

Steve Daves

No Way but Forward

"No," was the answer twenty-year-old Steve Daves received from the deans of Virginia Tech's six colleges. He had gained admittance to the institution's highly-competitive architecture school, only to face the realization a year in that it wasn't the right fit for his skill set. "I then spent my sophomore year wandering aimlessly in a fun college town, and my academic performance took a nose dive," he recounts today. "In an effort to get my GPA back up to the minimum needed to stay enrolled, I had taken summer classes, and was able to bring it up to within 0.0013 of that minimum requirement. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. The school sometimes granted a pass if a student has a hardship, so there I was, standing before the deans in this dimly-lit conference room, trying to make my case."

Steve had bought a suit for the hearing, and he had rehearsed his story—that he had been lost without knowing what he wanted to do with his life, but had done a lot of research to find out that his mind was more geared toward the engineering aspects of architecture. He told them how things were getting better—in fact, he had gotten all A's and one B+ in his summer school courses. But the deans declined to make an exception for Steve. The answer was "No."

It was two weeks before classes were to start back up again, and Steve did his best to polish up his resume and begin the process of finding a job. But he knew that if he left college now, he'd never come back. "That's not what I wanted for my life," he recalls. "My parents had made it clear that I was on my own, and I was committed to being successful. I knew a college education was the road to get there, and I had a younger brother and half-sister looking up to me. I couldn't let everyone down."

Steve decided to try one more thing and approached his summer school business law

professor to see if there was anything he could do to raise the one B+ to an A-, which would put his GPA over the minimum threshold to stay in school. The professor told him to write a paper explaining a particularly complicated topic related to a case study that was used in the class. Steve quickly completed and submitted the assignment, and a week before classes were set to start, the professor agreed to raise his grade from a B+ to an A-. It was the nudge Steve needed to keep his place at Virginia Tech, and a defining moment in

his career trajectory and life philosophy. "I had chosen Building Construction as my new major—a challenging combination of engineering and construction business courses that included calculus, physics, statistics, and deformables," he explains. "But from the moment I got that new lease on life, I worked incredibly hard, earning A's and B's and graduating with a 3.9 in my major. It was probably the most influential period of my life."



Decades later, as President of R.W. Murray Co., a commercial general contractor serving the DC metropolitan area, Steve was told "No" again. The Great Recession had left the company deeply compromised, so Steve and his partner, Chuck, began exploring all avenues that might provide a more secure future for the company and their employees. They began serious discussions with a reputable Richmond-based construction company that had an interest in establishing a presence in the Northern Virginia market. The discussions progressed steadily along the path toward a merger, to the point where all that was left was a meeting in Richmond to review and finalize the deal. Late in the afternoon on the day before that final meeting, however, Steve and Chuck got a call from their contact at the company. The deal was off.

"Sitting alone together in the conference

room as we hung up the phone, Chuck and I were ghost white,” Steve recounts. “We thought the merger was the best way of getting out of the hole we were in, and we didn’t have a solid backup plan. But we’ve always been a great team, so we looked each other in the eye and committed to push our way through the challenges on our own. We were both all in. We were going to buckle down and figure it out.”

At the advice of his Vistage Chair, Mike Harden, Steve went home that evening and sat down at his kitchen table. His wife Christina was out of town, and his kids Justin and Megan were out with friends. Alone with his thoughts in the quiet house, he began to write. Out poured five pages of action items—a point-by-point litany of what needed to be done to carry R.W. Murray through. Chuck had done the same thing and the next day, the two partners merged their ideas into a master list. Making some extremely hard decisions at times over the next two years, they were able to check off every single item, one at a time.

Thanks to Steve’s patience, tenacity, and commitment to building success in the face of adversity, R.W. Murray has remained a formidable construction contractor in the DC community, maintaining its reputation for excellence and integrity while almost completely rebounding to the \$50 million in revenue it drew before the recession. “If something is standing between you and success, it’s important to keep trying and exploring alternative solutions,” he says. “When someone says no, remember that there’s really no way but forward if you want to achieve a better future.”

