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Firm finds earthly reward for humane service

Nicholas Thomley was a college sophomore when he started his social services company, which has grown in seven years to \$7.2 million in revenue.

By Dick Youngblood, Star Tribune

Nicholas Thomley's entrepreneurial impulses date to eighth grade, when he and a buddy organized a floating craps game at their Maple Grove middle school.

By the time school officials caught up with them and imposed a three-day suspension during which they were to contemplate their transgressions, they had pocketed about \$100.

And that didn't count the proceeds from a retail business they were running, selling soda, candy and gum out of their lockers.

Thomley's creative focus has since shifted to more legitimate pursuits: He's the founder and CEO of Pinnacle Services, a rapidly growing St. Louis Park firm that offers vocational, residential and financial management services to the elderly and people with disabilities.

I'm not usually the envious sort, but this guy's record has turned me a virulent shade of green. Consider:

- Thomley started the company as a sophomore at Concordia University.
- He grossed nearly \$2 million in his second year of operation and hoisted his revenue to more than \$7 million within five years after that.
- Oh, and he just turned 27.

Did I spell virulent correctly?

Along the way, Thomley also has completed his undergraduate studies, which were interrupted briefly as Pinnacle pushed him toward 90-hour workweeks.

As his schedule slowed to a mere 10 hours a day or so, he started taking night classes and earned a bachelor's degree in organizational management and communications at Concordia in 2003. And earlier this year, as Pinnacle's 2006 revenue headed for \$7.2 million, he collected a master's degree in business administration from Augsburg College.

Despite the long hours, Thomley calls the start-up period "the best time of my life; I loved the feeling that we were really building something."

The inspiration for the company grew out of a job he held in high school,

working with disabled residents of a supported-living residence owned by a company that is now a "friendly competitor," as he put it.

"I really enjoyed that job, helping people," he said. "You felt as though you were making a difference."

Thomley started Pinnacle in December 1999 and spent a year marketing the business before landing his first client: a contract with Hennepin County to manage the distribution of state and federal funds for therapeutic equipment, computer magnifiers and other needs of persons with disabilities.

He was on his way: By the end of 2001, he had 150 employees and revenue had climbed to \$1.9 million. Since then he has expanded his services and won contracts with Anoka, Carver, Ramsey, Beltrami, Koochiching, Todd, Chisago and Clay counties.

What accounts for the success? "Exceptional client service," said Jen Castillo, principal planning analyst in Hennepin County's human services department.

"[Thomley] has a sincere empathy, a real sensitivity to the needs of each client," Castillo said. "He believes each person is different, and he tries to find creative service options that make his business fit the client's needs, rather than the other way around."

Since 2001, Thomley has added an array of services, including:

- A chain of five metro-area supported-living facilities, each with four residents, where round-the-clock staff helps disabled clients with everyday living challenges. Now there are plans to open an apartment-sized facility early next year to house 10 people with mental health issues who do not require nursing home services.
- An unconventional employment support program that trains clients with the aim of placing them in the general workforce instead of sheltered workshops. This approach offers "better pay and growth in self-confidence and capability," Thomley said.
- Support services for clients with developmental and mental health issues to train them in independent living skills ranging from grocery shopping to cooking to budgeting so they can remain in their homes.
- A respite program that offers periodic breaks to primary caregivers.
- Case management, involving assessing, coordinating and acquiring needed services such as home-delivered meals or personal-care attendants.

Thomley started the company with a \$20,000 loan from his grandmother, who also put up her home as collateral for a \$100,000 bank loan. Those obligations have long since been settled, and Thomley now has a \$500,000 credit line with North American Banking Co.

To hear North American Vice President Brad Benesh tell it, the credit was a no-brainer despite Thomley's youth.

"In my 27 years in business banking, he's one of the most impressive young people I've ever dealt with," Benesh said. "What he's done at his age is well above average by far.

"He has an innate business sense," Benesh added. "The kind they can't teach you; you just have it."

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