

Rob Henninger

Bringing the Market Home

One of Rob Henninger's earliest memories is the cross-country trip he took with his father, uncle, and older brother in the family's 1948 Dodge. Rob was barely four years old at the time, and his father, a Naval officer and recent graduate of Stanford Business School, was headed to work at the Pentagon. Rob had been born at a submarine base in Connecticut in 1947, and shortly after that his father had moved their family to Palo Alto, California, where the Navy sent him for his MBA. Now the family was migrating again to Northern Virginia. But this time, though he didn't know it yet, Rob was home to stay.

"When we first arrived here," Rob says today, "Fairfax County was very rural with lots of farmland and some small towns. But that was all rapidly changing. Growing up in the 1950's and '60s, I saw constant development and growth. The landscape was transforming radically. I even remember when the Beltway was first being built. My wife grew up not far from there, and she used to ride her bike on it before it was open."

Steeped in the energy and frenetic pace of this booming community, Rob was not one to fall through the cracks. Instead, he embraced opportunities to be a part of that growth. As the county built new schools to handle the increasing population, Rob volunteered to work with a team of other students to decide on the official colors and mascots for the fledgling institutions, and to draft constitutions for student governments. He drove a paper route in one of the most rural areas in the county and also worked as a housepainter in the summers. When he went to college, he stayed in Virginia, attending the College of William and Mary.

It is no surprise to learn that today, Rob Henninger, 66 years old and founder and CEO of Henninger Media Services in 1983, is still here in Northern Virginia, and that his company is

headquartered in nearby Arlington. For a company that provides editing and finishing services for television and other broadcast media, it would have made sense to work in Los Angeles or New York City. But Rob was determined to start his company here.

"It would have been logical to go to one of those cities," he acknowledges. "Maybe it was stubbornness, but I loved it here in Fairfax County and Arlington. I was going to do everything in my power to develop our field of postproduction in this market." In essence, Rob felt a fierce loyalty to his city. It would have been easy to give up on it and move where the market was, but Rob was resolute: instead, he would bring the market home.

At least some part of Rob's deep commitment to the area goes back to his childhood. Before he was eight years old, he had an experience that would change him forever.

"We had a ritual in our house where, once a week, my father would let my brother and me share a soft drink," Rob remembers. "Our parents didn't like us drinking too much soda, so we could only have it once a week, on Saturday. Dad opened the bottle, and one of us would pour it into two glasses, while the other got to choose which glass they wanted. We loved soda; it was a big deal to us."

One day, Rob and a few of his friends were playing outside, when the other boys revealed that they had smuggled out a bottle of Pepsi, which they then shared. Not long afterward, two of the boys were diagnosed with polio. Rob's mother kept a close eye on him, and as soon as he exhibited symptoms, he was taken to the long-time family pediatrician, Dr. Katherine Knop, at the Yater Clinic in D.C.

"I'm really lucky she was our doctor," Rob says. "I was just six years old and Dr. Knop felt hospitalization could actually make things worse,



so she had our family quarantined and our house set up for my care. My parents monitored me constantly and Dr. Knop would come by the house every evening to check on me."

The months in bed were followed by months and years of physical therapy. While the disease crippled some of Rob's friends, thanks to his mother's close eye and Dr. Knop's care, the nerve damage and muscle loss he experienced was restored with intense therapy. A more permanent effect of the disease's course was to make Rob more aware of those inner voices that can keep one on track: his intuition and his conscience. "It had a big effect on me," he avows today.

Even after such a trying experience, Rob was driven to leadership positions in high school, and to try his hand at new things like acting. "We were at George Marshall High School when it opened and the drama teacher, John Reese, was a first year teacher. He directed our plays with very high standards and was a real inspiration. I got totally involved and began to set my sights on acting and the theatre as a career."

By junior year in high school, Rob was himself directing plays, which is when another student, Renee Guenard, came to play a special role. "We actually met in the eighth grade at Longfellow Middle School, and although we had a lot of the same classes and she acted in some plays, we weren't particularly close," Rob recalls. "Mr. Reese had asked me to direct a one act play for a regional competition where the other school's plays were being directed by teachers. Renee wasn't in the cast but she signed up to be stage manager. In rehearsal we had some huge setbacks, but Renee was totally supportive and got us past every obstacle. Our play won first place at the festival, but more importantly, I realized this amazingly strong, smart, and creative person was who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I guess she felt the same, and we've been together ever since."

Rob and Renee were married in 1966 while they were in college at William and Mary. He continued studying theatre, playing a number of leading roles in plays like *Hamlet* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, all the while holding part time jobs and starting a family. "By the time we both graduated we had two children. We often look back at those times and ask ourselves, *How did we do that?*" Rob says with a laugh.

Right out of college, he got a job at the Washington Theatre Club and was actually on track to become a stage actor. But at the end of the first season, a friend who did lighting in film and television got him a job that changed his life. "I had never thought about television or film," Rob said. "I was a purist. I was going to have a career in acting and go into playwriting. But then I got this one-time freelance job, and everything changed."

