Andrew Canter

Clear As Glass, Strong as Family

Andy Canter's impact can be seen all over the Washington DC metro area. But if you're not paying attention, you might look right through it. If you've walked past the National Air and Space Museum, stayed at the Gaylord National Hotel, or passed through security into the Senate office buildings on Capitol Hill, then you've seen the proud work of Ridgeview Glass, owned by the Canter family and led by Andy, its President. Over the years, the firm has installed glass at the Pentagon, the US Botanical Gardens, and even the

White House. Indeed, Ridgeview boasts a legacy and success that's as clear as the glass it installs and as strong as the family that has made it all possible.

When asked what he's most proud of, Andy thinks back to late 2001, when over the course of several weeks, letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to US Senate office buildings and news media offices, killing five people and infecting over a dozen others. Amidst the panic, the Department

of Defense placed an emergency order to Ridgeview Glass to produce and install glass doors to improve the security of their checkpoints. "We have had an impact on this city that you can see and feel and touch," Andy affirms today. "Whether it's for government buildings or Tyson's Corner, we have played an integral part in the success of these businesses and agencies."

Andy first got his start with Ridgeview Glass, founded by his father in 1981, when he was still in high school. An exceptional student who, in his senior year, managed to achieve a 6.0 weighted GPA even with the added burden of AP classes, Andy was always very confident in his abilities. He would work all summer long for his father at Ridgeview, and when school resumed in the fall, Andy would keep working, first at a pizza parlor and then at a video store. And even with work and school occupying most of his waking

hours, Andy used that exceptional work ethic to carve out time to pursue another passion that remains a great source of fulfillment for him today: music.

"At thirteen years old," Andy says, "the year my father founded Ridgeview Glass, I thought I'd be a guitar player when I grew up." He never gave up on that dream and has played in several bands over the years. Today, he's a member of Chopper Trike Rebels, which will soon be putting out a record. "I reviewed our contract

like I would a Ridgeview contract," he says. "It's extremely hard to make money in the music business." In a way, Andy's success in business has helped him make Chopper Trike Rebels a recognized band in the area. "I manage the band," Andy explains, "and interestingly, my business experience has allowed me to take measures to make and securing gigs selling merchandise much easier."

With this combination of

incredible academic stamina, a flare for music, and an innate proclivity for entrepreneurship, Andy is perhaps the quintessential Renaissance man, yet he ran into friction during his college years when a liberal arts curriculum sought to force him into a mold he didn't fit in. After high school, he enrolled at the University of Maryland College Park, where he intended to study computer science. When he arrived there, however, he was disappointed. "I realized very quickly," Andy says, "that the liberal arts approach to education was a terrible fit for me. I wanted to be a computer science major, but instead I found myself sitting down in a dark auditorium first thing in the morning being forced to memorize the dimensions and features of the Parthenon frieze." It wasn't long before he realized that college wasn't for him.

"I taught the University of Maryland everything I could in about three months," he

laughs today. Before the end of the first semester, Andy moved back into his parents' house and started working for his father full time. With a blistering work ethic, unrelenting confidence, and a keen analytical mind, it wasn't long before he began struggling with his father for more responsibility, and ultimately more control of Ridgeview Glass.

"When I came back to the business, my father made me work in the field for several years," he recounts. "I went through the various levels of the hierarchy and gained experience with every facet of the business. I came into the office at 22, and started off with drafting, light project management, and estimates."

This was also a period when Andy had a lot of growing up to do. "Moving out of my parents' house was an important lesson," he affirms. "When you're 21 you might think that your parents' home is still your home, but you'd be wrong." Andy's girlfriend stayed with him at his parents' house for a time, which made for a less-than-ideal climate in the Canter household. As a result, tension brewed between Andy and his mother, who also worked for the business in accounting.

