



# Self-employment: from brilliance to bankruptcy

BY JENNY PAHL

VANCOUVER (CUP) — Discouraged by dismal job prospects and turned on by the idea of independence, many university graduates are turning to self employment to stay afloat. They find themselves tiptoeing between brilliance and bankruptcy.

It's five o'clock on a Tuesday morning, and Sean Sullivan is too wired to sleep. He has expensive equipment on his mind — \$10,000 worth of film production hardware that he'll move into his downtown apartment later in the day.

At 21, Sullivan is an entrepreneur. The equipment he's moving will be used for computer animation, desktop publishing and film and video editing. From home, he will direct the operations of Far Star Studios, his new production company.

A recent graduate of the Simon Fraser University (SFU) film school, Sullivan felt his career goals could be accomplished more effectively outside the constraints of a larger institution.

"I've always wanted to have the tools to communicate what's in my head, to be able to take my kind of warped idea and make it into a tangible reality," he said.

These days translating artistic vision into reality doesn't come cheap. Sullivan is in debt to the tune of \$11,000. The loan was for the capital he needed to start his new company.

Sullivan isn't alone in his scramble for capital and a willingness to accept personal liability for his artistic vision. Martin Prihoda, 22, bailed on a SFU history degree to spend a year at Vancouver Film School and focus his energy on his

production company, Mirrorball Productions.

Since its creation, Mirrorball has produced a short film entitled *The Deal* and the video for "Small Screen", a song by Vancouver band Jazzberry Ram. Prihoda snagged the Jazzberry Ram gig by approaching a band member in the washroom of a local watering-hole.

*The Deal* appeared at the Toronto World Wide Short Film Festival and will also be shown at upcoming short film festivals in Utah and Rotterdam. The film cost around \$1,000 to make. Prihoda used money which had been previously earmarked for a semester at university.

At the moment, Prihoda is concentrating on raising capital for a half-hour screenplay he hopes to put into production. He estimates that the film will cost \$40,000 to produce and plans to seek investors from the private sector. Because of government cuts to the arts, acquiring a grant from the formerly bountiful Canada Council can be next to impossible.

Prihoda acknowledges this reality but is confident that a large, more responsive market for independent film exists in the private sector because of the recent media attention given to indie-style films like *Pulp Fiction*.

Though Mirrorball doesn't pay the bills yet — Prihoda has to

work eight hours a day with another film production company to make ends meet — he doesn't regret his decision to withdraw from school mid-semester.

"It was one of the best decisions I've made in my life. It's a shame that I'm not graduating but I think the decision I made that morning was a graduation in itself," he said.

Self-employment seems like a viable alternative for young people in today's uncertain job market where unemployment continues to waver around 17 per cent. But David Bond, chief economist of the Hong Kong Bank of Canada and a professor of commerce at UBC, asserts that self-employment carries enormous risk.

"Nine out of 10 [people] that start [a business] don't finish five years," he said.

In addition to the risk of incurring large debts at such a young age, the life of an entrepreneur is characterised by hard work and long hours. Sullivan and Prihoda estimate they routinely put in 12-hour days.

The heavy time commitment of owning your own business is not restricted to those driven by an artistic vision, however. Matt Breech, the 23-year-old owner of the Tallgrass Hemp Company, can be found still working at his office at 8 p.m. on a Saturday.

Tallgrass is a wholesaling

company, acting as a go-between for companies using hemp to make clothes and body products and the retail stores that sell them. Tallgrass employs five full-time staff, including Breech and one of his business partners Ben Banky, 29.

The son of two University of Victoria professors, Breech studied history at the University of Ottawa — anticipating an academic career for himself.

But while studying in China during his third year, his path changed.

Some American travellers told him of the burgeoning market in hemp products, and using his fluent Chinese, Breech hired a guide to take him to a hemp factory, where he commissioned the production of 100 shirts. To bring the shirts back to Canada, he bribed Chinese customs officials.

After a failed attempt to sell the shirts for a unit price at an open-air market, Breech unloaded the lot at wholesale price to a hemp shop. And Tallgrass was born.

