

# NINJAS VS ZOMBIES

By Randy Jones

Last December, with my Leesburg, Virginia “nest” officially empty, I packed up all my worldly possessions, hopped in my car, Anderson Mini Cooper, and set off on my journey to a new life in Southwest Florida. My story is probably quite familiar to any number of other big-city defectors who favored the sunshine and sandy beaches of Florida’s Gulf Coast.

Though parenting certainly doesn’t end when your children transition from teenagers to 20-somethings, the occasional “dad, I need money” call doesn’t exactly translate into a reason for living in an overcrowded voter-focused metropolis. My marketing business is all about the “consumer” and, if there’s one place on earth where the consumer rules, it’s certainly Florida.

As a parent, I felt I had effectively performed the essential functions of child-rearing as endorsed by Dr. Phil. My children, Kevin and Maribeth, were quasi-adult college students living “on their own,” working mind-numbing part-time jobs (an absolute necessity for any type of meaningful professional development) and, best of all, neither had served any jail time. Yes, I was a patriarchal Superman for pulling this off! I had raised them, nurtured them and, dare I say, mentored them.

Back in Virginia I had a choice, I could have continued in a zombie-like state, in my now eerily silent house, staring at empty spaces that, until recently, were inhabited by teenagers, college paraphernalia and assorted Guitar Hero apparatuses. Or I could celebrate my advancing years

like a fiercely determined Ninja warrior on a quest to secure a fabulous new life.

## I chose Ninja!

Professionally, I benefitted from the ability to bring my job with me—in my case, thanks to this wonderful late-twentieth-century invention called the “world wide web,” I was easily able to relocate my target marketing firm to Collier County where technology would play an even more critical role in my nationwide communication with employees, vendors and clients.

The fact is, once here, I could have stayed in my own little office—in my own little chair. And other than occasional jaunts to the beach, Tommy Bahama or Walgreens, I could have lived



Author Randy Jones lets his inner Ninja turned Vampire shine through.



an almost identical professional life to what I had previously known up North.

### Once again, I chose Ninja!

However, a successful Ninja needs POWER. And much like my children needed me as a parent and mentor—I could now certainly benefit from someone to show me the ropes, hook me up and provide me that power.

As a freshly-minted Collier County Citizen (complete with the requisite backyard alligators which we named Clive and Cynthia to increase our comfort level with this shocking new proximity to nature), I began my search for my inner-Ninja, not by looking to my future, but by looking to my past. I found myself reflecting on those people in my professional, academic and personal life who have guided me over the years. Those who have raised me from 20-something (infant) advertising sales rep to 30-something (teenage) middle manager to 40-something (adult) marketing entrepreneur.

I wondered—have I lived up to their high standards? Has the time these extraordinary people invested in my future been adequately paid forward? What had I done to deserve the open arms treatment I desired from the Collier County community?

It then occurred to me—I had hands-on Ninja experience! In early 2009, I was approached by Justin, Daniel, and Cory, an enthusiastic trio of guerilla filmmakers who wrote, directed and produced an independent feature film, *Ninjas Vs Zombies*.

With nothing more than a few thousand dollars, a digital camera and computer editing software, these three entrepreneurs had actually completed an entire film. Despite my obvious lack of experience with their type of product, how could anyone help but be energized by their passion. Plus, isn't passion for one's work actually the golden standard for success? Isn't passion the number one benefit today's youth bring to the workplace? (Well that and a profound understanding of Twitter.)

Surprisingly, they asked me to serve as the film's marketing consultant. Of course, it helped that they knew very little about marketing so my inexperience in the film industry didn't serve as a detriment. What ostensibly appeared to be a large pro-bono project required very little time. In reality, the collaboration of Marketing Dude + Guerilla Filmmakers proved to be mutually beneficial—we actually taught each other. We listened...we shared...we brainstormed...we grew. Anything my filmmaking trio lacked in marketing knowledge they more than made up for with (P-word alert!) passion. They didn't need to be taught as much as they thrived on being encouraged.

Due to their undaunted perseverance, drive and, of course, passion, *Ninjas Vs Zombies* is now available from Netflix and Blockbuster as well as any number of large, national e-tailers nationwide. My experience as a mentor to these extraordinarily gifted young men is, simply put, one of the highlights of my career. And though not a single dollar has entered my pocket, the value of the experience is inestimable.

Though the film's definition of a "Ninja" is a more traditional good-guys-kicking-bad-guy-butt spin, my definition of being a Ninja meant seizing control of my new life. Mercifully, the wisdom that accompanies age instinctually told me to, just as I had done on the film, give first and expect nothing in return. (Well, age + instinct + Oprah if I'm being totally honest.)

So just as I had done in Virginia at both George Mason University and Christopher Newport University, I volunteered my time as a guest lecturer at Florida Gulf Coast University. Regardless of the age of your children, there is no cause more worthwhile than contributing to the education of any child. And no profession should be more celebrated than that of our country's educators. To this day, my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Patsy Watt of Columbia, Missouri, has remained a mentor, cheerleader and inspiration to me. I have long contemplated honoring her lifelong support by applying to appear on "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader" but, alas, the fear of humiliating poor Mrs. Watt on national television prevents me from doing so.

The arrival of my business on Marco Island was deemed newsworthy enough to garner a front page story in the Marco Island Sun-Times causing one DC-based Facebook friend to comment, "Was the feature on DRYING PAINT not ready yet?" Though I assured her the next week's article on drying paint was, in fact, fascinating, the real benefit to this press coverage was it opened a door for my involvement in the American Cancer Society's fundraising activities on Marco and expanded my circle of meaningful professional friendships.

I subsequently volunteered my time to both The Marco Players and The Naples Players as both a performer and volunteer marketing consultant. It was during my time with the uber-talented thespians at the Sugden Theatre that I first encountered the ubiquitous Rhona Saunders. Upon discovering a mutual previous residence (Washington, DC), profession (marketing), interest (live theatre) and business ethic, Rhona graciously volunteered to take on the role of Randy's Personal Ambassador to the Naples Business Community.

Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus because thanks to Rhona—I was NINJAFIED!

Truth be told, the opportunity to be a mentor, or positive role model, is everywhere. I attempt to mentor my college-aged children. I would like to think I mentor my staff but only they can confirm the reality. I'm not sure if "OMG! You're just a little boy in a big man body" is a positive assessment of my mentoring skills, but I have chosen to think "yes."

Most area professionals understand the vital role networking plays in the business. Furthermore, I have certainly lived in the Gulf Coast region long enough to understand the extreme significance to the area's fundraising and charitable activities. However, whether you refer to your activities as mentoring, fundraising or volunteering, giving with no expectation of receiving is actually when you're most likely to be surprised with the most gratification.

So I had rebuffed the trap of being a Zombie, I found my inner Ninja—and ultimately became a Vampire. Though it would be easy to turn that statement

into an analogous claim that I'm sucking the life out of Collier County, I'm really referring to my completely unexpected film debut during the final three minutes of Ninjas Vs Zombies. Though I don't want to spoil the ending, and I certainly can't repeat any of my depraved dialogue, in actuality, my sucking the life out of a fabulous mentoring experience is forever captured on film.

If you think you have nothing to offer—that's not true. Or you feel you don't have time—make the time. And if you think mentoring proffers a one-sided benefit—you're dead wrong.

With a tip of the hat to SCORE Naples, our own Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce and an incalculable number of selfless individuals sharing their talent every day, when it comes to mentoring, don't be a Zombie, be a Ninja and kick some....



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