

# Tom DeWitt

## Always a New Day

Challenge coins are tokens of narrative, the strongest currency of all. They convey the story of an organization and become the anthem of each individual who makes up the whole. They are passed on from members of the organization to important figures that cross their paths, a tangible representation of stories and meaning being handed from one person to another. They are reminders.

In his pocket, Tom DeWitt carries a challenge coin with the peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the sign of the cardinal, representing Virginia—the state where his company was founded. The mesas and saguaro cactus of Arizona signify the location of the company's first employee, as well as the idea that its mission spans the nation, coast to coast. At the center of the motif stands the U.S. Capitol building against a rising sun, representing the Aurora Foundation—an organization Tom launched in 2008 to help returning service members pursue their education. "Taken together, the coin tells the story that no matter where you come from, you have a role to play in the success of our nation," Tom says today. "If your focus is on maintaining the nation and keeping it strong, there will always be a new day for this country."

As the cofounder, President, and CEO of SNVC, an IT services company, Tom passes this story on to each one of his employees, initiating them into the very narrative of nation building. "I want them to understand that the nation we have today didn't just happen," he affirms. "People have been working on it since Jamestown, and they have to keep working on it if they want our freedoms and society to continue. As a part of SNVC, we're all actively part of that idea. We make sure there's always a new day to come."

Tom and his partner founded SNVC on a hot June day in 1998, operating out of a house in

Arlington, Virginia. Their first order of business was installing an air conditioning unit in the front room window, and they accidentally sent it falling through the window to land in the dirt a story below. They looked at each other and said, "We hope this isn't representative of what's to come."

In his previous work, Tom's partner had installed data communications circuits in U.S. embassies around the world, where he'd routinely run into top secret U.S. operatives wielding cool, mysterious technology. When asked about the technology, they would always say dismissively, "Oh, don't worry about this. Some small Northern Virginia company made it." Tom and his partner envisioned becoming one of those Small Northern Virginia Companies, hence the name SNVC.

Tom and his partner had been known in the military as people who could get things done, and there were a number of parties interested in utilizing SNVC's services from day one. Working long days followed by evenings drinking iced tea at a hamburger bar in Crystal City, they planned to be a small consulting firm of up to five people who got together for a holiday party once a year, and began to bring on partners in the Northern Virginia area. As they began working on site, however, customers expressed interest in more business. The expanding interest compelled them to hire their first employee, which meant their next big challenge was setting up a benefits system. "If we were going to have people giving up their years to work for our company, we want to make sure that at a very minimum, if they had problems, they were well taken care of," says Tom. "We wanted to offer the best benefits around."

SNVC's early days were permeated by a sense of excitement. Tom found his work was more than valuable to their clients—in fact, SNVC was actually quite good at what they did. As the



company grew, he found they needed to spend more time running the business, and SNVC transformed from a traditional consulting firm to a brick-and-mortar presence. As the market presented opportunities, they explored different offerings. Some worked well, while others didn't, and through their willingness to explore their options, SNVC found the right fit for their clients.

Today, SNVC has a contract with Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where around 30,000 soldiers of all ranks flow through the education system to learn what they need to know to be excellent. From Officer Training and the Sergeant Major's Academy to the Army's basic training courses, all the instruction now occurs through the network that SNVC runs. "If the network's down, instruction goes down," says Tom. "If instruction goes down, soldiers lose time. We just picked up the contract last year, and we've already been able to implement important changes to improve network readiness." SNVC also helps to run the nationwide Army National Guard network.

SNVC's second mission focus is strategic analysis of IT options for CIOs. After identifying technology options, Tom and his team help clients understand the best avenues for application, as well as how an organization can invest in future technology to increase its efficiency and ability to accomplish its mission.

In 2004 and 2006, SNVC was honored by Inc 500 Magazine and the Virginia Chamber of Commerce as one of the fastest growing privately held business in the region, and in the U.S. But as the years passed, Tom came to understand that SNVC's fate, like many other small businesses in the Washington metropolitan area, was intimately tied to the actions of Congress, and specifically its growing inability to ensure federal budget stability. As partisan rhetoric escalated in Washington, the thoughtful federal budget process was supplanted with the Continuing Resolution—last-minute plans hastily enacted on the eve of government shutdowns to extend the status quo for a number of months, limiting new opportunities.