For starters, the production was prepared to pay Rob \$150 a day as an electrician, when he had been working in the theatre for \$80 a week as an actor. To Rob and his small family, the difference was considerable. Then, as he began learning more and more about film production, he became hooked. When this first project ended, he found himself in the middle of the early 1970s recession and unable to find immediate work, but he would not be deterred.

"I developed a strategy," Rob explains, "of volunteering to clean up and fix local film productions' lighting equipment. They had these equipment rooms, and I'd get them organized. I volunteered to do it in return for learning and practicing with the cameras, but an unintended byproduct of the arrangement was that the producers got to know me. They saw I was someone they could count on, and that I knew my way around the equipment. So when they needed someone for a project, they gave me a call. This was a breakthrough moment for me. I didn't know it at the time, but I was learning how to network. I was learning how to establish relationships and to create opportunities."

This led to a venturesome period of travel and advancement. Freelancing in various technical roles for production companies took Rob to Guam, Saudi Arabia, and Europe. He learned various technical aspects of crewing a production, and he became involved in documentary filmmaking in the Washington, D.C. area—home. "Washington is very strong in documentary filmmaking," Rob affirms today. "This goes back to the 1930's and the WPA, I think, and the fact that this area has such rich history and great resources like the Smithsonian and the National Archives."

With his school experience in playwriting, Rob started writing for documentaries. He would soon learn, however, that what he really wanted to do was edit those films. He wanted to apply his training in structure, flow, and development to

stitching a documentary together. Although he had no direct experience with editing, he again employed his strategy of building trust and creating opportunities for himself. Sure enough, while working on a film with footage from Saudi Arabia, the editor became ill. The producer knew that Rob was eager and capable, so with that, his editing career began.

"I just sat down and dug into it," Rob says. "And it was one of those moments in life when time just stops. You're working for hours and hours, yet your whole focus is rapt. You start at nine in the morning, and suddenly it's three the next morning. I was totally absorbed in what I was doing, and though I had a lot to figure out technically, my affinity for the experience was natural and complete."

Editing was a great fit for Rob, and he came into it at a time of rapid technological advancement. In the mid-1970s, large postproduction facilities began to open as a necessity for housing the electronics and staff that projects of such magnitudes called for. "I began traveling to markets outside of the Washington area," Rob explains. "I would go to nice facilities, and as the facility business grew, I witnessed the emergence of new technology. I developed a confidence that the art and science of the industry was all being figured out in real time, and that there was no set way of doing things. I saw that the process was being invented as we all went along because the technology was, and still is, changing every year. I became confident that I had a clear shot of figuring it out and keeping up with it."

And so, in 1983, Rob Henninger founded Henninger Media Services in his hometown of Arlington, Virginia. His father, a very business-savvy individual, helped him write the business plan. "Since then," Rob says, "he's been on the board of advisors. I wish I had his knowledge and skill in the area of business. He's been a terrific advisor, as has my mother, who was a professional bookkeeper."

Early on, Henninger identified and reinforced its core business values: quality, service, innovation, and teamwork. The company became a vanguard for the technological advances in video editing beginning in the early 1980s and extending through several generations of innovation through the into the 21st century. Two of Henninger's largest clients, National Geographic and Discovery

Channel, came into being and grew along with Henninger in the D.C. Metropolitan area.

Through this growth, Rob readily points out that technological innovation has sometimes meant volatility. "The hardest experience came between 2000 and 2003," he recalls. "We had a lot of talent and people whom I really valued. But because of shifts in the business, with networks developing their own in-house facilities and things like that, we had to downsize significantly and had some very tough choices to make."

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the workforce today, Rob expands upon several management and leadership lessons he's picked up over the years. "I really had to learn not to micromanage," he says. "I had to learn to work smart. We were working so many hours at the beginning that it was ultimately unsustainable, but we had established this standard of working that hard. And I tried to control workflow so strictly that it created a backlog. I really had to learn to hire people I could trust. The biggest test for me, as well, has been setting the course—establishing the direction we're going to go, and then setting the expectation and allowing my people to figure it out and take responsibility on their own to execute the plan."

Beyond this, Rob emphasizes the paramount importance of defining what it is that's most important to you, and truly standing by it at all times. "I'm most proud of my wife, my seven children, and my six grandchildren," he smiles. "And I'm also proud that I've been able to stay local to the area I love. I'm very proud to have contributed to the growth of our industry in this market—to have been part of its creation, rather than just its continuation. The vision at the time grew out of my desire to spend more time with my family, but since then we've helped grow a market that competes with the best work in New York and Los Angeles. And I will always be proud of that." Indeed, because Rob refused to give up on his city and believed in his ability to define a market through his life's work, the D.C. metropolitan area will never be the same.

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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

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