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Warren Brown

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ORAL HISTORY

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DATE May 2, 1984 Warren Brown
(Signature - Interviewee)

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WEST VIRGINIA BUSINESS HISTORY

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Warren Brown

CONDUCTED BY: Kevin Gergely

DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 2, 1984

TRANSCRIBED & TYPED BY: Gina Kates

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Kevin: It's something _____ (inaudible).

Warren: Yeah, I guess that's a change.

Kevin: Okay, that's basically all I needed to know.

Warren: Great.

Kevin: So I really appreciated it.

END OF INTERVIEW

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WEST VIRGINIA BUSINESS HISTORY

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Warren Brown
BML Lighting

CONDUCTED BY: Kevin Gergely

DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 2, 1984

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Kevin: This is an interview with Kevin Brown, _____ and BML Lighting, which is a theatrical lighting organization. The organization is in _____ New Jersey. Hello, Mr. Brown. Okay, what I want to know is how BML got started and why did you get into the business.

[
Warren: Well, BML was started by my partner, uh, in high school. Uh, he started out just by doing uh, lighting for dances and things like that (high school dances?), mmm-hmm. Actually, yeah, high school dances. And uh, at one point he uh, he picked up a line of lighting gear that he could sell and he started selling it as well as actually doing lighting for high school bands and dances and things. And uh, in 1975 his uncle invested \$900 in him, to incorporate his business and uh, buy some additional gear and pick up another couple lines that he could sell. Uh, and that was the year before Eric graduated, and that was the point where I joined him. Uh, at the time, in New Jersey, you had to be 17 to drive. At the time, Eric didn't have a license or a car and I did. And uh, we were friends for ...for quite a few years. We went to the same schools together. And uh, I started with him, just driving around in my car. He couldn't do business very well without transportation.

Kevin: (laughs) Okay. What did your job turn out to be after that?

Warren: Well, my job involved uh, over a long period of time, I started out just helping him out on different shows. And then in 1975, when he incorporated, he also took over half of his mother's garage, her two-car garage and built an office. And I helped him with that. And I started helping him a little bit with the sales, uh, until eventually I became a sales rep and I was doing more sales and uh,....

Kevin: What all...what all were the products you were selling?

Warren: We're selling stage lighting uh, gear. That includes lights and lamps, light bulbs and dimmers and cable and uh, colored media, that's gels, to color the lights. Uh, anything associated with lighting.

Kevin: Well, say in your first year of business, how...how big did you think the business was? How much money was involved?

Warren: Our first year of business we did \$2000 worth of business our first year. Our second year we did \$4000, our third year we did \$7000, fourth year about \$20,000, fifth year about \$40,000 and the sixth year when I left we were up to about \$75,000. Excuse me, uh, our fifth year we did \$400,000 and when I left we were doing about \$750,000 worth of business.

Kevin: Okay, what kind of competition was there? Were there any competitors?

Warren: In New Jersey there is a lot of competition. I would...down here of course, you don't hear about stage lighting companies too much. But up in New Jersey where we were 25 miles from Manhattan, uh, there was quite a bit of the competition. There is a large uh, club circuit, where club bands play. Uh, and they constituted a great part of our business. Uh, it the bands up there play in a much more sophisticated sense than they do down here. Uh, much more sophisticated technically uh,

Kevin: Why don't you describe what all's involved in the job you do for a band.

Warren: Well...now that..that depends on ...on...at what point you would come up to us and ask us that. In the beginning, if we would do for instance a battle of the bands, for a high school, high school band, uh, we would bring uh, just basically some flood lights, and a controller to be able to turn 'em off and on, flash 'em off and on, and maybe a _____ spotlight. Later on, we moved into the clubs, when we were old enough to go in ourselves, uh, in there we were a little bit more sophisticated instead of using flood lights, the type that you use to light up the front of your house, we were using actual professional lighting instruments uh, little bit more sophisticated controllers. After that we moved into the concert area where we were using uh, again more sophisticated control, more sophisticated lighting gear and uh, when I left and at this point we were doing major concert tours all over the United States. Uh, with trusses of lights, carrying maybe 300300 lights for a show.

Kevin: Why don't you describe the growth in terms of employees, and in size of the facility you were in.

Warren: Well, like I told you, iin 1975 we were in half of Eric's mother's garage. From there, uh, in 1978...

Kevin: Was that just the two of you then?

Warren: Basically it was just the two of us. We...we would from time to time have a third person come in and help us. And also, in 1976 when we graduated from high school, Eric went to Montclare State College in New Jersey and I came down here to Marshall, and he basically ran the business out of his dorm room. He even had a separate line installed in his dorm room to run the business out of. He did that for a year and a half. At the same time, down here, I was selling gear down here and I brought a BML system down here with me and uh, was doing a local club band down here for income. A year and a half later Eric quit school and moved back into the garage. Uh, at the same time, I...I had quit school after only a year and was back up there as he moved back in and we ran the business out of the garage again. Well, that summer, let me try and remember...it was the summer of 1978 I believe, that we moved from the garage to an old industrial building uh, a few blocks away. Very old and decrepit building. It had very little heat, uh, the roof leaked all the time. It was in a very bad location. Our driveway was dirt and uh, it wasn't very conducive

to the customers coming in but uh, it was larger and it was only \$250 a month, which uh, at the time we weren't making a whole lot and we didn't want to sink a whole lot into it.

