

## **Georgia's Business #416**

### **Guest: Bob Williamson Chief Executive Officer, Horizon Software**

**Richard Warner:**

Welcome am Richard Warner we have been doing this show in one form or another for about 30 years and the story you are about to hear is probably the most amazing one we've ever done. Our guest is Bob Williamson. Bob is CEO of the company called Horizon Software which is closing in 200 employees, 26million in revenue. That is almost beside the point because of the journey that Bob has made. And we are gonna get into that journey for a second but first let's get a baseline of where we are today. Horizon software does what?

**Bob Williamson:**

We sell software to institutionalized and service markets. So anybody that serves a lot of people food we have a in the end solution inventory, order processing all of the things that they need to do including point of sale in order to make it in that business.

**Richard Warner:**

Custom Software Company you got to be really good at it. How long have you had the company?

**Bob Williamson:**

We incorporated in '92

**Richard Warner:**

16 years. You incorporated in recession. Some tough times. There always tough times if your trying to start up a company. Ok. Horizon software doing what its doing that level of revenue. Let's rewind. You're 17 years old graduating from high school your in Mississippi. What life like at that point?

**Bob Williamson:**

Life was very tough for me I came from a very difficult situation and it was tough very tough.

**Richard Warner:**

Dad was in the military moved around a lot.

**Bob Williamson:**

Right, we went to many different schools my brother and I and I took a lot of wrong turns and I made some very bad decisions and choices.

**Richard Warner:**

Which a lot of high school kids do. It's time to graduate now, what happened? You made the move from Mississippi to Atlanta are we in the right time frame here?

**Bob Williamson:**

I got addicted to drugs and alcohol. I was in Haight-Ashbury in the '60s.

**Richard Warner:**

So you had much longer hair that you have today?

**Bob Williamson:**

Down to my waist and I hitch hiked and hopped freights all over the United States and had been in and out of jail. I fought a lot and actually when I came to Atlanta I was addicted to primarily methamphetamine but also heroine I'd just gotten out of prison, I'd taken LSD hundreds of times and had a very bad experience with that and overdosed methamphetamine.

**Richard Warner:**

What was it like when you were doing that, what did it do for you?

**Bob Williamson:**

It was very unfulfilling, I was paranoid most of the time I was very disenchanted with life I was miserable I was lonely, I was afraid, but it was a terrible black period in my life. I did not have any spiritual convictions I thought if there was a God He had to be mean I didn't want anything to do with him. So I was very suicidal several of my friends had committed suicide and homeless penniless. When I got to Atlanta I didn't have a penny to my name I ended up on Luckie Street as you will

**Richard Warner:**

Down by the aquarium.

**Bob Williamson:**

And I sold a pint of blood for 7 dollars and they had a YMCA across the street. I think they've torn it down now Lucky Street YMCA. So I spent a night there for \$5 I had \$2 left over I bought some candy bars and a coke and my first was cleaning bricks, cleaning the motor off bricks with a hatchet and I was making \$15 a day cash and I got a boarding house for \$15 a week. I had decided to come to Atlanta with a mission of I was either gonna commit suicide or I was gonna straighten up and get off drugs.

**Richard Warner:**

And then the event happened.

**Bob Williamson:**

Yeah, I had worked for a few weeks and then I actually got a job at Glidden Paint Company on Chattahoochee. But I had a very serious car wreck. I had borrowed a car and had a head-on collision where West Peachtree and Peachtree meet and I very nearly

died. I went to Grady Hospital. I was in intensive care for quite a while there and I had befriended a nurse down there. She was a real nice lady and she would, each week, bring me books while I was recovering to read.

**Richard Warner:**

You're in a lot of pain, at this point.

**Bob Williamson:**

Yeah, I had a broken femur and I was in really bad shape. I had several blood transfusions...I almost died. But, I have always been a reader. I read a lot books. I'm an insomniac, and I have been since I was a child, so I only sleep about three or four hours a night, so I read...voraciously. She would bring me a list of all the best sellers from the library and I would pick out the list that I wanted and each week she'd bring me a list of books. So, I kept noticing that the Bible was the best-selling book in the world. And, I had a very low opinion of religion and so forth, but I decided to read it, I think more to disprove it than anything. But, I started reading it. I started in the old testament and it was very boring, so I switched to the new. I read the new completely through, and I went back to the old, read it, and then read the new again and I became a Christian. So...

