ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

WINNERS LIST

- Kerby Jean-Raymond
- Amina Muaddi
- J Balvin
- Dr. Martens 1460
- VF Corp.
- Steve Madden
- Puma
- Tommy Hilfiger
- Dick's Sporting Goods
- Sandra Choi
- Kenneth Cole x Donna Karan
- Rothy's
- Bob Campbell
- Midnight 00
- Jeffrey Kalinsky
- Paris Texas

THE LEGENDS

A CAST OF SUPERSTARS

Driven by heart, design talent and retail genius, these icons have made an indelible mark on the footwear world.

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

BOB CAMPBELL

From humble beginnings to a multimillion-dollar kids' empire, BBC International's CEO has blazed his own path, defined by confidence and a generous heart.

BY ERIN E. CLACK

Growing up on the tough streets of Pittsburgh, Bob Campbell didn't have much. By the age of 9, he was already working his first job on a bakery delivery truck to help his single mother put food on the table.

But what Campbell did have was a scrappy optimism and a belief that with a lot of hard work — and maybe a little luck — he could rise above his circumstances and make something of himself.

It's a mindset that would carry him all the way from the stockroom of his local Kinney Shoes store, where he worked an after-school shift at 15, to the helm of a multimillion-dollar footwear empire.

While the BBC International chairman and CEO certainly did enjoy a few strokes of luck early in his career, the remarkable rise of Campbell was undoubtedly driven by his famously brash confidence and risk-taking spirit. Many of his biggest successes were born from gutsy gambles.

"In those early days, I took a lot of chances," he told FN recently. "When I made mistakes, I learned from them, and I was able to translate that knowledge into the company we know today."

After spending nearly 20 years rising through the ranks at Kinney and parent firm F.W. Woolworth Co., where he focused on women's footwear, Campbell launched BBC in 1975, making the surprising decision to specialize in children's shoes, a category he knew very little about.

As competition grew in the adult market, he saw an opportunity to carve out a niche in an underserved space. He broke in with a few hot sellers and was soon moving millions of pairs and garnering a reputation as the

"When I made mistakes, I learned from them, and I was able to translate that knowledge."
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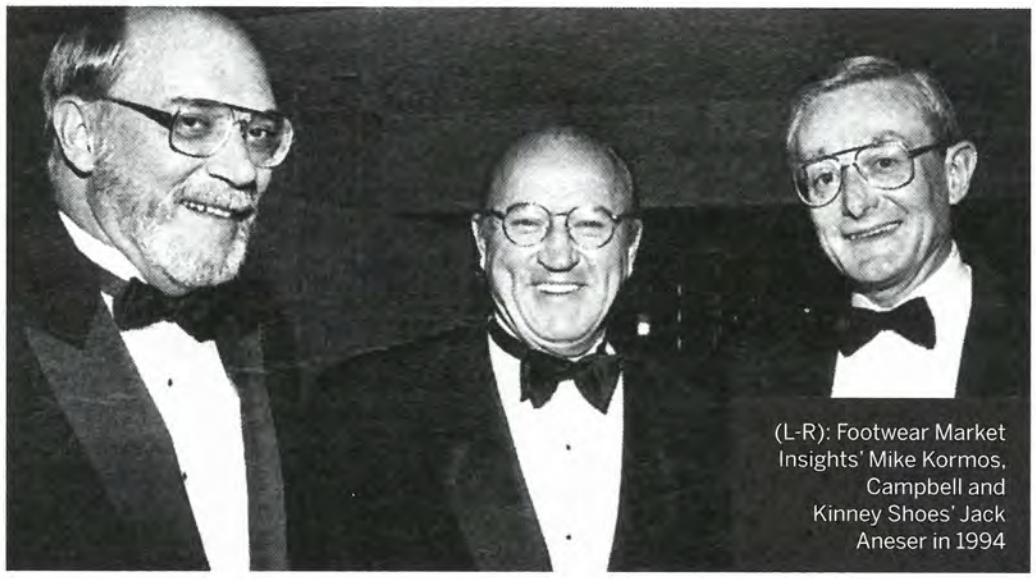

(L-R): Footwear Market Insights' Mike Kormos, Campbell and Kinney Shoes' Jack Aneser in 1994

(L-R): Campbell, Kinney Shoes' Harold Rowen and Foot Locker's Floyd Huff in 1988

BOB SAYS

A few memorable comments from FN's many conversations with Campbell over the years.

"What I love most about the shoe business is my fellow industry leaders and supporters. We all contribute our wisdom about footwear and share it with the next generation of leaders." — NOVEMBER 2019

"When I was a stock boy at Kinney Shoes and I made $35 that first week, I thought I was rich. But my dream was to make $100, so I worked at it. They made me a stock boy, but I hated it; I wanted to sell, so they let me. Within a year, before I'd even graduated from high school, I'd made enough money to buy an old Dodge for $600. It made me very proud. When I graduated, I decided to stay with Kinney full time. I started selling shoes when I was 15, and here I am a damn shoe dog." — MAY 2017

"Building this company has been a real adventure. It makes me proud. We've seen a lot of change and evolution through the years. We started as a first-cost business and then moved into character licensing. Then we built a wholesale business with brand licenses. We grew from a mostly domestic company into a global company that distributes in more than 120 countries. And now, we've taken on ownership of brands." — OCTOBER 2015