Kevin: What do you mean, it's not a whole lot? How much?

Warren: \$250 a month.

Kevin: You said you weren't making a whole lot.

Warren: Oh. Uh...at that point, I'd say we were up to about uh...\$40 or \$50,000 a year. That quickly jumped as I...as I mentioned before. Our 5th year we were up to \$400,000 and our 6th year as I said, \$750,000.

Kevin: Were you adding any more employees then?

Warren: Uh, yes, we did. Uh, as we moved, we picked up two more people part time. One to act as a secretary, we did have a part-time secretary in the garage. Uhm, but uh, now we picked up another person who helped work in the shop. By the next summer, uh, which would be the summer of 1979, we were...we were in the industrial park and we had 3 full-time employees working in the back, full-time secretary, Eric and myself. And at that point, we were doing some regional tours and uh, our sales were way up. We were doing a lot more sales. Our most tremendous growth occurred in our first year in that industrial building.

Kevin: Okay, your business now, how many employees does it have right now?

Warren: Well, at the present time I believe there are about 15 employees and they're doing close to a million dollars a year in business. Uh, they're dep...their income is depending on national tours and uh, sales. Uh, one thing I didn't mention. We were doing rentals as well. Uh, and that's something that they've dropped basically. They do a little bit of rentals. That is, someone who can come in, rent the gear from us and take it away in their car and do what they want with it. Basically now we take our systems out with our own people and uh, or we sell the equipment. We don't rent a whole lot any more.

Kevin: Do you make more money in sales or in doing the lighting for bands?

Warren: Well, that's kind of a tricky question. Uh, the thing with sales is that it's not a very capital intensive kind of thing. With lighting, we don't need a great deal of inventory. Uh, because most people are use to coming in uh, taking a look at samples of what they want and then ordering it and then having it come in a week later, coming back and picking it up. Uh,

Kevin: So you're not dealing with the big warehouses and stuff...

Warren: No, no. We...we ...we get the stuff directly from the manufacture, as it's ordered most of the time. Now we do have probably a \$10,000 inventory, well, probably more by now. Probably quite a bit more than that. Uh, of lamps, from G.E. We're G.E. distributors. We carry quite a large stock of gel, that's color media, uh, and different things like plugs and connectors and cable. We also sell cable; that's another thing we sell is wire. Uh, and those are things that people want and they're gonna want 'em right away. Uh, the larger things we don't stock. We uh, people will order them and then they'll come in the next week as we pick them up from the manufacture's.

Kevin: Okay, you were talking about how you were just out of high school when you started and then your partner went to college and you went to college somewhere else. And I know you've gone to college several times and now you're finishing up. Uh, what have you found...what kind of training did you have when you got into this and what kind of training did you find out you needed when you got into it?

Warren: We didn't have any training at all when we went into it. Other than uh, well, what we had picked up on our own about lighting. I can honestly say that all of our training, all of our knowledge we gained on the job as we were building the company. It seems kind of odd that well, we just never thought about it. We just dove right in and it seemed to go. Uh...the training that I felt we needed uh, the lighting experience seemed to come easily. We learned what we needed to learn about lighting, very easily. And uh, we...very painlessly, really. What...what we needed to learn and we didn't learn and which is the reason I left to come back to school, uh, was the fact, well, was that we needed more business training. That came uh, much more painfully. The business quite a few times found itself in trouble. And for a lot of different reasons. But I think the business grew so rapidly, we were not able to keep up with that rapid growth. I've often used the analogy of being a monster that started out as a little baby and then grew so fast we weren't able to control it. Well, obviously, my partner Eric has been able to control it well enough that it's still in business. But I don't think Dunn & Bradstreet gives us a silver star by our name. Uh, we've had our troubles and I think it's largely due to lack of knowledge, lack of business knowledge, lack of management knowledge uh, lack of experience. Uh, hopefully that will improve in the future.

Kevin: Okay. And all this time coming right out of high school, moving around and the two of you going different ways a lot, who was keeping the books? How did you know if you were making any money all the time?

Warren: That was really...that's really kind of funny. Uh, for the first, I'd say three years until the time, when I came back in 19...in 1979, it was the summer of 1979, I was back with the business again uh, I never really left it. Wherever I was, I was always kind of helped out in different ways from afar. But uh, when I came back, physically with the business in 1979, was when

our first true bookkeeping system was formed. Uh, at that point, I had had a few accounting classes uh, I knew the need for accounting practices. And we didn't have any at all. Basically what we did, we kept a checkbook, uh, we always had a checkbook and come the end of the year, we'd have to sit down and go back and divide all those different checks we wrote into the different areas and ...and basically, we had sort of a retrospective bookkeeping system. We did it from behind. But starting in 1979, we went to a ...a fairly sophisticated bookkeeping system, which has gotten more sophisticated now.

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