

## BIZSMARTS

Insight and ideas to help you better run your business

### HOW I ...

# Went from combat to corporate training

ARMY VETERAN STARTS UP ADVENTURE COURSE FOR CORPORATE CLIENTS IN MIDDLEBURG



Joe DeRing says he uses his Army training every day in running Empower Adventures, a team-building obstacle course.

JOANNE S. LAWTON / STAFF

**J**oe DeRing is an Army veteran with a knack for adventure. Now he's combining his military training and love of adventure to improve your workplace. With a team-building approach that involves zip lining, survival training and leadership skills, DeRing says he is now saving one company at a time.

**Where did the business idea come from?** I spent eight years as an infantry officer in the U.S. Army, and so in training and throughout my Army career, we'd do confidence courses and obstacle courses, airborne school, air assault school. That particular training environment was always my favorite part of being in the Army. Working with my team to get up and over obstacles, traverse ravines and really working together.

#### How do you attract corporate clients?

We used conventional advertising means – digital marketing, billboards, things of that nature. But what I started doing was marketing my experience as an infantry officer and building and training teams to operate under really stressful conditions.

#### What kind of clients have you served?

From small companies to large companies. We've worked with the Army, the FBI, Border Patrol, TSA and so

### THE BASICS

**Company:** Empower Adventures

**What it does:** Lead recreational and educational adventures, including zip line trips, canopy tours, hiking, and rappelling as well as corporate retreats and seminars.

**Leadership:** Joe DeRing, founder and president

**Location:** Middleburg, Middletown, Connecticut

**Employees:** 25

**Clients:** Served roughly 70,000 people

**Website:** [www.empoweradventures.com](http://www.empoweradventures.com)

on. On the financial side, we've worked with Bank of America and all different kinds of financial companies. We worked with FedEx and UPS, Home Depot has come out, we've had Sikorsky Aircraft, General Dynamics – large companies that have teams that need to work on how they communicate, how they set goals, how they clearly define their roles, what processes do they have in place, what inefficiencies can we fix.

#### Tell me about a time when the training helped a client.

I'd say our time with Time Warner was one that sticks out to me. They were a team of about eight people who didn't really know each other real well. But by the end of our program, they were able to see where they were lacking communication, they didn't have some clearly defined goals. They went away with a brand new strategy on solving problems.

#### Why move from Connecticut to Middleburg?

We had the Salamander Resort and Spa ask us to build our Empower Adventures center on their property, not only for their guests but for the whole Northern Virginia-D.C. region.

#### What was your biggest challenge?

Getting corporate teams to understand the investment they make in a team-building program comes back to

them 10 times or more because of the relationship building, the problem solving, the communication improvements and overall bonding of a team. It's hard to quantify a number on that level of improvement.

#### Toughest challenge that you've thrown at a company?

Probably our survival team challenge. It's kind of a cross between "The Amazing Race" and "Survivor." Teams have to race through the woods using a map and compass to find these different challenges. Once they find them, they have to work as a team to survive, and each challenge is a different survival skill, like trapping food. Another big challenge is finding and purifying water. Individually, these challenges aren't that bad, but when you put them together and you make the conditions less than perfect, it gets hard on groups.

#### How did you go about receiving funding?

In 2009, the lending environment was much different than it is now. The Great Recession was in full swing. We went to the bank with our business plan, and they said, "Thanks, but no thanks." So in 2009, we actually had to find private capital, investors who not only would believe in our plan, but in me to give them a return. And we did that within three years. Once we had our first facility up and running, that provided us the track record we needed to get traditional bank funding for this facility here in Northern Virginia.

#### How do you deal with the seasonal nature of your business?

We run our programs inside as well. They're a bit different in terms of the scope of the activities, but there's still a lot of team-building and problem-solving scenarios we can present to groups in a conference room or a ballroom that requires them to go through those mental gymnastics.

**What's next?** We don't necessarily own the land, we lease the land. So we're always looking for landowners to partner with in doing that. We'll continue to look for more properties where we can push our message from.

#### When did the vision for Empower Adventures start to take hold in your mind?

In 2006, I was in Afghanistan, and I was leading a mission to train the Afghan Army in different war-fighting techniques. It was in that experience that my desire to bring the training and team building I was teaching back. It was then I said, "This is what I want to do."

– Interview by Chase Cabot