Brett Coffee

Learning to Navigate

The room is filled with parents, siblings, and supporters of the young men receiving a significant award. The code and law are recited, as the American flag stands tall beside them. Their mothers wear sashes proudly displaying their son's many accolades. Brett Coffee is thirteen years old and receiving his Eagle Scout, the highest award for Boy Scouts. While most Boy Scouts work throughout high school to earn this level of honor, Brett accomplished this before entering his freshman year of high school. Brett says, "I think

you have to be very disciplined to become an Eagle Scout. For me, the motivation to finish that quickly was that I knew I had other things I wanted to accomplish." Today, Brett holds his Eagle Scout pin in his hand and is reminded of not only the many survival lessons he learned as a Boy Scout, but also all of the leadership skills that have served him throughout life. "It taught me from a very early age that I had the skills and the approach that would lend itself towards being

a leader. Boy Scouts very strongly encourages young men to have a leadership role and teaches them the skills to get there," he says.

accomplishments early Those leadership skills would be a building block for many other milestones. Brett says, "When I started bike racing, I was able to look back on my Eagle Scout experience and say here I am leading grown men on my own as a sixteen-year-old, but it made sense because of the leadership skills I learned from Boy Scouts." Next to his Eagle Scout pin is Brett's Finishers Medal for completing Ironman Cozumel. This triathlon requires athletes to swim a 2.4-mile loop in the Cozumel ocean reef, followed by cycling 112 miles around the island, and finishing with a 26.2-mile run. Brett completed the triathlon during an epic rainstorm that left the competitors running in ankle deep water. Brett explains that when his wife encouraged him to start a hobby, he naturally returned to cycling and then to take up triathlons. He continues saying, "This was a very emotional accomplishment for me, because when I was younger I was an athlete and set that aside for a number of years to focus on my professional career. When I started cycling again I had to come back to not only being an athlete, but I also had to overcome the challenge of not being a strong swimmer and going out to finish a 2.4-mile ocean swim." The tenacity and drive to train day after day in pursuit of a

challenge the size of an Ironman competition is one of Brett's strengths, one he brings to his business endeavors as well.

As a Chief Operating Officer of Computer Systems Center Incorporated (CSCI), Brett continues to lead tenaciously with a concentrated motivation for making businesses stronger and more efficient. "I was originally trained as a lawyer, but I like to build businesses and better teams," Brett says. "I like to solve problems and

see things work better at the end of the day than when I started." Fourteen years ago, Brett started with CSCI as a consultant to oversee the process of the company forming a non-profit entity. Brett helped build The SemperComm Foundation from the ground up when he first came to the Washington area, helping his then-fiancée get the organization off the ground and attracting the attention of CSCI, which was then the primary sponsor.

Linda LaRoche and Joseph Link, who founded CSCI in 1987, believed that they could create a more efficient business providing superior technology to the government and military. Brett says, "They were very concerned about the warfighter and wanted to bring these very advanced technological concepts to bear so that our men and women in the field had the best technology available to them. That is still the mission today,

over thirty years later, and we play in a unique space combining commercial and government technologies." CSCI has provided these excellent services to all departments of the military as well as other government agencies. Currently, they are entirely focused on serving all branches of the Department of Defense, with a major focus on the Navy and more recently the Marine Corps. Brett says, "Marines are part of the Navy, but they often have very unique challenges. From a technical point of view, they are often operating in areas of very low bandwidth." He explains, "So your office WiFi would be a luxury out in the field. That is the kind of challenge that we are trying to solve."

According to Brett, CSCI is ever-changing and continues to develop and expand creating new challenges and growth. Brett describes that of the hundred employees, most of them are former military who appreciate the company's focus and sacrifice on ensuring that the mission is accomplished above all else. "We have strong longevity, with the average tenure being over eleven years for our employees," Brett explains. He credits this longevity and corporate culture to the CEO and Founder, Linda LaRoche. "She has created a culture that is rooted in the mission and values of the company," he says. "She is a brilliant businesswoman and has taught me a lot."

