

Guy G. Brami

The Accomplishments that Last

In the quiet hour following the passing of his father, Guy Brami and his mother stood side-by-side in the hospital room. When she turned and handed him the ring his father had worn all his life, Guy's eyes filled with tears. Georges Brami had given rings to Guy's two older brothers at their Bar Mitzvahs with their initials engraved, just as he and his brothers and his father before him had received rings. But at Guy's Bar Mitzvah, his father approached him empty-handed. "He told me he wasn't going to get me a ring because one day he'd give me his own," Guy remembers today. "We had the same initials, so it worked. That meant more to me than anything, because he was my hero."

Guy is now a Principal at Gelberg Signs, the full-service sign design, fabrication, installation, and service company his father ran before him. He enjoys the gift of going to work with his brothers and business partners—Jean-Luc and Neil—each morning, and at the end of the day, he's grateful to return home to his wife and two children. "For me, it always comes back to family," he says. "No matter what kind of day I'm having, they're always the best part. The joy I get from my family is why I do what I do."

As a family business without a stuffy corporate atmosphere, Gelberg Signs is also the ideal climate for Guy to confront and overcome challenges on a daily basis—a process that has driven him since he was a young, disorganized kid challenged by his mother to clean his room. "In thinking about what makes me tick, I've come to realize that I'm addicted to the idea of a challenge that leads to an accomplishment," he says. "Like my father, I like completing a challenge and feeling a sense of pride afterward, even if it's as trivial as tackling the dishes after a big family dinner. There's nothing like wringing the sponge out after you've wiped down the last countertop and finished a job well done."



At the helm of Gelberg Signs, now a 50,000-square-foot manufacturing plant specializing in metal fabrication, plastics fabrication, and carpentry, as well as full screen, digital, and 3D printing, Guy wears many hats and loves the process of confronting and overcoming the problems people bring to him. While most sign companies generally have large format printing like posters, banners, or vinyl for automobiles, Gelberg has mastered the complexities of sign-fabrication and can truly take a project from conception, to permitting, to project management, to fabrication, to installation and maintenance.

Guy's work spans the gamut of sign manufacturing to include both interior and exterior signage. He does large building and free-standing identification signs, electronic messaging displays on digital screens for stadiums and hotels, architectural sign packages like room or suite identification, way finding, and custom wall coverings or murals. "If you're going to display your logo or message, we can build it," Guy affirms. "We did nearly all the signs for Nationals Stadium, for instance, from the big sign on the side of the stadium, to the menu board you order your hot dogs from, to the signs directing you to your seats or the restroom."

Gelberg Signs now has around a hundred employees, up from forty in 1999 when Georges passed away. As the largest sign company in Washington, DC, and one of the largest in the mid-Atlantic region, the company is also a Certified Business Enterprise (CBE), designating it as a local, small, disadvantaged business that pre-qualifies them when applying for contracting opportunities with the DC Government. In October of 2010, the President of the United States paid a visit to the facility for a tour and then delivered that month's jobs report from its grounds. "It was quite an honor to have President Obama address our

employees and recognize us as such a notable manufacturing company," Guy recalls.

Having worked together now for 25 years, Guy and his brothers have gotten to know each other in ways they couldn't have imagined as kids, and have settled into their sweet spot as a team. Each has a business and marketing degree from the University of Maryland, and each is responsible for business development—the main focus of the oldest brother, Luc. Guy splits his time between business development and the installation and service division, one-off internal special projects, and marketing. Their other brother, Neil, handles the internal production and project managers, and all three come together to run the upper level management of the business.

While Gelberg Signs is now the Brami family business, it wasn't always. The company was launched in 1941 by William (Bill) P. Gelberg as primarily a display and exhibit company. They did traditional sign painting as well as specialty projects like building floats for parades or constructing exhibits for large associations and trade shows.