The government then moved into the "Lowest Price Technically Acceptable" strategy, recompeting work for cheaper so it could continue to fund high-priority items. Thus, the majority of the federal work was tied up on contract already, and the large companies with prime contracts began to withdraw work from subcontractors to

sustain their own revenues. "We found out that we had some really good partners, and some not-so good," Tom reflects. "But we've recovered and have positioned ourselves now so that most of our work is prime contracts. Opportunities are freeing up as well, thanks to the two-year federal budget approved for fiscal years 2015 and 2016. We've been able to start rebuilding the company in ways that make sense to us." SNVC now has a team of around sixty employees and is on track to do revenues of \$4 million this year. In 2012, it was honored as #1 in the Midsize Business category in *Virginia Business Magazine's* "Best Places to Work in Virginia."

SNVC's commitment to service and to national success tracks closely with Tom's own narrative, which began in Fort Knox, Kentucky, in 1958. "I think my parents represented the majority of who America was at the time," he recalls. "There was the attitude of service to the nation represented by my father, who served in the Army until I was twelve. And then there was my mother, who was a stay-at-home mom acting as the glue to keep everything together and functioning."

The family lived in Germany for three years, where Tom started developing his earliest memories. He can still distinctly remember how, as a five year old, he would struggle to make it to the bus on time in the morning. One day he missed the bus completely, and his father instructed his mother to have him walk the two miles to school. "I was proud as could be to walk all the way across post to go to school," Tom remembers. "But I resolved not to miss the bus again, and the experience helped develop in me a distinct sense of independence."

In many ways, Tom's childhood is a relic of the past—a token of bygone days where children were given the freedom to explore and cultivate their own abilities. The family moved to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where Tom would play all day with a group of friends amidst the training areas for soldiers going off to Vietnam. "We'd be off on our own from dawn till dusk digging trenches, building bunkers, running through the woods, and learning a whole lot of responsibility and common sense," he recalls. "We learned the difference between a blank and a live round. We learned that if something had a pin, you do not pull it. At the end of the day, my mom would do a headcount. There was me and my two sisters, and all was good."

On those rare occasions when Tom's father was home, Tom remembers going to drive-in movies in pajamas and spending time together as a family. "My parents were very good together," he recalls. "My father believed strongly in family values and service, and that's how he lived his life. He showed us that service and commitment to our nation created the life and opportunities we had, which was hugely impactful to me later on. My mother, as well, was unwavering in her commitment to integrity, which she ingrained in us through our upbringing."

When his father received orders to serve in the Vietnam War, the DeWitt family moved to Winchester, Virginia. Tom was nine years old when they settled into their new home, a plot of land situated on the front lines where union soldiers had launched their assault against the confederates during the Third Battle of Winchester in the Civil War. Tom would venture across the railroad tracks to a big open field, where Star Fort sat at the top of a hill—a historical landmark even today. "As a boy I spent my days searching for arrowheads, mini balls, and treasure," he recalls. "We knew there was confederate gold buried somewhere up near the fort, and we spent our summers searching. And in searching, we learned so much about independence and problem solving. It was a dream come true, and those lessons made me who I am today, even though I came up short on the gold."

While serving in Vietnam, Tom's father returned early, diagnosed with cancer. He completed his twenty years of service shortly after his diagnoses and retired as a First Sergeant in 1970, when he took a job in the private sector working in retail. But the disease progressed quickly, and he passed away when Tom was only thirteen. Grief-stricken, the family reoriented itself, and Tom found himself with a new sense of responsibility as the man of the house. "My mother told me that my father had always wanted more for me, so it was time to get moving," he recalls. "She really empowered me to start making decisions about my life and to take responsibility in our family. I realized that if I wanted something in life, it was now up to me to make it happen for myself. Facing that challenge fundamentally changed the way I looked at life."

Tom's father had made arrangements such that his mother wouldn't have to work if she didn't want to, and she decided to remain at home

to be there for his sisters. She was incredibly determined, and when people told her there was no way she could raise her three children alone, she only grew more committed to raise Tom and his sisters the way she believed they should be raised. "She had the utmost integrity, and her refusal to give up had a big impact on me," Tom recalls. "Thanks to her influence, when people tell me I can't do something, I just drive forward."

Every dime the DeWitt family saved went to meals and other necessities, and Tom had to find creative ways to make money if he wanted to purchase anything else. He had done odd jobs for extra allowance over the years, but when his father passed, his mindset completely changed. "I realized I had to be responsible for my own success and that I couldn't just sit around waiting for things to happen," he says.

