been launch businesses, shoot bad guys--whatever. But it had always been operational. I'd never had a strategy job. I'd never had kind of a staff strategy function, and I wanted to fill that out in my skill set.

Dan Morrow: We were talking about art and dance and business. There's a certain satisfaction in coming to an elegant solution.

Bill Bass: If you look at the backgrounds of the people at Forrester--absolutely fascinating. One guy had his Masters of fine arts. We had a Ph.D. in theater. We had a Ph.D. in Slavic languages. It was not traditional IT/IS people--you know, information technology people. It was people with a really eclectic range of backgrounds that are trying to figure out what is going to be the elegant solution long-term in pulling this stuff together, and how a consumer is going to use it.

The other thing is, it was an interesting...people keep forgetting that it's not about the technology. It's about how people use the technology. And we'll talk about Lands' End Live and this stuff. But it's not about the fact that we have technology that you can now connect people to real live operators over a computer. It's the real live operators that matter. It's 98 percent who they're talking to.

I mean all the computer does is enable you to connect to this person on the other end. But it's the person at the other end that is ultimately what's providing the value.

Dan Morrow: What did you do at Forrester that you found most relevant to what you do here at Lands' End?

Bill Bass: Well, the first report I wrote at Forrester was writing about the profitability of putting content up on sites. How could you publish online? And what I found was there is no model for publishing online that was going to make any money.

Then the second report that I wrote was about how people use technology.

And then the third report I wrote was what was going to happen to the newspaper industry and classifieds.

And so I wrote this thing and said, you know what? This whole classified thing is going to be a disaster. And newspaper business models are going to collapse. And that really made people in the newspaper industry unhappy. The people at Forrester were happy because I'd just burned all the bridges to go back into the newspaper industry. [laughter]

So I didn't have to worry about going back to the newspaper industry.

Remind me, because we can talk about the CareerPath thing somewhere along in here, too.

And so as you go along, you start to realize how quickly are people going to use technology, and what are they going to use it for. And I tell you, there were a lot of companies that would come in...

Let me give you an example. This is a Microsoft example. Nathan Myhrvold, who was the Chief Technology Officer of Microsoft--I made Nathan very unhappy. I made a lot of Microsoft people unhappy. Because they're out there trying to say, okay, the Internet's a big thing and we're going to be a big Internet content player. I kept going, there's not any money here. You can't do this.

There's a magazine called Slate. Michael Kinsley, who's a big Washington pundit, had gone out to lunch--Slate magazine. We're going to change the way publishing happens online. And they decided they're going to charge subscriptions for this.

And I was saying, "You know. There's no business model charging subscriptions here because there's too much free content on the Internet that's substitutable for this. The Washington Post is up online for free. The New York Times is up online for free. Time magazine's up online for free. It's not just junky stuff floating around on the Internet."

And Nathan...they're getting unhappy because I'm saying this in the press.

And so I run into Nathan Myhrvold, and he goes, "People should pay for what they value. And this is valuable stuff and people should have to pay for it."

I said, "Well, that might be true in a philosophical sense, but in an economic sense, you have supply and demand that determines price points."

There's nothing in the world I value more than oxygen. I would pay you a lot of money if I knew I wasn't going to have any oxygen. I used to be a scuba diver. You get really--focuses your mind when you think you're running out of oxygen! But I don't pay anything for oxygen. [inhales] It didn't cost me anything just to breathe that in. And the reason I can do that is that the trees are cranking it out for free. And so the only way a business model starts to work is if you can sit there and restrict the supply to everybody else. If Microsoft could convince the Washington Post not to put their stuff up for free and--you know, they could do that..but you can't do that. And whether or not Microsoft is a monopoly or not, they still can't do that. [laughs]

And so the business models that are out there are really unbelievable. People focus in on the wrong things. And the right things to focus in on are what provides a great customer experience. And if you focus on that, everything else really does kind of take care of itself.

And that really is the thing that I learned at Forrester, is that they're just crazy business models.

