

INSIDE THE OPERATING SYSTEM OF A **RENAISSANCE MAN**

BY MYERS REECE

'70 DAVE SABEY IS A MAN OF MANY TALENTS

It would be tempting to call Dave Sabey a savvy businessman and leave it at that. After all, he has built a \$600 million real estate company from the ground up and recently held a press conference with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg to announce the opening of a one-million-square-foot data center in Manhattan, courtesy of Sabey Data Center Properties. He is a self-made man.

He is, indeed, a very savvy businessman.





Photo: Steve Friedman, courtesy of Sabey Data Centers

But attaching a single title to him feels wrong, like it's missing a slash or two – maybe businessman/philosopher or businessman/medical research advocate/cattle rancher. A conversation with him is a whirlwind tour through a ceaselessly active mind. If you're not prepared, you may be caught off guard by the tour's turns and range.

Sabey is the type of guy who pours you a cup of coffee while reflecting on the power of Frederic Chopin's 18th century piano compositions, before launching into an earnest examination of the human genome and a contemplation of the "rhythms of life." When discussing his company's data centers in Central Washington, he mentions something about "millisecond latency" and then says matter-of-factly: "It costs absolutely nothing to move photons through glass." At this point, you would be forgiven for nodding blankly, as people do when they've entered a realm of conversation where they have no footing but

are pretending they can still walk. You will likely arrive at this point several times on the Sabey mind tour. It can be difficult to keep up.

At 66, he says he still doesn't know what he wants to do when he grows up. And there is truth in that joke. He is always looking forward and searching for ways to satiate his tireless curiosity – like founding the Seattle Science Foundation and serving on boards and councils at higher-education institutions such as Harvard, Notre Dame, Gonzaga, University of Washington Medical Center and Eastern Washington.

Even after building a real estate empire stretching from Washington to New York, Sabey thinks a lot more about what he can do next than what he's already done. But when he allows himself time to reflect, to look back on his career, he sees a four-decade journey from a senior at Eastern Washington University with thoughts of being a teacher to a national real estate mogul with thoughts





Photo: Steve Friedman, courtesy of Sabey Data Centers

wife in apartments behind the A & W, he would go duck hunting early in the morning, squeezing a little outdoor living into a busy schedule of football, work and school. Eastern Washington, he says, was the right institution at the right time in his life.

“My wife and I had a great time at Eastern,” he says. “It was an experience we wouldn’t give up for anything.”

In college, Sabey envisioned himself as a teacher and coach. That vision, however, would change, in the way visions do for young adults finding their place in the world. Sabey had taken a construction job to help get through college, but that side job shifted into a career opportunity and he ended up taking over a business that constructed wood roof systems. In 1972, fresh out of college and 23 years old, Sabey started what is four decades later the highly successful Sabey Corporation. He was the first person in his family to receive a college degree.

Sabey wasted no time in growing his wood roof system company into a major construction and real estate firm, buoyed in earlier years by contracts with Boeing and later by tech-driven expansion into health care and data centers. Today, Sabey Corporation manages millions of square feet of commercial real estate; including three million square feet of data center campuses across the country that were developed by Sabey Data Center Properties, of which Sabey is the chairman. These

of still being much more. Football injuries in his fingers rule out becoming the next Chopin, but not much else should be ruled out with Dave Sabey, except retirement. That doesn’t look like it will ever happen. There’s too much out there to explore.

“The world is a pretty cool place,” Sabey says, as matter-of-factly as his assessment on photon movement.

Sabey, who is married with three grown kids, grew up in the Seattle area and attended Highline High School, where he was a superb athlete. From there he went to the U.S. Air Force Academy Prep School. He then played football and wrestled at the University of Washington. During his junior year at UW, his friend on the football team announced he was transferring to Eastern Washington. When asked about possibly joining his friend in Cheney, Sabey was unsure. He was comfortable in Seattle.

But he and his wife Sandra decided to feel out the situation by scheduling a dinner with then-football coach Brent Wooten and Wooten’s wife. Sabey had gotten to know the Wooten family in high school when Wooten’s dad filled in as coach for Sabey’s wrestling team.

“We had an amazing time,” Sabey says of the dinner with the Wootens. “We decided to transfer.”