Guy's father and mother, who had grown up in Tunisia as French and Italian citizens respectively, immigrated to the United States in 1959 after the French pulled out of the country in 1956. In the land of opportunity, Georges Brami took work where he could find it to support his wife and young sons, Luc and an older boy who passed away in 1966. The language barrier was a challenge, but fortunately, his sister had married an American doctor who happened to have Bill Gelberg as a patient. Bill mentioned he was looking for hard workers for his small family business, and he knew Georges had managed the legal affairs of his family's textile business back in Tunisia. More importantly, Georges was an avid painter and an artist at heart, and his creativity could serve the company well. Dr. Mugmon connected them, and Georges was hired.

Over time, Georges proved himself, and young Guy watched it happen. As a child, he saw his father rise around 5 o'clock each morning for work, not to return home until around 6 o'clock in the evenings. He would be exhausted from a long day but still made time to sit down for dinner with his wife and sons, impressing upon Guy the sacred value of hard work and a close-knit family. "Anyone who knew my father always said the same thing—that he was the most honest person

they had ever met," Guy says. "Clients will tell me now that they remember working with him and what an honest guy he was. In terms of character, integrity, and loyalty, he was a model, and that shaped the three of us. I'm always measuring myself to the standard he set through those years."

While Guy's father was the breadwinner, his mother was the traditional stay-at-home mom. With an unbelievable inner strength, she survived the loss of her firstborn son to leukemia when he was thirteen—a brother Guy never had the opportunity to know. "Through the tragedy, and as my father worked long hours, my mother carried on the family beautifully," Guy reflects. "She didn't let that loss affect her ability to love us and keep us moving forward together. She was a miracle."

Guy and his brothers grew up in Hillcrest Heights in Prince Georges County. Sports were a big part of his childhood, and when a relative was married to the coach of the Washington Redskins, the family enjoyed the same season tickets year after year. Guy became an Orioles fan and an avid baseball player himself, starting with Boys and Girls Club baseball and then moving on to Babe Ruth baseball, American Legion baseball, and his high school team. Soccer found its way into the mix as well.

For his youngest years, Guy dreamed of becoming an astronaut and then an astronomer. He spent a portion of his childhood with ambitions of becoming a doctor like his uncle, and in high school he had thoughts of being a professional baseball player. Thanks to the example of his father, the idea of work was always something that excited him, and as an eight-year-old too young to have his own paper route, he convinced his brother to get a larger paper route and outsource the extra work to Guy.

He delivered papers until he was fourteen, learning how to make tough business decisions like when to cut off a customer that wasn't paying. Later, Guy got a job at a pet store, bagging food and changing water in fish tanks until he was old enough to get a job at a Hechts department store. At sixteen, he started picking up summer work at his father's facility when they had big projects, sweeping up the shop or actually making the signs. Still, he never imagined he might be involved in the business later in life.

Through his early work experiences and at school, Guy loved interacting with people and

getting a sense of what makes them tick. A self-confessed geek, he gravitated to science and yearned to understand time, space, the cosmos, and the history of mankind. He was also especially moved by a high school teacher who taught like a college professor, engaging students in an open dialogue lecture that allowed the kids' questions to shape the discussion. "It was the first time in a school situation that I was really blown away by how the teacher taught the class," he remembers. "I always wanted to raise my hand and dig into why a given historical event took place."

Computers were the hot topic of the time when Guy graduated from high school in 1985, and when he started college at the University of Maryland that fall, he decided to pursue a major in computer science. It only took one month of coursework, however, for him to realize that the field was simply not his thing. When he switched his major to business, everything seemed to click—an affinity echoed in the part-time jobs he picked up knocking on doors and generating leads for a home improvement company and manning the drive-thru window at a beer, wine, and liquor store.

"I learned that I really enjoy interacting with people," he remembers of his college years. "My colleagues would point out how much easier it was for me to just knock on any door, strike up a conversation with the person who answered, and land a lead. Sales came naturally to me, and when the professor of my marketing capstone class told us our first job out of school would most likely be in sales, I knew I was on a path that fit my strengths."