Dan Morrow: How did you find Lands' End? Did they find you? Or did you find them?

Bill Bass: We had a...it was interesting. I loved Forrester. I had an absolutely great time there.

Dan Morrow: Bright people.

Bill Bass: Bright people--nice people. People that you'd go hang out and drink a beer with, even if you didn't work with them.

Those are great environments to be in because there are a lot of companies where you work with these people, but you wouldn't hang out with them if you didn't work with them. Forrester's one of those where I'd move in and live with these people if I could.

So things were going along great at Forrester. I ended up being director of the new media area, then became director of the new media and I picked up e-commerce under that. And then I was--

Dan Morrow: Liking Boston?

Bill Bass: Liking Boston, but not liking my commute. Because I lived to be close to the Globe. Forrester's in Cambridge, and that became something of an issue.

My next job was going to be going over and taking over international operations in Europe, so I was going to move to Amsterdam. They backed off my move to Amsterdam for a year. And I wasn't happy about that--I told them I wasn't happy about that.

About this time, I was in New York, and Dan Okrent, who was the editor of Time Inc. New Media and had been a client of mine at Forrester... Dan's a fascinating guy. He was the editor of Life, he invented rotisserie baseball. Ken Burns, the documentary film maker, did the thing "Baseball." Dan is the featured guy in "Baseball" – talking about the history of baseball. He's there in his red sweater.

And actually, it was funny. I'd just been watching. When I first met Dan, I'd just been watching "Baseball." Because I work out on a treadmill at home and I get tapes from the library to watch while I'm doing that. So I'd been watching the "Baseball" series.

And I'd been saying some stuff about Time Warner. Dan had just come in to take over Pathfinder. He called me up and says, "This is Dan Okrent, I'd like to take you out to lunch." I go, "Hey, I've been watching you on Ken Burns' "Baseball" series!" But anyway, so Dan and I became pretty good friends over the course of a couple of years. And so I was in New York. I had a meeting get canceled. And so I said, "If I could go out to lunch with anybody in New York who I know--Dan! I'll give Dan a call. He's always a great guy to go to lunch with."

So I go out to lunch with Dan. Dan's on the board of directors at Lands' End. And it was an interesting thing because this happened when I was at Forrester covering what was happening. And it was interesting to see a traditional editorial guy be on a board of directors for another company. And the reason is because they wanted to figure out how e-commerce and media...traditionally you had media and then you had retailers, and they were two very distinct industries. And now you were starting to see this blurring of the line between the two.

And so Dan told me they were looking for somebody out here. I flew out here kind of as a favor to him—looking for a reason to not like it so I could go back and go, "Oh, it'd be a great job for somebody, but not great for me." I got out here. I loved the people that I met. I loved the business model. I was interested in getting back into the operational side of the business.

You know, being an analyst is a lot of fun, but after a while, you tell companies, "Look, you need to do xyz to be successful." And then they don't go do it. And after a while you sit there and you go, you know what? I'm going to go do this because then we can be successful.

Dan Morrow: What was your mission when you were hired here? What was job one when you came to Lands' End? This is not that--this is...

Bill Bass: A year ago--last May. So in May '99, what we had at Lands' End had really been a lot of success--a lot of innovation--they rolled out the personal model where you could try clothes onto a virtual model.

And so it was two things. One was to implement Lands' End Live. Which is--

Dan Morrow: [Strike] Lands' End Live just for--

Bill Bass: And so Lands' End Live is...when the Internet first came along, everybody said, hey, we can put up Web sites and we'll have all this information there and then nobody will ever need to call us. And we'll save lots of money on customer service costs. Because up until then, all your customer service or ordering or stuff had always had to go through a telephone and have somebody be answering it on the other end. So a lot of companies saw the Internet as a huge cost-saving device for the company, because they'd be able to offload a lot of customer service costs and put in electronically.