R.W. Murray was founded in 1959 by Bob Murray at a time when the “design/build” concept was revolutionizing the construction industry. No longer were clients forced to endure the headache of various contractors attempting to patch together a project in various pieces that often undermined one another. Bob instead leveraged his relationships with developers in St. Louis, taking over the zoning research, design, permitting, and building for one fixed amount. The model was so successful that Bob and the developers expanded to new cities, opening up new regional offices along the way. The Northern Virginia office was founded in 1987, and Steve came onboard in 1989, fresh out of college, as its third employee.

Steve’s boss at the office was Bill Fairchild,

a phenomenal leader and mentor. When Bob Murray decided to retire in 1992, he offered his regional managers the opportunity to buy their respective regional assets. Bill decided to buy the Northern Virginia office and discussed bringing Steve in on the deal, but because Steve had been saving for a house, the two of them decided it wasn’t the right time. “Bill assured me I’d have plenty of opportunities here if I wanted them,” Steve recalls. “I could have gone to work for one of the bigger firms at that point, but I saw I was one step away from the guy who was starting his own company. It would be risky and frightening, but also fun and challenging, with much more responsibility and opportunities to learn than anywhere else. And I also had deep admiration for Bill. I knew I wanted to stay and see what the future held for me.”

Today, R.W. Murray serves private, commercial clients that include the retail, commercial office, industrial, offsite medical, and community amenity realms. From ice skating rinks, to indoor shooting ranges, to banks, to medical and general offices, to industrial distribution facilities, the company delivers excellence in pre-construction, design/build, and general contracting services with a team of 31 highly-dedicated employees. “The construction world is challenging and can be very high-risk,” Steve says. “But it’s the people that make it all worthwhile. Together, our teams turn a client’s vision into reality, and we’re always willing to go the extra mile to help someone navigate through complicated construction processes.”

Steve’s tenacity and commitment come in part from watching his father, whose dedication to his work proved both a blessing and a curse. Steve was born in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, while his father was in graduate school. His father followed in the footsteps of his family business by pursuing a career in banking, working long hours building his career. Growing up in North Carolina, they had what Steve envisioned was a normal family life, but over time, the marriage between his parents deteriorated. When Steve came home from school in fourth grade to find them hugging in the kitchen, he didn’t know what to think. Tearfully, they sat him and his younger brother down to tell them they were getting divorced.

His father moved out, while his mother began working as a real estate agent. Several years later, she married a high school classmate and

moved the family to a rural town in Botetourt County, Virginia, about twenty miles north of Roanoke. "To me, it was the country," Steve laughs. "Our house was on four acres that used to be an apple orchard, which was nice in the fall because you could just grab apples off the trees. The houses across the creek from us had no electricity, and we'd climb to the top of the mountain nearby to hike on the Appalachian Trail. You could see forges and valleys for miles. It was really remarkable."

Steve was entering seventh grade at the time, and from the years that followed, he remembers the four-hour long ride home on the Greyhound bus after visits to see his father in North Carolina. He remembers switching from football to basketball in eighth grade and winning their school's first district championship when he was a freshman on the JV team. Then, when he made it to the varsity team in his junior year, they won the school's first varsity district championship title. "Those were experiences I'll remember for a lifetime," he says. "I've gotten to see my kids have similar experiences in ice hockey, lacrosse, and volleyball, and it's wonderful."

