

John Foster-Bey

Small Steps for Big Changes

When John Foster-Bey woke up on the pavement in the middle of a highway, he could barely stay conscious long enough to wonder how he had gotten there. The next thing he remembered was waking up in the hospital, sore and bandaged, with the faint recollection of a car accident and a growing panic over the other passengers in his car—all kids who had been accompanying him to a Youth Development conference at the University of Vermont.

Before the accident, John had been working in a small Connecticut town for a youth center as a Deputy Director for a new program called Positive Youth Development. “We were trying to engage and redevelop the whole community to make it better for young people to grow up in,” he says. The program required the directors to go to conferences all over the area, including one at the University of Vermont. Because that particular conference fell over summer vacation, they decided to take a handful of students to join in on the experience, so John took one car full of kids, and the program’s Director took another.

On the drive home from the conference, one of the students, who had recently earned her driver’s license, wanted to practice driving, so he decided to let her take over for a while. They had been going along smoothly, until suddenly, a motorcycle cut them off. The student lost control of the car, and John was thrown from his seat into the middle of the highway. “My leg and lower back were badly broken, and I was suffering from internal injuries, but when you’re that badly hurt all at once, you don’t feel most of the pain,” he recalls. “Even if I had felt it, I was too worried about the kids to notice.”

Thankfully, everyone else in the car suffered little more than whiplash, and while it took John well over a year to fully recover, from relearning how to walk to having a spinal fusion,

he knew he was lucky to be alive. “It was a defining moment for me, because even though I was doing meaningful things for the community, I realized I could be doing even more,” he recalls. “I wanted to open up some more doors and tap deeper into my abilities to help the people around me, so I earned my MBA and started applying for different jobs that would push me more on economic issues. It was the time to do it, because I had realized how quickly things can change and how important it is to live life to the fullest each day.”



John kept the promise he made to himself and dug deeper into finding solutions for the issues that plague society, and today, he is the President and CEO of CSR Incorporated, a company dedicated to providing professional and technical consulting and research services for the betterment of society. CSR was initially started in 1978 when an engineering company that had been in existence since the 1960’s decided to enter the domain of government contracting. Since that time, the company has been focused on providing consulting services and research to government, private, and nonprofit organizations nationwide, focusing on social services, juvenile and criminal justice, health policy, economics, and education.

What makes CSR unique is not only its breadth of capabilities, but also the certain stamina required to be a leader in its field for over 35 years. For the past two decades, the company has consistently achieved between \$8 and \$10 million in revenue, but John hopes to see those numbers double within the next five to six years. “The world has shifted in such a way that, if we maintain a steady state, we will essentially become irrelevant,” he explains. “We are currently classified as a small business, but we have identified some target goals to work toward, and I’m determined to meet them. My hope is that we

will define ourselves across fields as a leader who really makes a difference. If people set out to do performance measurement in certain fields, I want our name to come immediately to mind. When we do work with grantees, I want someone to say that we really understood the folks we were working with, as well as the context of those services.”

John was initially brought into CSR in 2008 to manage the company’s Research and Evaluation Division, with little thought in his mind of one day assuming leadership of the company. Yet the previous President and CEO, who was a founder of the company and had held her position for 33 years, had been open about the fact that she was looking to retire in the near future, so when she approached him about filling her shoes, he was not entirely surprised. After a brief transition period, he officially took over in December of 2011, and while CSR is employee-owned through an employee stock option plan, John has a large stake in the business and frequently consults with an outside group of advisors around financial and strategic business issues. “I think the President of any company needs to have someone to be accountable to, but also someone to turn to for solid advice,” he says. “One of the things I now understand that I didn’t fully grasp coming into this is that, when you take over something, you need someone you can turn to who will always be honest with you—for your sake as a leader just as much as for the well being of the company.”