And that's a fallacy. Because there are things that you can't do with a computer. It's not the same as talking to a real person. There are questions that you'll get that you need a person who understands the product and can actually see the colors and can match things together and help you make decisions about, you know, you want a gift for your cousin. "Tell me about your cousin and I'll help you because I know all the 90,000 products that we have here at Lands' End." Actually 3,000 products--90,000 sku's.

And so we were trying to figure out a way to take this customer service that Lands' End is renowned for. I mean we've got great people answering the phones over there--nice Wisconsin people off the farms. Can't get any better than that. And we had this Web site. And how do we have people come into the Web site and connect now, to these great customer service people?

And that's what we did with Lands' End Live. It was a way to come up with one click and blend the experience. And it really is trying to blend the experience that we can provide you off the Web with the experience that they can provide you with a real live person and blend them together.

Dan Morrow: And the approach here at Lands' End was to use the technology not as a cost-cutter but to enhance the quality of the personal experience.

Bill Bass: That's exactly right. Yeah. If you go into this thinking about how do we cut costs doing this, you're going to screw up. Because there are so many opportunities to provide a markedly better customer service.

And the thing that's worked well for us is our market share for what we do on the Internet is a lot bigger than our market share on what we do off of the Internet. And that's because we're providing a better experience online.

Dan Morrow: When did that transition take place? Do you know?

Bill Bass: The actual market share, we've probably always been bigger online. Because since we were one of the first companies to go online and use this as a customer service tool...I mean it's like cranking along...

So we've probably always been on that side, on the Internet side of the business, always out in front. In the retail business, there have been companies selling clothes for hundreds of thousands of years. Thousands of years at least.

Dan Morrow: [Marshall Funk] was doing that--

Bill Bass: Yeah, right.

Dan Morrow: --[around the turn of the century].

One of the things I wanted to ask you about is what do you think the long-term effect of this really electronic enhancement of human relationships [is going to happen]? Do you think it's raising people's expectations of what constitutes a great service?

Bill Bass: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And the thing that's interesting to me is--and we're just now at the very beginning of this, still. A lot has happened over the past five years. Businesses have risen and...AOL has taken over Time Warner. I mean there's been massive change.

So I don't agree with...I had somebody ask me the other day--would you agree with the fact that we're just in the first inning of a nine inning game? And I'm going no. There's a lot of stuff that's happened. It kind of trivializes what's happened so far to say that we're still just at the beginning.

So I like to use a thing more like we're halfway, and we'll always be halfway. [laughs] Okay? There is a lot of stuff that's happened, and there's a lot of stuff that's going to continue to happen, and five years from now we'll still just be halfway there.

One of the things that's really interesting that's happening right now in 2000 is the introduction of broadband. And I've seen this in my own family. We got a cable modem when we were in Boston. And a cable modem gives you high speed access to the Internet, but more important than that was the fact it was always on. So you didn't have to go and start up your computer and do something. It was just there. And it then integrated itself into your life seamlessly. I mean it became "What's the weather going to be like? I'll check it online"--because it's all right there.

And with broadband, technology and the Internet had ceased to become "Okay, I'm doing the Internet now." It had now woven itself into the fabric of your life. And email--how you communicate with people. I was at a conference a few days ago and they were talking about is the Internet going to be like the telephone or the television? I'm going, the Internet's going to be more important than the telephone and the television.

And the reason for that is I get more email now than I do phone calls. I mean Email has become a much more important communication medium for me than the phone has.

And television's just an entertainment medium. I mean you sit there and you get entertained. The Internet--I'm booking airline tickets, I'm buying things, I'm getting online with my daughter to do school projects.

When we were in Boston--and this is one of those times when it just hits you with a 2x4--the impact that this is going to have. My daughter came home from school--she's in third grade. And there was a project that they were running. It was about growing giant vegetables.

And as an extra credit for the project, as you studied these growing giant vegetables, it was if you know somebody that grows giant vegetables--giant pumpkins and things like that--interview them and write up the interview and we'll give you extra credit.

