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## The making of a serial entrepreneur: Geekwire's Jonathan Sposato

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**By Stacy Nguyen**

Northwest Asian Weekly



**Jonathan Sposato (Photo by Stacy Nguyen/NWAW)**

On June 13, at its E3 press conference this year, Microsoft announced the launch of new Xbox hardware, a litany of news on a handful of exclusive franchises and sequels — Gears of War 4, ReCore, Forza Horizon 3 —

and more, amid a fever pitch of buzz leading up to announcement.

More than 14 years ago, Geekwire's chairman, initial investor and PicMonkey's CEO John Sposato was 34 years old and in a room with his colleagues. He believed in and felt the palpable excitement of possibilities. And, at the time, he also didn't know if the thing he was working so hard on would even last.

But he thought, "Let's ride this wave."

Sposato was on the team that created Xbox, which launched Nov. 15, 2001.

"When I see someone on stage giving a talk at E3, launching some new thing about the Xbox," Sposato said, "I'm tremendously proud of them and my former colleagues and the industry. But — it's also a moment when you realize there's something that's very constant in life, that is very true — and it doesn't matter what industry you're in."

"I'm convinced that you can be Steven Spielberg, and you can walk into a movie theater and you see a new movie that Michael Bay has directed. And you have to be okay with the fact that you are part of something and that you even see evidence of your own DNA in that thing — when Michael Bay was growing up, he watched a lot of Spielberg movies — you have to be okay with the fact that the industry moves on, and it grows and changes. And you have to be okay with not being a part of that anymore. It has its own identity, its own framework.

"That's life."

## **Family**

Sposato was born in London at a highly politicized time, to a single Chinese mother — a fact that he was hyper-aware of, from a young age. Within the same year, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage with *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). His birth father is Korean American and lives on the East Coast — a man that Sposato met for the first time just last year.

Sposato cites cultural reasons for his parents' separation — why they weren't allowed to marry.

Sposato's mother, Helena Eng, studied at Columbia University. This is why, from age 6 to 9, Sposato lived apart from his mother — cared for by his maternal grandparents in Hong Kong.

Eng went on to become a nurse anesthetist at Swedish Hospital in Seattle. She met and married an Italian American man while still in college, Donald Sposato, who legally adopted Jonathan. His father was a hospital administrator at Harborview Medical Center. It took his parents several years to apply for him to

come back to the United States.

“I consider him my father,” said Jonathan Sposato, who, by this point, is used to all sorts of assumptions that people make when they see or hear his name. “He also raised me. To honor him, I keep that name.”

### **Sense of place**

About 15 miles north of Seattle, next to beaches and shoreline, Edmonds started as a mill town in the late 19th century. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Edmonds experienced a boom during Sposato’s childhood, between the 1960s and 1970s, its population increased nearly threefold, from 8,016 to 23,684 people — at least partly due to the construction and opening in 1965 of the Interstate 5 freeway, which runs east of the city.

“I was the only Asian at school,” said Sposato. “There was one other Asian kid, a Chinese American family. . . . They had more of the canonical Asian American experience. They ran a Chinese restaurant. They were small business owners, and I admired them tremendously. His name was Dickson Yu. His mom was Winnie, I think. That was it. And me — and I was sort of in a mixed household.”

Sposato is always quick to speak positively of people. He is careful to qualify and clarify his opinions before he makes them. He talked about Edmonds as a nice place to grow up. He said the people he was around were lovely for the most part, the beaches idyllic, and the sunsets beautiful. He talked about how safe he felt and how he could ride his bike everywhere. He said the schools were good.

“And I think the entire country was coming out of processing decades of really tragic history with their fathers and uncles and brothers having to go off to war in some part of Asia,” said Sposato. “The brutal Pacific War against the Japanese in the ’40s. The brutal Korean War in the ’50s. Then Vietnam (1955–1975). In the ’70s, you know, it was, at times, a little hard to be the only Asian American kid in a place like Edmonds.”

Sposato chooses to frame these early experiences as moments that galvanized him. He easily talked about how, without the experiences, he wouldn’t be able to appreciate what it is like to be — he took time to search for the right word, before settling on, “disenfranchised.”