As a Boy Scout, Tom took to selling Christmas cards and other items all over the neighborhood. He finally earned enough to buy a telescope, which he used to examine the face of the moon and further his burgeoning love of science. As he got older, he joined a friend in launching a modest lawn mowing service, employing a push mower to trim the yards of neighbors for \$4 a pop. The money was used to afford bicycles and other novelties.

Tom's mother never allowed him to play on official organized sports teams because she didn't want him to break any bones, but he was always out playing football every Sunday with friends and on intramural teams. He joined every club he could, and as a natural organizer, he often fell into leadership roles. "For me, it was always about pulling in other people to get involved, whether it was volunteering for a cause or just for fun," he remembers. "I was very fortunate in high school to have great friends from all areas and with all interests, and we'd balance our activities between productivity and pure fun."

In ninth grade, Tom won second place in a science fair, which further motivated him to embrace the subject. He had a brilliant and kind biology teacher in tenth grade who inspired him to lift his grades in the class from B's and C's to straight A's, and the measurable success gave him an appetite for more success. He enjoyed chemistry as well, and he had an exceptional physics teacher during his senior year—a veteran who had served twenty years in the military. "Mr. Phillips absolutely lit up my imagination," Tom

remembers. “Those teachers encouraged me to test boundaries. I was one of the most fortunate high school students ever because I got to work with teachers that encouraged my writing on the creative side, and my skills on the scientific side. I thought I could do anything I wanted with my future because I had a love of science and a love of space. Maybe one day I’d become an astronaut. I saw a clear path in science and mathematics and was eager to pursue it.” As his senior year completed, however, Tom noted various signposts pointing toward military service. Tests designed to measure skill sets and recommend future careers would always match him with the military. Teachers would get to know him and then ask if he had considered it.

Driven by his love of science and by the confidence instilled by his teachers, Tom set his sights on becoming the first person in his family to go to college. When he was accepted at Longwood College in Virginia, he saw that possibility come alive before his eyes. Yet the direction of his path was questioned again when his mother told him that his father had always wanted him to go into the military as a commissioned officer. “At that point, I had absolutely no interest in the Army,” Tom says. “All I knew was that it would be incredibly hard work, and dangerous.”

Finally, during his freshman year of college, Tom decided his future lay with the Army. “Never underestimate what a role model can do for you,” he says. “As I reflected back on Mr. Phillips, a retired Lieutenant Colonel who taught me things I never thought I’d be able to understand, military service seemed like a great route to go. He was an absolutely wonderful guy, and I emulated him.”

Longwood had recently become a co-ed institution, and it didn’t yet have an ROTC program, so Tom asked the Dean of Academic Affairs about it. After he collected and submitted a series of student signatures expressing interest, the school agreed to launch its own ROTC the following year, when Tom was a sophomore. “It was great that we were able to do that, because I was willing to transfer to another school if I couldn’t join ROTC locally,” he recalls. “But I was able to work with the administration to create the program, building a path to military service for myself and countless others to come after me.”

Tom was able to afford college thanks to his father’s GI Bill benefits, which were passed on

to him as a surviving child. To make ends meet beyond that, he worked jobs as a lab assistant, spending many late nights cleaning equipment and cutting out small newspaper letter “e”s for classes to view through microscopes. His mother had also been a very frugal saver, and had set aside savings bonds for when Tom left for school. “There were things that were taken care of, and there was a part I had to work for,” he says. “Somehow, some way, it all came together.”

Tom learned valuable information in the classroom, but it was often outside of class hours that the most important lessons were learned—lessons about personal relationships, personal boundaries, and the difference between right and wrong. In addition to starting Longwood’s ROTC program, he joined several friends in launching its first fraternity. “I always had a desire to create and bring people together to do things,” he recalls. “As some of the first men to attend Longwood, we had the opportunity to build and create all kinds of things. We quickly recognized that the circumstances were right to do things with our lives and with the opportunities at our fingertips there.”

Through it all, ROTC remained one of the most enjoyable experiences of Tom’s life. After making the decision to go into the military, he was free to enjoy what that meant, testing his limits through ROTC and exploring his potential. As a young cadet, Tom spent summers working with the Field Artillery at Fort Polk, and after working side by side with active duty forces in the pouring rain, people started addressing him as sir. “That was eye-opening for me,” Tom recalls. “I realized they were looking for leaders who were willing to experience the same things they were experiencing. So if it’s part of your requirement to stand up in the rain as part of your military training, you better be the first one standing up. You better stand up longer than anyone else, and you better make sure everybody knows you’re doing it.”

