

# William Graham

## Building on Integrity

Falling in with the wrong crowd may have been the best thing that ever happened to William Graham because it hurt his grades, and that made his mother cry.

"I did *not* get in trouble at school," William says. "That was not me. Until then, I had never gotten in trouble in school."

But in the ninth grade he fell in with that alluring high school social group—boys who are unlikely to thrive. After a couple of months in their company, William was kicked out of science class, and told that he couldn't return until the teacher had a conference with his mother.

"I was terrified knowing my teacher would be meeting with my mother," William says.

In the midst of that terror, quarterly report cards came home, and William's included a couple of grades which suggested that he wasn't likely to thrive either.

"In those days, they mailed your report card to your house," William recalls, "and when I came through the door, there they were—my grandmother, my aunt, and my mother with my report card on the table. My mother just started to cry," William says. "And that was it. I was strictly an honor roll student after that."

He stayed on the honor roll even in the eleventh and twelfth grades, when he had to leave school three times a week to take his mother to her dialysis appointments.

William Graham, founder of Graham Technologies, grew up in Washington's Ward Seven. "There weren't a lot of resources in the neighborhood," he says. "You had to leave the area to find decent groceries." But the resources the neighborhood did have were the crucial kind—a few good parents, a few good teachers, and a forward-thinking public school that offered a course in what was then a marginal field: computer programming. A friend of William's grandmother had suggested that William might do

well to learn about computers, so when he saw that course in the catalog, he signed up.

"I didn't really even know what it was," William remembers. "I just saw the word 'computer' and I said, 'All right, I'll take that.'"

Most of the kids in William's neighborhood thought sports would be their ticket out, especially basketball. He played basketball, too, and he was pretty good. But he had seen plenty of players who were better than him wind up on the very streets they had hoped to escape. So he decided to learn his way out.

He was assisted in that endeavor by Mrs.

Tillerson, a dedicated teacher at H.D. Woodson High School, who introduced him to computer programming and, when his aptitude began to show, encouraged him to enter a city-wide programming competition sponsored by the Black Data Processing Association. His success in that event earned him a spot on the team that was sent to the

regional competition in Detroit, where they competed against teams from schools with much more developed computer science programs. "We got blown away," William says, "but it was still a great experience."

And it cemented his decision to stake his future on the upstart field of writing computer code.

William's mother wasn't able to attend the competitions that launched his career. Diabetes immobilized her. She was admitted to a nursing home shortly after William finished high school, and she died when he was 19. "My mom never complained about her illness or made excuses, and she never allowed me to make excuses," William says. "She was all about making it work, and that instilled a lot of confidence in me. She stayed positive so I would have to stay positive."

That influence helped William overcome the disillusion that followed his mother's death.



He had attended Incarnation Catholic Church with his paternal grandmother, and as a teenager, he was very active in the church's youth group. He went to church, where he prayed for his mother every week. "I kind of turned away from it after she died," William recalls. "I was very upset and a little bitter because I didn't understand how it could happen. You know, I was coming from a tough environment, and I just didn't understand why God chose to take my mom away. But time heals everything and I eventually learned to be grateful for the time we shared. I just couldn't stay bitter, because my mother wouldn't have allowed it."

William was working at the Hecht's warehouse loading trucks when his mother died. "In the neighborhood where I grew up, the statistics were against us. But in reality, my neighborhood was full of brilliance. Opportunities were just limited and money was tight. Kids were smart enough to go to college but had to work to help with family bills," William says. His starting pay was \$5.25 per hour, and after a year that rate went up to \$5.75. His manager told him that was how Hecht's worked—they would keep on giving him those little raises, just enough to make him think that he was getting somewhere so he would stay. "I knew that wasn't going to be the life for me," William says. At the same time, a friend whose mother taught at Strayer College recommended the school because it offered evening classes. After learning that he could earn a degree while working fulltime, he enrolled on the spot.

For three years, he worked at Hecht's full time during the day and went to school full time at night. "There were a lot of nay-sayers," he recalls. "It wasn't that people were jealous that I was in school, it's just that people who weren't in college didn't realize what it could do for their lives."

It did a lot for William's life.

Near the end of his college career, he secured an internship at Fannie Mae working in the relatively new field of Internet Technology, and that experience opened his eyes. "I went from an environment where people were just working for retirement—twenty or thirty years of blue-collar—to Wisconsin Avenue, across the street from Sidwell Friends, where kids are driving Jaguars to high school."

It also opened a lot of doors. "Once a company saw Fannie Mae on my resume, the

school I went to didn't matter," William says. After completing that internship, while he was still finishing his degree at Strayer, he answered an employment ad in the Washington Post. A company called Compucare in Reston needed an entry-level computer programmer, and they hired him. So in one step he went from earning \$5.75 per hour to earning \$28,000 per year.

