

# Eric Dean

---

## Leadership is a Service

When he was young, Eric Dean visualized success as a business with fifty cars in the parking lot. By growing the creative spark of entrepreneurship into tangible, real-world outcomes, he dreamed of providing a great work environment that allowed fifty people to support their families, providing the means to pay fifty mortgages and educate fifty sets of children. "To me, that's legacy," he says. "That's why I've been driven to embrace the high highs, low lows, and risk that comes with being an entrepreneur—this belief in the importance of creating something bigger than myself that serves others."

It was just after college, when Eric spent four years in the Army, that the idea of leadership as a service became foundational to his life philosophy. The military taught him to lead from the front, eat last as an officer, and always take care of his troops first. Now the founder and CEO of Whereoware LLC, a DC-based agency specializing in all things digital, he practices leadership as a service on a daily basis. "Above all, I focus on engaging with the members of our team," he says. "Our entire inventory is the intellect and brainpower of our employees, and my job is creating an environment that allows them to be excellent. Enabling excellence through leadership as a service is what it's all about."

Eric and his partner started planning in 1999 and incorporated Whereoware in January of 2000, but it took several iterations for the company to land on the business model and expertise that have proven so successful today. The company builds websites, including ecommerce and lead generation sites, and creates and executes digital marketing programs, especially email and search engine marketing. "We wanted to be a full-service firm, creating ongoing relationships with our client companies," Eric says. "With that in mind, we started offering marketing services to generate

traffic to their websites. This created an ongoing revenue stream and also allows us to ensure our clients are getting a good return on investment from the very beginning. We like staying in touch with them and keeping a constant business relationship, and as a result, our client retention numbers are exceptionally high."

Now with a team of more than 80 employees, Whereoware is growing rapidly, and Eric continues to live the entrepreneurial dream he's had ever since he was a boy. Born in Dallas, he spent his early years in Austin while his father earned his graduate degree at the University of Texas. Their home was three blocks from the football stadium, and on game days, six-year-old Eric would stand in the yard with a sign advertising \$2 parking in their driveway. "My earliest memories are of going to the games," he says. "I've been a Longhorn fan ever since."

When Eric was seven years old, his father got a job teaching American history at Frostburg State University in Frostburg, Maryland, where he taught for the next forty years. The family moved into a Victorian house on Main Street in the small town, and Eric would work odd jobs shoveling sidewalks and dog sitting until he was old enough to get his first real job as a stock boy at the grocery store. His mother got her masters degree and began teaching at a nearby university as well, and with both parents in academia, Eric and his sister and brother were taught to be strong readers, writers, and communicators. "My father was the kindest and most respectful person I've ever known, and my mother had an insatiable intellectual curiosity, always pushing us to learn," Eric says. "Dinner conversations centered around the world events of the day, and we were constantly learning."

While both of his grandfathers were successful businessmen, Eric's family did fine



living on a professor's salary, and he remembers fondly camping trips and piling into one hotel room for family vacations to the beach. He played baseball, soccer, basketball, and tennis, and particularly remembers the coach of his middle school community soccer league, Ebbie Finzel. The man had been an All-American soccer player for Penn State, and he was a model of accountability and sportsmanship. "He taught us that when you lose, you don't hang your head," Eric says. "You get in line and shake the other team's hands and congratulate them because they were better than you today. Then you work on getting better. It was very influential on my character."

Eric was a mediocre student until tenth grade, when he decided to finally start applying himself. Thanks to his father, he was able to make arrangements to leave high school early, at age sixteen, and start college at Frostburg State University. Thanks to his father's teaching job, tuition was free, and the classes were far more intellectually stimulating. "I was eager to get going," he remembers.

After a year and a half, Eric applied for an Army ROTC scholarship and for a transfer spot at the College of William and Mary. He succeeded in both, escaping from Western Maryland and embracing a true college experience for the first time. He made great friends, joined a fraternity, and applied himself through a liberal arts education that taught him to be an effective communicator and synthesizer of ideas and concepts. "It's a great school, and I loved being around so many intelligent people," he says. "I also really embraced ROTC as a pocket of leadership training that came very natural to me. I loved learning key life lessons on the power of expectations, the weight of responsibility, and the pointlessness of excuses. The uniform fit, both physically and metaphorically. It was a great experience, and as we neared graduation and my friends were sweating through job interviews, I was secure in the knowledge that my military service would continue for the next four years."

