

Jeffrey Rossen

Deciding to be Great Instead of Big

The tectonic plates of Jeffrey Rossen's world converged in December of 2002.

"I was flying back from my honeymoon and I got a call from my boss," Jeff explains. "He said, 'Jeff, don't rush back.'"

"That can be taken in so many ways," Jeff says.

If you're sitting next to the girl you've loved since you were in the 5th grade, and all you've ever wanted to do is be the man she needs you to be, and she has just become your wife, a call like that feels like a moment of truth.

Jeff was no stranger to turning points. Just three years earlier, during his 3rd year at Virginia Tech, Jeff had been offered a job practicing the craft he embraced at the age of twelve, after building his first pond: landscape construction.

"I went to a job fair at VT, and I met this guy," Jeff says. "We really hit it off, and he said he wanted to hire me. I told him I had another year of school, and he said, 'Well, I have a seat for you now, but I can't promise I'll have anything next year.' So I said, 'Let's do it.'"

With that, Jeff went to work for one of the largest landscape design-and-build firms in the US. It was a great fit, and within a year he was tapped to spearhead the company's expansion into residential maintenance in the DC metro area. "We were doing six-figure construction jobs, and then we had to tell the clients that we couldn't provide them with maintenance," Jeff explains. "So the boss said, 'Let's open a maintenance division.' And he put me at the helm of that."

Two years later, while Jeff was away on his honeymoon, the company that had lured him away from Virginia Tech decided to shutter its entire residential operation and focus on commercial accounts. His boss was calling to give him that news and to offer him a position at the

commercial headquarters in Gainesville, VA.

"I had taken that job because they were doing big work, and I wanted to go in there and extract," Jeff says. "I wanted to learn to ride the bike on someone else's wheels. But I hated commercial, so I figured there was only one way to go."

The next day, when his boss asked him to write a letter informing clients that residential maintenance would no longer be available, he did so, and he mentioned that he would be launching his own landscape company in the weeks to come.

"Same equipment, same people, same prices," Jeff says. "And I asked if they were in."

That's how Rossen Landscape was born.

"I've always been destined to do this," Jeff says.

He can trace that destiny to a family friend named Doc, who had a passion for breeding Japanese koi fish. Because Jeff was known for skimming tadpoles out of neighborhood ponds and taking them home to watch their metamorphosis, Doc invited him into the fish-raising fellowship.

"He gave me some koi fry—baby fish so small that you can hardly see them—and he taught me to raise them and cull them, and then to breed them. When they got too big for the aquarium, I built my first pond, and from then on, I knew that was what I wanted to do: build outdoor beauty through water."

That first pond was an eyesore, so he replaced it with another, and then with another, advancing his skills in each attempt. The third pond had such aesthetic and architectural integrity that his uncle hired him to build a pond in his yard, and then his grandparents hired him, and then a neighbor, and so it began.

Jeff grew up in Virginia Beach, where both



sides of his extended family have deep roots. His father was a financial planner who specialized in pensions and disability insurance for doctors, and his mother worked as a fund-raiser for causes such as Israel Bonds and the United Jewish Federation. He describes his childhood as very normal. "I was given every opportunity to be what I wanted to be," Jeff says.

"My dad was loyal to a fault, and he taught me how to be a good friend. While he didn't have a lot of patience for my shenanigans, he always defended me outside of the home environment, whether I was right or wrong. Mom is a doer, a lover of all people, someone who acts from the heart and selflessly helps everyone and anyone, whether they want the help or not. To my Dad's dismay, she was constantly supporting my hobby of collecting living things, and she fueled my fire without budgetary constraints. Without this support from her, I certainly wouldn't have become the person that I am today.

"I grew up in a family that supported causes," Jeff says. "I was always getting dragged out to work on a service project. My dad was very involved with a Jewish retirement home—for a five-year period, we would go every Tuesday night and lead Bingo. It was boring as heck for a high school kid, but that was my dad's thing, and I wanted to be part of it, so we did that. I'm still very involved in the Great Falls and McLean communities—as much as we can be with the business, because I feel like giving back and being that community partner is better advertising than advertising."

Conventional, seated education didn't work for Jeff. When his body was confined to a chair, his thoughts would drift out the window. "I was disengaged at school," he says, "but I was totally engaged with plants and animals. I had ten to fifteen aquariums in my room at any given time, and I filled them with lizards, fish, snakes, turtles, chameleons, even poison-dart frogs. If I could put it in a cage, I did it."

By the tenth grade it was clear that Jeff's academic disengagement would constrain him to community college, if he pursued higher education at all, but that didn't bother him. "I realize now that my peers didn't think I would amount to anything," Jeff says. "But I was too immature to realize that people doubted me back then, even when they made it apparent. And I had so much positive encouragement from my parents and

grandparents and other family members that it didn't dawn on me that I was a screw-up."

Another person who encouraged him throughout that time was the little South African girl he had met in the fourth grade: Francine.

"She was just different," Jeff says, "striking in both personality and beauty. I don't know what it was. We just clicked—as friends at first, but then in fifth grade she and another girl both had a crush on me, and I loved that, though I didn't really know why. I just knew that whenever we did something at school where you had to have a partner of the opposite sex, I wanted Francine to be my partner. We ended up dating through high school, and she believed in me when no one else did."