"Dad, who do we know that grows giant vegetables?" I'm going, "That would be zero" [and that sat] right there. [laughter]

We're one generation removed from poor Alabama dirt farmers. I mean the idea--I don't do this for fun. I don't go garden for fun. I'm too close to my family having to do that for a living!

But I go, "Yeah, let's go on Yahoo and just find out what we can find." So we typed in "giant pumpkins" on Yahoo. And the top thing that comes up is the Australian Giant Vegetable and Pumpkin Society. And we went in and looked at their Web site--they had pictures and stuff like that. And then they had the email to the president of the society.

So I said, "Hey, Julie, here's somebody that grows giant pumpkins. Why don't you tell him what you're doing, that you're working on this class project, and ask him the questions that you would ask somebody if you knew him right around here."

And so she said, "How'd you start growing giant pumpkins"--that type of stuff. Three or four questions and pow!--off to him in an email. We wake up the next morning and he's answered. Because it's their day during our night and all the rest of that. And he's answered all her questions. And all she does is just print that thing out and then attach that to a little poster board that she'd come up on giant vegetables and off she goes to school.

And it's an instant connection—we'd never do that on the phone. It's different than the phone and more. It's bigger than the phone. I mean here now Julie all of a sudden realizes hey, Australia—they've got different growing seasons. Do they have pumpkins for like Halloween? Because that's October, but that's the beginning of their summer, not their fall. [laughs] And you start adding in all these kind of interesting things around it.

And so bigger than the telephone and bigger than television--because it's not just about entertainment. It's really woven itself into more than that.

Dan Morrow: You were talking about expectations and the projects you were working on in the Department of Education. This is going to transform the expectations not only of teachers, but of kids of what's possible.

Bill Bass: Yep.

Dan Morrow: And doable.

Bill Bass: As long as we can get--and it is an interesting question--can you get the computers into the hands of these kids when they're young enough to be able to use them?

I mean the whole...how do we get kids involved with technology? And it's not just okay, I can give you...back when it was just books, you could give people old books. Or even if you didn't have books, if you had a great teacher, you could make do with what you had. With technology, you can't really do that. It still is important to have a great teacher, but at the end of the day, if you don't have that Internet connection, you're not talking to the pumpkin guy down in Australia.

Dan Morrow: Yeah. And it's a pain in the neck. Like you said, if it's there, broadband and it's integrated, you don't think about it.

Bill Bass: Right.

Dan Morrow: But if it's a pain in the neck you won't use it. I'm going to ask you about the impact of this technology on loyalties as well.

You've served in the military--loyalty is really the most...I mean it's the motto of the Marine Corps. And the loyalty between people in an elite group like the 82nd Airborne, it's legendary.

Do you think this technology is going to change those kinds of relationships? Well, you could talk about it in business terms, in terms of brand loyalty. Is this the end of brand loyalties? Has everything become a commodity?

Bill Bass:

No, no, not at all. It is an interesting question on the employment side. You are definitely seeing a more shifting transitory environment in the workplace. But I think a big reason for that, though, is you get back to...I was talking about the newspaper industry. It doesn't change over a hundred years. It's fine if people are there for 30 years, because it doesn't change over that time.

But you know, I just look at my career. I mean I've been a helicopter pilot, I've been a newspaper guy, I've been an analyst, now I'm a clothes horse. [laughs] At least I'm selling clothes! I think you're going to see much more of that happen because the pace of change...

The other thing that's been interesting to me--we talked about art.

Thousands of years, things don't change. Then hundreds of years, things don't change. And then, in the past...it's kind like one of those logarithmic function type things going on here. Because the amount of change that we're running through right now is just dramatic compared to what it was 50 years ago. And even 50 years ago is dramatic compared to what it was 100,200 years ago.

And I think that's going to continue to make life more...it's just going to change more. And people are going to have to change more, and they're going to end up doing many different things in their life. Because the things that they used to be able to do, those things won't be around anymore.

Dan Morrow: What do you see as the biggest obstacle that's in the way of this kind of change [unintelligible]?