**Richard Warner:**

Was this an "ah ha" moment or was this something that began to permeate?

**Bob Williamson:**

Well, I think the term "born again" means you're a baby and I did not have a bolt of lightning that transformed me, but what I did was have an experience where I knew love. I knew that Jesus Christ loved me and that he could fix broken things and lives and I think that at that moment, I had a reason to live. And, so, soon after I got out of the hospital, I met my wife of 37 years and we got married...

**Richard Warner:**

How'd you meet, what was she doing?

**Bob Williamson:**

She was a very nice person, she was working at an insurance company. She was the opposite of me, very stable, lived in Atlanta all her life. And, she wasn't ever in an trouble of any kind...no drugs or anything like that. And one thing I had done was, I would avoid anybody that was around drugs at all like the plague, so...

**Richard Warner:**

Did you fess up to her early on?

**Bob Williamson:**

No. I didn't. I did after a while. I told her I had a lot baggage. But, after a while, I told her everything. And I began to study and read the Bible and mature. It took many, many years and I made a lot of mistakes and I think that you're a baby, and then you're a child and then an adolescent and...hopefully I'm maturing. But...

**Richard Warner:**

In the hospital bed when you started reading that, was the feeling given that it was so dark and so heavy that you were lighter?

**Bob Williamson:**

Yeah. And you say, was it an "ah ha" experience, I definitely felt it, you know. I felt change. I felt good. I just can't say that all of a sudden somebody who'd been in prison and been fighting and taking drugs and seen all of the things and done all of the things that I've done, that all of a sudden I had good character and that I was leading a righteous life and not making mistakes. Which, I still do today, you know. I'm just saying that my life changed. It was miraculous really.

**Richard Warner:**

You get out of the hospital, you've met someone and now the professional of Bob's life begins to take hold. It starts with Glidden Paint Company...in the basement.

**Bob Williamson:**

Right. Yep. I started in the labor room. I made \$350 a month. My wife made \$450. But, I rolled up my sleeves and I decided I would...and this place was located in the bowels of the basement. It was a very dingy area, it was dark

**Richard Warner:**

In a cage

**Bob Williamson:**

In a cage. What I did, I painted the whole room white, I organized all the labels and I figured out a way to really save them a significant amount of money on labels and my bosses found out about it and they promoted me. And everytime I would go into a department, I would do the same thing. I would just try to figure out a way to save money, make it better...and save them money and they promoted me. I was promoted 8 times in two years.

**Richard Warner:**

Did you, did your colleagues or bosses have any idea where you came from?

**Bob Williamson:**

Yes. Yeah. And I was the only one that they had ever had in their management program that didn't have a college degree. But, they did not know the extent of where I had been. And I didn't really broadcast that.

**Richard Warner:**

So, this is the mid-70s, that we're talking about, and now we're about to make another move and...tough times aren't over yet. 1977, you decide to become an entrepreneur, fair enough? With this art gallery business?

**Bob Williamson:**

And, basically, I had decided to go into business for myself. I invented a paint. I was an artist as a hobby, and I knew a lot about paint. I had learned a lot about paint, I had actually worked for three different paint companies and the reason I left Glidden is because they told me that no one could be promoted for 2 years. They had been hit with an affirmative action lawsuit. I wasn't eligible for promotion, so, I turned in my notice, I went to another paint company. They got bought out by a bigger paint company, and I went to another one. And in all of this time, I learned a tremendous amount paint, the composition of it and so forth. So I was experimenting around as an artist and I developed a paint for my own use and I went to a seminar by one of the best artists in the world, and he gave the seminar and he said a lot about paint and he was badly mistaken and he made a lot of errors. So, I didn't want to embarass him. When I got home, I wrote him a letter and I told him where all he had gone wrong and said "If you're going to go around the country giving these seminars, here's the chemistry" and drew him diagrams and so forth. So, we became really good friends and, so I sent him some of my paints to try.

**Richard Warner:**

Who was this?

**Bob Williamson:**

His name is Jim Hall. He's from Idaho Falls, Idaho. And as soon as he got those paints, he called me up and I thought he was gonig to jump through the phone. He said it was the best thing that he had ever seen in his life and he had to have more and that made me think, well, you know, here's a guy who's the best in the world, um...