Eric did so well in ROTC that he had his pick of assignments when he graduated in 1986. With the Cold War ongoing and the Berlin Wall still standing, he was drawn to the mystique of intelligence, opting to attend intel training school in Southern Arizona. He again excelled, and when it came time to choose his next assignment, he volunteered for a year-long tour in Korea in the

hopes that he would then be assigned to Hawaii. When his request was granted, he found himself a 21-year-old lieutenant witnessing South Korea's first ever democratic elections. "I'll never forget the buses packed with first-time voters," he says. "Students had seen how it was done around the world and were teaching elders what to do. It reminded me that I was there for a good reason."

Eric used the assignment to travel to Hong Kong and Thailand, and he extended his orders an extra month to stay for the 1988 Olympics. He was then transferred to Hawaii, where he joined a large infantry division. "We spent a lot of time in the woods training, and I discovered that the life of an intelligence officer was actually no more glamorous than that of an infantry guy," he laughs. "But I got to travel for exercises in Korea, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, and elsewhere, seeing the world and cultivating an appreciation for international business. I decided I wanted to go back to school to study business with an international focus."

At that time, the United States was enjoying a time of relative peace, and service members were given the opportunity to discharge early. Eric got into the Darden Business School at the University of Virginia and still remembers the bittersweet, surreal feeling of driving away on July 29, 1990, the day his dispatch paperwork was processed. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait four days later, and the "early out" program was shut down on August 4<sup>th</sup>. "My life would have been very different if I had waited just a few days to start that process," he remarks. "I did volunteer to return, but since the need was more for logistics and supply experts, I wasn't selected."

Instead, Eric applied himself at UVA and spent his summer internship doing corporate finance for a defense contractor in Silicon Valley. He discovered he did not like the work, nor the bureaucratic structure of the large Fortune 500 company. "When you're young, you always think you can do it better," he laughs. When he returned to UVA for his second year, he did two independent study projects focused on international trade and then landed a position at a small export consulting firm called HCI. The North American Free Trade Alliance was in the works, and he traveled to Mexico City frequently to develop export opportunities for small companies in Virginia. "We weren't very successful," Eric says. "But I did meet Heather, the woman I

married several years later.”

After two years at HCI, Eric was contacted by someone he had met at a conference—a successful entrepreneur who owned a textile company called Bacova Guild. Eric accepted a job as the export manager for Bacova, which had grown from a small shop to a company of around 400 people. The company was sold to Burlington Industries six months later, and within a few years’ time, Eric’s began considering his own entrepreneurial possibilities. With an exciting job, a beautiful wife, his first child on the way, and the feeling that they had the world at their feet, life was good.

All that changed, however, when Eric got the call that Heather had gone into labor a full three and a half months early. Their son, Patrick, was born critically ill, and the hundred days that ensued were marked by desperation and fear. Powerless, Eric turned to writing, composing notes and updates for friends and family that were cathartic in their purpose and reflection. In the end, Patrick emerged from the dark woods of uncertainty, and Eric and Heather finally breathed sighs of relief with new stamina and new understanding. “We made a scrapbook chronicling that journey, and though it’s still too painful to look at, it’s my most prized possession,” he affirms. “It symbolizes the love parents have for their children, and the absolute tenacity my son showed in hanging on. It also reminds me of the bond I have with my wife, because if we could get through that, we can get through anything. It’s the hopes, fears, and dreams of a family, and all the support of others who helped us through that time.”

Two years later, after life had stabilized, Eric again set to work on a business plan that would spin his own company out of Bacova. Heather, however, was hesitant, nervous about the risk involved. That’s why Eric was surprised to receive a phone call from her one Friday afternoon. She was at a conference in New York and had just seen Jim Valvano deliver a moving speech on the importance of following your dreams. She told him she was ready and urged him to share his proposal with his boss. When Eric was sure that she meant it, he asked his boss to lunch the following Monday and laid out his vision.

