

# Ron Garret: His Mind is Wide Open

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Benita Albert brings us part two of her story on Ron Garret.

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Ron Garret, known as Erann Gat while an Oak Ridge High School student in the Class of 1982, describes himself as a software engineer, entrepreneur, and angel investor. He said, "I have cofounded four startups and invested in over a dozen others. In a previous life I was a researcher specializing in robotics and AI."

And there is much more to report. I will continue his story where I left off in a previous, Part One installment.

In his first year of master's degree studies at Virginia Tech, Ron met a new professor on campus with whom he formed a special bond, subsequently selecting him as the advisor for both his master's and PhD programs. That professor, David Miller, would also be the influencer over the first phase of Ron's professional work. In 1998, Miller accepted a job offer with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in California, and he chose two of his graduate students to accompany him, securing jobs for them at JPL. Ron said, "So I was working and finishing my dissertation at the same time." Completing his dissertation in April of 1991, he considered applying for an academic teaching and research position. However, due to an overflow of candidates for such assignments, he chose to stay at JPL. Reflecting on this choice, Ron said, "In retrospect it was a much better career path for me. I got to work on all kinds of cool projects with no teaching or research fundraising responsibilities."

Summarizing his work at JPL, Ron wrote, "In a previous life I was a researcher specializing in autonomous robots. I helped to pioneer what is today the de-facto standard autonomous mobile robot control architecture. For a while I was the most referenced computer science researcher at all of NASA according to the 'citeseer' citation tracking engine, a title I held for several years after I stopped publishing. I eventually rose to the rank of Principal at JPL, the highest rung on the technical career ladder there." His time at JPL stretched from 1988-2004 with a one-year interruption in 2000 to commute weekly from southern California to a job in northern California with a new company named Google.

Google is an American search engine company that more than 70% of worldwide online users now employ. When Ron joined the neophyte enterprise, Google was less than two years old. To further emphasize his trailblazer appointment, consider that Ron's badge number, issued when he hired in, was 104.

Ron described his work at Google as follows: "I was the lead engineer on the first release of 'AdWords.' I also wrote the 'Google Translation Console,' one of the first crowdsourcing applications on the web."

I researched 'AdWords' and learned that it was one of the first self-serve online advertising platforms with the name now rebranded as 'Google Ads.' Love it or hate it as users, the software allows businesses and advertisers to create ads to be displayed on Google search results pages.

Ron was the first author of the 'Google Translation Console,' later rebranded as Google Translate. Ron described his initial efforts: "It was an interface through which volunteers (humans) would translate Google's site content into various languages. The modern term would be 'crowdsourcing,' though that word had not been invented then. The challenge was how to make sure the translations were accurate when we had no one on staff who spoke the target language." His initial efforts in 2000 came to fruition in 2006, five years after his departure, with the official launch of Google Translate. In 2025, the Google Translate app supports 249 languages and can translate text, handwriting, photos, and speech.

Ron's short tenure with Google was due to several factors, but he cited two especially compelling reasons - a "brutal commuting schedule" (from his home in Los Angeles to San Francisco) and the fact that JPL sought his return for leadership on new outer space projects, one of those being Deep Space 1. Deep Space 1 was a NASA demonstration spacecraft that flew by an asteroid and a comet as a part of the New Millennium Program testing advanced technologies.

Within the first half decade of his professional career, Ron found himself immersed in the dichotomous work mentalities of government research laboratory missions and corporate competitive cultures. Perhaps his ground breaking work inside

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Google made him suffer from what he called 'imposter syndrome,' meaning he questioned whether he was contributing enough. As he said, "It was hard to see the future success in the beginning days." His work at JPL in early robotic technology and control systems was on the forefront of driverless car innovations, again, a futuristic concept waiting for acceptance and implementation.

As of 2004, Ron stepped out on his own taking on new ventures that expanded his scientific background to include entrepreneurship. The stock options available to him as a former Google employee supported his efforts to envision, finance, and create innovative ventures. In the last two decades he has co-founded four companies and invested in at least a dozen others.

From 2004-06, Ron was the Co-founder and CTO for IndieBuyer, an online marketplace for independent films. Anticipating a potential growth market due to cheaper high-resolution video cameras and digital editing software, his initial plans were not unlike the later highly successful Netflix marketing strategy. However, Ron said that they underestimated the amount of capital needed to reach critical mass. This venture, though thwarted, spun off a unique self-actualizing project for Ron to pursue.

As a citizen of Los Angeles, Ron became interested in filmmaking. He enrolled in a course in screenwriting in the early 2000s. He felt dissatisfied with his lack of writing experience in his educational background, desiring more than just the mechanical aspects of essay writing he had learned. He sought what he called, "More substance...an emphasis on dramatic structure, character arcs, and historic context." Furthermore, Ron added, "I like to tell people that after you've lived in LA for a while, if you don't write a screenplay, they kick you out."

They didn't kick him out, perhaps because he made a full-length feature film entitled, "But for the Grace of God?" which is available on iTunes and Amazon. The film centers on one man's quest to address the homeless problem. That one man is Ron Garret who attempted to converse with, and to help homeless individuals get off the streets of LA. The film premiered in 2011 at the Oakland International Film Festival.

I love the pre-story, a snapshot of Ron's motivation to address the subject of homelessness. "My dog, Mobo, didn't fear approaching homeless people. He was an equal-opportunity sniffer who did not discriminate based on race, socioeconomic status, or even species. As long as you smelled interesting, he was your friend."

