

"THE BEST INVESTMENT I EVER MADE"

TOP EXECUTIVES REVEAL THEIR FINEST FINANCIAL BETS. BY ILENE DENTON

The best investment you ever made? If you happened to buy stock in a little Omaha, Neb.-based company called Berkshire Hathaway when it started 60 years ago, we'll excuse your crowing. But successful investments are measured in many different ways, as you can see from the business leaders to whom we posted the question, "What's the best financial investment you ever made?"

JESSE BITER

Founder of Biter Enterprises and The HuB

"Dropping out of college and investing in myself by starting a business [HomeNet Automotive, selling inventory software to car dealerships; he sold it to AutoTrader in 2010]. That was the difference from working for somebody else the rest of my life. I was 19, just starting my junior year studying entrepreneurship and business at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania. As a 19-year-old college dropout, I thought I knew everything. It took me four or five years to know I didn't know anything. So I also invest a lot of time in books. My goal is to read three books a month. I'm consistently studying other people's thoughts and business practices; that's helped me grow. It made me realize there's a place for education, maybe not a structured education with a piece of paper."



JOHN HARSHMAN

Owner, Harshman & Company, Inc., Commercial Real Estate Broker



"The white building [called the Harshman Building] at Main Street and Orange Avenue where my office is. I bought it in 1998. Downtown was coming out of the doldrums of the 1986 tax law and recession and was starting to look better. I bought it list price for \$1.265 million and I was able to move some tenants out and replace with other tenants so I instantly increased cash flow. From then on, it was a series of putting the right tenants in the right place. It's been a great location for my business, too. It's a 13,300-square-foot Sarasota School of Architecture building, built in 1977 and designed by Tim Seibert; Al Conyers was the engineer, so it's built like a fortress. We've investigated painting it a different color, but Tim says it's meant to be white. The value has increased significantly over time, but I don't want to sell it."

TRACY SEIDER

Broker-associate, RE/MAX Alliance Group



"The investment of time—devoting time to my real estate clients, to my three children, and to the community. My business is about buildings, but it really has to do with people. I'm active in numerous organizations. It's a joy to give back because the community gives us so much. After all, people move here because of the community, not because we have nice houses. Every place in the country can sell you a nice building, but what makes us incredible are the people who are willing to make an investment in giving back to others. I do believe that through my efforts in the community I'm helping build real estate values in Sarasota."

AMANDA STIFF

Investment adviser and owner Access Advisors, LLC



"Equities and real estate. Long-term blue chips are my absolute best investment. When you want to invest, you have to look at the whole picture and have a plan for your stage of life. I've found it in investments in blue chip equities—technological companies, drugs and drug manufacturing companies. They've been fantastic, but it all depends on your timeframe. I've held them for some 30 years. The home where I've lived in the last 20 years has also been a good investment for me. I am not a flipper. In my own investments, I'm pretty conservative and boring."

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MICHAEL LOMBARDO

Owner, Ideal Classic Cars



"I bought my first toy, a VW dune buggy, for \$1,800 in 1980 when I was 18. I grew up fairly poor in south New Jersey, in a somewhat rural area, and I worked odd jobs to save for it; it was the first time I could accumulate enough to buy a toy. It motivated me to work hard; it's part of why I'm in the car business today, and classic cars especially. A few years ago I bought myself a Ford GT for \$200,000. I had to have one. But I still have the dune buggy. I'll never let go of it; it reminds me of where I came from and what motivated me to be successful."