

Herbert S. Ezrin

Where There's a Will

By the time Herbert Ezrin started his eighth grade year at Jefferson Junior High School in Southwest Washington, D.C., his will to succeed in school had been deprived of oxygen for so long that it was all but gone. Growing up in the impressive shadows of three older siblings, and with his parents tending to his baby brother when they weren't hard at work at their convenience store, Herb struggled with his role as a student. He had attended one school until age seven, and then another when his family moved to Northwest Washington. When the family moved again, he relocated to another building and a new group of kids for junior high. He had friends and liked his teachers, but in some ways he felt lost, and it reflected in his poor academic performance.

Jefferson, a school in a lower middle-class neighborhood, was run by Hugh Smith, one of the top ten public school principals in the country at the time. He had gathered an exceptional team of teachers, and among them was Robert Boucher. As Mr. Boucher got to know the shy boy in his algebra class, he saw something subtle hidden beneath Herb's self doubt. It was will and potential he was seeing, so Mr. Boucher committed himself to helping Herb find his way.

Herb began to notice and appreciate the extra personal attention Mr. Boucher made a point to show him, and the lessons taught in his classroom that far surpassed book learning. He'll never forget the day Mr. Boucher wrote a long algebra question on the board, turning to the class of several dozen students for an answer. Herb raised his hand and gave his answer, only to be told by the teacher that it was wrong. Other students offered their solutions, but he rejected all of them. Finally, Mr. Boucher put the correct answer on the board—the same answer Herb had first given. "When I told him it was the answer I

gave, he looked at me and then playfully tossed the eraser at me," Herb recalls today. "He said, 'Of course that was your answer. Remember that.' He was telling me that I had the ability; I just didn't know it. I just needed to have faith in myself."

The entirely singular education Mr. Boucher gave him lent Herb the confidence he needed to uncover the power of his own will. From his eighth grade year until he graduated from high school, he never missed the honor roll. "He was my all-time number one mentor," Herb affirms. "He drew out my capabilities in the best way possible. He meant so much to me, and we stayed in touch until the day he died."

By then, Herb was practicing law and living in Potomac, Maryland. Many years later, in the local Safeway one evening, he happened to notice that the nametag of the manager—a friendly young lady he spoke to from time to time—read Boucher. He asked her if she was related to

his beloved teacher in any way, only to discover that she was his daughter. "All the gratitude I felt for the way he changed my life ran through me," he says. "She took the time that day to talk to me, and the next time I saw her, she came running up to me. She had told her mother about our conversation, and her mother knew all about me. That school and that particular teacher changed my whole life." Now the founder, President, and CEO of Potomac Business Group, Herb has dedicated his life to using his will to find a way, helping others navigate the roads they find themselves on and helping them build new ones when a fresh path forward is needed.

Herb launched Potomac Business Group in 1994 as an investment banking firm in Potomac, Maryland. With a team of eight business associates, the company specializes in M&A, capital raises, financing, loans, turnaround work,



and the real estate transactions that accompany the sale of businesses that owns property. His daughter, a talented graphic designer, created his logo, and he set to work on branding—not only of his business, but also of himself. “I understand that, when I’m branding Potomac Business Group, I’m also branding Herb Ezrin,” he says. “So much of my success is built on the reputation I’ve developed in the greater business community, and throughout the country.” Herb also launched Tidewater Biodiesel, LLC, through which he’s working to start a biodiesel business in Chesapeake, Virginia. “The will is there,” he remarks. “Now we’re working out the way.”

Pushing through adversity toward achievement has been a hallmark of the Ezrin family ever since his great grandfather immigrated from Russia to Washington in the wake of the Civil War. Growing up in the D.C. area, Herb’s grandfather set his sights on studying classical music, but as a Jew, he was barred from studying at a conservatory in Washington. Determined, he went back to Russia to study at the University of Moscow. There, he married and fathered 13 children, the youngest being Herb’s father. In 1907, when his father was only five years old, a cohort of the family moved back to D.C., and while the Ezrin name still exists in Russia today, Herb was born a fourth-generation Washingtonian.

His mother, of Lithuanian descent, worked long hours alongside his father, modeling a strong work ethic that Herb readily absorbed and would pass on to his own children. Their store was located next door to a movie theater in Southwest Washington, and the Greek gentleman who owned the building had agreed to let the Ezrins’ store sell all concessions to his moviegoers. Herb began working at the store at ten years of age to earn his allowance, where he met Sidney Kline, a gentleman who sold products to the store. The two took a liking to one another, and for \$5 a day, a nice lunch, and an ice slush, Sidney hired Herb to ride around with him on his delivery truck, running parcels into customers as he idled in the street.

These experiences as a boy working for his parents primed Herb with highly marketable skills for summer jobs in later years. When he was sixteen, he was hired as the cashier at a busy store in Dupont Circle. “It was always jammed with customers throwing money at you, particularly at lunchtime,” he remembers. “Everyone else who

worked the cash register would crack under the pressure and come up short at the end of the night, but not me. I was used to the crowds that came into and out of the movie theater, so I was prepared for those later work experiences.”