Bill Bass: There's a lot of people that don't like change. [laughs] And they will actively try and make it not happen. That's one. The other--

Dan Morrow: That's more cultural than technical.

Bill Bass: Yes. Completely cultural, completely cultural. This life is more stressful. It is more stressful. I had a lot of stressful jobs when I was in the Army, right, but it's a different kind of stress. In the Army, I knew that if I knew my job and did it well I would succeed. Here, there's things way outside of your control that you can't control.

Dan Morrow: Speaking of stress and personalities, one of the questions I specifically wanted to ask you about Lands' End is arguably the most high tech retailer in the United States.

Bill Bass: Traditional one. Leave aside the Amazons and people like that of the world.

Dan Morrow: But given all that, and given your dependence upon the technology, you locate your facilities in areas like Dodgeville, Kansas and--

Bill Bass: Yeah. Wisconsin.

Dan Morrow: --and Wisconsin.

Bill Bass: We get snow. I don't think it's snowing in Kansas right now.

[laughter]

Dan Morrow: And then Oakham.

Bill Bass: Yep. Oakham, England. Mettloch, Germany.

Dan Morrow: Rural [centers]--why? Is it the kind of people you--

Bill Bass: That's exactly it. People are nicer in rural environments.

It's interesting--you talk about people...are you from the South or are you from the North or West. But I think a bigger difference is are you from a city or are you from a rural country. If I go to Maine, and I'm talking to rural people in Maine, and I'm in rural part of south Alabama, the accent's different, but the environment is very similar. And if I'm in Atlanta or I'm in New York, the environment is very similar.

And so the nice thing about living in rural areas like that are you get people where community matters more.

Yeah. And just getting along here in the company. Lands' End is one of those great companies. There's certain companies that you look at that their public image is very different than what they are like inside. Disney would be a great example of one that is very business focused inside, but it kind of has this warm and fuzzy huggable feeling as a brand.

Lands' End is...what you get inside is the exact same thing that you get from outside. Everybody's nice and pleasant and all the rest of that.

And it's kind of interesting, because as a company, as technology comes along--and every company is having to face this--technology comes along.

We just had the Internet come along. Okay, we're going to launch our little e-commerce group.

There are a lot of companies out there that have decided, okay, we're going to carve this into a new business. Split it out from our old business.

When I was at the Globe, that was a great decision. Get it out and have that.

The problem that you run into with that, though, is that then you now have...it's like the boat's leaving the pier. And there are some people on the

boat, and there are other people that are getting left behind. And as a company, we don't want to have that sense.

We want to have everybody here as a community. We're all going to succeed or fail together. It's not going to be we're going to spin this little thing off and go off and run that by itself.

The interesting thing as we've gone along is how do we integrate with what we're going with e-commerce and the Internet culturally in the company? Integrate that in with the rest of the company so that everybody has a stake in this. Everybody understands that if you don't have the skill sets that you need to succeed in this world that we're moving to, we will get you the skill sets.

Lands' End Live--great example. We come in and we go, okay, guess what? We're now going to connect our Internet customers in with our customer service reps. The same people that have been taking phone calls for all the years. Conceptually, it's a great idea. We're loving this.

Okay. Now, some of it'll be through voice, with the telephone, and some of it'll be through online chat with the thing. Great. No problem.

A problem. The customer service reps that we've hired have never had to deal with...

Dan Morrow: Typing.

Bill Bass: Typing. Or talking to people, writing things. It's just, okay, I'm going to put in your credit card number. Da da da da da. But it's not like grammar, spelling, all of those things.

Dan Morrow: Nobody pays any attention to grammar when you're chatting. Do your guys have to pay attention--

Bill Bass: Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean this is Lands' End. It's the same as if you're calling on the phone. You want people to have a great experience with you, and if you feel like you're dealing with somebody who hasn't been educated very well, that's not a great experience. Because then all of a sudden you're sitting there going, man, if they don't have grammar, maybe like they're going to type my credit card number in wrong or mischarge me for something. So you have to have people trust you, that they're dealing with a very competent person.