After high school, Francine chose to attend the University of Maryland to explore her opportunities, and Jeff stayed in Virginia Beach to launch Atlantic Landworks, a pond-building company he ran part-time for several years. He also enrolled in community college on the advice of a guidance counsellor who told his mother about a two-year landscape management program at Virginia Tech. If Jeff could show sufficient academic prowess in one semester of community college, the counsellor said, then Virginia Tech would let him in.

"My mother wanted me to have a college degree," Jeff says. "I didn't particularly want one, but I wanted the college experience—all my friends were doing it. And I always say yes to fun."

So off he went. Because the coursework was interesting and mattered to him in a way that high school academics never had, he excelled to a degree that allowed him the opportunity to transfer into the four-year program, at which point he addressed the issue of the person who wasn't there: Francine.

"The summer before our sophomore year, we decided our relationship mattered enough that we had to be together, and it wasn't possible for me to go to Maryland, so she came down to Tech," Jeff explains.

Two years later, he went to a job fair.

"Meeting my wife at such a young age has defined me," Jeff says. "I've always just wanted to perform for her, to do good and be a good person for her. I've loved her since I was very, very young, and all I want to do is be the man she wants and needs for me to be."

Jeff started Rossen Landscape in 2003 with \$200,000 in maintenance contracts from his previous client list. The company focused on maintenance for its first five years, and then added a design/build component in 2008. Projected revenue for 2018 is over \$5 million, sixty percent of which will come from design and construction.

"We're looking to build out the team with the right people, and avoid growth just for the sake of growth," Jeff says. "There's a book called *Small Giants*, which is great—it's about small companies that decide to be great, not big, and I think that's where we are headed."

One of the challenges Rossen Landscape faces is managing its workforce in a fluctuating economy. "If we have the infrastructure in place to do five million dollars worth of business, and then the economy drops and we're doing four million, that's a huge concern."

The company's growth trajectory reached a turning point in 2010, at almost three million dollars of annual revenue. "We provide a high-expectation niche service," Jeff explains, "and at three million, it started getting hard to maintain accountability across the company." So Jeff decided to bring in a partner (and best friend): Jason Navon.

"I realized that I could do more with a partner than I could do without one—that was a turning point," he says. "I knew that I could do three to five million a year at five-to-ten percent net margin by myself until the end of time, but did I want to do that forever, or did I want to do 15-to-20 million at fifteen percent margin?"

"I'm a great people person, but I'm not a great people manager," Jeff says. "I manage on touch and feel, and Jason manages on facts and process. For me, the challenge is providing direction to the team while working within the algorithm and without derailing the whole system—everything's an algorithm to him. That's why I brought him in and why he is such a tremendous asset to the business."

Together, Jeff and Jason have crafted a unique company mission: to create an environment that nurtures happy clients and happy employees. "It's a cyclical thing," Jeff says. "If the employees aren't happy, the clients won't be happy. It all starts with them. We feel that trying to create a remarkable employee experience—that's the secret mix. Over the past two years, we've put a serious emphasis on

creating an environment where people are going to thrive and want to work, so we can attract more top talent, and with that approach the right work continues to come our way."

"We've finally cracked the code on running a successful design/build business. It's all in our processes. We have the team in place to keep the clients happy, and now it's a matter of balancing our volume with our workforce."

The word that best describes Jeff's leadership style is feel.

"I operate on feel," he says. "Senses. Awareness. Understanding what people need and what needs to be done. Attempting to see the future. Visionary stuff. Touch and feel. Having a finger on the pulse—that's what I'm best at. I like to guide people into a path and then let them find their own way. I don't like having to answer questions about details for them. I like seeing the big picture and saying, 'this company needs this; it's up to you to figure out how to get there.' I'm good at identifying objectives and putting them into play. Jason is very good at taking those objectives and making sure they are executed by the team"

His advice to young people is simple: "Figure out what you care about, and then identify the possibilities within that arena. Identify your passion and make it part of your profession. And be ready to earn it—don't expect it to be easy."

"In our business, we talk about three things: get it, want it, capacity to do it. A lot of the time, people get it, but they don't have the drive. Or they get it, and they do want it, but their make-up internally just doesn't let them do it. For example, I would never be a very good therapist because I don't have the capacity to do that—I'd be sitting there crying with my patients.

"So when we interview young people, we ask those questions: Do you get it? Do you want it? And can you do it? And if the answer to any of those questions is no, we don't want to put you in a position to fail."

"My passion is the subject matter of our business. It's what we do, not what we are. We get a blank canvas, and we can turn it into something remarkable. That's what makes me keep wanting to do it again. And I love creating lasting relationships with people. I started with most of my long-time clients when I was in my twenties," Jeff says. "But what I've accomplished as a husband and a father is way more important than

anything else.”

“For me, sailing off into the sunset means retiring to a place on the water where the fish are my neighbors. The goal is to set the business up so I can semi-retire early and be on the water as much as I want. I have some clients who have retired at a young age and found that they made a mistake—that they feel empty without a ship to steer. But I’m crossing my fingers that when I’m finally lucky enough to sell this business to my employees—and that is the plan—I will have purpose.

The one object that is symbolic of Jeff is his tool box. “When I get home from work after a rough one, the first thing I want to do is go out there with my pruners, a shovel and a cold beer. As long as I have my toolbox, I can keep my mind active, I can make a living, and I know I’ll be fine.”

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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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).



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