Shelby Clark’s light bulb moment occurred in 2008 as he biked past hundreds of other people’s cars parked along Boston’s streets on his way to rent a Zipcar.

“Why can’t I just grab one of these?” he wondered, looking at rows of idle automobiles. Why not, indeed, he later discovered. The United States has more automobiles than drivers, many of whom it turns out are ready to make productive and profitable use their automotive assets.

Today, Clark is recognized as a pioneer in the swelling sharing economy as the architect of RelayRides, a peer-to-peer car sharing platform that now boasts nearly 100 employees, a dedicated user community across the country, and clones around the globe.

“I’m proud to have created something much greater than myself,” says Clark, who stepped away from RelayRides’ daily operations in 2013 but remains on its board.

An unlikely journey

Arriving at Northwestern from his native Colorado on a swimming scholarship in 2000, Clark switched his engineering major multiple times, from industrial to manufacturing to mechanical before latching onto biomedical, a decision motivated by the passing of his father during Clark’s sophomore year.

“I was interested in the intersection of business and biotech, particularly if it meant other people wouldn’t have to lose a loved one like I did,” Clark says.

After graduation, he spent two unfulfilling years as a management consultant, eventually taking a nonprofit sabbatical and landing at a then-upstart agency called Kiva.org. As one of Kiva’s earliest employees, Clark helped build the internal systems that allowed the peer-to-peer microfinancing organization to scale.

Entrepreneurship, he realized, could spur social change. “I was fascinated by the idea of connecting people online to drive change in the offline world,” Clark says, calling “commercialization and scale just as important as discovery.”

After six years with Kiva, including time in Uganda, Clark joined a biotech hedge fund. While listening to dreamy-eyed entrepreneurs passionately pitch ideas to cure cancer or grow kidneys, Clark realized he was on the wrong side of the table.

He quit the hedge fund, entered Harvard’s MBA program with the explicit goal of starting a company, and launched RelayRides in 2010, testing a series of hypotheses to understand how people would interact with and use the novel platform.

“I always considered myself a rational, logical thinker who enjoyed finding solutions to large problems,” Clark says. “RelayRides was just that—and a leap of faith.”

Clark has brought that same mindset to his new position as the CEO of Peers, a San Francisco-based startup that supports workers in the emerging sharing economy workforce. “Engineering is a broad skill set to solve problems and a toolkit I’m still using daily,” he says.

Daniel P. Smith