Through high school, Steve's character was most deeply shaped by his junior year English teacher, Dee Sheffer, who wrote a new inspirational quote in the left corner of her chalkboard every single day. The impact of those quotes stayed with him, and today, one of Steve's favorite traditions is the R.W. Murray inspirational quote calendar sent to their clients and business associates each year. "It reminds me of walking in to Mrs. Sheffer's class each day when I tear off the previous day's quote," he says. He also appreciated the charismatic and fiery demeanor of his basketball coach, Don Meredith, who would routinely throw his coat into the stands in frustration. "He never yelled at us for losing; he was just extremely passionate," Steve recalls. From his father, he learned to be focused, driven, and goal-oriented, though he had no interest in a career in banking. From his mother, he learned compassion and how important it is to take the time to understand someone else's perspective—a lesson he employs professionally on a daily basis.

He was also deeply impacted by the resourcefulness of his father and his stepfather, both of whom would fix everything around the house by hand. Steve helped his stepfather finish the basement of their home, and watched in awe as

he built several large and indestructible wooden shop cabinets using only basic plywood. "He did the full design and assembly, paying attention to every detail, routing all the corners and counter-sinking the screws," Steve recounts. "Thanks in part to the exposure I got from watching both my dad and stepfather, I thought architecture was the best, coolest job ever. I got into building things with my hands, working with my stepfather to restore old cars and helping my dad with things that needed repair around his house when I was with him. I was always building model trucks, airplanes, ships, and cars, or drawing and building model houses. To me, that translated into architecture."

Steve graduated 33rd in his high school class of 215 students and was surprised to be admitted into Virginia Tech's architecture school, which only admitted 150 students worldwide each year. After surviving a rough first couple years, he excelled academically and landed an interview with Bill Fairchild when he came to campus during Steve's senior year. The two hit it off, and Steve accepted a position as a project manager at R.W. Murray, joining the ranks right out of school to work on interior tenant finish projects. He was grateful to bring with him a large hooked wall hanging of an eagle lovingly stitched by his grandmother's gentle, arthritic fingers—a graduation gift to hang in his new office. "I still have it hanging in my office today," he says. "It's invaluable to me because it reminds me of her passion and dedication to her family."

That first summer, he managed six projects totaling \$650,000 worth of work and got to try his hand at every stage of the process. "I was negotiating with the clients, purchasing with subcontractors, and managing the accounting, the schedule, and the superintendent in the field," he says. "I went back to Virginia Tech that fall and ran into some of the guys I graduated with, and they were still only in training. They couldn't believe I was doing so much."

When Bill bought the assets of the regional office of R.W. Murray, one of the most important tasks at hand was the crafting of a business plan for the newly formed local company. He had generated a substantial outline of his plan and, after his purchase transaction, began converting it into a full-fledged business plan document. Steve was fortunate enough to work with him through the process. "Bill would draft paragraphs of the

plan at home each night and bring them in for me to review the following day," Steve recalls. After several months of drafts and edits, the final business plan was completed and published. Computers were just becoming widely disseminated around that time as well, so as they began to build the business, the two of them were also tasked with converting everything over into a digital format. They worked together daily, methodically converting typewritten tables and forms into then current digital applications. Working through all of these start-up tasks alongside Bill gave Steve valuable insight into the process of creating a successful business. "From computerization, to growing the company, to hiring people, I got to see so much during the first ten years of my career," Steve says.

A few years later, in 1994, Steve decided to join a buddy on a weekend ski trip organized by a local social outings company. In the bus on the way there, he struck up a conversation with a young woman named Christina, who happened to be co-owner of the company. That conversation lasted the entire bus ride, continued throughout the weekend, and only stopped as they offloaded back in DC. Steve called her the next day, and the two have been inseparable ever since. "Christina went to Virginia Tech the same time I did and we hung out with all the same people, but our paths never crossed," he says incredulously. "My first roommate out of college even tried to introduce me to her in 1992 because he knew we'd hit it off. For whatever reason, we never connected until that ski trip and as soon as I met her, I knew she was the one."