"My mom is a tough lady," Andy explains. "She was incredible at collecting payment and fierce in the workplace. Once I moved out of the house, we never butted heads over anything other than work. But she had high expectations of our employees." Andy and his family, as business owners, were working with great passion and total commitment to the business, and Andy's mom expected the same amount of commitment from their salaried workforce. This and other challenges spurred Andy to develop a leadership style oriented around fairness and understanding, and to find a balance between work and family within his own life. "It's important to have a shut off button," he points out. "You have to have the understanding that you have set work hours. If it's necessary that you work late, then you'll work late. We were working 70 hour weeks for the first several years, but when you're done with the day, you're done with the day. That mindset has allowed us to have a successful business and also a close, loving family that has never once threatened to buckle under the pressure of the business."

A quick learner, Andy was scheduling and planning by age 24, and in fits and starts the transfer of the business began. Although there

was some conflict, neither Andy nor his father ever had to choose family over business. "My father and I are best friends," he avows. "He was an amazing field mechanic when he first started in the industry, and later he was a superintendent and foreman. But as I learned more about the business side of things, I could see that this would be my forte. I saw opportunities in planning that he wasn't capitalizing on, and I started pushing and taking over."

Andy was young, but he felt more than ready to handle scheduling and planning. "I didn't have any ownership on paper," Andy says. "It wasn't necessarily about that for me. I saw opportunities, and I was eager to take advantage of them. My dad pushed back, but it was never bad—there were never kick-down-drag-out fights. But there was definitely the struggle of him losing power, and me gaining it."

Despite this subtle challenge, the business was undoubtedly growing, and the changes Andy had begun to instill were working. Andy's father could see that his son was making good decisions. His AP math background aided him immensely in learning both the technical and financial aspects of the business, and before long, the family worked out a way to split ownership of the business. Dividing things up in this way has actually lent the enterprise a stability and resilience that is atypical for most growing family-run businesses—something for which Andy and his family remain thankful today.

"Sometimes the problem with a growing business," Andy explains, "is jealousy over money between the partners. We got to a point where there were essentially three parties: my future wife and I, my brother and his wife, and my mom and dad. We split the company evenly between us, and it may have been the smartest thing we did for the business, as a family. Once we worked that out, by 1995 my father had all but completely handed the reins over to me."

Since then, Andy has kept the business profitable almost every year. The business has had to downsize and grow at points, but Andy has always been able to meet his goal of keeping a core of many original team members intact. "We have employees today who have worked for us for over twenty years," he remarks.

Today, Andy's brother, Matt Canter, also works for the business as a project manager, and they split majority ownership evenly between them. "I'm best at the big picture planning and strategy," Andy says. "My brother is better at the nuts and bolts aspects of running the business. He wants to get down to 64th of an inch. But while we have clear, defined roles, we remain cognizant of the fact that you can't be afraid to step into different roles and put on different hats. In a business of our kind, that's necessary."

When his parents eventually retired in 2007, Andy overruled their reluctance to get out of the business with anything more than a small retirement allowance. "I insisted that they stay on the books," he explains. "I told my mom she was crazy. Just like the parents take care of the kids, it's time for the kids to take care of the parents." Indeed, when Andy and his brother were young children, their mom left her job to take care of them. When they were a little older, she only worked part time, wrapping up her professional responsibilities by the time they were done with school so she could be available and involved with them. "We weren't raised by teachers and babysitters," Andy points out, "and I'm sure that made a big difference in my upbringing. I credit it a lot for my confidence level. A singer in my band had a child recently, and his wife left her job to care for their daughter full-time. When you look at the way kids speak and learn to interact, you can see that it makes a big difference."

Two and a half years ago, Andy's father was diagnosed with lung cancer and given a grim prognosis. Andy and his brother leapt into action

and were sure to attend every appointment with their father, and supported him through treatment. Today, the cancer hasn't spread, and Andy's father has lived far beyond his initial prognosis. "Your family is the closest thing you have," Andy says. "That's your blood, and I don't know how people get by without it." By sticking together through good times and bad and pushing one another to capitalize upon their strengths, the Andy and his family have built Ridgeview Glass into a thriving enterprise that has transformed the city of Washington, and the Canter family itself.

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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.BernhardtVealth.com and Gordon's Blog.

