



alumni focus

LinkedIn's Reid Hoffman '85

by Clennon L. King '78

Reid Hoffman '85 was nobody's social butterfly at The Putney School. His sphere of influence was small, his friends few, and most labeled him a loner during his three years.

Google the former Putney student's name now, 25-plus years later, and 95,000 hits pop up on the person some call "the most connected man in Silicon Valley." One big reason is he founded the fastest growing professional networking site in the world: LinkedIn.

So, how did Hoffman get from the solitary Putney Planet to the global epicenter of business networking?

“I asked myself the question: ‘How do I help millions of people lead better lives?’” said the Mountain View, California entrepreneur. With a degree from Stanford and a master’s in philosophy from Oxford, he chose a life in the IT business over academia. Hoffman said, “I didn’t want to write books that only 50 people would read, I wanted to improve the lives of millions of people.”

In five short years, Hoffman’s start-up has netted 35 million registered users with another million every 17 days. And, according to the *London Times*, the company’s worth is \$1 billion, with Hoffman himself as the single largest shareholder.

“It’s the most important professional networking site in the world,” said **Barnaby Dorfman ’86**, founder of the Seattle-based start-up Foodista.com. Dorfman lived in Reid’s dormitory his freshman year at Putney, and said, “Reid’s part of the PayPal Mafia.”

Hoffman initially sat on the founding board of PayPal before taking over the reins as executive vice president of the online money transfer service. Then, after establishing a relationship between PayPal and the credit card companies, Hoffman helped sell it to eBay, giving him financial freedom.

“For the first time, I was no longer working for the man,” said the California native. Now, he is an investor with 80 percent of his assets tied up in other companies.

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How does the site work? It allows users to create business contacts, and find jobs and potential clients.

IT researcher **Bill Schilit ’77**, who doesn’t know Hoffman personally but works at Google world headquarters next door, said his company has redefined how business is done. “He has developed a network concept into a business tool with business value. For example, instead of engaging in the time-consuming process of phoning to establish a contact, set up a meeting or recruit and hire people, businesses can now use LinkedIn,” Schilit said.

And in the current market, with record plant closures, job losses, and a sagging economy, Hoffman’s site is predictably seeing lots of traffic.

After the PayPal sale, Hoffman founded his first start-up, sat on a slew of boards, including Mozilla and Vendio, and became an investor in big IT brands like Facebook and Flickr. He also helped launch more than 60 companies as an angel investor, providing seed money to entrepreneurs even before the venture capitalists enter the picture.

Hoffman was born in Palo Alto, California, the only child of two lawyers. They divorced when he was one, resulting in addresses during his childhood that included Alaska, California, and New York. Then, he said “the independence bug” bit, prompting him to apply to boarding school. And while he looked at Exeter and Andover, he chose Putney, spending the next three years 3,000 miles away from home.

**FORMER PUTNEY
TEACHER, TOM WESSELS,
WAS REID'S ADVISOR.**



“It was kind of like *Lord of the Flies*,” Hoffman recalled of his socially challenging life at Putney.

Former Putney teacher and advisor **Tom Wessels** remembers Reid as someone who didn't hold grudges even though he was sometimes marginalized because of his intellect.

“I wouldn't call him a child prodigy,” said Wessels, who recalled deep conversations with Reid about philosophy, science, and life. “But he was way beyond his years intellectually.”

Latin teacher **Lisa Cox** echoed Wessels, characterizing Hoffman as a student more excited by the intellectual than what was happening around him socially. “He had a restless intellect and loved to exchange ideas on everything from Latin to politics to epistemology,” she said.

Inside the classroom, Hoffman had a knack for offering a variety of perspectives, said classmate **Amy Pardieck '85**. “I can remember Reid saying in discussion ‘Or else, this could have been a factor,’ or ‘We can't forget this,’” she said. “They were comments that were incredibly beneficial to broadening the topic territory, rather than narrowing it.”