In 1995, Bill and Steve brought on Chuck Loving, a driven and boisterous young man who had run the construction side of a development firm called Metropolitan Partnership. Steve and Chuck were polar opposites but worked well together with leadership and management styles that often complemented one another, and in 1997, Bill approached them with his plan to retire in ten years and sell them the company. Steve and Chuck agreed and entered into a stock purchase plan, acquiring the company slowly over the next twelve years as Bill gradually turned over the management of the organization. They brought on Jonathan Barbour in 2002 to train as the next generation of the company, and Chuck and Steve's stock purchase transaction was completed at the end of 2009—just as the economy tanked.

The excitement of owning his own company was quickly engulfed by fear as its revenues went from \$50 million to \$25 million in a matter of two months. Deeply committed to the employees and optimistic that conditions would improve soon, Steve and Chuck used the funds available to avoid layoffs despite a slowdown in work. But things didn't improve as expected, and the company to which Steve had dedicated his entire professional career almost went bankrupt.

"There were points in time I didn't know if we'd make it," he says. "We met with Bill and asked him to take a look at everything since he was so knowledgeable, and it was our first time trying to steer an enterprise through such a hurricane. He said that because we still had some cash in the company, we'd be fine as long as we kept generating work. It was a big relief to hear his assessment. I knew that if we made the decisions we needed to make and focused on helping our clients achieve their goals in life, we'd be okay."

With that, Steve and his partners began reaching out to the personal networks they had cultivated and grown over the years. Fortunately, the company had a stellar reputation in the industry, and Steve, Chuck, and Jonathan were known for always doing the right thing, being honest, and taking care of people. Thanks to this reputation, companies were willing to sit down with them and ultimately take a chance on R.W. Murray. They were able to secure a new bonding line with a contact out of Richmond—the baby step that helped put them back on the road to sustainability. "When I advise young people entering the working world today, I remind them how important it is to constantly expand and nourish your network," he affirms. "It's an invaluable tool that can very likely take you wherever you want to go if you keep it strong, look for opportunities, and call on it when you need it. Just make sure you're willing to help others out too."

Steve and Chuck also gambled on an approach that had everyone tightening their belts, and no one losing their jobs. Salaries were left intact, but benefits were scaled back, and company trips were eliminated. The gamble came with the company's project-based incentive plan—it's substitution for end-of-year bonuses in which the amount of each project's incentive was doubled. "Since our incentive plan is paid based on customer satisfaction, we wanted to incentivize the

employees to focus more on making sure the client was happy,” Steve says. “Our hope was that this would encourage our team to generate more work, translating to more incentive for the employees, which would help make up for the benefit cut. It was a pathway for employees to participate in making themselves whole, creating benefits for both themselves and the company overall.”

Today, employees remain at the center of the company mission statement. “The business exists to provide an environment where our employees can achieve their goals in life,” Steve affirms. “As the owners and strategic planners of the company, Chuck and I keep this at the forefront of our minds as we make decisions.” A servant leader, Steve most values the success of those around him, and was deeply touched when the company received the 2001 Ethics Award from the National Capital Committee on Ethics. “Construction is not the most highly-regarded industry,” he points out. “It’s the best recognition we could have gotten because it speaks to how we operate as a business.”

His greatest source of inspiration, however, comes from Christina—herself an exceptionally creative and successful entrepreneur and author—and the kids. “My wife and kids are the world to me,” he says. “Christina is one of the

most driven individuals I’ve ever met, constantly going from the moment she wakes up every morning. Justin has truly come into his own in college, showing a lot of that same charisma and drive to be successful. And Megan is an incredible athlete, student, and person, unshakably strong on her path toward her own future. If I had accepted “no” in the past, we wouldn’t be where we are today, all moving forward together.”

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

The logo for Bernhardt Wealth Management is centered on the page. It features the word "BERNHARDT" in a large, elegant, black serif font. A thin horizontal line is positioned directly beneath "BERNHARDT". Below this line, the words "WEALTH MANAGEMENT" are written in a smaller, black, all-caps sans-serif font. The entire text is set against a light gray, textured rectangular background that has a slightly irregular, hand-painted appearance.

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