After consulting on the non-profit project, Brett joined CSCI as a lawyer and later was promoted to General Counsel and then also Vice President for Business and Corporate Affairs. For Brett, new challenges have always been welcome. "In the beginning, a lot of the issues I dealt with were legal, but had a significant business component to them." He explains, "We would have a situation that was legal in nature and how we negotiated it, but the reasons behind it were business related. I had to navigate between those two areas." As he showed that he could handle the legal issues while contributing to the business side, and that he could handle crisis situations and other challenges, CSCI started giving more thought to how he could work in a business role. Brett combined both legal knowledge and business skills to renegotiate a lease with CSCI's landlord at a challenging time for the business. Rather than purely focus on legal arguments, it was Brett's idea to broker a new business relationship with the landlord, taking CSCI from a hopeless situation to something renewed, a feat few thought possible. Later, Brett was named Secretary of the company and then promoted to COO in 2015.

Brett was born in Chicago, Illinois the first child of his parents who moved from farming towns in southern Illinois. When Brett went into the first grade, his family moved to suburban Hinsdale. Brett describes this town as a relatively comfortable community, with safe neighborhoods and an excellent school system. Prior to moving to Hinsdale, Brett was enrolled in a Montessori school that provided him with a jump start to his education. Thus, when he moved, he was able to enter kindergarten earlier making him the youngest in his class. "This is where I joined Cub Scouts, and I can remember walking to meetings by myself at a very young age, probably five or six," Brett says. He describes living close enough to walk to the grocery store and would often help run errands for his mother.

Brett's parents were both entrepreneurs who owned and managed their separate businesses. His father and his partner owned a company that represented media companies in their advertising sales for thirty-five years. Brett says, "My dad has an easy ability to talk to anybody and a salesman's ability to remember names. He has caused me to be more forward than I would be in terms of engaging people." Brett's mother owned a food stylist business, assisting the marketing and advertising for grocery stores and food companies. "For the inserts in the Sunday paper, where the food looks so good, my mother was responsible for making it look so delicious." His mother also tested recipes for accuracy, taste, and appearance. Today, her recipes are still shown on the Ready Crust piecrusts and sold as Soft Batch cookies. "She field-tested a lot of different cookies when I was a child, to my benefit. If the cookies were not perfectly round, they went to me and my friends," Brett says. Brett has great respect for what his mother accomplished during a time expected become women were to homemakers. Brett says, "She was smart enough to start her own business, so I saw her creativity, integrity and hard work as an early role model."

He describes his childhood as picturesque, being able to go outside to play and walk to the library or school. He explains that around the holidays the Scouts would sell Christmas wreaths to fund different scouting events. Although Brett was the youngest in the troop, he was savvy enough to find a sales angle that would serve him well. After school, the Scouts would need to walk

home to retrieve their order forms, however Brett lived the closest to town. His first stop was a realtor's office who agreed to buy several wreaths to improve the look of the homes she was selling. Then, he went to all the other realtors, prompting them to purchase as well. "Even from a young age, Scouts taught me to always look for the competitive advantage," Brett says, "When selling the wreaths, I was more interested in the competitive nature and less interested in the rewards. I liked going out and selling something and providing a service to people that brightened up their holidays."

Boy Scouts was a staple activity for Brett growing up, but also one that taught discipline. He describes not being the best athlete as a child, but when his parents signed him up for various sports it was expected that he complete the activity. He got involved with Cub Scouts around age five at the influence of his father. By age ten, Brett graduated to Boy Scouts and quickly earned his Eagle Scout by age thirteen. "Because my parents said we could not quit what we start, I knew I had to get my Eagle. I wanted to have the scouting experience and then go out and do other things," he said. Throughout the year, Brett would participate in monthly camping trips and other high adventure activities. He describes camping in handmade igloos and skiing for four days in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and biking with his troop 350 miles to summer camp in one week. Brett says, "We had a lot of fun with that, and it taught us a lot of grit, resilience, and planning and really began to make men out of boys."