At Eastern Washington, he continued playing football and pursuing a degree in education with an emphasis on English. Though he only spent a year at the school, he recalls his time in Cheney with fondness. Living with his

data centers house computer systems that support the operations of some of the world’s best-known tech companies, as well as governments and higher-education institutions. The New York data center unveiled in March is considered the world’s largest high-rise data center.

Sabey has an ability, both innate and trained, to mentally break down the world into comprehensible systems – specifically, data systems, of which he knows plenty. He describes DNA as “basically a very complex software-coded operating system” and offers a similar explanation of the immune system. He believes by approaching health care in a different manner, guided by a clear-eyed analysis of human systems and their data, health care costs can be reduced by 25 percent in the next 10-15 years.

His interest in health care has led to partnering with the New York Genome Center, a position on Harvard Medical School’s Systems Biology Advisory Council, his founding of the Seattle Science Foundation, his affiliation with Seattle’s Institute for Systems Biology and his many other health-care related investments, developments and partnerships. Everywhere he looks, there are problems to be solved and systems to be explored. Indeed, the world is a pretty cool place.

“I’m interested in how things work, in operations and systems,” he says. “I always ask people, ‘How do you do this? Why do you do it this way?’”

But while Sabey believes the world is a cool place, he wants it to be a more efficient place. He speaks about efficiency as a means to improve everything



PHOTO: LIDO VIZZUTTI

from daily functions like household chores and business management to larger ideas like fostering healthier societies and teaching our children in a better way.

This philosophy has guided his professional career. As a developer, he sees “going green” as a term for thoughtfully using resources. He approaches development the way he approaches everything else: with a carefully plotted plan, but also an adaptable mind intent on using what’s around him as smartly as possible. That’s why he sees the Columbia Basin, with its hydroelectricity power sources, as an obvious location for data centers. And his Intergate. Columbia data center campus in Central Washington won a LEED gold award from the U.S. Green Building Council.

“It makes sense to carefully utilize our resources and not disturb something that’s pretty cool,” he says. “We’re very cognizant of optimization and efficiency.”

As a general principle, he says technological advancement is making the world more efficient.

“Digitization is lowering the cost of everything dramatically,” he says. “That’s another great use of our resources.”

For Sabey, even relaxation comes with blueprints and lessons in efficiency. He says he spent 20 years designing his dream home in his mind before building it. That home, an impressive wood structure with intricate indoor rockwork, sits on Northwest Montana’s beautiful Flathead Valley floor near Bigfork. Sabey spends as much time there as his schedule allows, living the rest of the time in Seattle.

Everything in his Montana home is exactly how Sabey wants it. The living room windows are perfectly aligned with the front door and a mountain valley in the background. The floor is at a precise elevation ensuring that it’s the highest point on the property. And, as another example of resource optimization, the home’s wood beams were retrieved from a Boeing warehouse his company built 30 years ago.

Unsurprisingly, he designed the ranch’s complex irrigation system as well. The result is a fertile and sustainable cattle ranching operation, diagrammed into spacious plots on which cows grow healthy and happy. His massive bull, Shrek, expresses his gratitude by greeting a group of visitors approaching on Sabey’s electric-powered golf cart. He snorts and bristles when the dog nears, but then contentedly turns his attention to his water and the lush grassland home his owner has lovingly made for him.

The ranch’s 400-plus acres serve as home to more than 300 head of cattle. Sabey leases another 200 acres to grow forage. He says he spent 10 years researching the genetics of his cattle to make sure he has the best breed of Angus possible. Along with his prized Angus cattle, he and his wife also raise award-winning cutting horses.

The ranch serves a valuable purpose for Sabey, because if life is an operating system, he knows it’s one that needs to be rested and recharged once in a while. And he also knows the appropriate recharging device is solitude, which he finds in great abundance on his Montana ranch. He is always a thinking man, but the ranch offers an environment for a different kind of contemplation.

“There’s something about nature and the connections to the earth and the cycles of life,” he says.

Yet even on his Montana ranch, technology triumphs. A computerized system provides a database of various scientific facts that Sabey considers vital for a well-oiled cattle operation, such as Expected Progeny Differences, which he rattles off in conversation as EPDs. When he thinks about all of this technology guiding his life, and the lives of so many other people, he says succinctly: “It shows you where the world is going.”

And Sabey’s not going to get left behind. In fact, he wants to help the world get there.