

David Pijor

Honoring His Father's Legacy

"At a certain point in your life, you make a turn," David Pijor says, "and then you realize that's exactly where you're supposed to be."

David's turn came after law school, when he realized that he liked helping companies, and that the best way to do so was follow the model of his father, who was a community banker in Lorain, Ohio for most of his life.

"I have a poster in my office of my father sitting at his desk surrounded by paragraphs of praise for Lorain National Bank – commitment to the community, to customers, to employees. It was part of an ad campaign to show how Lorain National's 246 employees make a difference every day. The connections are so powerful. I came to banking in part because it allows me to use the full scope of my training – accounting, economics, law, plus my love of entrepreneurs and my passion for helping them. But it was also a way to serve my father's memory."

David's father knew him very well. In the middle of a painting project one summer, David's father gave him some advice. "He told me to set up my own shop," David says. "Go to law school or med school, or become a CPA. 'You're stubborn,' he said. 'You shouldn't work for someone else. But be careful not to think you know it all. You need a good attorney, a good accountant, and a good banker,' he told me. 'Actually,' he said, 'if you have a good accountant and a good banker, you won't need the attorney.'"

"So I'm here because of my father," David says. "And because community banking really does do good things for the community. If small businesses are the engine of growth in the economy, community banks are the fuel for that engine. We allow dreams to come true."

'Here' for David is FVCbank, which he describes as "a commercial-focused bank with strong leadership and strong lenders. We try to do the right thing for customers even when it's not the

right thing for the bank," he says. "We want to be trusted advisors to our clients – we're the banker you call on Sunday night when something goes bad."

FVCbank was founded in November of 2007, on the eve of the Great Recession, when a lot of things were going bad. The founding board of directors wanted David to run the venture, but he was reluctant to do so. "In part it was that stubbornness my father mentioned," David says. "I wasn't sure I wanted to report to a board of directors."

To illustrate that stubborn quality, David offers this story: he was the valedictorian of his high school class, number one of nearly 700 students, but he had begun a well-paying summer job at a local steel mill before graduation exercises, and his work schedule conflicted with the rehearsal for that ceremony.

"I went in and told my wrestling coach that I wasn't going to be able to make it to the rehearsal, and he said, 'Well, then you don't get to walk.' I told him that was ridiculous – I was the valedictorian, I could figure it out without the rehearsal – but he said that was the rule. So I went to see the principal, and I explained that I had this great job, which I needed to pay for school at the University of Michigan in September, and I didn't understand why the rule couldn't be bent. Tell me what to do and how to do it – I'll show you my speech in advance so there won't be any surprises—I'm not going to take over the stage. But he said, 'David, a rule's a rule.'"

So David didn't go to his high school graduation. He went to work instead.

"I learned that stubbornness can be a good thing," David says. "The confidence of knowing you're right can afford a lot of strength, and being able to pick the course of my life even as a young eighteen-year-old was pretty meaningful – doing something because you know that you're able to



do it, and it's the right thing to do. But the arrogance associated with that can sometimes be a destructive thing."

"FVCbank was created by the force of my personality," David says. "I'm going to do it because I'm going to do it, and nothing can get in my way. But that stubbornness had to evolve into something more collaborative. The kid who didn't go to his high school graduation had to learn how to build a cooperative leadership team."

David was born in Austin, Texas, where his father was stationed during his service in the Air Force. After completing his service, David's father moved the family back to his home town, Lorain, Ohio, a city on the shore of Lake Erie known for producing steel, plastics, and industrial chemicals. Both of David's parents grew up there.

"I often didn't make it home from school until very late because I'd stop at Aunt Fran's house, or I'd visit Aunt Mary Lou," David recalls. His mother had two brothers and seven sisters in the neighborhood. "It seemed like everyone within a four-block radius was my cousin. We couldn't get into any trouble because all the grown-ups knew all the kids."

The extended family was so large that most weekends featured either a family wedding, a family birthday, a family christening, or some other celebration of Polish Catholic family life.

"Friday fish fries at the Slovak Home, Saturday dances at the Polish American Club," David recalls. "They'd put sawdust on the wood floor so the kids could slide while doing the polka. We were insulated, protected, and loved. It was a great life."

"I was sort of the leader of the gang," David says. "A good kid: I did what I was supposed to do and didn't talk back. I was stubborn, but they let me be. In fact, my teachers encouraged that, as long as I was respectful. 'Ask questions,' they said. 'Be curious about the world. And don't be afraid to have audacious goals. Expect that you can achieve the exceptional, and then you can.'"

David's father went to work as a teller at Lorain National Bank and gradually climbed the ladder all the way to the president's office. As a young boy, David didn't see much of his father because he served on so many boards and committees that he was rarely home. "Then he realized that I was growing up too fast, and he gave up a lot of those commitments so we could

play baseball together. He'd take me to work with him on Saturdays. The bank had an old-fashioned vault with a door the size of a room. He'd drive me around town and point out places where he had made a loan, or where he hadn't, and he'd explain why. He was unique in his ability to read people," David recalls, "and that's why he was such a good lender."