That was three years ago. Breech finished his history degree, but he knew that a future in academia was no longer in the cards.

"It was hard to get my head around the fact that I wouldn't be going to graduate school," he said.

Though no longer pursuing a formal education, Breech has continued to learn through his new occupation. Since neither he nor his partner had any formal business experience before launching Tallgrass, they learned the necessary skills from asking and "just doing it."

"The neat thing about business is you're doing everything...we learned

accounting one week and international shipping the next," laughs Breech.

One of the challenges Breech faces is having to employ people who, in other circumstances, he would look upon as his buddies.

"What it comes down to is that I still have to be the boss, which is not a role I was completely comfortable with at first. You have to find that balance and foster professionalism and getting gooned all day with the employees is not the way to do it.

"Whatever I'm doing I want to be at the top. I want to be a player."

Breech also recognizes the importance of knowing the market and the finances of your product.

"Just use your imagination and make it economically viable. If you can make it appeal to the hard-nosed, cigar smokin', fat, middle-aged scumbag broker, then you can make it appeal to pretty much anyone. If the numbers look good, they'll do it," he says.

Despite different pursuits, Sullivan, Prihoda and Breech have at least one thing in common — strong belief in themselves and their ability to achieve their goals.

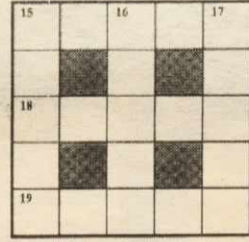
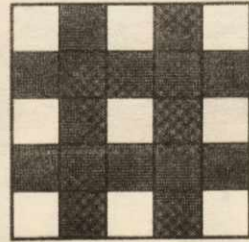
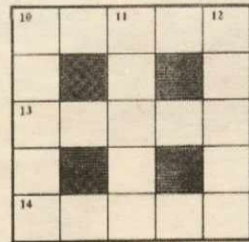
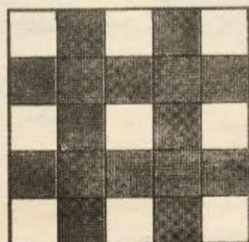
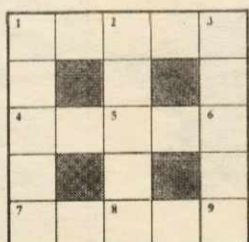
To Prihoda, failure is, "not even trying to achieve my goals. Failure to me is not a film that wasn't successful. That's just another step in achieving my goals and my success."

UBC professors Raphael Amit and Ken MacCrimmon have studied the motivations of successful entrepreneurs and found that many entrepreneurs take a pay cut to venture out alone — and that their reasons for doing so were largely visionary.

Sullivan would agree. When asked what he's doing in his studio from 9 a.m. to midnight, he answers, without a hint of exhaustion, "I can't stop doing it. I enjoy it too much."

## 3D Crossword Puzzle # 2 — by Eric Fielding

A 3D crossword grid has words across, down, and deep. In the example DAB is across, DOG is down, and DEN is deep:



### Across

1. Passing
4. Child Of Heaven And Earth
7. Viscid Secretion
10. Belay
13. Swedish Coin
14. Belies
15. Fox-Faced "Monkey" Of Madagascar
18. Collect More Maple Syrup
19. Comrade

### Down

1. Statistic
2. Loft
3. Inklings
10. Classic And Cherry
11. Residence
12. Converges
15. Songlike Poetry
16. Maxim
17. Come Back

### Deep

1. Transfer Paper Design
2. Shock
3. Celebrate
4. Acceptor
5. Rainbow Or Brook
6. Advancement Group
7. Jazz
8. Tenet
9. Insolent

Answers To 3D Crossword Puzzle # 1:

P	E	R	D	U
A		E		N
Y	A	C	H	T
E		U		I
E	N	R	O	L

A		O		N
E		A		A
L		E		U

D	R	U	I	D
W		L		U
A	Z	T	E	C
R		R		A
F	E	A	S	T

R		G		E
S		E		I
I		L		E

E	T	H	E	R
A		A		A
T	A	R	O	T
E		E		E
N	O	M	A	D