

BESTLIFE

My Passion

How I Built My Dream Job

As told to Josh Dean
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A former software developer drops out of the rat race



I remember very clearly the day it all clicked. It was the late 1990s, during the dot-com boom, when my stock portfolio just went crazy. I sold some Yahoo! and a few other stocks and decided to treat myself to a new car. I went to Ferrari, Porsche, and Lamborghini, and in each showroom I had the same problem: No matter which car I tried, I wasn't comfortable. I'm a big guy (about six feet three inches and 250 pounds) and I just didn't fit in the cars. It just so happened that a professional athlete and an actor—neither of whom I feel comfortable naming—were also there, commiserating over the same problem. I thought, Why doesn't someone build a supercar for pro-athlete-size guys?

I put the idea in the back of my mind and continued to run my business, Dream Media, an Internet software company. My wife and I were living in Malibu, and we loved it, but I was commuting into the city and I had a couple of bad situations over the course of a year—including having a gun pointed at my head—and it dawned on me that I didn't have to be in Los Angeles anymore. I hate traffic, so why deal with it? I was turning 40, and I decided I was done with the software industry. It was time for the next chapter. I decided to build that supercar myself.



LIGHT TOUCH
A Miata weighs nearly twice as much as the speedy Ariel Atom.

revenue stream, so I took a chance and rang up Simon Saunders, the creator of a British car called the Ariel Atom. It's basically a stripped-down street-legal racing machine that became a sensation after the host of the popular BBC car show Top Gear said it was more fun than flying in an F-15.

I convinced Saunders to sell me the U.S. rights, and then I reengineered the car for the American market. One of the biggest differences in our version is that I wanted to use a GM engine instead of the Honda that Saunders used, but no one in Detroit would call me back. Then Jay Leno phoned. He had seen one of our cars at the Pasadena Art Center. I explained the problem, and he made a few phone calls. Two days later, a four-cylinder GM Ecotec arrived, and Jay bought the first car off the line.

The reaction has been amazing. In my old career—software—when things were going well, you heard nothing. Here, all I do is hear from customers. They've become evangelists for the Atom. It's an almost indescribable driving experience. The horsepower ranges from 205 to 300, but the weight—1,300 pounds (to put that into perspective, a Mazda Miata weighs 2,500 pounds!)—gives the car a ridiculously high power-to-weight ratio. The version with the big engine goes from zero to 60 in less than three seconds. That's faster than a Ferrari Enzo, which costs \$1 million. Ours has 70 options and starts at \$40,000, though a top-of-the-line version with carbon-fiber parts can run you up to \$90,000.

People have this misconception that horsepower is all that matters, but what you really feel is acceleration, which has everything to do with the power-to-weight ratio. You want the car to throw you back into your seat and turn at high speeds. The Atom is an utterly visceral driving experience. It has no doors, no roof, no windshield. You wear a helmet or goggles, unless you like getting bugs in your eyes.

The Atom has given us a cash flow, created a large and loyal customer group, and forced our designers and engineers to master niche car production. It has also forced us to grow. A year ago, we had nine employees; today we have 55.

Not all of our employees are working on the Atom. Our supercar continues to move forward, with one major difference. One day last year I was feeding my daughter with a baby bottle and a thought popped into my head: *What is the world going to be like when she's giving her daughter a bottle?*

I realized we wanted to be a green company, and the V-12 engine in the Rogue GT made it a gas monster. Part of that change of heart was education. Part of it was the change from Malibu to Ashland. Films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Who Killed the Electric Car?* reinforced my feelings. Now I know too much. It's a moral obligation.

We decided to make the supercar electric. It's no longer called the Rogue. Now it's the Enertia GT. The performance, for the most part, won't suffer. Electric motors have more torque, so, if anything, it will be quicker. It might not go 200 miles an hour, but who drives that fast? And where?

The funny thing is that a simple shift in philosophy completely remade the company. We have all kinds of alternative-fuel products in the works, starting with the world's first electric plug-in motorcycle, which can hit 60 miles an hour. It should be on sale by the spring of 2008.

The first step was to find a home for both my family and the new company. We looked at pretty much every city west of the Rockies and settled on Ashland, Oregon. We bought 25 acres and some llamas and started to homeschool our kids. Instead of playing video games, our boys fish for trout in our pond and catch snakes and lizards.

And me, I founded Brammo in my garage in 2001. In the beginning it was just me and two employees, and for a long time we were stuck in the R&D phase. We cleared a huge hurdle by forming partnerships with Falconer Engines, who would build the 12-cylinder motor, and Xtrac, from the United Kingdom, for the only gearbox that could handle the Falconer engine, for a car we had started calling the Rogue GT.

But I also realized we needed to learn a lot about manufacturing, and that it would sure help to have a



CHEAP THRILLS The Ariel Atom can be purchased for as little as \$40,000, but it takes off quicker than a Ferrari Enzo.

In a decade, I believe that 70 percent of U.S. cars will be electric, and as a small independent company, we can be a big part of that shift. At the end of the day, I hope my company is one of 10 you can look back on and say, "Remember when transportation changed and we saved the planet?" I'd like for us to be remembered that way.

THE PLAN Drive the Atom yourself



Don't take Craig Bramscher's word for it—experience the almost literally eye-popping thrill of the Ariel Atom yourself. This summer, starting in June, Brammo is taking its street-legal race car on a tour of tracks in Canada and the United States. Alas, East Coasters have a bit of a commute ahead of them if they want to participate. The Ariel Atom Experience won't venture farther east than the Autobahn Country Club, in Joliet, Illinois. The full-day experience costs \$1,500, which includes one-on-one instruction, several hours of track time, in-car video, and a discount on the purchase of some not-entirely-dorky AAE clothing. arielatomexperience.com

Craig Bramscher, 47, owns Brammo Motorsports, which produces the Ariel Atom (pictured on this page) and is working on a new concept electric supercar tentatively called the Enertia GT.

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