After three years of training, Tom became the first in his family to graduate from college and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. And once he received his Second Lieutenant’s bar, he dedicated his full focus on leading a successful command—a responsibility that would become one of the defining experiences of his life. “As an officer, I was responsible for leading people toward achievement and mission

accomplishment," he says. "From day one, I embraced the doctrine that I was responsible for everything that occurred in the organization. Everyone's accomplishments and failures were my responsibility. It was up to me to create an environment for my command's success."

Tom's father, a non-commissioned officer (NCO), had often told him that the best officers were the ones who found great NCOs to rely on. Tom's First Sergeant became one of those people for him, keeping him grounded and helping to guide him in the right direction. "Thanks to the wisdom of NCO mentors who had been around for fifteen or twenty years before my arrival, I came to realize that I really did have the skills to succeed and lead people," Tom recalls. "In this sense, my first command was about growing up."

Tom rose through the ranks, taking care to call one of his First Sergeants at every milestone to thank him for his part in Tom's promotions. He led successful second and third commands, validating the path he had chosen in life. Through sixteen years of service, he thrived on the responsibility, enjoyed the people, appreciated the structure, and took easily to his assignments. Then, when he was a Major performing as a project manager, Congress passed a law that lowered the eligible military retirement threshold from twenty to fifteen years of service. "It was as if a door opened at that specific moment in time and asked me to walk through it," Tom recounts. "I wanted to be able to send my two kids to college debt-free, and I knew I wouldn't be able to do that in the military. With that, I decided to make the jump out into industry."

Tom's reputation as an excellent project manager quickly attracted interest from the private sector, and he was offered a job immediately upon retirement to try his hand at delivering services. Over the next two years, he excelled in that position but began to imagine the possibilities that could be unlocked if he started a new company. "A lot of people like to join established organizations because they offer job security," he reflects. "But if you believe in yourself, you can create your own job security through launching a business. Building your own company gives you the opportunity to set the vision and pursue things you wouldn't otherwise get to pursue. But most of all, I wanted to launch my own business because I had never done it before, and when confronted with two paths, I always take the one I haven't

taken and work toward achieving the most positive outcome."

Over the years, as SNVC weathered ups and downs in the economy, its most sacred mission became job creation. Tom also launched the Aurora Foundation in 2008, which has provided \$240,000 in grant funding to date to support veteran retention at universities across the nation, as well as the SNVC Institute of Leadership Values at Longwood College in 2010, which has helped teach leadership to approximately a thousand students and professionals so far. "The older I get, the more I feel that it's time to pay it forward," Tom says. "Creating jobs gives somebody else a shot at the American Dream they're pursuing. SNVC is designed to be an environment for those opportunities, 'giving people a hand up instead of a handout' as President Reagan used to say. I love to create jobs that give people the opportunity to excel and make their own decisions about how they want to live their lives."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Tom picks out a particularly compelling point of Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—the importance of beginning with the end in mind. Deciding where you want to be in two years, for instance, is less about the destination, and more about starting the journey to avoid stagnation. "Nobody knows what they really want to do in life," Tom points out. "If you pick something, your path may deviate, as mine did when I jumped off the biology track to enter the military. But it was my love of biology that led me to college, which opened the doors to become a commissioned officer. Don't wait for somebody to create your life for you. Be in charge of who you are and get yourself up and moving in a direction."

Just as importantly, having direction is a critical element of leadership, allowing you to connect with others who have the same ideas and want to work toward the same vision. "Everything I've done is thanks to other people," Tom avows. "Great people help to make it happen. I've always believed in who we can become together." Indeed, in calling up friends to volunteer together, launching a fraternity, commanding a unit, starting a company, or creating programs like Aurora, Tom's leadership has always been through creating opportunity and connecting people to it. Every opportunity created represents the hope of a

new day—whether for one person, or for the nation as a whole.

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt  
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*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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The logo for Bernhardt Wealth Management features the word "BERNHARDT" in a large, serif font, with "WEALTH MANAGEMENT" in a smaller, sans-serif font below it. The text is centered within a light gray, textured rectangular background.

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