

Decades ahead of his time . . .

He was a maverick . . . and when he began hectoring fellow CEOs about the marriage of social needs and business opportunities, most of them snorted and turned away.

I worked and traveled with Bill Norris for five years, from December 1979 through December 1984.

Founded in 1957, Control Data Corporation became the most successful computer company of the 1960s and 1970s, the darling of Wall Street. By 1984 the company was worth \$5 billion and employed 60,000 people. According to an article in *The Washington Post* two years later, Norris “not only marched to a different drum, he created the company that built the drum -- and pounded out the beat for nearly three decades . . . (he was) one of the most successful, inventive and iconoclastic business leaders” in the country.

But the race riots of 1967 shocked Norris. Cities were burning, mobs rioting and looting. Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia. Even Minneapolis, Control Data’s home!

Norris sent one of his senior executives into the midst of the riots to find out what the company could do to turn things around. His aide returned a few days later. “These people need jobs,” he said. “They need *real* jobs.”

Norris responded instantly. He took it as a personal challenge. “Build ‘em a plant,” he said. “Build a Control Data plant right there in the heart of the city.”



Business leaders scoffed. Control Data employees cringed. But the personal awakening Bill Norris experienced changed his life -- and the course of business history. Within the next ten years the company opened plants in four inner cities (Minneapolis, San Antonio, Washington, D.C., and St. Paul) -- and in two of the most god-forsaken rural communities in the country.

By the time I arrived at corporate headquarters as his chief communications lieutenant in 1979, Norris had gone even further by fashioning a business philosophy that left no room for argument: “Our mission,” he wrote, “is to address the major unmet needs of society as profitable business opportunities.”

It was the first articulation of social enterprise as we know it today.

It was heresy to Wall Street, but the media loved it. So did Peter Drucker, the centerpiece of an international conference we sponsored in 1982 that attracted more than 250 CEOs. Jesse Jackson wrote

to Norris, "I had given up on corporate America until I visited your operations and met you." Ralph Nader praised him in *The Big Boys*, his 1986 best-seller about corporate CEOs.

Invitations for Norris to tell others about Control Data's new strategy flooded into his 14th floor office from all over the world. During the five years I traveled with him he delivered more than 300 speeches -- to government leaders, corporate titans, international financiers. He gave interviews to more than 100 major newspapers, magazines and television programs. I worked 90-hour weeks just to keep pace, but he never slowed. He lugged around a briefcase crammed with notes and vitamins. Every day he went to work at corporate headquarters, he rode the elevator seven floors, then climbed the stairs seven more to his office. He was indefatigable.

And Control Data's social enterprises mushroomed.

By the early 1980s, Control Data was operating mobile medical vans on a Native American reservation in South Dakota, using computer technology to herd caribou beyond the Arctic Circle, revitalizing entire urban neighborhoods and rural communities, working with Chief Justice Warren Burger to create training and employment opportunities for prisoners, launching the first small business incubators in the country, developing the nation's first wind farms, creating a vast array of computer-based learning programs for colleges and universities and self-paced learners. The innovations just kept coming, and publicity flowed like a river.

But few remember -- because Control Data failed as a company. It began to falter in the mid-1980s. Competition from Japan for computer peripherals and assaults from below by mini- and micro-computers made Control Data mainframes an endangered species. Wall Street and media critics blamed Norris for being distracted, too focused on his "social programs," and leftists harped at the way Control Data carried them out.

They were all right. Norris took his eye off the company's core, and the people running the social enterprises made a lot of mistakes.

And yet they were all wrong.

Bill Norris was simply decades ahead of his time. He was a trailblazer. Mistakes are part of the game, and others learned from Control Data's miscues. Social enterprise today is a major strategy for non-profits, small businesses, government policy-makers and -- yes -- major corporations. By the time Norris died at age 95 in 2006 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease, almost everything he'd attempted to do was being done successfully by others -- although few recalled or even knew about the ground he'd broken.

I remember.

Working for Bill Norris changed my life, and I've spent the past 30 years spreading the gospel of social enterprise. Hundreds of others came out of Control Data imbued with the Norris philosophy, and we've been spreading the seeds all over the world. Whenever I see another nonprofit starting a business to address a social need, I think of Bill Norris. Whenever I speak to a group of fledgling social entrepreneurs and see the excitement in their eyes, I think of Bill Norris. And every time I read about another corporate CEO preaching the importance of a double or triple bottom line, I remember Bill Norris thundering from his bully pulpit.