“I think . . . social and emotional learning — those are pretty recent concepts. Back then, I think kids could be unkind to each other. Back then, that was sort of my litmus test. I was in elementary school. Who took me at face value? Versus, who just reflexively just didn’t want to be friends with me, because of my race?”

“I had some experiences — I would call them random acts of unkindness. They taught me that I’m not entitled to everyone’s kindness. I’m not entitled to everyone being nice to me. No matter how nice and charming I think I am.”

Sposato was a good student. He attended Whitman College (1985–1989), a private liberal arts institution in Walla Walla, and was on the pre-law track — something he will readily admit was influenced by his mom, something he ultimately didn't pursue.

Instead, he jumped head-first into his first startup at 22. This was pre-internet. The games development company grew to about 40 employees and had 12 products under its belt. It was sold to Electronic Arts, Inc. — better known as EA Games — when Sposato was still in his early 20s.



**PicMonkey office. Jonathan Sposato is the CEO. (Photo by Stacy Nguyen/NWAW)**

## **Tech beginnings**

Sposato cites Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers" and one of the ideas that it proffers, the notion of needing to be in the right place at the right time being as important or more important than talent, intelligence, and skill-level, as key to his current success. That is — a lot of what is defined as success revolves around pure luck.

Sposato is 10 years or so younger than Bill Gates, Paul Allen, Steve Ballmer, and Steve Jobs, and thus, inhabited a different kind of tech environment in his teens — but still one with the same underpinnings.

Sposato attended user group meetings while he was still in high school — these would be called meetups today — and Sposato said it would not be uncommon to be a teenager and meet a famous tech person at these meetings. It was not uncommon to be a teenager developing games.

Sposato said that in the early 1980s, one person can make an entire game — be programmer and artist. In fact, he taught himself to code and did write his own games on the Apple II.

Sposato would argue that the Pacific Northwest was the right place for him.

He spent his high school summers doing an internship at Synergistic Software under the supervision of co-founder Robert Clardy. (Founded in 1978, the company is now called Northwest Synergistic Software.)

## **Moms**

When Sposato decided not to go to law school, his mom just about had a heart attack. “I guess I don’t mean that literally,” Sposato said. “She might read this and say, ‘Don’t say that!’” He laughed. “But she was not happy about me not going to law school.”

In contrast, his dad was pleased and delighted. Sposato attributes this to his dad’s intuition. He said his father has always had a good gauge on his personality and what inspired and drove him. His dad didn’t think Sposato would have been as happy in law.

With an ever-growing list of professional achievements, Sposato can still joke about chasing his mother’s approval.

“It didn’t matter that I had a successful game startup company in my 20s,” he said. “It didn’t matter that I had this great career at Microsoft and shipped all these products and was director level and had meetings with Bill Gates. It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that I sold my first company to Google. It didn’t matter after I sold my second company to Google. It was only when I appeared in Seattle Magazine under a list of influential people or something like that. It was in print, and there was my picture. And these things, they don’t go long. It’s not like they give you five pages of copy. But I was in that, and she happened to be at the grocery store — and she saw it. She was flipping through it, and she was like, ‘Oh, there’s Jonathan!’ That’s when she bought 12 copies and shipped them to my aunties and uncles. So that moved the needle a little. ... Is this typical of Asian American moms?”

He laughed again.

## **Being Asian American**

Sposato is married to Heather Lowenthal, a former film producer who did media production work for Microsoft (today, she cares for their son and does philanthropic work).

Sposato goes about most of his days — most days at PicMonkey, Friday afternoons at Geekwire with his

cofounders and Geekwire creators Todd Bishop and John Cook — without being reminded of his race, or his ‘otherness,’ yet he is very racially aware.

He will readily talk about Donald Trump — speak about how he’s more wary of Trump’s supporters — whom Sposato calls consumers of a very “media-savvy guy who productizes himself incredibly adeptly.” Sposato said it’s important to focus on what these supporters represent — the ever-fracturing sense of the country, the growing extremes to the right.

Sposato has a historical basis, both broad and personal, to the observations he makes about race — and he acknowledges that he works within a fairly male- and white-dominated industry, especially when it comes to positions of leadership.

