

Allan Kullen

Against the Odds

"Her name is Ester Baumgartner. She's a Swiss girl who sings, and apparently she lives near here. Do you know her?" Allan Kullen had posed the question over and over in a broken mixture of Hebrew and English to whoever would listen.

Allan had met Ester while on an archeological dig on Masada, in the Negev, Israel. All he knew by the time they parted ways was her name and the fact that she was staying in Tel Aviv. So after finishing his work with the archeologists, he decided to do something unusual. Equipped with only these few pieces of information, he would try to find her.

Allan hitchhiked his way to Tel Aviv and asked anyone who could understand him, until eventually, despite all odds, he found her.

It wasn't just Ester he found, however. "It was at that moment that everything kind of transformed for me," Allan recalls. "The odds were none to none that an American speaking broken Hebrew could venture to a foreign city and find some girl he met for two weeks on a mountaintop while only knowing her name. If I could accomplish that, it dawned on me that I could probably do anything I wanted to in life."

Ten years later, in 1974, Allan tested that conviction by buying a struggling printing company that was stuck in the middle of a check kiting scheme. "They had some issues in their accounting department that made them way overvalued, so the bank ended up owning the company," he says. "I recommended to them that I go in and take over what was left. I bought it from the bank over a five year period."

Allan changed its name to Todd Allan and slowly repaired the structure of the company for several years. He replaced old equipment and, with the help of specialists in the field, the company grew strong enough to merge with a

book printing company called Federal Lithograph in 1983. At the same time, he also acquired a printing company in Virginia called K&E, which came with five satellite copy centers. "The arrangement allowed us to have a home base with five different feeder operations, which seemed like a terrific idea on paper," he recalls. "However, it turned out that the people in Philadelphia that owned the company had actually sold those copy centers to five other people, which created quite a glitch."

After working through countless setbacks while blending in recent acquisitions, things began to stabilize. This allowed Allan to upgrade the equipment, hire several salespeople, and finally move the company to its current location in Maryland. In 1984, the company received a major boost when a publication he created with other graphic arts vendors was reviewed by the *Washington Post*. The story advertised them as a \$25 million company, rather than the \$2.5 million they actually were. "No one

saw the correction in the paper the next day, so we got a ton of recognition," he laughs. "That's when I learned that, in D.C., perception can have a pivotal influence in the way reality plays out."

The heightened prestige gave the company a boost that allowed it to further expand and purchase equipment—in retrospect, more than it truly needed. "It's what you do when you think the world's never going to end," he laughs. "Printing was a phenomenal business in town. If you owned a printing company, you had to not go to work in order to not make money. It was stable, and the Government Printing Office facility on Massachusetts Avenue was pushing out work. Eventually, however, the technology changed. The hot type disappeared, cold type came in, and that started the revolution. The only bad part of it was that the guys doing the computer stuff never



talked to the printing industry when they did it. Designers were starting to use programs like PowerPoint, which is a great software, but nearly impossible to print. It just doesn't convert."

Despite the shifting technology and fluctuating demand within the industry, and despite going from its peak of 127 employees down to slightly over 50 by the end of 2012, Todd Allan remains a strong, \$9 million company today—success it has earned by establishing itself as more than the average printing company. "What we sell is time," Allan says. "Anybody with good equipment can put ink on paper, so beyond that, we sell people the ability to go to sleep at night knowing they're going to get their product on time. We built Todd Allan around that notion."

Able to weather the twists and turns of fate that have rendered many printing companies things of the past, Allan has an undeniable natural talent for the industry, which seems as much his own reflexive acumen as it does a product of his personal background. His father owned Kaufmann Printing, a commercial printing company that brought the first offset web press to the D.C. area. In the late 1930's, his father began working in the industry, delivering proofs and hot metal from typesetters to printers. He worked his way up until, eventually, he ran the business, which he ultimately sold to Publishers Company (Pubco) in the early 1970's.

Allan was the first member of his Baltimore-based family to be born in Washington, D.C. His mother worked in accounting until Allan and his younger sister came into the family, at which time she opted to stay home with her children. Growing up, Allan spent a great amount of time in his father's printing plant, so that by age eleven, he was helping out in the stripping and shipping departments. When he was not helping out with his father's company, Allan would do printing on his own, making programs for dance classes on his own small printing press. "I would go down and get the type, and we'd have little wooden block cuts for hearts and dance figures," he laughs.

Despite his knack for printing and constant involvement in his father's company, Allan felt little interest in the industry for most of his childhood. It wasn't until 1959, when he began attending college at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh (now known as Carnegie Mellon University), that

he began to open up—not only to printing, but as an individual as well.

Before Allan enrolled at Carnegie, the school had begun its massive transformation from an Institute of Technology to a University. In doing so, all of its industry schools were systematically eliminated, and the last one to exist was the printing school in which Allan was enrolled. It dissolved during his freshman year. "In 1960, the Dean came in and said there was bad news and good news," he recalls. "The bad news was that they were closing the school. The good news was that, since they had admitted us to the program, we could stay until graduation, but a lot of the printing electives were not going to be around, so we could take anything we wanted on campus."