What Herb wasn’t prepared for was the news he received in early 1961, when his local draft board let him know that his name was on the list and he’d be drafted that year. He was taking part-time accounting classes at American University (AU), and the Vietnam War was just gearing up. If he didn’t enlist or join a reserve or guard unit, he’d be placed in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, or the Marines, his fate lifted entirely from his own hands. With that, he began searching and finally found an opportunity in the Air National Guard at Andrews Air Force Base—the last opening they’d have that year.

Eight weeks of basic training in the dead of summer commenced. The Berlin Wall was erected, and a week after Herb was discharged back to the Guard Unit, he received a certified letter in the mail letting him know that his guard unit had been activated. He reported to full-time active duty at Andrews Air Force Base on October 1st, where he would spend the next year guarding the East Coast. “There were a lot of drills and exercises and things that needed to be done, but once we realized we weren’t being deployed overseas, I got permission to continue with my courses at AU,” he explains. “I had worked with an accountant previously, and I called him up to offer my help during tax season to make some extra money.”

Herb finished up his accounting credits and made the Deans List in 1962. Then, in June of 1963, he married Sandra, who he had been introduced to five years earlier by her cousin, the wife of Sidney Kline. When the two met on a blind date, it was love at first sight, and they never dated anyone else. They had promised their parents they’d wait to marry after Sandra finished her undergraduate studies, so the date was set for a week after her graduation. “She has incredible intuition and has been my rock through all the ups and downs of life,” he affirms today. “She’s incredibly supportive but will tell me when she thinks I’m wrong, which is important. She’s incredibly strong and loyal, and operates with the highest degree of ethics.”

Several months after the wedding, Herb started law school and kept working part-time in

accounting. He became an editor for the Law Review. The month he graduated and earned his JD, President Lyndon Johnson signed a bill granting full VA benefits to all who served through the Berlin Crisis, so he went on to earn his LLM in Taxation at the Georgetown University Law Center. Between his time in the guard, the Air Force, and a reserve unit, he spent almost six years in service before being honorably discharged, and today, he keeps a piece of the Berlin Wall—a gift from his niece—as a token of the impact it had on the course of his life.

Herb began as an accountant and became a CPA, and then entered the legal profession, landing a job with a tax attorney in a small office. To start, he was given a tax court case, a district court tax case, and a Supreme Court case, which kept him challenged and engaged. He left the firm in April of 1967 with a job at an esteemed law firm, where he worked for three years before striking out on his own, renting office space from an accounting firm, and forming a partnership with a colleague.

The two worked together for several years before merging with another small firm and moving the practice to Chevy Chase, Maryland, where it remained for ten years. Three weeks before they were set to move out of their office space, however, their suite burned down, launching the firm into a mini crisis that ultimately led to its demise. “We had ten partners, plus associates, but the team wasn’t pulling together the way I had hoped it would,” Herb remembers. “It was 1984, and we weren’t making our budgets. As the Administrative Partner, I laid out a plan that afforded a pathway forward, which involved cutting some overhead and developing a new culture of teamwork. I asked for a show of support, and not one hand went up. That’s when I knew that it wasn’t the place for me anymore.”

With that, Herb called his original partner and proposed they start their own small firm again, taking one associate with them. He practiced for several more years and then got involved in some major business deals in the food industry. He was challenged more in that capacity than he was practicing law, and was met with great success from 1987 through 1990. All that changed, however, when the Federal Reserve changed its regulation of interest rates. “Ours went from 8 percent to 18 percent,” he says. “It killed

our cash flow, and business deals dried up. We ended up liquidating everything and selling it off.”

Now, Herb is free to focus his time and energy on Potomac Business Group, where each deal and each client challenges his mind in its own way. “I consider myself a problem solver,” he says. “I go out of the box to solve a problem, whether it’s getting a deal done or protecting a client in a litigation proceeding.” Herb has also been a Board Member, Treasurer, and Committee Chair at the Association for Corporate Growth, and a Board Member of Exit Planning Exchange and of several charitable organizations. He finds himself always drifting naturally into leadership roles, as he has done his whole life.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Herb emphasizes the importance of honesty and openness. “Try not to be shy,” he says, reminiscent of the lessons Mr. Boucher taught him. “Speak up for yourself, and remember that everything’s always changing, so it’s important to always keep learning. And when you decide what you want to do, be the best you can be at whatever it is. That’s what people really want.”

In striving to do his best through his long and varied career, Herb has found his greatest accomplishments and accolades not in awards or salaries, but in his family and friends. To him, success is when Sandra is out with friends, and one of them mentions to her that people stop and listen when Herb speaks. It’s in the promise and potential of their three children and four grandchildren. It’s in an article published in the local newspaper about his oldest son’s avid involvement in the community. In the piece, the interviewer asked the source of his son’s drive to work hard and stay dedicated to charitable and community affairs. “He said he got that from watching Sandra and me,” Herb says. “That’s one of the greatest accomplishments I could ever hope for.” It’s in the drive his second son has as an entrepreneur, and in the passion his daughter has for her charitable and community work. It’s the Ezrin spirit, passed down from one generation to the next—the will that always finds a way.

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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

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