His professor proved correct when Guy landed a position with Encyclopedia Britannica shortly after graduation. Every new hire at the organization was required to undergo a six-month training program, and Guy was formally schooled in everything from sales, to giving presentations, to overcoming objections and obstacles. "Because of the training I received there, I think of that job as one of the best things that ever happened to me," he affirms. "And through the three years I worked there, I conversed with people of all types and backgrounds, coming to understand what makes them tick and the psychology behind decision making. I saw what people go through before they can say yes, and how I could make them more comfortable through that process and happier in the aftermath. It was a great experience, and I've

fallen back on what I learned there countless times throughout my career."

Just as Guy was embarking on his first job out of college, his father sealed a deal that would change the course of the Brami family forever. Bill Gelberg had passed away of a heart attack in 1977, leaving the company to his son, an architect running a firm in New York. Georges had worked his way up to Vice President of the company, running the facility and managing their major account with Marriott Corporation, so he naturally stepped into the role of President. He continued running the business through 1988, when it was sold to an investment firm looking for a manufacturing business.

Soon after Gelberg Signs was acquired, however, the investment firm decided to go in another direction, and Georges and his sons were struck with the idea of offering to buy the company. They were able to secure a loan through his good relationship with the bank, and the offer was accepted in 1989. Neil had been working with the company, Luc immediately joined, and in 1991, Guy followed suit.

The opportunity to go to work with his father everyday for ten years was a blessing Guy was grateful for in the moment, and treasures even more in retrospect. "By the time I was born, my father was 47 and had accrued a lifetime of wisdom," Guy says. "Because of that, he taught me things in a much different way than he would have if I had been born when he was younger, and I think that was a huge benefit for me. It was fundamental in shaping who I am and my character, both personally and in business through my twenties. It was incredible to get to spend that time together."

Guy's mother and father were together for over forty years, exuding a dedication, loyalty, and sincere appreciation for one another that helps guide Guy's marriage today. "Michelle is incredibly smart and savvy," he says of his wife of fifteen years. "If I have a problem, she's always the first one I take it to, and she usually has the right answer. I always tell my kids that if they hit a home run, they got that from me, but if they come home with straight A's, they got that from her." Michelle had a fifteen-year career at Lockheed Martin and now works as a financial analyst for a federal security agency, all while making the time to be there for their two children as they grow up.

Now, as a leader at Gelberg Signs, Guy

channels his love of people and understanding of human nature into his leadership philosophy by keeping his door open to employees who want to talk and his mind open to anyone who has ideas. “I try to go into every situation and problem ready to listen,” he says. “Our employees have great ideas, and there are many people who know more than I do, so we focus on always being open. I would describe my leadership style as malleable, looking for best practices, advice, and insight. In turn, people listen to me because I’m open and they know I’ll incorporate what they have to offer into decisions that are made. The answer doesn’t have to be my idea, and people respect that.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Guy reminds us that expertise takes time and diligence. “Young people want to get there fast, and there are ways to do that in this economy, but putting in the time pays off for long-term success and development,” he says. “If you decide you want to be an expert on something or be successful, you just have to have determination and put in the hard work to get there, and you will.” Guy has a special place in his heart for Covenant House Washington, an organization serving homeless, disconnected, and exploited young people throughout the DC area as they work to get their feet on the ground. Gelberg Signs welcomed a group of twelve young interns from the Covenant House workforce development program in 2008, building close bonds with the kids as they put in the work to change their lives. Guy is now chairman of the board at Covenant House, upholding the organization’s holistic approach to ending youth homelessness.

Covenant House helps young people achieve change in their lives that is tangible and real—the kind of achievement Guy lives for. It’s a

victory that’s solid, just as one can walk down the streets of DC and point out hundreds of his company’s projects. Visual, concrete, they’re the kind of accomplishments that last.

“In Washington, incredible services are performed, but I love that we’re manufacturing things and able to see the tangible evidence of our work,” Guy says. “I love feelings of success that can be measured—like when we put up a sign and hear from the client that they love it, or when a young person at Covenant House can finally afford to get their own place because they’ve landed a job, or when I get to sit around the dinner table with my family in the evenings. If you think about it, everything I love about my life now is the tangible accomplishment of the hours my father put in to give us a family business. We’re his living, breathing successes, and that means a lot.”

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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](#).*