

Eugene N. St. Clair II

The World of Ideas

Ever since he was a kid, Gene St.Clair has lived for the world of ideas. He was born an inventor, spending his childhood building model airplanes out of Legos and wiring up new creations in the garage. His love of building and inventing only grew as the years passed, and as an adult, he realized it would take multiple lifetimes to tackle all the invention ideas on his list – unless he had a team of engineers to help.

This dream sparked a wider vision, inspiring Gene to build a high-powered team of industry experts with the tools and skills to bring creative ideas to life. The key, however, lay not necessarily in the ability to shape and assemble physical materials, but instead in the ability to understand the human experience, the human mind, and the human condition. It lay in the ability to design and execute a concept with the end user's experience in mind, first and foremost. And it lay in Gene's commitment to creating a space where ideas are free to flow, transform, and improve the lived experience. Now the founder, President, and CEO of Humanproof, LLC, a human factors engineering government contracting company designed to nurture, explore, and bring to life great ideas, Gene has joined forces with other driven and talented individuals throughout the United States, creating an environment where dreamers become doers.

Although the field of Human Factors began with Frederick Taylor's time-motion studies in industrial assembly tasks, it became a matter of life and death for World War II pilots struggling with a lack of consistency across aircraft cockpits. After an enemy attack on an airfield, pilots would try to fly the remaining planes, only to find the controls and displays in unfamiliar places. Suddenly, user experience became a critical design consideration. The assembly line had been developed decades before, prompting the study of human motion and efficiency, but people were

now beginning to examine how a better understanding of behavior patterns could allow them to better meet the user's expectations.

Since that time, the field has grown tremendously, incorporating everything from anthropometry to ergonomics in the pursuit of improving product, hardware, and software usability. In several U.S. Government organizations, the discipline of Human Factors is now packaged with safety, training, personnel selection, manpower, survivability, and habitability to form Human Systems Integration (HSI), and though maximum results are achieved when these seven tenets act in consort, customers often have to hire competing companies to handle each component. Gene saw how these companies were incentivized to remain siloed through the design and acquisition process, preventing the HSI concept from delivering the return on investment it was capable of. "I took issue with that because HSI is something I strongly believe

in," he says. "I saw a big gap between what the government was asking for and what the industry was providing, and I knew HSI was capable of building better products and dramatically reducing lifecycle cost. I knew I could deliver the intended vision, and I began by starting one company to handle the entire process seamlessly."

With this vision, in June of 2012, Gene launched Humanproof to convene leading industry experts in each category and made the investment to cross-train them to speak each other's languages, creating synergy through collaboration. Designed to be a turnkey HSI solution for the government and deliver better products for less money, the company got its start putting together a strategic research plan for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The agency is in the process of upgrading the national airspace system, so Gene and his team examined



the challenges expected to face future air traffic controllers. Subsequently, they landed contracts with the Department of Homeland Security via the Coast Guard, and are currently working with a shipyard on the design of a new cutter. Humanproof has begun to expand into the Transportation Security Administration and beyond into the energy, healthcare, and manufacturing sectors, with plans for commercial work including app and website development.

Humanproof now has seventeen employees and plans to grow fourfold in the coming year. It's growth comes in part from government contracts, and in part from its role in the creation of a rich collaboration of engineers and investors primed to generate ideas, flesh out designs, build prototypes, fund projects, and bring final products to market. True to this unique model, Gene has created a company culture where ideas are shared freely, with each employee secure in the knowledge that their intellectual property will be preserved. "My goal is to create a compounding effect, where our team creates great products for our clients and is also empowered to foster their own inventions, allowing great ideas to feed off each other and promoting the ability to execute and move those ideas to market as fast as possible," Gene explains. "Humanproof is an evolving portfolio of talent and resources that allows us to do some pretty extraordinary things while having a lot of fun in the process. It was designed from the beginning to be an engine of innovation."

While the company's current upward trajectory is exciting, the future wasn't always so certain, and Gene remembers the risk of leaving a stable government contracting job to start his own business. The move took guts, but Gene was emboldened by the example his parents set for him long ago. Born and raised in Leonardtown, Maryland, he can still remember when, as a five-year-old, he watched his father take out a \$750,000 loan to start a real estate project. "With four kids to feed, my father was taking a huge risk, and I had the opportunity to watch it unfold over time," Gene recalls. "There were no assurances of success, and we very well could have gone bankrupt, but we always had shelter, food, and education. Things turned out okay, and I developed the understanding that risk is just part of the package of opportunity. It set the stage for me to take a lot of risks later in life with the confidence that I'd still

have the basics, and that things would work out."

Themes of entrepreneurship permeated his childhood thanks to his father, a figure of consistency who rose at 4:30 every morning with patience and perseverance, and his mother, who lived her life with heart as she held down three jobs while raising four kids. Gene's father launched a construction company which he operated for three decades, and on top of the property development venture, he starting a storage unit company and then a gravel pit operation. His mother, a nurse who later served as the disaster services chairman at the Red Cross, started a lighting center. As a kid, Gene himself was always looking for ways to make money, like catching blue crabs that sold for \$50 a bushel. When he grew older, he spent summers doing hard manual labor for his father's companies, shoveling gravel, installing water and sewer pipes, and constructing pumping stations for the surrounding communities. Through it all, his parents set an extraordinary example for integrity, morality, and values.