**Richard Warner:**

Business opportunity.

**Bob Williamson:**

Yeah. So, I borrowed \$1000 on my credit card and I made up a bunch of paints and I went to an art show. And people were literally lined up out in the street. My booth was the most heavily attended and when I came back I had two wads of money that big in each pocket and so I started this little basement business and expanded it to my garage and then it just grew from there.

**Richard Warner:**

Grew to the point where...I mean, for an entrepreneur, the holy grail is, either a big company comes and buys you out for lots of money or you go public. And you're going to go public.

**Bob Williamson:**

Right. Well, back then, I had started seven companies and they were all kind of related...most of them were. I started a manufacturing company where I manufactured and I had expanded greatly from paint. I had all kinds of art supplies. We had over 6,000 items and we were selling to 290,000 customers world wide and I had seven distributors.

So, I had a publishing company, I had started a magazine for a wildlife artist, and I had published 19 books and I had a retail store. Anyway, I had seven businesses all together. Most of my customers were sportsmen and they were hard core sportsmen, because they were wildlife artists primarily. So we had decided, with that base, we could sell other things to them, other than art supplies, like Cabella's or Bass Pro or something like that, where we'd sell them hunting and fishing clothing and equipment and so forth.

**Richard Warner:**

And it had gotten to this public IPO place...

**Bob Williamson:**

Right. I had two people that were interested and I made a deal with one of them. So, I went back and announced it to the company and I was just jubilant. You know, we're going public. And the next day, my accountant came in and turned in his notice, or, uh, my controller. And I couldn't understand it. He was like a son to me and I said Bob, you know, we're going public.

**Richard Warner:**

What are you thinking?

**Bob Williamson:**

What are you thinking, you know? And he said, he gave me this story that his father in law was going to give him this job and give him part ownership in a business and I said, you know, you're going to be a VP, we're going really big and I couldn't talk him out of it and he didn't even want to give me a notice and he was like a son to me.

**Richard Warner:**

Did that raise a red flag? I mean, that smells funny.

**Bob Williamson:**

It really didn't. I was pretty gullible at the time and I was, I was hard working. I worked 20 hours a day for six days a week probably for seven years, to get where I was. And I was, at the time this happened, I was writing three books on three different subjects and editing a magazine and...

**Richard Warner:**

Well, he's not the only one who quits...

**Bob Williamson:**

Well, no, as it turned out, there were many of them involved with it. It was my sales manager, purchasing agent, several people in our warehouse. There were about 13 of them.

**Richard Warner:**

And the bottom line, what you came to find was what?

**Bob Williamson:**

They had been stealing me blind for about six months. The three...we knew we were going to have a three year audit and I told him we were going to have a three year audit and he knew that he would be caught and so he turned in his notice and...we were actually going to have a part for him, but uh...as it turned out, I found out and...

**Richard Warner:**

This would have been the moment..when you discover the company you thought was built on rock is built on sand and you were told...bankruptcy. Just file bankruptcy, get it behind you, move on and the decision was not to do that.

**Bob Williamson:**

Yeah, my banker and my accountant and my lawyer all told me to take bankruptcy. When this guy left, I was \$278,000 over drawn at the bank. I didn't have any inventory and we owed about \$900,000. And I had 65 employees and a plant in Idaho. We went to 19 employees in three days and it was grim. But I told everybody, as long as nobody sues me, I'm gonna fight this thing to the bitter end. So...

**Richard Warner:**

That requires, you know, nobody sues you know, the first impulse for this kind of money is lawsuits begin flying. How do you avoid that? How did you do it?

**Bob Williamson:**

What I did, I sat down and wrote them all a letter and I told them what I happened. I said, I'm a victim here. I'm not goin to pay penalties, I'm not going to pay interest, but I will pay your money back. And I can't tell you how much I can pay, because it's going to take a long time to recover from this, but I will pay you something if you leave me alone. If you don't, then, you're not going to get maybe pennies on the dollar. And I didn't avoid their calls. That was the thing. It was miserable talking to them because everybody who called me wanted to sue me for about...many years.

**Richard Warner:**

That will wear you out mentally.