As a result, Allan tried his hand at biology, business, and engineering, which gave him a broader background. He served as editor of the school paper and was elected president of the Intramural Society and Vice President of his fraternity. "I had no direction in high school. I wasn't very social at all," he recalls. "College was when I really grew and broke out of my shell." He even considered going into the service, so he spent two years in ROTC, but despite having the top academic scores in his class, he was turned away due to flat feet.

Though he had a long list of demanding extracurricular activities, Allan excelled in school, and by the time he graduated, he had several offers for graduate school. He was offered a partial scholarship in Math to the University of California at Los Angeles to become a teacher's assistant, as well as an opportunity to pursue an MBA from Berkeley. By then, he knew he was destined for the printing industry, so he decided to go to Berkeley. "I thought that, if I was going to go into printing, it would be best to go into management," he remembers reasoning. "As it turns out, I did just the opposite. When you buy a small company, you automatically become a salesman."

Upon arriving at Berkeley, Allan realized he had already accumulated a number of applicable credits from his undergraduate studies. After completing a research project that could serve as a thesis while working with one of his professors, he asked to take his comprehensives for his MBA and graduate after his first year. The school resisted, but never explained that if he

passed his comprehensives and paid for the second year, he could return the following year and pick up his degree.

Not certain what to do at that point, he joined a Dutch travel group in 1964. "At that time, nobody flew to Europe," he explains. "When kids went overseas, they would travel six or seven days on a ship, stay for four or five weeks, and then take a ship back as well. The group that I met with needed somebody to put out a daily newspaper on the ship, so I paid for my travel expenses by working, putting out this mimeographed newspaper."

To enhance the European experience, Allan landed an internship for a printing company in Amsterdam and traveled as frequently as he could, meeting the Swiss girl that would lead to that fundamental shift in his perception. When he returned to the states after a year, he took additional classes towards his MBA (he still remains six credit hours short) and accepted an offer from his father to work in the book publishing division of the company that acquired his father's business. "I grew up in the printing industry, but it wasn't all that I wanted to do, even though I knew it very well," he says. "So instead, I accepted an offer from Pubco to help create and produce encyclopedias. I did a couple of other things on the side, like selling for a company with a new concept in photographic reproduction. I worked with a company that put designs on sunglasses and sold them through a motorcycle distributor. I knew I could do anything I put my mind to, so I took that chance in life to put my mind to as many things as I could."

After working at Pubco for a number of years, Allan began the brave and bold process of piecing together Todd Allan—a journey that seemed extremely risky at the time, but somehow flourished into a company that would become a leader in its field. And while Todd Allan's future remains bright, Allan hesitates to say where the path of the printing industry will go. "It's hard to say, so you have to remain flexible and vigilant," he says. "In the old days, people would just keep taking the used equipment and run it until it wouldn't run anymore. But now, all that stuff is heading out of the country. So I'm not sure how the industry will evolve next. There will always be ink on paper, no question about that, but there may not be as much, and we may have to find some other niche to work in. It's either that, or

consolidate with another firm."

One way Allan has managed to keep his company's edge is through creative side projects. While he was at Pubco, he noted that when business was slow, one of the company's vendors would print bibles, dictionaries, classics, and other educational material, which they then sold door-to-door. He saw value in that strategy and brought it to Todd Allan by buying an Ellis Island program called *The First Experience*, which featured a collection of photographs and texts of immigrants coming through Ellis Island. "I already saw the value of producing educational material and printing it while a company was slow, so I decided to make it a sideline of business," he explains. "I also wanted to do it because, while I was in Europe, I saw things I was never exposed to in school. Those experiences made me really excited about history, and I wanted to share that enthusiasm through my business."

The program did so well that Allan quickly discovered a demand for trainers to teach the material, so it was expanded and evolved into *Americans All*®. It continues to thrive, and Allan is now transforming it again. The new entity will produce state- and grade-level-specific social studies resources and online databases with comprehensive information on the history of the United States. The program will also offer, at no cost to schools, professional development programs for teachers to learn how to better use resources in their classrooms. In keeping with Allan's affinity for history, it will also include revenue-generating opportunities for schools that reveal and preserve America's heritage and legacy.

While Todd Allan is undoubtedly a great lifelong success, Allan quickly identifies his family as his greatest achievement. "Diane, my wife of forty-four years, and I have two children and five grandchildren," he says. "Despite all we've been through, she's kept life normal. She never got involved with any of my business ventures, but she certainly supported them and me."

To be sure, Allan's career has not come without setbacks, but he managed to persevere despite the odds that may have been stacked against him. In advising young people entering the business world today, he encourages finding a passion, as it becomes one's greatest asset to fight against problems one encounters. "You've got to have something to drive you," he says. "From my

perspective looking back over 70 years, the day you're born is the day you begin to die. That's the pragmatic part. You already know your beginning date, but you've got no idea what the ending date is, so all that's left is what's in between. You want to look back and know your life was full." Indeed, that fullness is built through the journey, whether it's weaving through the streets of a strange city in search of a girl named Ester, or navigating the curve balls of an unpredictable industry. For through that journey, you don't just find yourself—you build yourself.

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