Now when typing came along, so we had to run a test. So now people who are going to want to work on the Internet, let's test out your writing and vocabulary skills and stuff like that, and then let's start training you on that type of stuff.

Dan Morrow: Did you lose some of your...

Bill Bass: Sure. Yeah. There were some people that we said...

Dan Morrow: They were great phone people who just couldn't make the--

Bill Bass: Yeah. We said, well, you didn't lose them--we just kept them on the phones, where they're still great phone people. [laughs] And then we try and get...start working on training for people like that to help get them so that they can sort of type.

But that was an interesting thing for me because that's where you start getting into the, okay, let's actually implement some of these great ideas and you start running into the wow, who would've--

Dan Morrow: I'm going to ask you one last question, simply because I can talk all day. And I always feel awkward asking it to someone who's as young as you are. But when the world looks back on this revolution, how would you like to be remembered for your participation in it?

Bill Bass: It's an interesting question for me because this whole thing is a very personal "me" thing. When we look at what we do at Lands' End Live, it's like I am a little cog. We have several hundred people over there on the phones that is actually Lands' End Live. We've got 20, 30 technology people that busted their ass to get this thing up. Because I was going, "It will be up by September 15th. We're not going to miss our...the war starts then, and we are not going to be... Look, you guys drew the short straws in the Army and I don't put up with slipping deadlines."

But you know, it's interesting, because to me...the thing that was important to me about my high school class--the guys that I lived with--we succeeded or failed as a group. We really did. I mean it was a very community-based thing.

And that's one of the things that makes me uncomfortable about this whole...whenever I won an award, hey, you did great with Boston.com... There were a bunch of people that pulled that thing off. When we go into combat, I'm one of a bunch of guys that are sitting there flying, and if any one of us screws up, the whole mission doesn't succeed. Which is why I was always a big believer in you go to the best units you possibly can, because so much of your success depends upon all the people around you.

And so you could be the greatest guy in the world, but if you're in a unit where you've got a bunch of real screw-ups, you're going to die. You're dead.

And so I guess the thing, if I had to be remembered for one thing it would be the ability to get people to work together towards a common goal. But it's not necessarily just me driving that. I mean it's kind of this feedback. You can't do that by yourself. You have to do that with people around you.

I mean I wish this whole thing could be like to all the Lands' End Live people, because they're the ones that really made it happen. I just kind of take credit for it.

I did that. When we launched our Web site in the U.K., I was flying into England to do the press tour for the launch of the site and stuff like that. And I'd written on the little entry thing--it says what's your occupation. Sometimes I put management. And this time I put Internet.

And the guy who's letting you into the country looks at it and he goes, "Oh, Internet. Oh, what do you do with the Internet?" Well, I'm here to launch this Web site for Lands' End in the U.K. And he goes, "Oh, really! Did you build it?" And I go, "No, I'm just here to take credit for all the people that did." [laughs] And he goes, "Gosh! The world works that way, doesn't it?" I go, "It works exactly that way."

Dan Morrow: [Unintelligible]. That was another question I was going to ask you about loyalties. I mean you're doing business in Germany, you're in Britain, all over the United States...

Bill Bass: Japan.

Dan Morrow: Anywhere that anyone can access you from--

Bill Bass: Yeah, actually, we shipped to 175 countries last year through the Web site.

Dan Morrow: Do you think this is going to be the end of, over time, the end of national boundaries?

Bill Bass: It's not the end yet, but we're halfway there. [laughs]

Dan Morrow: Do you think that's where it's going?

Bill Bass: Absolutely. No question about it. The globalization...if we look back 300 years from now when somebody is looking back at this, we are at the beginning now of where it really picks up. You've seen a little bit now because you've got the EU coming along--the European community all starting to go to a single currency and stuff like that.

My daughter getting on the phone to somebody--getting on an email to somebody in Australia, and it's just as easy as getting to somebody right next door. It is the globalization of culture, and that is, to me, the biggest thing that we've got going for us.

