

# Andy Burness

## Communicating Social Change

Looking back on his life, Andy Burness can mark the roads not taken. He knew early on that advocating for causes he cared about would be his calling in one form or another. But it wasn't clear until well after college that his path would take him to leading one of the nation's most respected public interest communications firms, where he would do just that.

Earlier, as the sports editor of Duke University's newspaper, he was named Best Columnist in the Southeast, and passed up an opportunity to interview with the *New York Post* as he neared graduation. "I was basically told that a successful future in sports writing was mine for the taking, and I imagined my stories one day being featured in *Sports Illustrated*," Andy recalls. "But I ultimately decided not to go through the interview process. I knew I had to be on a different path. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it had something to do with social justice, and I was hoping that I would find it."

Nor did he take the road that would have led to graduate school in Clinical Psychology, after a college professor singled him out for admission to a highly selective program. Again, Andy made the decision not to apply. He knew that he wanted to make a difference—but on a larger scale.

Sometimes, the roads not taken are determined by a road taken years earlier. Such was the case with Andy when, as a high school junior, he decided to apply to be a foreign exchange student through the American Field Service. "The odds of being selected were basically zero," he remembers. "I was an OK student trying to get in to this exceptionally competitive program, where one student at most was accepted per high school per year."

Andy was one of twenty interested students invited to an evening at the high school, where he and the others were vetted by faculty

and parents. There, the conversation drifted to how the students might best represent the U.S. abroad, given the context of the ongoing Vietnam War. "It's a complicated issue given the balance of powers in the world," Andy said, echoing conversations he had heard at home.

Several days later, the phone rang, and Andy got the news that he was one of two students being nominated by the school. And several weeks later, he was informed that he would be living as an only child with a family in Chile—a country neither Andy nor his parents knew anything about. "It was 1970, and high school kids just didn't study abroad," Andy remembers. "It was hard for my mom and dad to let me go away to this country, which was very foreign. What parent wants their high school kid to spend a year five thousand miles away? But they let me go."

And though he didn't realize it at the time, it became one of the most defining experiences of his life.

"I learned there was a world and language beyond my own," he recalls. "I went from being a stranger from another land to a family member in every sense. As my Chilean hosts cared for me for a full year—including nursing me through an illness while there—I later supported them when they were dying. It's fair to say that we grew to love each other." The relationships with his Chilean parents would be the first of several with mentors, teachers and guides to whom he credits much of his success.

In Rancagua, Chile, Andy experienced a bigger world for the first time—not as a tourist or as a thrill-seeking adventurer on a drive-by excursion, but as a young person experiencing a different way of life every day. Rancagua, the hub of the country's world-leading copper industry, wasn't poor by global standards, but the empanada vendors and apricot juice salespeople lived far more modestly than Andy had



experienced growing up in West Hartford, Connecticut. The Chilean experience reconstituted his priorities, redefined his concept of humanity, and bent the curve of his life's trajectory toward social change for public good. "That experience changed the way I would see the world," he says. "From that point onward, I've seen myself more as a citizen of the world than as an American, a Jew, a white person, a professional, a male or any other category that defines me narrowly. I've tried to embrace different ideas, experiences, and cultures, knowing that at the end of the day, we all have similar wishes and aspirations. I came to really understand that all of us—not some of us—should have the same basic 'givens' in life.

Today, at the company that bears his name, Andy and his 60-person staff promote causes, not products—giving voice to researchers, innovators, and activists who seek to fight poverty through policy change. Some call for reforms to improve the U.S. health care system or seek to share information about the world's most advanced malaria vaccine. Others advocate for indigenous people's rights in the Amazon forests or new research on sustainable crops in Africa. Still others seek to empower Latino youth through access to high-quality, post-secondary education. And a growing movement is making progress against the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States.

When Andy decided to launch his own company in 1986, he knew it would be the sum of his previous professional experience, falling at the intersection of philanthropy, the nonprofit sector, public policy, government, and the media. At that time, the field of Public Interest Communications was virtually unknown, and while his vision was expansive, Andy's entrepreneurial goals were modest. He wanted to work in a small office setting with a small community around him—peers and young people he could mentor who had the will to do great things. He also wanted to build a business that would allow him to get on one international flight each year to work on projects overseas. Now, three decades later, Burness is the largest company of its kind in the United States, and Andy has advised malaria researchers in Malawi, lectured university students in Argentina, and advocated for solutions to combat blindness-causing trachoma in Morocco.

