John Nau is glad things didn’t go according to plan.

“I thought, going through college, I … HALL OF FAME

JOHN NAU III

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COURTESY OF SILVER EAGLE DISTRIBUTORS

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earned a place in the 2012 Texas Business Hall of Fame.

John Nau

Silver Eagle Distributors, Houston

Sweat equity pays off for this beverage mogul

‘I NEVER TOOK A BUSINESS COURSE IN MY LIFE; I’M A CLASSIC CASE OF ON-THE-JOB TRAINING AND SWEAT EQUITY.’

John Nau

Silver Eagle Distributors, Houston

side with the team, burning the midnight oil,” Boblitt says.

In the 1980s as a company with only 210 workers, it was easy for Nau to stay in touch with the aspirations of each one. Today with more than 1,200 employees, staying in one-to-one contact is more difficult, but he hasn’t allowed the concept to wane.

“I always keep an open-door policy,” he says. “If an employee has a problem, they know they can bring it to me. You’ve got to keep in touch with what’s going on with that younger workforce. And believe me, at 66, I’m out of that demographic,” he says with a chuckle.

And how does he do that?

“It’s very simple: Talk to them. Always be willing to listen. Always be willing to ask questions.”

Of course, getting truthful answers requires an atmosphere of trust.

“The employees themselves have got to have faith that if they answer the question honestly, that there isn’t going to be any negative feedback. They’ve got to have confidence that it’s not going to come back and bite them,” he says. “You’ve got to have credibility with the workforce.”

And Nau knows trust has to be earned. Consistency and honesty, he says, are crucial.

“If you say you’re going to do something … then do it.”

And he does. Recently a group of his employees won a sales contest, and as congratulations, Nau invited them to have dinner at his home in Wyoming. At the time, he didn’t realize that his promise would land him in a confrontation with a grizzly bear the next day. But at least he kept his word.

History buff

Though his work doesn’t normally take him into such dangerous realms, Nau has other passions that frequently lead him into the war zone. The Civil War zone, that is.

His passion for American history, especially the War Between the States, has shaped his activities outside the job, but he takes no less of a leadership role there.

For example, as chairman emeritus of the Civil War Trust, he helps preserve historic battlefields so they can be shared with younger generations. He recently visited a Mississippi battlefield with his five grandchildren, ages 3 to 8, about the age he was when he visited a battlefield for the first time.

He can’t tell yet whether they will be as drawn to history as he is, but so far, it sounds as though they’re interested.

His grandson returned home to Houston and built a Battlefield of Vicksburg out of Legos, which made his grandpa proud.

And sharing his love of history is exactly what he would be doing if he weren’t so busy running Silver Eagle Distributors.

He’d be a guide at a Civil War battlefield or a teacher of U.S. and Civil War history, he says.

Even so, he has no plans to retire and return to grade school in the foreseeable future.

“If you can’t have fun selling Budweiser, you’re doing something wrong,” he says. “So why would I stop doing that?”

ASHLEY FESTA is a San Antonio freelance writer. Reach her at ashley@ashleyfesta.com.