"Charity is very important to me. I believe very strongly that if you are successful, you've got to give back to the community, you've got to give back to the people who need it." — MAY 2017

"Everybody in the adult business looks at [the kids' business] and says, 'Wow, what a great new market to tap into.' But it's a tough business to be in if you don't know and understand it. And looking strictly at the numbers, the kids' category is still only a small percentage of the total [shoe] business. It's a great business — we love it and we've found our success in it — but it's a whole different animal." — OCTOBER 2015

"We're innovative. We created lighted footwear — and just look at that category today. Everybody has lighted shoes. We still sell millions and millions of pairs of them." — OCTOBER 2015

"The two big words in business and my personal life are 'communication' and 'respect.' My door is open every day, and the newest person in the company can walk in and say, 'Hey, how ya doin', Mr. Campbell?' It's an open door because I really believe [that at BBC], we are a family." — MAY 2017

ILLUSTRATION: ANDY GELLENBERG; PHOTOS: FN ARCHIVES

go-to guy for private-label kids' shoes.

Five years later, Campbell made another bold move, taking a chance on a shoe deal for a quirky Belgian cartoon property called The Smurfs, which had yet to even reach American TVs. The series became a ratings smash, kicking off a merchandising frenzy. It also put Campbell's firm on the map in the licensing business, paving the way for lucrative partnerships with such entertainment giants as Disney and Marvel.

Campbell, photographed for FN in his New York City apartment in 2017

But there have been bumps along the way. For instance, after spending freely on the purchase of a factory in the U.S., Campbell soon realized he had bitten off more than he could chew with the venture and found his company on the brink of collapse. "I thought I was going to go broke. I was right there, about to lose everything, including my house," Campbell recalled in a 2017 interview.

His luck — and fortunes — changed dramatically when he was contacted in 1992 by an inventor working on a patent for shoes with little lights. Campbell recalled that the technology set his mind buzzing with possibilities, so, armed with a handful of rough prototypes, he approached LA Gear about bringing it to market. The resulting LA Lights franchise took the sneaker scene by storm, with 10 million pairs sold in the first year alone, and it trail-blazed a concept that remains a staple in kids' shoes.

"When I look back at the things that really set BBC on a path for success, lighted shoes is one of them," he noted. "That idea was my first really big break."

By 2000, Campbell — never one to get complacent — sensed the winds changing in the market. Consumer demand for brand names was growing, and the BBC chief identified an opportunity to diversify and capitalize on his company's expertise in children's footwear by working with labels looking to get into the category. BBC forged a licensing partnership with Polo Ralph Lauren, followed over the years by other big names including Tommy Hilfiger and Nine West.

The company also took on Heelys, a struggling brand that many considered unfixable, and reignited the business in 2013 with fresh product and tighter distribution. "My father has an incredible ability to see opportunities within challenges that others might not," said son Seth Campbell, who joined BBC in 2014. "He's an eternal optimist, and it's contagious. In sales meetings, he'll push everyone to constantly increase their numbers, refusing to hear anything negative. And people will step up because everyone wants to do well for him."

"[Bob] is a testament to the idea that you can work hard, play hard and leave a positive impact."
— DICK JOHNSON

Indeed, among his industry peers, Campbell is something of a legend, fiercely admired for his self-made success and tireless work ethic. "Bob is a tremendous operator. When you have a guy who starts at the very bottom and ends up so high, that tells you the credit he deserves," noted longtime friend Joe Ouaknine, chairman of Titan Industries.

Yet for all of Campbell's accomplishments in business, it's his generosity that earns him the highest praise. Despite a demanding schedule, he has always made philanthropy a priority — his way of honoring his humble beginnings and paying his success forward. He gives lavishly of his time and money to charitable causes, from local nonprofits in BBC's hometown of Boca Raton, Fla., to industry organizations such as Two Ten Footwear Foundation.

"Bob's greatest legacy — one he's still creating — is certainly his history of charitable giving," said Jim Issler, president and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway Shoe Holdings. "His immensely big heart has made a profound difference in the lives of the young and the old, from so many walks of life both within our industry and without."

"Bob is a unique mix of tenacity and compassion," agreed Foot Locker CEO Dick Johnson. "He aggressively pursues opportunities in business yet understands how important it is to give back to the community. He's [a testament] to the idea that you can work hard, play hard and leave a positive impact on an entire industry."

Today, as BBC approaches its 45th anniversary, Campbell and his team are busy tackling yet another new frontier: the adult market. Not wanting to be pigeon-holed as just a kids' resource, BBC has broken into the casual athletic space, led by a 2018 deal with Champion and a 50% stake in skate label Straye (announced last month).

The expansion has come at the prodding of Seth, who is increasingly taking on a larger role in the business. So it would seem a natural time for the patriarch, now 82, to step back and enjoy the fruits of his labors.

But true to form, the shoe titan refuses to entertain any thought of retirement or slowing down, even after a serious health setback two years ago that resulted in a partial amputation of his leg. "I'm not going to retire — retirement is death," Campbell said. "But when I'm ready, I will slow down and let Seth and [president and COO] Josue Solano lead our executive team. I know they will continue to carry my vision forward and drive BBC to be the best it can be." ▮

PHOTOS: JOSHUA SCOTT