

Al Espinoza

Imagination and Reinvention

Experiences in childhood and adolescence often shape an individual's attitudes, ambitions and successes well into adulthood. Many successful entrepreneurs are born into privilege, while others are born to supportive, nurturing parents who encourage their intelligence and independence. Al Espinoza, by contrast, had none of the early advantages typically associated with success later in life. His mother suffered from bipolar disorder, while his father was unstable, as well as verbally and physically abusive. Both parents were fervent Jehovah's Witnesses who forbade extracurricular activities and friendships outside the church, and these harsh restrictions alienated Al and his three siblings from other potential sources of support outside the family.

At age eleven, Al's father took a job in Idaho and moved the family from their home in Los Angeles. Growing up half-Hispanic in a relatively homogenous town, Al experienced even more isolation from children his own age. And although his father worked as a professional engineer, the family struggled financially. "I always felt poor," he recalls. "We never had anything, and we had to shop at secondhand stores. We weren't dirt poor, but we were definitely on the lower middle class end of the scale." His oldest sister, also suffering from bipolar disorder, committed suicide when Al was in his teens. But for Al, the defining moment of this tumultuous and sometimes traumatic upbringing was his decision to build a better life for himself.

"I was sixteen," he remembers. "My father and I had always had a bad relationship, but one day during a particularly nasty argument he threatened to kill me. So I hid in the basement of our house. I had to stay there until he cooled down, and I remember thinking, 'I can't control the first part of my life, but I can control the second

part of my life. As soon as I'm out and can control my own life, I'm going to make sure it's good.' That's something I always think of: making sure the second part of my life is better than the first." Al had always been an excellent student, and after that life changing fight with his father, he moved in with friends—managers of the local sandwich shop where he worked—and applied himself entirely to his pursuit of success.

As a student of Junior Achievement, a nonprofit youth organization that partners with local businesses to teach financial literacy, work readiness, and entrepreneurial skills to young people, Al encountered local businessmen and read books by larger-scale entrepreneurs. When his father told him to consider a career as a plumber, Al applied himself ever more fervently to his goals of academic success, college admission, and financial independence. The sandwich shop owners, Steve and Margot, were the positive role models he had craved throughout childhood. Although he had been born into one life, he refused to let it define him, working each day to build a new one through study, hard work, and positive relationships.

Thanks to his vision and hard work, Al was accepted into the Idaho State University, and, with his new credit card, he put an \$800 down payment on a \$20,000 house near school. After his freshman year, he was offered a summer job as an intern at the computer department's engineering facility, and when the summer ended, he was offered a full time job by the government contractor overseeing the work. Eager to embrace full financial independence, at age 19, Al accepted the job, transitioning from a full-time student to a night school student. Lockheed Martin later took over the contract and, seizing an opportunity to leave Idaho, Al took a position that required him to relocate to Washington, DC.



Never one to shy away from change, Al took his relocation as an opportunity for a second reinvention. “It really opened my eyes,” he affirms. “Coming to DC, I was kind of like a babe in the woods. Everything was new to me.” Ever the education junkie, Al began pursuing his MBA at Loyola University. He completed that degree and continued working with Lockheed, but over time, he began to wonder if striking out on his own would be a wiser course of action. “I saw how much they billed me out to the customer, and I knew how much they paid me, so I thought it made sense to try to start my own company,” he remembers. With that, Al set his sights on entrepreneurship. Of the transition, he says, “In the government contracting environment, I was able to build relationships very quickly. Within 18 months to 2 years of starting a project, I convinced one of the leads to support me going out on my own, and they agreed to subcontract under me. That’s when I became incorporated. I hadn’t dreamed of becoming a government contractor as a kid, but I was here in DC, and government contracting is where it’s at.”

Assessing his surroundings, Al built a new vision for himself: successful entrepreneur and government contractor. The next step was getting others to share that vision—something that, in the cutthroat world of contract work, involved more than a little endurance and tenacity.

