

From 10-Year-Old Inventor to Mobile Entrepreneur

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If you'd met Brian Roundtree when he was just 10 years old, you probably would have guessed he would grow up to be an aviation engineer. But Roundtree, now 46, is instead chief technical officer of SNAPin Software Inc., a Bellevue, Washington, developer of self-service software for mobile devices from Nokia and other manufacturers that his company sells to such operators as BT Mobile and Orange UK. Back when Roundtree was still a boy, his father, an employee of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), would bring home defunct equipment and obsolete technical manuals for him to play with. The boy would gather his gifts in a secret space beneath the stairway of the house and build gadgets.

Some of young Brian's projects were far more sophisticated than the typical crystal-radio set a kid might knock out on his own. For example, he once built a fan that had no moving parts. "It was a device that blew air around," he says. The device consisted of many wires that resembled needles; when he applied high voltage, the device would ionize the air. The experiment's results were mixed, however. While the air did move, it was poisonous to breathe!

Brian also had access to some brilliant electrical engineers. His father, an early programmer, would allow the boy to hang around FAA computers on weekends. Engineers there would help Brian debug his latest creation. That legacy endures to this day, Roundtree says: "I have two passions — aircraft and computers."

He also picked up some impressive mentors along the way. Early on he met William Lear, who later developed the Learjet and helped Roundtree get into the composite industry. Ten years later, when



Brian Roundtree of SNAPin has two passions — aircraft and computers.

Roundtree was in his 20s, he tried to ramp up a small business and met Bill Gates' father, William Gates Sr. The elder Gates advised Roundtree on business plan development.

But Roundtree did not get serious about professional computer work until the mid-1980s, when he was working on an automation contract for the U.S. Air Force. In fact, this work eventually led him to the mobile industry. "I had been traveling a lot and frequently changing flights, which was really annoying my assistant," he recounts. "I thought that if I could just make the change on my PalmPilot, it would make the flight change automatically." Of course, the Palm couldn't do that.

But by 2003, mobile phones were smart and capable enough that they could. Roundtree created an easy e-mail client for Symbian OS devices that included built-in automated-support capabilities, such as the ability to self-configure. Since there was no Microsoft Exchange e-mail on Symbian OS at that time, when Roundtree showed the self-supporting e-mail client to operators, he says, "their eyes lit up." That was all he needed: In 2003, Roundtree started SNAPin Software, a venture-funded startup that provides automated self-support software for mobile phones, thereby relieving operators and OEMs of much of this chore.

But Roundtree still pursues his other main passion. His father taught him to hang glide, and it's a hobby he continues to enjoy.

Learn more about SNAPin Software

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