Several days later, the company announced that it was merging two divisions and shutting down its Washington office, and Eric’s

boss agreed to help him with his idea. Eric launched Mosaic Design Works, a factory in Bath County, Virginia. The goal was to turn it into a giftware company selling to stores, rolling up other companies into the model to create a distribution center for business-to-business sales of coasters, doormats, pictures, and other items.

It was 1999, and the internet was just beginning to change the way businesses operated, so Eric decided to take his business model to a local tech company to ask them to build an online marketplace. The tech company, however, saw a different opportunity. “They told us we shouldn’t bother with the factories, and should instead focus on building the technology platform as a marketplace where other companies could sell their products,” Eric says. “The technology was the product—not the supporting actor, but the actor.”

With that, Eric and his partner hired a president to run Mosaic and focused their energy on launching the new technology company, Whereoware. It started as an online wholesale marketplace selling consumer products to Hallmark stores, boutiques, other small outlets. Working predominantly in the consumer products channel selling giftware, Eric and his partner soon discovered that there were a number of other companies operating within the exact channel, but with several months’ head start. “It was the gold rush days,” he laments.

To get started, the partners had used money from friends and family supplementing an initial round of investment from a technology fund. They then competed alongside twelve other companies for a \$21 million investment from a group of trade show companies. “We had 25 employees but no revenue to speak of,” Eric says. “We had a day and a half worth of payroll left when we won that competition and the first bank transfer came in. I wrote the balance up on a white board in front of the whole team, starting from the right-hand digit of the figure. The 0 became 00, then 000, then 0,000, and finally over a million dollars. The room exploded in excitement.”

The company charged forward, hiring 45 people and building out the product while landing customers. But it didn’t take long for the dotcom bubble to burst, and ten months later, they were forced to undergo a heavy round of layoffs. “It really is terrible to have to look someone in the eye and tell them they did a great job but, through no fault of their own, they have to go home and tell

their spouse and kids that they lost their job,” he says. “Going through that, I was very committed to do all I could so that I never had to repeat it. We’ve been blessed that since that day of layoffs, we’ve never had another one, despite some very hard times.”

Around that time, in 2002, the bank called the loan for Mosaic. Heather had cosigned on the agreement and happened to be the one who opened the letter first. “She called me to tell me,” Eric remembers. “As a lawyer, she’s much more risk-averse than I am, so it was hard on her. Fortunately, we were able to transition the company, and my partner and I decided to part ways. He took Mosaic while I took Whereoware, and both are still growing today.”

Eric guided Whereoware back from the edge by keeping it flexible and nimble, changing the business model a few times along the way. It flipped away from the idea of its marketplace as the product, developing into the successful digital marketing agency it is today. “Being an entrepreneur has definitely delivered many lessons in humility,” Eric affirms. “But once we clawed our way back to profitability, we were able to keep it that way, thanks to the company’s culture of excellence and innovation.” Thanks to this vision, the company won a Trailblazer Award from the giftware industry in 2014 for its innovative approach to tech. It won a Beacon Award from IBM in 2015 for its software products, as well as a Direct Marketing Association Innovation Award in 2016. “We’ve got a lot of momentum right now,” says Eric.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Eric underscores the

importance of trying new things and taking initiative—tenets he has focused on as a father to Patrick and his second son, Drew. “Stretch your mind by trying new things,” he says. “I look for bright eyes, a spark, and the willingness to take an extra five minutes to make a good job great. Constantly strive to do the best you can, no matter what job you’re doing at the time, because it’s all those small professional victories that amount to the legacy of your life.” Today, instead of a fifty-person business that pays for fifty mortgages and education for fifty sets of kids, Whereoware is an eighty-person company and counting. It’s thanks to a lifetime of taking those extra five minutes, and to the heart of service that beat just as strong long after Eric folded up his uniform for the last time.

© April 2017 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

— 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](#).*