As a child, Gene retained a deep interest in aviation, but early on he grew bored in his classes and remained relatively disengaged when it came to academics. Despite a mediocre academic performance, his innate ability and potential landed him a slot at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida, where he pursued aerospace engineering in the hopes of realizing his dream of designing aircraft. Distracted by the engineering minutiae involved in the field, however, Gene didn't truly connect with his coursework until he took his first human factors engineering course. "I was fascinated to learn that a perfectly trained pilot in a perfectly designed airplane could fly it into the ground if they were distracted," Gene explains. "Once I started digging into the human mind and seeing how various factors influence behavior and decision making, I was intrigued. I studied sensation, perception, and learning, and discovered a real passion for assessing how even the airline culture itself contributed to airline crashes."

Once Gene found his life's work in human factors engineering, he started earning straight A's and shortly made the dean's list. He also earned his pilot's license, which he had been working toward since he was fifteen. Before he graduated from college in 2001, he landed an internship with

the nearby Navy base, working in their crew systems division on Human Factors for helicopters. Even then, Gene had ambitions to start his own company, though he knew he hadn't yet gained the breadth of knowledge to take the leap. Instead, he spent the next decade working for various government contractors—a sequence of jobs that allowed him to see HSI from the ground level all the way up to a headquarters' perspective across a number of contracts. At first, Gene focused on interface-level concerns at the field level. Later, he served on a project team writing strategy for an agency's implementation of a complex program with downstream ramifications. "I was able to explain to people at the highest headquarters management level how a program manager was thinking, and why something wasn't working downstream," he details. In this capacity, Gene helped agency heads better implement ideas and manage change, communicating not just requirements, but intent. From helicopters, to ships, to command centers, to headquarters-level organization, he developed a 360-degree, floor-to-ceiling comprehension of the HSI agenda as applied to various agencies.

Through his twenties, Gene was driven by the pursuit of an education, a career, and a success defined by material and financial victories. When he became a Freemason, however, his idea of success transformed into something much more expansive, defined by self-improvement, perfect tolerance for all religions, and societal contribution. "I started examining the concepts of integrity and morality in a much more intentional way, and I realized they were the very bedrock of life," he remarks. "I had internalized those concepts along the way thanks to my parents, teachers, friends, and colleagues, but surrounding myself with the culture of Freemasonry meant opening my mind to a worldview defined by the brotherhood of all men. Based on this idea that we're all in this together, I had to start thinking about the impact I was having on the world. From that perspective, I realized I was barely scratching the surface of what I was capable of contributing to mankind."

Thanks to the tenets of Freemasonry, integrity and morality became the foundation of Gene's approach to business, extending through every action and thought that would later shape Humanproof. The resulting commitment to transparency and fairness would become a

defining characteristic of Gene's company, resonating strongly with clients and evident in every transaction. Freemasonry also became a very grounding force in his life, allowing for a quiet mind despite the frenetic nature of business ownership to come. "The symbols of Freemasonry create a powerful impression on the mind and an ideal worth striving for," Gene explains. "These are the things that stand solidly, even when the rest of the world is in chaos. When things are stormy in my own mind or within society as a whole, I remember to remain calm and stable and revert back to my foundation of morality and integrity, which has certainly contributed to the success of Humanproof."

Now recognized by Leadership Arlington as a 2015 "40 Under 40" honoree for his community involvement and leadership, Gene understands leadership as so much more than just the ability to organize people to move in the same direction. It's a continual process, and one that starts with the very foundation of the person looking to lead. "I've come to find that a leader must be the living, breathing example of what he wants to see in others," Gene says. "If you're not the hardest working person at your company, don't expect anyone else to work harder than you. A leader sets the example, so ask as much of yourself as you do of others. Keep pushing yourself to be better and you will see those traits expressed in those around you."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Gene underscores the importance of lifetime learning in the pursuit of something you love. "The pursuit of money leads to the golden handcuffs, so make sure you're doing something you believe in and find worthwhile," he says. "Don't be afraid to abandon one path in favor of another. It's your life, and it's important to pursue something that makes you happy."

Gene certainly lived this logic when he married his wife, Melanie, in February of 2014. The two had met through a congressional softball club, and Gene had spoken to her at length about starting a business. Through that time, Melanie worked as a hairdresser, and a number of people had suggested she start her own business. She finally decided to leave her job to start a salon in Clarendon, Virginia, which grew to become very successful. "I watched her tough it out, writing a business plan and then putting her life savings on

the line to pull it off," he recounts. "A year later, I launched Humanproof. I think we've had a tremendous impact on each other, helping one another make the jump and commit to taking the risk. I'm very grateful for her incredible no nonsense work ethic and what a great balance she's been for me. I also owe so much to the exceptional mentorship of Paul Fauser, who continues to take the time to teach me everything from government contracting mastery to business relationship creation."

Just as he did when he was young, Gene continues to live for the world of ideas. But he's since built an infrastructure for this world that increases its power by countless magnitudes. Thanks to his commitment to self-betterment through public speaking and the Toastmasters program, he now has the poise and voice to deliver ideas to the world through award-winning speeches. "To pitch an idea to investors or raise money, you have to get out there and tell your story in a way that demonstrates your passion," Gene says. "Otherwise, you lose."

Gene has also cultivated the neural pathways to preserve inner calm amidst external turmoil, and the foundational values needed to build trust with clients and employees. "As I've built this infrastructure and this platform for

success, I've really come to feel that there isn't anything I can't do," Gene affirms. "Our goal is global, and it'll take passionate people at every level of operation to bring our vision to life. After all, it's the world of ideas that will transform today's problems into tomorrow's solutions, and Humanproof is committed to supporting this process at every step of the 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 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](#).

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