

# A MOST PERSONAL VENTURE

First at Restoration Hardware and now at Guideboat Co., Stephen Gordon C'73 has built successful retail brands rooted in his singular vision.

A stack of precisely folded, deep-indigo T-shirts sits inside a wooden building in Northern California that lived more than 100 years as a sawmill. They share this space with hundreds of intriguing, useful and beautiful items—all placed here to divert you. But the T-shirts, those carry the biggest clue to Stephen Gordon, the man behind this burgeoning retail empire. “PLY THE WATERS,” the shirts proclaim, in bold, classic lettering.

*Ply the waters.* At first, those words simply evoke the nautical life, and that’s appropriate: In addition to traditional apparel, accessories and household items, the Guideboat Co. store sells small craft, both new and antique. But the phrase also implies diligence, searching, a deep sense of surroundings. “Don’t skim over

the surface,” it says—as archaic and thoughtful as “just do it” is impulsive.

Gordon launched Guideboat Co. two years ago as what he calls “a most personal venture,” including a flagship store in Mill Valley, California, a catalog and a website. This is his second entrepreneurial enterprise. The first was Restoration Hardware, a business he started in his home, grew to 112 stores and took public. He followed that up with a stint as CEO of Sundance’s retail operation. At 64, Gordon hasn’t stopped plying the waters. “It is what I do,” he explains over coffee. “I don’t play golf—I build retail brands.”

Gordon’s latest project is informed by his childhood in a small, upstate New York town on Lake Champlain, near the Adirondacks. Plattsburgh was a *Leave It*

Martin E. Klimek



Kelly Puleio

**RIGHT: Guideboat Co.'s flagship store in Mill Valley, California. Gordon's passion for boats stems from his childhood on the shores of Lake Champlain in upstate New York.**



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to Beaver sort of place, where his grandfather, Gordon says, owned “the drugstore, the jewelry store and the shoe store.”

“My grandfather had a guide boat and used to fish and hunt,” Gordon recalls. “I got to row that and had many, many great times.” He recaptured those memories a few years ago by purchasing a rare 1892 J.H. Rushton Adirondack guide boat. From that single iconic item—a graceful, handmade vessel resembling a canoe with oars, fitted with sensuous wooden planking and caned seats—he created an entire retail concept.

Just like his guide boat, Gordon’s merchandise is utilitarian, but with a true sense of provenance, an innate, authentic beauty—whether it’s a \$95 striped sailor’s shirt by the French company that outfitted Picasso and Chanel, a \$4,850 reproduction of a perky 1950s Sabot sailboat or a \$5.50 tin of Rose Salve No. 12, which coincidentally (or perhaps not) was formulated in 1892.

“It’s not just a boat, it’s symbolic of something much more,” explains Marie Wintriss, who worked with Gordon at Restoration Hardware and Sundance. “Stephen is able to look at the world or a thing or an experience and then create this larger experience for the customer.”

Gordon did just that when he started Restoration Hardware. After earning his bachelor’s degree in psychology from Drew, he got his master’s at Humboldt State University in Arcata, on the Northern California coast, and soon purchased a Queen Anne Victorian house in nearby Eureka, a former lumber and fishing boomtown. Working toward his counseling certification, he had an epiphany. “I didn’t really enjoy sitting for eight hours a day and listening to others,” he admits. “I took my pulse and asked, ‘What am I thinking about?’ Often it was entrepreneurial thoughts.”

So Gordon decided to renovate his house, with hopes of opening a bed-and-breakfast. “In the process I realized two things,” he says. “One was that I couldn’t find the parts, and the second was that I actually didn’t have any money to buy the parts.”

“I just happened to recall that somebody said if you buy something for a dollar and sell it for \$2, everything’s good,” Gordon remembers. “So I made these binders with pictures of door knobs and chandeliers and things.” He paid \$30 for a crude sign, “which actually scared me,” he confesses, because money was so tight. But then customers began to appear. “They would

buy five door knobs, then I would buy five door knobs,” Gordon says. “It was as simple as that.”

The following year he put \$500 worth of inventory on his credit card and opened a 300-square-foot store that soon grew to 3,000 square feet. Gordon found he had “an intuitive sense of what people would like.” He also figured out how to market what they liked. “But ultimately my whole career has been based pretty much on what I like,” Gordon says, “and hoping there were enough other people who share that.”

A gutsy strategy, but Gordon believes confidence is at the heart of entrepreneurship. “Entrepreneurs are some of the most careful people on earth,” he explains. “They just look like they’re risky.”

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Digging deeper, proving he still has his psychology chops, Gordon says he believes successful merchants simply aim to please their customers. “And in wanting to please—be it family, social situations, whatever—you have to have radar, you have to be keenly aware of your surroundings. If we were all honest with ourselves, we’d say that same sense enabled being great merchants.”

Wintriss says Gordon’s success can be traced to his ability to “emotionally connect with people” by telling stories. At Restoration Hardware, she recalls, “There’d be a bowl of doorknobs—but it wouldn’t just be a bowl of doorknobs. There’d be a sign, with a paragraph of text that Stephen wrote. He wrote all the copy, and he told you the story of why this doorknob was made out of brass, and the original foundry, the history of the people and why brass was the best material to use. All of a sudden, he’s made this emotional connection.” She laughs. “You’re finding yourself getting really emotionally attached to a brass doorknob that you don’t even need.”

That level of obsession fuels Gordon’s success. “He’s the kind of guy who will have a dream about something and wake up in the middle of the night and send you an email,” Wintriss says. One time, another former colleague recalls, Gordon stumbled upon a vintage penguin cocktail shaker at a martini exhibit at San

Francisco International Airport. “I immediately got a call from Stephen,” designer Ed Robinson remembers, “saying, ‘You’ve got to get down to the airport!’”

The Restoration Hardware team produced a version of the shaker in record time, and it went on to be a top seller. “He found joy in working really hard, having excellent standards and pushing his team,” Robinson says. “But the folks who worked for him wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“What you see in the product is Stephen,” says Mary Britton-Rose, who worked with Gordon at Restoration Hardware and also came aboard Guideboat. “He edits it, curates it, tears it down to something that’s very cohesive, and people get it immediately.”

“He would say, ‘You’ve gotta think ‘til it hurts,’” Wintriss says. “So don’t just take the easy way. Mull things over. Study things.”

Gordon credits his college days with shaping that rigor. “I learned so much at Drew, and a lot of that was analytical thinking and how to communicate—the things one gets in a liberal arts education that have nothing to do with a particular discipline.”

His advice for budding entrepreneurs? “Do what you love,” he says. “Do what feels natural. Protect your backside. Make sure you have a safety net. And once you believe you have it, proceed fearlessly.”

In other words, ply the waters. *Gayle Keck*