"The programming at that time was proprietary," William says. "I didn't like the languages Compucare was working in, but I knew that I had to take the opportunity to build my resume." After a couple of years at Compucare, William took a job in applications support with a start-up company called Vastera. "Some of my mentors said, 'William, you shouldn't make that move, because it's a step backward, from programmer to support person,' but I wanted to get away from the legacy programming at Compucare, and Vastera was offering stock options."

"The culture of the company was great," William recalls. I got to work with the CEO—we even played basketball together—and I saw him take the company from the stage of just an idea to a great success." Two years after William started at Vastera, the company went public, and he used his stock options to buy a house.

So in 1999, at the age of 24, William became the head of a three-person household, which included his grandmother and his younger brother. Four short years later, his grandmother would die of colon cancer, and his brother would die in a car accident. "At the age of 28, the family I grew up with was gone," William says. Thankfully, William had his dad and sister to rely on for support when needed.

In 2005, six years after buying that house, he sold it for \$245,000 more than he had paid for it, and that money became the start-up capital for Graham Technologies.

In the intervening years, William worked for American Management Systems and Booz Allen Hamilton. "That was the job that groomed me to be an entrepreneur," William says. "Before Booz Allen, I was a technician—I sat in my office all day and wrote code. Booz Allen taught me to be a consultant—how to recognize opportunities, how to interact with the customer, how to handle interpersonal challenges. How are you doing with diversity? Are you going out to lunch with different colleagues to learn about different

cultures?

"I had a great manager who forced me out of my comfort zone. He'd call me into his office and ask what I was working on. I'd always jump right to the task: 'Oh, I am working on this project that is due on Friday.' And he'd tell me not to focus on just tasks. He'd say, 'I want you to think at a high level. Make sure you're aware of other opportunities at Booz Allen.' He would challenge me to do things I didn't think I was ready to do."

Part of William's training at Booz Allen included a course in government contracting, where he was introduced to standard GSA schedules, including hourly billing rates that went as high as \$204. When he realized how much profit Booz Allen was earning from his work, he set his sights on starting his own company.

He was encouraged to that end by a cousin with whom he reconnected at a family funeral. During their conversation, his cousin shared that he, too, worked in the IT field, but instead of working for someone else, he ran his own company. He agreed to meet with William and walk him through the blueprint for building his own company. Start with one employee, he suggested—yourself—so that's what William did.

William drew up the corporate documents while he was still working for Booz Allen, during a time when he was also in the process of getting a security clearance. Then he started looking for his first contract. The first one he landed was a contract with Data Computer Corporation of America, which was helping the FBI migrate from a legacy system to a web-based platform, and William had just done that kind work for the EPA.

"My first contract, I asked for \$100 an hour," William recalls, "and they gave me \$107 an hour. And that's how it started."

Graham Technologies, which William started in 2007, is an IT professional services firm that specializes in software development, cyber security, and systems integration. The company started with a workforce of one person and annual revenue of \$300,000, and now the company employs 76 people and expects revenues of close to 20 million in 2018. Their primary customers include the Center for Disease Control, the Department of Defense, and various national security customers.

"I try my best to hire the right people," William says. "Humility is very important to me. I try to make sure I'm building a culture of integrity

and humility. I'm not a micro-manager—I put the right people in place, and then I let them do what they need to do."

One of the most important people William added to that culture was his wife, LaToya, whom he married in 2003. "She has always inspired me and supported my vision," William says. "I wouldn't have succeeded without her support." LaToya graduated from George Mason University. She worked in a number of HR capacities elsewhere before taking over HR and Operations at Graham Technologies in 2008. .

William's personal integrity was front and center during a professional crisis that took him by surprise in 2013. "I was trying to build the business," William explains, "and I had just won my second prime contract when the Federal Government shut down. And I made the decision to pay my employees instead of laying them off or giving them leave without pay. I paid my entire staff, because I knew they could work wherever they wanted—they were intelligent people—but they were supporting my vision, and they trusted me. So I wanted to pay them. To do that, I had to access personal retirement accounts and investment accounts—I put it all on the line.

"I've always had that underdog mentality," William says. "On paper, I don't have the pedigree of an Ivy League education, but I have always been confident in my skills and expertise and the value I bring to the table."

William says he leads with his story, and his example. He likes to use his experience and knowledge to grow other leaders. His advice to young people is to focus on their strengths and seek counsel and guidance from those with different skills

"And I would say find a mentor. Mentorship is crucial—I had mentors at every job. The first thing I did in every new environment was find a mentor—and I wanted someone who didn't think like me, because I wanted to be out of my comfort zone and learn something new.

"Find someone you haven't talked to much around the office and take that person out to lunch. One of the reasons I'm successful is because I've met a lot of good people. They share their stories with me, and we brainstorm—I still do that to this day."

William is most proud of the legacy he's building for his children. "I'm a family-oriented man," he says. "The one thing that I'm most proud

of is being able to pay for my son's college education and preparing for my daughter's educational journey as well. I take nothing for granted. I am thankful for my blessings."

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– 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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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