**Bob Williamson:**

Yeah, it did. But I'd been in a lot worse situations. When you sleep on the side of the road or you see somebody drop dead in front of you for OD-ing or one of your friends commits suicide, in the scale of that, it was bad and it was one of the most miserable timed of my life, but I had seen worse, if that makes sense to you. So, what I did, I didn't avoid them. I wrote them every week and I took their calls. And, you konw, they would scream and yell or whatever, and I would just try to talk to them and eventually, we made our way out of it, and actually, I think that was the best thing that ever happened to me. I consider myself fortunate that it did, because it made a much better businessman out of me. Before, somebody'd come into my office and they'd say, I need a computer, "Well, order it, don't bother me" then when they came in they say they wanted a pencil, "Bring me the stub" hahah...and then we'll get you another pencil. I learned how to budget, I

learned how to live within in my means. I learned that bigger was better, but profitable is always good, and I've lived by that. So, honestly, I think that things that happen to you in your life that are bad build your character and prepare you for times like that. So, as it is, that's where I got my college degree and MBA.

**Richard Warner:**

Yeah, real life?

**Bob Williamson:**

Real life.

**Richard Warner:**

And I was going to say that you have the wrinkles to prove it, but you don't.

**Bob Williamson:**

Well, I do...

**Richard Warner:**

They're on the inside I guess...You started with your sons. Your sons were left-brained people. They wrote software code and therein lies...

**Bob Williamson:**

Well, two of my sons are very computer oriented, most people would refer to them as geeks. The other one is a sales and marketing guy and he could sell anything to anybody kinda thing. But we've been a family business. All of our businesses have been family businesses. Ever since they were in high school and old enough to take part, they have. And not only them, but they're friends and college buddies and all of that.

**Richard Warner:**

That discipline that you got from the art experience...I imagine that's carried over into the software experience...

**Bob Williamson:**

Oh yeah. A Williamson balances our check books even now and our sales are at 30 million dollars, so, I did learn my lesson, and, I think that that's the good thing about family businesses, you can pass on the mistakes that you've made. They'll make their own mistakes, but I don't think they'll eve make the same mistake and I won't either again. You know, I might make another kind of mistake, but not that one.

**Richard Warner:**

Looking at the Bob Williamson of the 1970s must seem like a different lifetime.

**Bob Williamson:**

Well, it's miraculous what God's done in my life. You know, I base my Bible on Biblical principles...I'm an openly Christian businessman. But that doesn't mean I use that to try to get business. It means I use the principle of the Bible...they're excellent. Because

when you think about it, our mission statement, to provide outstanding customer service...well, that's what Jesus did when he came to Earth, was to serve people. He wipes his disciple's feet, he died for us. The second thing in our mission statement is to provide the highest quality products and I think that that's what he would do, and then our third thing is fair prices and the last thing is working together in the spirit of integrity, honesty, and pride. So, if you look at the Bible, I've used the Bible throughout my life. I've read it many, many times, and there are very solid business principles in there. I think the biggest thing wrong with businesses today is they've forgotten about customer service and it is the most important thing. Even if you have a mediocre product, if you've got outstanding customer service, you're going to succeed. If you combine that with the highest quality, and fair prices, you're going to succeed, and I've done it with 9 businesses and to me, that's how I use the Bible. I don't use it to try to get people to buy my products because I'm a Christian, because that's not why I do it. And our company, I write a daily devotional, wordsforthe day.org is my website. And, I use Biblical principals to tell them how I address daily problems, whether I've had a death in my family, I've got a big deal I'm working on and it's not working out too well, I always relate it to some kind of Bible passage. So, what I do, I go to the Bible everyday, that's the first thing I do. We have the Ten Commandments in our lobby. People see it, they know it, but I don't push it down anybody's throat. The thing about it is, that's what made the difference in my life. I have a very strong work ethic and I persevere. I mean, I'll be there until the last dog dies in the fight, I mean, I'm very competitive. But, that's not what really changed me. It was a miracle that I'm not dead, or in jail or in an insane asylum. My brother committed suicide about 8 years ago and he didn't ever make that transition and you know, it's because he didn't have the same thing in his life that I had in mine.

**Richard Warner:**

I promised you an amazing story of Bob Williamson and thats it. Wonderful to have you here...

**Bob Williamson:**

Thank you.

**Richard Warner:**

Thank you for watching