Burness has partnered with some of the biggest names in American philanthropy and the

nonprofit world, including leading foundations such as Robert Wood Johnson, Gates, Kellogg, Ford and Rockefeller; respected institutions such as the Aspen Institute and the Brookings Institution; and universities such as Duke, Northwestern, Harvard and Johns Hopkins.

Domestically, Burness has been involved in causes vast and varied, including reforming Medicaid to give more choice to individuals with disabilities. Recognizing that doctors and hospitals play an important but limited role in the overall health of an individual, it has supported a movement to bring diverse voices into the conversation about health improvement. "Health depends on housing, income, educational opportunity, and space to get outside in a community," Andy points out. "There's no excuse that where you live—something as seemingly insignificant as your zip code—is more predictive of your health than your genes or your insurance status. If we're going to improve health in America, it must be through engagement with those who don't wake up in the morning thinking about their health."

Burness is involved with a range of other initiatives aimed at social justice in the United States—improving access to dental care for people in Indian Country; showcasing the nation's best community colleges as models for low-cost, excellent higher education; working with advocates to reduce recidivism by improving the continuity of care for people who cycle in and out of our jails; and recognizing scientists through the Tyler Prize, the "nation's Nobel" for environmental discovery.

Perhaps what's most important to Andy is that his company walks its talk. It is regularly named one of the best places to work in the Washington area, most recently by the *Washington Post* in 2014. "We're able to run a profitable business that provides a good livelihood for our employees, but that's not why people come to work in the morning," Andy says. Despite holding an MBA, Andy insists that running a business was never the main goal. "It's not first and foremost about money for us," he says. "It's the mission that rules, and the work environment we're able to create. For me, leadership starts and ends with values, but these values can't be imposed top-down in an organization. They've got to come from each employee." He's clear that people should be paid fairly, so that compensation issues,

to the extent possible, are taken off the table as a distraction to the mission at hand. A believer in face time, shared credit, and open access to company leadership, he emphasizes proactive and direct communication with his employees and strives to treat employees and clients alike as he would wish to be treated. He believes in a company culture in which people genuinely care about one another, fostering the free-flow of idea-sharing and collaboration that keeps the atmosphere fresh and lively. "I try to make sure people feel free to be themselves in our workplace," he says. "It should be a kind, fair, and low-stress environment, but we hold ourselves to high performance standards."

This approach stems directly from his upbringing, mirroring the way his parents applied a set of standards to his academic performance. "I remember coming home from school one day with an 89 on a French test, and saying that I wish the teacher had given me a 90 so that I could get an A," he recalls. "But my mom said, 'This is about you.' My parents expected me to be accountable for my own record, with no excuses or apologies. I came to understand that, whatever happened, it was on me. I saw that the bar was high, and if you're self-motivated and buy into the mission and vision, you'll want to reach that bar. And at the end of the day, all you owe is the best you can be. I didn't necessarily have to get all A's, but I needed to do my best. I'm very grateful for that message, and today I expect our excellence as a company to flow from each team member owning the quality of their work and being self-motivated."

It was the experience in Chile and the opportunities that presented themselves at Duke University that shaped his professional ambitions. At Duke, Andy studied under Dr. Samuel DuBois Cook, a distinguished political scientist and a close personal friend of The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Professor Cook, in his own right, went on to become the first Black trustee at Duke, as well as the first Black head of the American Political Science Association and the President of Dillard University in New Orleans. "One could not pay attention in that class and emerge without a commitment to social justice," Andy remarks. "Though he didn't proselytize, you felt as if you were in Ebenezer Baptist Church. I was totally taken by his political philosophy, and his teachings about social justice and the 'beloved community' remain central to my values. His vision for a good

and just humanity is my guide for the issues we take on and the policies we support."

Through student leadership positions at Duke, he met Terry Sanford, the University's transformative president. Sanford had served as North Carolina's Governor from 1961 to 1965 and then assumed leadership of the university in 1969. In that capacity, he worked to calm tensions over the Vietnam War and the 1970 Kent State shootings. Sanford would become a role model and friend of Andy's, and when Andy graduated in 1974, he landed his first job working for Sanford's presidential campaign.

