Peter McMillan, JD ’87, has taken a personal commitment to the environment and developed it into a full-blown business, finding a way to be green and still make some green.

After graduating from Washington University School of Law, McMillan, always an entrepreneur, started Law Finders, a company that specialized in short-term and temporary placement of attorneys. He struggled, though, soon realizing the work was too routine. So when longtime friend Chuck Pass stopped by one afternoon, bemoaning his own lack of joy in selling sporting goods, the two decided to pursue something for which they felt passionate.

This pivotal point came on the heels of Earth Day 1990, the 20th anniversary of this day's founding. St. Louis had been the scene of a massive event that re-energized McMillan and renewed his commitment to protecting the environment.

"I remember there were 100,000 people who came out to Forest Park to the celebration. The issue was really big in people's minds. It was then I decided to stop talking about it and start doing something about it," says McMillan.

The pair began looking for ways to harness McMillan's passion for the Earth with Pass's knack for sales.

"We researched different environmental businesses—recycling and the like—and quickly discovered there was no money in it," says McMillan. "The one exception was the handful of catalog companies that were doing quite well selling environmental goods by mail."

Seeing that, the pair hoped there was also potential in offering eco-friendly products in a retail setting. With a product line similar to the mail-order companies, they started Pedro's Planet in a 12 x 12 booth in the Market in the Loop on Delmar Boulevard, carrying lawn and garden equipment; body-care products; and office supplies, including recycled paper.

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"While we sold some of the other items, people were most interested in the office supplies," recalls McMillan. "They'd come in and buy recycled paper and say, "This is great, but I need a whole lot more of it for my office.""

The name for the company originated with McMillan's childhood nickname. Mulling over possibilities, Pedro's Planet came to him in a flash while walking his dog, Zoë, over to Pass's house one day.
“It just fit. We started in this tiny space in the Loop and, while we weren’t doing it on a lark, it was pretty close,” says McMillan. “We really didn’t have huge plans for it. We just wanted to address an issue and make environmental products available to people without having to order stuff from catalogs or drive hundreds of miles to get a compost bin.”

A significant point of expansion came in 1992 when Pedro’s Planet began offering recycling services to businesses: a perfect complement to the paper and office supplies that had become Pedro’s biggest seller. McMillan realized that his drivers could empty recycling bins at the same places where they were making deliveries with little extra effort. So Pedro’s Planet started offering free pickup of waste paper and then sold the paper to a broker for reprocessing.

Office products—especially recycled paper—are the main focus of Pedro’s Planet. Last year Pedro’s did $5.5 million in sales and recycled some 500,000 pounds of office paper in St. Louis. And that’s not including all the phone books and catalogs saved from the landfill.

Pedro’s Planet offers other environmentally friendly business products, McMillan points out. “Recycled paper is our biggest seller, but we carry over 2,300 items made with recycled content. Our newest addition is furniture made entirely of recycled and sustainable materials that uses environmentally friendly adhesives.”

McMillan is competitive on price and quality; he also offers service that customers rave about. The company’s Web site, PedrosPlanet.com, has a testimonial page attesting to that. According to an office manager in a trucking company, “Pedro’s offers the best of both worlds; quality, cost effective supplies with timely delivery, as well as the free recycling services. Pedro’s personnel are an added plus. They make you feel like a friend, not just a customer.”

So McMillan’s biggest challenge is not convincing people that green is good; it is simply getting a Pedro’s rep in front of the decisionmakers, those who buy office paper by the truckload for a company—especially tough in an industry where consolidation is the name of the game. His competitors are the nationwide chains that are as much marketing machines as office supply outfits.

“Once they see us, they’re usually hooked,” says McMillan of his pitches to purchasing agents. “We get a chance to talk about our service, the free recycling of paper and toner cartridges. It’s a no-brainer for them. We offer something different, something that no one else is doing. It’s just a matter of us getting in the door.”

To keep up with business growth, Pedro’s Planet recently relocated its now 14-person office to an expanded facility in west St. Louis County. (By the way, dogs are still a welcome presence. Though Zoë is no more, an equally affectionate mutt named Bear is a mascot of sorts for Pedro’s Planet and accompanies McMillan to work most days.)

The company also now has an office in Denver, Colorado, where more than 100,000 pounds of paper was collected last year. And Pedro’s Planet has plans to expand; Kansas City and Chicago are the immediate targets for additional sales offices.

McMillan credits his legal education from Washington University for helping make Pedro’s Planet successful. The School of Law, he says, honed his mind for business, especially in the critical area of contracts: “In the whole context of how business works, you recognize how every relationship has some legal aspect to be considered. There are so many dimensions that rely on contracts, including the relationships with your employees, your customers, and your suppliers.”

Although dealing with recycled paper may not be a typical field for a law graduate, McMillan is happy. “I’ve always been an avid environmentalist. I remember even in high school writing about it, fretting about it, and talking about it. It’s just always been part of what I’ve done.” ◆