So you asked me when I got here last summer, what were the things I worked on? Well, one was getting Lands' End Live up, and that was an immediate thing.

But the other thing was I told them, I said, "We have to launch our sites internationally." And so we launched in Japan, Germany and the U.K. Damn near killed our folks to get them up, but I said, you know, we need to be up by this Christmas because people are going to be going online there.

This year we're going to be launching in France, Spain and Italy. Next year I want to go into China and the Southern Hemisphere.

Little problems for us going into the Southern Hemisphere because the seasons are counter-seasonal. And so our buying, our merchandising--all this stuff--we're set up on like spring, summer, winter, fall. But now they're inverted and that's changing the way the whole company is having to set itself up.

But you've never seen--up until now you've never seen--let me go to media companies here for a second. You've never seen media companies dominate worldwide outside of hits driven businesses. So you'll have a music group that can be worldwide; you can have--Titanic was the number one movie worldwide. 300 years from now if you don't know what the Titanic was, it was the ship that sank and they made a great movie out of it.

[laughter]

But now, what you see is Yahoo is the number one Web site in the U.S.; it's the number one Web site in France; it's the number one Web site in Japan. You're now seeing these businesses, that because it's a scale and they can go global with this, become the number one product in North America and Asia and Europe. And having access to all this information--I mean you talked a little bit about the education stuff--is children around the world access all of this stuff--it globalizes.

It's amazing to me--you can argue whether or not English was the right language to become kind of the global language--but the difference between when I went to Europe 20 years ago and when I go to Europe now and how widespread English has become accepted as kind of the dominant language--despite the [unintelligible] of the French trying to hold back this tidal wave. I was in France and I'm kind of apologetic. I'm trying to use my...

I took French in high school and college, but I'm kind of still at the level of they're speaking French or they're not speaking French. But you know, I'm trying to tell her which way to--tell the cab person--which way to turn. And finally she starts talking to me in English. I go, "Oh, you speak English." She's like, "Of course!" She's irritated with me now that I would question that she spoke English. Twenty years ago they were irritated that you would think that they would speak English. Because that's become the language of the Internet.

Dan Morrow: But they're still irritated.

Bill Bass: Oh, they are still irritated.

[laughter]

I think only at high levels of the government are they irritated. People down below, I don't think people down below get that irritated.

So the whole globalization of this, because you now have that communication that can flow around. And you can buy things worldwide and you can now see what's available.

Whole governmental systems are having problems now because people go on the Internet, they go, "Hey, you know, we don't have to live like this. There are other people that don't live like this." And that's going to be huge--massive huge.

Dan Morrow: I've got so many questions. Do you run into...all of the movie making business has been Americanized, the fast food business is being Americanized. But do you hear people saying everybody's going to look like they're American? [Unintelligible] sell all over the world.

Bill Bass: Well, yeah, but I mean you could sit there and also sit there and go, guess what, who owns Chrysler? Right? Where do we buy our cars from? They got Japanese-ized or whatever. I think what you're going to see is--I don't want to get too economic in this, but you do end up with places that have a competitive advantage in different areas.

So no, I don't think the U.S. dominates everything worldwide. I think the U.S. dominates some categories. I think Germany dominates some categories. I think Asia will dominate some categories.

And what you'll end up with then is you'll have global products. You will absolutely have global products and global things. It'll be the best of all of them. If Daimler makes better cars than somebody else, or Honda makes better cars than somebody else, then those become the cars that everybody drives.

It was interesting, I was down at a...so I just joined a clothing company a year ago. And I'm in these meetings where people are talking about fashion and twills and knits, and I'm going--what's a knit? [laughs] And so I went to this kind of textiles for dummies course down in South Carolina at one of the textile mills--Milliken.