Working directly out of the candidate's home was a heady experience for a just-graduated 21-year-old. Sanford inspired "outrageous ambitions" in Andy, the willingness to take risks and the vision to push big ideas that played out years later, such as opening his company's office in Kenya or creating a communications fellowship for minority college advocates in Washington, D.C. But when Sanford's campaign failed to gain traction, Andy decided to take his ambitions directly to the nation's capital. Happy to help, Sanford connected him with Elizabeth Hanford, a Sanford political loyalist who was a Federal Trade Commissioner. She immediately connected him with the Senate Intelligence Committee, which was looking for clerks to do entry-level work. Andy laughs, remembering the brutally hot days during that Washington summer and the joy of landing a job—any job. "Thankfully, they offered me a position on the spot," he says. "Elizabeth Hanford, the Democrat, went on to marry Bob Dole, the Republican Senator from Kansas and Republican presidential candidate. She too became a Republican Senator and presidential candidate. Who would have predicted that?"

Andy worked for the Intelligence Committee as his "foot in the door" job in Washington before being hired by Richardson Preyer, a progressive North Carolina Congressman who needed someone to handle his Health Subcommittee work. The former federal judge was an honorable, bipartisan, low-key Member of Congress, and Andy spent the next three years learning about the sausage-making of federal policy. He then accepted a position in media and external relations with the President's Commission on Medical Ethics in the Carter Administration, where he communicated the Commission's findings on profound ethical questions like the

right to die, genetic engineering, and research with human subjects. Working with great minds in philosophy, science, law, and medicine, Andy was generating front-page media content in the nation's major outlets.

Three years later, Andy accepted a position in media and government relations with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the largest private healthcare philanthropy in the U.S. There, he became well acquainted with the world of private foundations and had the privilege of forming another life-altering relationship—this time with Frank Karel, the nation's pioneer practitioner of public interest communications. Through senior positions at the Robert Wood Johnson and Rockefeller Foundations, Karel raised the public profile around solutions to homelessness and living with HIV, later becoming the world's most ardent champion of agricultural research to feed the world's poor. Andy's friendship with Frank was both professional and personal, and as much as any in his life, shaped his vision for how he would try to be a leader.

Despite three privileged years at the Foundation in New Jersey working alongside Karel, Andy wanted to return to Washington. Having built a reputation as a successful communications professional in philanthropy and health, he could have landed a solid position in communications at a university-based medical center, but he envisioned a life where he could wake up every morning to the unknown. To what cause would he contribute that day? Which corner of the world might have a project that would be both fascinating and in the interests of people's health and well-being? For him, the answer was to start the company he runs today.

Since 1989, Andy has enjoyed the partnership and support of his wife Hope Gleicher. The two met when she was running an organization called Healthcare for the Homeless in Baltimore, and their professional lives have been aligned ever since with the goal of improving conditions for people in need. "She challenges me to be the best I can be, and her support also comes with constructive criticism and substantive insight that have been really helpful over the years," he says. He also leans on his wise 20-something children, Alex and Molly, for his world beyond work. They, too, are citizens of the world, engaged in journalism and the health professions, respectively, as channels for living their values.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Andy emphasizes the importance of passion. "Even if you aren't quite clear what your ultimate passion is, follow something that moves you," he says. "It should be self-motivating to the point that you almost feel like you're on vacation while you're getting paid. Immerse yourself in the content of what you're doing to make yourself knowledgeable, and then focus your energy on being the best writer and communicator you can be, regardless of your profession. My mom taught me that."

Beyond this, Andy professes the power of openness, and the importance of being flexible with one's life plan if, indeed, one has a plan in the first place. "Even though the end goals for me were somewhat predictable, there's a fair amount of gray in the journey," he says. "If you can be clear about your particular vision for where you want to go, and then be flexible about how you get there, you can ultimately build an exciting and dynamic future for yourself and those you most care about. You can earn a living doing something for the betterment of others."

Staying true to the vision and the worldview of Dr. Cook, fighting poverty and working on behalf of the world's have-nots, Andy Burness is about bringing hope and possibility to places where they are scarce. It's the worldview that human beings should not have miserable and poor lives, and that the quest for equity and justice can be more than a philanthropic pursuit or a personal side project; it can sustain a professional journey as robust, enriching, and fruitful as any other.

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— By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

*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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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