In the late summer of 1984, twelve-yearold Brett was watching the summer Olympics where the commentator, Greg LeMond, explained that cycling is a sport for any body type. Hearing this, Brett's interest was sparked, as he previously had been told he was not tall enough for basketball or big enough for football. Brett decided to try bike racing and found that he not only had an interest in it, he had a great deal of talent for the sport. Until this time, Brett had not found any sport or activity he was truly passionate about. "I was willing to put everything else aside when I became a bike racer and I was able to focus on it 100 percent," he says. At twelve, Brett cycled 102 miles in just over eight hours during the local MS bike-athon. He felt he had failed because his personal goal was 117 miles, the distance of the Olympic road race just a few weeks before. Shortly after, his father took him to a bike shop two towns away, where he spoke with the owner about this perceived failure. The owner, impressed with Brett's ability at such a young age, invited him onto the local team. From there, Brett competed in bike races on the weekends and joined a smaller community for track racers, a much more physical and competitive aspect of the sport. Brett says, "It is a very, very physically demanding sport and you have to push yourself through the pain because there is always another gear to get to."

While working towards his Eagle Scout and becoming an avid bike racer, Brett experienced a pivotal moment in junior high school. His eighthgrade teacher decided to do a reenactment of the My Lai trial with Lt. Calley in Vietnam. Brett was the judge for the mock trial and one day his teacher called his mother exclaiming that Brett would one day be a lawyer. Laughing at the memory, Brett says, "My mother asked my teacher how she could possibly know I would be a lawyer at such a young age. My teacher said 'because during this mock trial Brett threw me out of my own classroom and held me in contempt of court!"" Although this moment was a catalyst towards Brett's career in law, he feels the assumption that his personality was a perfect fit for being a lawyer closed other possibilities for his professional development. "Most people think a lawyer is someone who argues cases in front of a judge, but there is so much more to the profession," Brett says. "It gave me a path and something to shoot for, but it held me back from some of those other professional paths I could have enjoyed. But, I'm enjoying engaging with these other disciplines with the benefit of my legal training."

While Brett was in high school, his parents got divorced and his father moved two towns away, where the bike shop was that they visited years before. Brett stayed with his mother and younger brother to complete high school. Brett explains that his parent's divorce was devastating for him. Still, he says, "It colored how I viewed marriage and gave me a strong sense of the importance of marrying someone for life." Later, his father remarried and had another son. In high school, Brett would visit his father, and started working at the same bike shop. "They gave me a job because I was a bike racer and they wanted to support that," Brett says. At the shop, Brett learned customer services and the mechanical skills to fix

and adjust bicycles. "It taught me how to fix things, which is still an important skill I have today."

Brett describes himself as a good, but not throughout grade great, student school. Regardless, he graduated high school in the top third of his class at one of the best high schools in Illinois. His senior year, Brett trained at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs for cycling, alongside Lance Armstrong and many other Olympic cyclists. "I knew that I would not compare to them, so rather than keep training for the Olympics I decided to go to college." So, before college, Brett quit cycling to focus on his professional career at the University of Illinois. Brett majored in and graduated with a degree in Political Science in 1993. While looking at law school, Brett consulted a long-time mentor and lawyer who encouraged him to apply to the best law schools he possibly could. Brett wanted to study environmental law, but his mentor said that success in law was linked strongly to prestige, leading Brett to an epiphany. "In talking with him, I found that corporate and business issues were far more interesting to me than anything I had ever encountered before. So, I became very passionate about how companies worked and successfully grew," Brett says.

When thinking about his family, Brett says he feels like the black sheep because both of his parents, his younger brother, grandfather, uncle, and cousins all found professional careers in the marketing and sales aspects of business, while Brett found business through entering law school. He started his journey in law at Fordham University and moved from Illinois to New York City. "Not only did I leave the sales aspect of the family, but I also moved far away from the family looking for different adventures," Brett explains. "When I was in college I had the opportunity to study abroad, so I went to Amsterdam. My grandparents pulled me aside at one point and asked why I needed to see Amsterdam since they had already been themselves! It was as if they checked that box for the entire family and I had no need to go see this new place and have my own experiences," Brett says. Regardless of his path in law, his family's sales experience influenced his interest in business. Brett found that while studying in law school, he felt drawn to all of the additional classes that focused on business. "Even though these classes were difficult conceptually, I

had a ball learning about them," he says. During his summer internship, Brett had the opportunity to work on a corporate bond offering, solidifying his passion for business and the law.