A report released by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission last month (sharing 2014 stats) showed that 68.5 percent of employees in high tech fields are white, compared to 63.5 percent across the private sector as a whole (in the same year, white people comprised 62.1 percent of the United States). Additionally, women held only 36 percent of tech jobs in 2014 — compared to 48 percent across the private sector.

“I sort of have a funny way of looking at it. At least my generation can have this funny and facetious way of looking at it. Credit goes to my friend [Korean American] Michael Ahn (currently Director of Third Party Game Development at GSN [TV & Games]). He used to say all the time, if you’re Asian American of a certain age, growing up in the United States, early on in your teenage years, you really only have two choices. You either become white. Or you become Black. There’s no in between. There was no such thing as being Asian American. So you have to choose.”

“He will tease me,” Sposato added. “He will say, ‘Well, it’s obvious what you chose, Jonathan.’”

“And my response to that is — [reading white] is a way of kind of owning the framework, of co-opting the framework. So if there’s a conventional definition of this is what success and acceptable and what ‘desired’ looks like, then there is some power in subverting it from within [by reading white]. ... That’s how I chose to go at it, from the inside. And then you redefine [the definition of success].

“You can redefine anything, if you choose to.”

Sposato is careful to say that all of this refers to his generation — the kids who grew up in the 1980s. He said that it’s a whole new world now. The Asian Americans in their 20s and 30s now inhabit a different place and time. Sposato stayed on with Google in 2005 for a short year after the sale of his online photo editing company, Picnik.

He talked about visiting the California headquarters.

“Younger Asian Americans, the younger generation — I really respect the heck out of them, in terms of the options they have. They don’t have to choose white or Black. They have this place they can be, which is a strong Asian American identity.”

“Growing up in Edmonds or at Microsoft, back in my 20s in the 1990s, you occasionally ran into another Asian American,” he said.

“And you go, ‘Hey, what are you? Are you Japanese American? Oh cool. I’m Chinese American.

“But right now, you don’t even have the conversation! Because it’s just, you know, you just say, ‘Oh, I grew up here in Palo Alto, or San Jose. I went to this school.’ They already have this built in shared commonality and this shared language that I thought was so cool.”

### **The leap**

Sposato said that the process in which he became an entrepreneur wasn’t something that he had logically figured out or something he was “smart” about. He said it was based on emotion.

“You know, my parents got divorced right before I graduated from Whitman. ... Right before graduation, I called my mom and asked her, ‘Should I book you guys a room right at the Marcus Whitman Hotel here?’ And she said, ‘Yeah, well, I don’t know. Don’t bother, I don’t think we’re gonna come. Your dad and I are getting divorced.”

Sposato felt like his world had changed fundamentally in an instant. He felt like he had nothing to lose. “I really felt that way.”

He knew that if he pursued law school, no one was going to pay for it, for him. He felt that he didn’t have a place to come home to, during the summer. He felt that he was truly on his own.

“There’s that sense that you’re not entitled to anything,” he said. “You have to make it happen for yourself.”

“So my way of making it happen was that I had something on the side, that’s been developing, that’s interesting — software development, games development. It kinda feels like there was an industry bubbling up here. I didn’t know how real it was. I didn’t know if it would last.”

Evidently — it did last.

Today, Sposato, at 49 years old, is a serial entrepreneur, an investor, CEO, and cofounder of PicMonkey, a web-based photo editor that will soon launch an app version of its service, and chairman and co-founder of Geekwire — among many, many other titles and accomplishments. He has the distinction of being the first person in history to sell two companies to Google.

“I think tech’s the engine of this country. There have been many engines. Before, it was manufacturing. Before, here in Seattle, it was aerospace. But today in tech, you can create something out of nothing. You can create something that is extremely valuable to people. You can do that right on your laptop. So I find that tremendously exciting. I think it’s good to contribute to that and to enable other entrepreneurs to do the same.”

*Jonathan Sposato will be an honoree at the Northwest Asian Weekly’s Technology and Innovation Awards. The event is Oct. 7 at China Harbor Restaurant from 6–9 p.m. For more information, email [editor@nwasianweekly.com](mailto:editor@nwasianweekly.com). Online tickets at <http://visionary.bpt.me>.*

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