Mary Taber '85 took most of her classes with Reid and said it wasn't just his mind, but his manner. “He had an intellectual curiosity without the sarcastic edge, and that was very refreshing,” she said. “He was always so positive.”

Outside the classroom, Hoffman apparently knew how to have fun as well. Friends say he regularly attended the Saturday night rock music dances in the Assembly Hall organized by buddy **Reid Deaver '86**.

And he loved playing Dungeons and Dragons with roommate **Reed Searle '85**. Searle, the son of an MIT professor, said he was accustomed to seeing brilliant people, but that Hoffman was a cut above. “Reid would create entire universes in his head,” said Searle, who traveled to Europe with Hoffman the year after they graduated.

“Did I see Reid starting and building company after company, linking human beings globally over the web? No.” said Searle. “But, it didn't surprise me either.”

Even Google's Schilit said it is clear Hoffman had to be brilliant.

“It's one thing to have *one* successful start-up under your belt,” said Schilit. “But with PayPal and LinkedIn, Reid Hoffman has two, which means he's got to be very, very smart.”

Back in the early '80s, Hoffman signed up for an evening activity in Putney's computer lab. He recalled “basically learning word processing” on Apple 2E vertical towers and Commodore computers, now considered dinosaurs of the IT age.

Former history teacher and, later, school director, **Sven Huseby**, who led the activity, said he was amused but not surprised by Reid's professional trajectory. “Reid clearly caught on to the power of what computers could be, and he saw how it could change our lives for the better,” Huseby said.

Former Putney computer whiz kid **Adam Behrens '84** has crossed paths with Hoffman during and since their Putney days. First, Behrens taught Hoffman assembly language and computer programming as part of a student peer project at Putney in the mid-'80s. In the mid-'90s, Behrens found himself on the payroll at Apple Corporation with Hoffman. That's when Hoffman approached Behrens about working together on a social networking idea that eventually morphed into SocialNet.com, Reid's first start-up.

“Reid’s a renaissance man,” said Behrens, who ultimately chose veterinary medicine over a career in IT. “He’s socially adept and broad in his thinking.”

Whatever social angst Hoffman experienced at Putney, the hugely successful entrepreneur lays claim to the school. He lists Putney on his LinkedIn profile, along with Stanford and Oxford. He has mentioned the school in media interviews. And his Putney diploma hangs in his Silicon Valley home.

Like all Putney diplomas, the images on his hint at what mattered during his time there: cross-country skis, a soccer ball, books, and Dungeons & Dragons.

Sitting in his sunny California offices on a January afternoon recently, Hoffman recalled he liked Sing, did barn, and played on the soccer team. He made the cross-country ski team, learned blacksmithing, as well as carpentry, drawing, and painting. He sugared maples, penned poems for the student magazine and even helped rebuild the school’s Cape Breton Island property in Nova Scotia.

In fact, 12 years after Hoffman graduated from Putney, he paid an unscheduled and unannounced visit to campus. “I remember wandering into the Main Building and the KDU,” he said. He also visited the General Store and met with his old advisor and Latin teacher who had since retired from Putney.

Taking that kind of side trip isn’t something easily done these days for the busy entrepreneur who admits only having dinner alone with his wife and former Stanford schoolmate, Michelle, every three to four weeks.

Still, the obvious question had to be asked: If Putney’s graduating class, part of the Facebook generation he helped create, asked him to speak at commencement, would he?

The once socially-awkward Putney outsider-turned-Silicon-Valley-insider smiled, and said “I’ll consider it . . . depending on my schedule.”

[*Editor’s Note:* As we were going to press, Reid’s schedule cleared. See him live on the East Lawn on June 7 at 11:00 A.M.]



CAN YOU SPOT REID IN THE PHOTO OF HIM AND HIS 1985 CLASSMATE? A FREE CAMPUS PUZZLE TO THE FIRST ONE WHO GUESSES RIGHT.