"Thank you for letting me pet your dog," a statement made to Ron by Walter, a homeless man, changed everything. Ron continued, "In the span of five minutes my image of homeless people was changed forever." The message, so beautifully delivered in the film, is to listen, care, and act.

Ron became an instrument-rated, private pilot, a passion first born in his youth while flying with his father, a former Israeli Air Force jet pilot. He recalled that they would fly a small plane around the East Tennessee area, taking off and landing on a small, grass airstrip in Oliver Springs.

Later, it was Ron's idea to create an online market place for charter jets, named Smart Charter. As a Co-founder and CTO, Ron proposed aggregating demand data for an automated scheduling system which could be used to reduce the number of empty legs across a fragmented private jet industry. Operating a website that would let prospective customers enter trip details for sharing with jet charter operations, Smart Charter could provide a centralized scheduling service. Before the company was launched, it drew the interest of Richard Branson of the Virgin Group who acquired the concept for 10M dollars.

Ron opposed the acquisition, but he was outvoted by his two fellow co-founders. He resigned from the company but kept his shares in the hopes the renamed company, Virgin Charter, would prosper. Ron reflected that the subsequent changes to the business model and a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the rarified market of charter jets led to failure of the venture. He summarized his lesson learned: "Be careful who you take on as a partner. Success in one industry does not necessarily translate into success in another."

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Ron remained undaunted as his curiosity and eagerness for new challenges led him to dabble in ventures in ride sharing, in replacing credit cards with digital signatures for e-commerce, and in online spreadsheet data innovations. His ride-sharing plan was hindered by procurement of driver resources, while simultaneously, a new company named Ubercab, later shortened to Uber, snagged the market. Working with the banking industry and promoting enhanced software design projects taught him the importance of committed partnerships and open information sharing.

In a recent blog posting, Ron wrote about the vagaries of entrepreneurship and his life's adventures with same: "My tale of failed startups all somehow have added up to a good life at the end of the day. Of course, hitting the jackpot at Google didn't hurt, but I really don't think that was the whole story. I learned a lot. And I think my current happiness stems mainly from the fact that I like the person I've become, someone who can fail...and still find a way, for the most part, to be happy."

With his wife Nancy, Ron shares a love for traveling the world including all seven continents and many island tours. Nancy is a photographer, environmentalist, and writer of poetry, plays, and novels. Her writings appear under the pen name of Eleanor Rogers.

In addition to Ron's pursuits in screenwriting mentioned earlier, he also loves to write. He describes himself as an armchair quantum mechanic while observing that, "Quantum pedagogy goes back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but the right explanation wasn't revealed until the 1960s and confirmed in the 1990s. I was never satisfied with the explanation being harder than it should be." He wrote a paper titled "Quantum Mysteries Disentangled" that he presented at a Google Tech Talk in 2011, a lecture you can view online by searching Ron's name and the paper's title.

He also describes himself as a part-time blogger. Since 2003, he has posted "Rondam Ramblings," sharing his thoughts on various scientific topics as well as personal opinions and reflections.

Ron is working on a book about programming in Common Lisp for real-world applications. Lisp (List Processing) is one of the oldest, high-level coding languages still in use. Ron learned to program in Lisp as a teen, and he has continued to use updated versions of same throughout his professional career. Investigating more about Lisp, I learned that it was developed in 1958, and it became a favored language for artificial intelligence research. Common Lisp is considered a modern standardized version known for flexibility, powerful macro systems, and modifiable running applications.

I feel Ron's happiness lies in the excitement of a new challenge, both in his professional and personal life. Currently, Ron is involved in proprietary work as a senior hardware designer. You can be sure he is on the forefront of science and that he is once again seeing the future and making it happen.

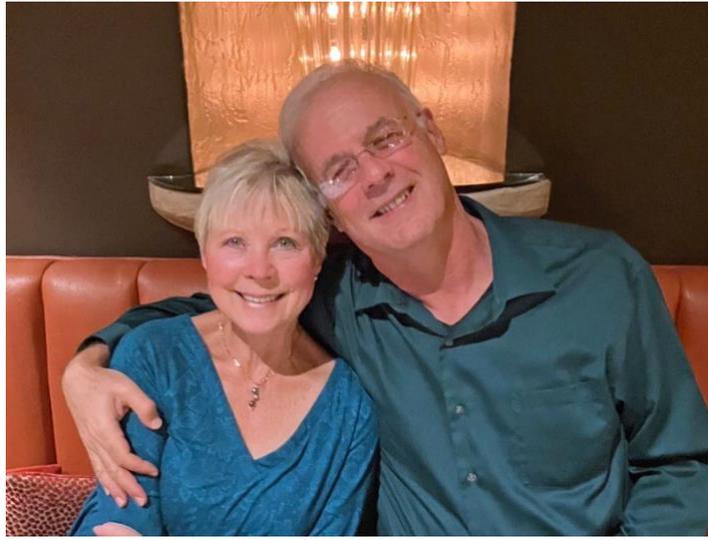
I admire the writings of theoretical physicist Brian Greene, and I am reminded of his comments on extraordinary feats of ingenuity: "Nothing quite focuses the mind like dissonant details awaiting harmonic resolution." Ron Garret is driven by a need for finding solutions to discordance be it in scientific applications, business innovations, or the social milieu. Furthermore, Ron is a dreamer with an insatiable curiosity to understand, explain, and experience new adventures. His mind is wide open.

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Thank you, Benita, for an amazing story of Ron Garret and his lifelong experience of making things happen.

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Ron Garret and his wife Nancy (Courtesy of Ron Garret)