It was 1997, and Innotion Enterprises was born. Its name, a nod to “innovation” and the “notion” that became a business, is the essence of Al’s approach of implementing ideas through innovation. But it was hardly smooth sailing right away, and the following years were an exercise in determination. For Al, it was a period of intense single-mindedness, punctuated by successes but often bookended by scrambling. He studied the agencies he wanted to work with carefully, and, like himself, his company was ever evolving, constantly molding itself to the needs of a rapidly changing market. “Everything I’ve done with the company has been chasing where the opportunity was,” he says. “Wherever there was growth in the industry was where I focused my efforts. We started in IT because it was the virgin field that needed a lot of support at the time, but it’s not our core today. When that field got overcrowded, we went into cyber security, and even though that’s still a great space, we saw opportunity in the market of asset management with foreclosures and

the whole housing debacle, so we diversified into that as well.” The business deftly moved from arena to arena, and even as they excelled in the IT world, Al’s natural love of real estate spurred him to again refine his goals. With that, he set his sights on working with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

In the beginning, Al saw far more rejections than triumphs. “I basically knocked on HUD’s door for at least three years, and I’d get the same response,” he remarks. “I didn’t have enough experience, qualifications, or track performance. It was quite frustrating.” In a meeting with a HUD contract officer, he even offered to complete the work for free, eager to build a portfolio and reputation by any means necessary. Al laughingly recalls that the officer scolded him, “The government can’t take things for free!”

His hard work and determination eventually began to pay off, however. Six months later, he was invited to discuss the possibility of a \$3 million contract award, which was far larger than any of Innotion’s other contracts at the time. HUD ultimately couldn’t offer him the contract, but Al reached out to a potential partner and proposed that they team up. The partner agreed, and the new duo won and successfully implemented the contract over the next few years. Al finally had his foot in the door with HUD, and he leveraged that new position to obtain ever-larger contracts.

Today, Innotion Enterprises employs 50 people and, in 2012, boasted revenues of \$45 million. Last year, the *Washington Business Journal* named them the #2 fastest growing company in the region, and moving forward, Al sees the company maintaining its characteristic opportunistic fluidity, moving from asset management contracts into the next up-cycle in real estate. “I see us transitioning from what we’re doing, going into real estate sales, brokerages, mortgages, and titles services,” he says, with evident excitement. “We rode the real estate trend down, and now we’re going to ride it back up.” To that end, the business is shifting away from government contracting. “I’m confident that, just two years from now, we’ll be completely reinvented once again,” he muses.

And Al himself is more than along for the ride. He is currently enrolled in law school, and he clearly isn’t in it for just a degree. Once again, he has a vision for his future and the fortitude to see it

through. A year and a half ago, he took a sabbatical to complete his first year full-time in Florida, and now, he's pursuing his JD part-time at nearby American University. "Law has a role in everything we do," he explains. "Understanding the law is crucial. The more you can understand the environment you're in—especially the legal environment—the better. And not only is it beneficial, but I also find it fascinating. And I hope this example shows the kids that it's never too late to go back to school."

Growing up as he did, it's hardly a wonder that Al's wife, Dawn, and their children are of central importance to his life. Dawn has been a constant source of support through business highs and lows. "She always told me, 'I never had any doubt about you.' She's a beautiful person," he avows. "She's very kind of heart—the type of person everyone loves." Al lists his daughter and son as his greatest source of pride, and hopes that his personal legacy will fuel their growth into responsible, passionate, and productive adults who shape their own futures. He also values community participation and serves as a member of the Shady Grove Foundation Board, while Dawn serves on the board of the Hope for Henry organization to provide support to terminally ill children as well as running her own company, DesignerGals.Com.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Al reflects on his own experiences and reminds us with serious certainty that we can do whatever we want in life. "It sounds trite, but it's true, and thinking to the contrary holds a lot of people back," he remarks.

"Self-doubt is our biggest obstacle. A lot of people, for instance, think that business is for other people—that they don't have this qualification that would allow them to run a business. But that's not true at all."

Indeed, as Al's pathway from hardship to success indicates, life is measured not by where you begin, but where you end up. "The power is in the delta—the change you enact yourself," he affirms. "Once people realize that they're in control of what they do and where they go, the world just unfolds before them." Imagination sets the stage for the future, and determination sets the events of change in motion, resulting in the kind of reinvention that built a flourishing business, a loving family, and a life to truly be proud of.

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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](#).