After finishing high school as the class valedictorian — and missing his graduation ceremony — David enrolled in the pre-med program at the University of Michigan, but much to his surprise he fell in love with economics and changed direction. He also fell in love with life outside the protective envelope in which he had been raised. "I was gone, on my own, and I didn't look back," David says. After finishing his degree in economics and accounting, he went to law school, which he describes as an opportunity to figure out what he wanted to do. "It was hard," he says. "My classmates were smarter than me." He became interested in tax law and contract law.

"I got offers from every law firm in Lorain," he says, "and I rejected all of them. I didn't want to be anyplace where being a Pijor mattered."

Initially he took a job with the firm where he had clerked during law school, and then started a firm of his own. "I had no clients, and no plan for getting clients," he recalls. "And I had to figure out a way to make that work."

David wound up following in his father's footsteps almost by accident. In the late 1990s, David was helping the vice president of a Virginia bank negotiate the terms by which he would succeed his mentor as the president of that bank when that mentor suddenly died. David's client predicted that his mentor's death would scuttle the succession agreement, and he was right. "So I suggested that we just open our own bank," David recalls. "'I'll do the legal work and you can run it,' I said." John, David's client, doubted that the two of them could make that work, so David asked his dad to help.

"Dad knew banking, so of course he knew we didn't stand a chance, but he loved me, so he agreed to help," David recalls. "That's when I learned not to be afraid of the impossible. Sometimes, if you don't know it's impossible, you can actually do it."

David and his partner launched James Monroe Bank in June of 1998, and they sold it in

October of 2006. A year later, as the global economy was plunging into free-fall, FVCbank was born.

"Our track record at James Monroe allowed us to raise a lot of money quickly, even in that environment, because there was no doubt that we would succeed, and we did," David says. "We're a focused commercial lender with \$1.5 billion in assets, which we've built by doing three things: we lend money quickly and responsibly, we manage commercial deposits, and we give away a robust platform of electronic and cash-treasury services for free. No service charges, no ATM charges – anywhere in the world – complimentary automatic deposit capture machines in the CFO's office – all of that for free. And as counterproductive as that seemed initially, it turned out to be a huge component of our success. I hadn't realized how much people hate bank fees, or how much they would love a bank that didn't charge them!"

"Since we were building the bank at the beginning of the Great Recession, we had to throw out our playbook. If your whole model is built on an aggressive loan platform at a time when no one is borrowing any money, what do you do? Well, we realized that we were actually in a very fortunate position: real estate values were collapsing around us, but it was a high interest-rate environment. When we opened, my \$25 million in escrow was earning almost 4 percent. So, making money on interest, we were able to cherry-pick loans with good collateral positions. We had no legacy bad loans. Remember that for those next three years, a lot of banks had trouble with regulators because a lot of their loans were under water, but we had no bad loans. So even in that horrible banking environment, we were able to grow – in spite of it and because of it."

"Recently," David continues, "we've developed a strong leadership team. Strong leadership is a competitive advantage, in so many respects. I realized as we began to achieve some success that the entrepreneurial DNA of the organization had to be modified and evolve to be more collaborative if I wanted to elevate the leadership of this team. How do you empower strong, passionate, competent people with all of their various strengths and weaknesses? It's been an interesting ride for the last three or four years."

That commitment to helping others – managers, clients, neighbors – is a legacy David

traces to his father. "His ability to motivate people was really impressive," David recalls. "He used to say that when you hire someone, you take on a huge responsibility toward that person. It's your responsibility to make it work, and if it doesn't work, it's your responsibility to find that person another job that's better suited to their strengths and weaknesses. Every one deserved to be successful," David says, "and when you hire someone, you take on responsibility for his or her success."

"Most people are capable of extraordinary things, perhaps more so than they realize. If you expect people to do extraordinary things, they will often surprise you and surprise themselves," David says. His management philosophy is to help people achieve beyond their own expectations.

David's advice to young people is to reach for the stars. "Don't be afraid of the unknown or the impossible," he says. "And cultivate mentors. Look for traits you admire in people and imitate them. A lot of my lucky breaks were the direct result of mentors who guided me, helped me, and advocated for me."

For the last 20 years, one of David's greatest advocates has been his wife, Kathy. "She's a very impressive woman," David says, "a graduate of the Indiana University Business School, and a great sales person, which means she listens more than she talks. A pillar of our marriage has been her ability to support me and encourage me in seriously risky entrepreneurial ventures without a second guess."

David and Kathy have five children, including daughters they welcomed into their family from China and Guatemala. "It's a wonderful, loving, chaotic family," David says, "and it's Kathy who's built that. I'm very blessed."

© January 2019 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– 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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).



BERNHARDT
WEALTH MANAGEMENT