A talented high school athlete, Milton Morris often found himself pulled out of class by a college recruiter or coach trying to persuade him to play football at one university or another. As he considered the scholarships and financial aid offers coming in from around the country, a teacher gave him advice that changed everything.

Morris recalls, “She said, ‘I really hope you go to Northwestern; football is a very difficult thing to do professionally, and if you went to Northwestern, it would open up opportunities that you’d never have at some of those other schools.’ Her advice stuck with me.”

Although Northwestern’s football team may have been less of a gridiron powerhouse compared to some other schools, Morris felt that playing in the Big Ten Conference would give him the chance to prove to himself whether professional football was a possibility. And if it wasn’t, he knew Northwestern would equip him to pursue a different dream.

“I poured everything I had into my books, so that when I graduated, engineering would be an option as well,” he says. “So plan B really became plan A, and it’s been a good one for me ever since.”

A NATURAL FIT

Today, Morris applies the persistence and diligence he learned at Northwestern to guide him as president and CEO at NeuSpera Medical Inc., a startup medical device company. It’s a natural fit for Morris, who grew up hanging out at the Cleveland Clinic, where his mother was a hematology lab supervisor for 27 years. After college, he earned a PhD in electrical engineering from the University of Michigan, where he worked in a medical engineering lab specializing in signal processing and algorithm development for implantable devices.

Continuing to use his engineering expertise to help others, Morris held high-level roles at several medical device companies, including senior vice president of research and development at Cyberonics, director of program management and operations at InnerPulse, and director of marketing at Boston Scientific. “Once you get into the business of extending and improving lives through your engineering ideas or the ideas of the teams you lead, it’s very difficult to step away,” he says.

THE INFLECTION POINT

Morris is leading NeuSpera’s efforts to secure Series A financing for its miniaturized injectable neuromodulation technologies. Guiding the startup through this phase is a new adventure involving long hours, but it doesn’t feel like work to Morris. “It’s been everything I thought it could be—exciting and challenging at the same time.”

Reflecting on his achievements, his thoughts return to Northwestern. Morris serves on the McCormick Advisory Council because he wants to help the school continue to offer students a place where they can achieve more than they ever thought possible.

“My entire expectation for myself changed in those four years at Northwestern,” he shares. “Beyond just the engineering, which is fantastic, there was the self-perception and the level of expectation for what I should be able to do going forward. Now when I look back and think how did I get here, I always go back to Northwestern and say, ‘It was then, that was the inflection point.’”

SARA LANGEN