And textiles is interesting because made in the U.S.A. is real important, and there was a big--Wal-Mart for a long time only said, "We'll only sell made in the U.S.A. products." And I'm down in Milliken and they're talking about that. And I go, "Look, I've got customers in Japan. I've got employees in all these places. What's this made in the U.S.?" To me, that's meaningless. Because we're a global company now."

And then I started asking them--they said made in the U.S.A. is real important. I go, "Okay, where'd you get this knitting machine?" They go, "Oh, it's German." I go, "How's that"--they go, "Well, you know, it's just the U.S. ones just weren't as competitive." And then you're sitting there going, do you see some irony here? [laughs] There's some cognitive dissonance here. You're telling me made in the U.S.A. but all the things you're using to make it are from outside the U.S.A.

I think that national boundaries are just going to matter less and less. It is going to be painful to get there. And selling internationally, we're having problems.

Because in Germany we got sued because we offer a lifetime guarantee for our things. And the German...there was a suit brought against us from a bunch of German manufacturers that says that's unfair competition because they're not willing to offer a lifetime guarantee and we shouldn't be allowed to. They said it's uneconomic. And we go, well, we make money. So obviously on the face of it, it's not uneconomic if you make products that are very good.

Dan Morrow: You've been doing it for 34 years.

Bill Bass: That's right. And so we brought a suit. We lost in the Supreme Court. We're not allowed to tell people in Germany that we offer a lifetime guarantee. So if this ever gets shown in Germany, I could go to jail now, because unsolicited, I have now told them that we offer a lifetime guarantee.

Dan Morrow: We have time for my last two questions. And really, for you to make sure there aren't places that you wanted to talk about that...or we haven't talked about.

One, are there any people--mentors, teachers, people that made a real difference in your life and career that we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about?

Bill Bass: Mattered more than any other.

Dan Morrow: That's a difficult question.

Bill Bass: And it really is, because I have been fortunate in that I have had teachers at critical parts of my life who have made a difference for me.

Mrs. Ross, my third grade teacher, when she realized that I'd just moved into town and I was going to be a handful, would put me off on special projects. She'd pull me out of the rest of the class and have me work on special projects.

Mr. Wilson, who was the science teacher who enjoyed blowing things up just as much as we did. And you could relate to--we'd do something on campus. I remember one time our campus reverend...we were carrying one of the teachers around the campus on a stretcher. We found a stretcher. It's like what can you do with a stretcher? Hey, let's go get Blair's mom and give her a ride!

[laughter]

So we went into Mrs. Potts' class and kidnapped her, tied her down on this stretcher, carried her off to Dr. Presley's class, who was this great guy-- history professor. And they're laughing. The reverend says, hey, this is an embarrassment. You're corrupting the young kids. And he ends up taking my football coach and shoved him into some lockers. It was a big thing. We walk out with the stretcher. Mr. Paddon, and the reverend is over there. He's yelling at our headmaster. We see this. He's pointing at us. We've got the stretcher! We run down the hill to the science building, into Mr. Wilson's office. It's like, "Mr. Wilson--hide us!" [laughs] And he's going, "Here, let me find out what's the issue, if it's a real problem." He calls up and he comes back. He goes, "You guys caused called a pretty big ruckus here!"

But you know, it's great that you have somebody like that along the way that you can go and just say, "Hide us."

[laughter]

And you go, you know, and I know he'll hide us because he likes to blow things up, too!

I've had some great bosses. I've been lucky. I mean I really have. I look back at my life. Because I was absolutely convinced I was going to die before I was 30. There was no doubt in my mind I was going to die before I was 30. I was parachuting and flying. I'd just kind of come to terms with that

And I'm glad I didn't die when I was 30. But this is one of those--if I died today, I would die being luckier than most. I mean I have flown more than most people and that is just a great experience. I've had tremendous people to work with. And I've had great friends, that I know--they would hide me.

That's the other thing. You build these little communities. I've got a lot of places I could go hide if I needed to go hide someplace.

I've been fortunate.

Dan Morrow: Well, I think that's a great way to end this interview. [Plus] a great pleasure.

Bill Bass: Good. Thank you.