He graduated Fordham University in 1996 and began his career at a small law firm in New York. During this experience, Brett learned how to manage assignments he had never worked on before in a short amount of time, with no examples and little oversight. After a year or so, Brett moved to a midsized firm as a Corporate Associate assisting the firm's corporate and tax partners. At this firm, Brett was challenged with handling a new crisis situation. When the two partners he was working with both became unreachable for several days, the client called and wanted to close the fund in a few days. Despite it being his first investment bank deal, he was able to pull everything together in just a couple days so that when the partner returned everything was ready for closing. Brett says, "I was able to deal with it, in part, because of my leadership experiences that I had in Scouts and partly because of the hard work and roll up your sleeves attitude that came from growing up in the Midwest." From there, Brett moved to another law firm in New York working with major international companies before leaving for a Silicon Valley start-up as International Counsel. In 2001, with Silicon Valley having imploded and funding dried up, Brett left San Francisco for San Diego to work full-time towards his Master in Law in Business and Corporate degree and an additional diploma in Corporate Taxation. Once he graduated, Brett worked for Leap Wireless as a securities attorney before moving to the East coast after meeting his wife, Lara.

For Brett, the best leader is guided by a strong sense of integrity and inclusive of opinions. He says, "Throughout my career when I have seen people make bad choices it is usually because they allow their ethics to slide. I have always chosen to make integrity my cornerstone in the things that I do, which could be influenced by my Boy Scout background." Brett explains that additionally, his leadership style is collaborative and emphasizes teamwork where everyone is constantly learning from each other and outside resources. He encourages young professionals to consider their personal strengths and continue being curious about their interests. He says, "Keep reading and stay interested in things both inside and outside of your field and be open to new experiences and

taking risks," he says. "If you throw in some hard work you will have a good recipe for success."

Brett met his wife, Lara, while he was living in San Diego and they were married in 2005. Lara's background is in communications and marketing, and she worked at CSCI before he did. For Brett, his marriage to Lara is a friendship and commitment. Many might find it difficult to work with their spouse; however, Brett explains that he and Lara love it. "We love looking at things with different perspectives and learning new things by comparing notes and working collaboratively," he says. Brett describes getting married as a defining moment in his life. He is reminded of his bond with Lara when wearing the cufflinks she had made for him from Tahitian black pearls brought back from their honeymoon. When Brett and Lara are not working they spend time raising their two children and taking on leadership roles within the community. Brett says, "My wife is the strongest woman I know. We both completed Ironman races, but hers was only thirteen months after giving birth to our daughter."

Both Brett and Lara have supported many charities and community organizations over the years. Most recently they were involved with a non-profit called Bite Me Cancer, founded by Nikki Ferraro who was diagnosed with Thyroid cancer at age seventeen. Brett served on the Board and says, "The non-profit aims at serving older teens and young adults who are battling cancer, as well as raise money for thyroid cancer research." Additionally, Brett has worked with the National Capital Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America on their Eagle Scout programs (and was recently named Chair of all Eagle Scout alumni activities in the DC Area), and he has served six years on the University of Illinois Alumni Association Board of Directors alongside other amazing business minds. Brett says, "When you sit amongst a group like that the question is not, is there a good idea because there are several sitting around the room. The question is how do we create the right situation to move the organization forward, which is a more complicated discussion." He also served on former Governor Bob McDonnell's transition committee and advised the Virginia General Assembly on technology issues as part of the JCOTS committee, as well as being a frequent speaker on a wide range of business and legal topics. Additionally, Brett has enrolled in an innovative virtual MBA program through the University of Illinois that he helped get approved when he was on the alumni board.

Additionally, Brett has received many awards and recognitions for his successes in his personal life and professional career. Recently, Brett was named a NESA Outstanding Eagle Scout Award recipient, recognizing his exemplary professional career. In 2010, Brett was named a 40 under 40 Award Honoree and given the People's Choice Award by the Washington Business Journal. "For me, this was an amazing accomplishment because I was named for my impact on the business and community," Brett says. He was named the top General Counsel in the Washington, DC area by two different organizations, and was recognized several times for his community service. These awards signify that Brett continues to be a champion within the business and legal fields, as well as the community as a whole.

Throughout Brett's life, he has woven the leadership skills gained on the path to Eagle Scout, his racer's determination to push through the tough times, his ongoing scholarship, and his curiosity and integrity in the business and personal spheres to a position of leadership at CSCI and in the community. With so much distance covered, whatever Brett Coffee navigates next is sure to make an impact.

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