While John has always been an entrepreneur at heart, he credits his family’s tremendous work ethic and sense of values for helping him get to where he is today. His grandfather was born in Barbados in 1880 and traveled to America when he was 12 on a merchant marine ship. “My cousin, who is a history professor, has done the work of chronicling his life, and we’ve found he has a very colorful story,” John says. “He helped build the Panama Canal and created his own carpentry business building houses. For most of his life, he worked for himself, and that’s something I had the opportunity to absorb growing up. I was aware he was his own boss, and I think that rubbed off on me early on.”

John’s father was born in Harlem, and while he was a trained plumber, being an African American in the decades before the passage and full implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act made it all but impossible for him to find work in his field. Instead, he joined his father in building

houses and eventually advanced to work for the New York Transit Authority. “He worked nights, but we still saw him all the time,” John recalls. “The whole family always had dinner together every evening before he went off to work.” When he retired, John’s father was finally able to pursue his creative interests in art and music.

John was born in New York and grew up in the Bronx before moving to Queens when he was in fifth grade. He was the oldest of four boys, and when his father began earning a better living, his mother was able to stay at home with John and his siblings for most of their childhood.

One of John’s brothers was only a year younger than him, so when the boys were old enough, they decided to create their own paper route. “At the time, we lived in the projects, so no one delivered newspapers to our building or the ones around us,” he remembers. “The only way to get your paper was to walk down to the corner store, so every Sunday, my brother and I would use our combined allowance of fifty cents to buy the five cent newspapers. We’d then go door to door and sell them for ten cents. We would save some of the money we made and use the rest to buy more newspapers, so some weekends, we could make as much as five dollars a piece.” After a while, John’s newspaper business started doing so well that older kids would try to mug them for their earnings, so he hired his neighbor, a boy twice his size, to act as their body guard. “He was really nice and really big, so we gave him a third of our money to follow us around all morning and protect us,” John laughs.

Even though his early entrepreneurial endeavors had proven successful, John was more motivated by comic book buying power than by the prospect of saving money. But luckily, his mother was very money-savvy and taught him how to be responsible for himself. “Growing up, we didn’t have a lot of money, but we never went without,” he says. “My parents also had a very strong moral compass which they passed on to us, so I always wanted to feel like I was contributing. I would even offer some of my newspaper money to my mother, but she only ever put it away for me later.”

Throughout his childhood years, his parents encouraged his education, as well as his love for sports. He was an avid baseball player, and while he spent most of his time playing pick-up games or with his neighborhood league, he was

always able to keep his grades up. "My parents always wanted us to have a sense of how to prepare ourselves for whatever might come up in life," he says. "My mom in particular never said I had to do this or that, but that I needed to have skills so that no matter what else happened, I could fall back on them."

During his sophomore year of high school, John decided to keep his friends company at basketball tryouts. His uncle had often taken him to the park to shoot hoops as a kid, but until those tryouts, he had never really given the game much thought. "That day, I found I could run the court and jump to pretty impressive heights, but I couldn't even catch a ball," he laughs. "I caught it once and tried to go for a layup, and the ball ended up stuck on the backboard."

Although the Varsity coach had laughed at John, he saw the boy's potential, so he put him on the JV team, and every day, he would work with him privately at the park near his house. The coach's premonitions proved correct, and John quickly accelerated to the star of the Varsity team, landing himself a full academic scholarship to the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. "To this day, I can't understand why he would take that much time to focus on me," John says. "There's nothing about me that would make me look like a great player, but he looked beyond the surface and found something in terms of my personality and work ethic that he was willing to invest in. If that hadn't happened, my life would have been very different."

John had always had a deep love for history that he inherited from his father, who kept volumes of history books on their shelves at home. Thus, when he started at the University of Bridgeport, he considered majoring in the subject. "I had an idea that I could use history to make a difference in people's lives. There are lessons from times past that might help people think of how to improve their own situations," he says. "However, I quickly realized that my vision for what one could do with history was very different from my professors' visions, and that posed a problem." John decided to abandon the major for one that had a stronger emphasis on social activism, so he pursued Public Administration and Community Development instead.

Once John had entered the field of community development, he found that his natural desire to educate and improve people's lives gave

him an edge to push the boundaries and try new ideas. For his first job out of undergrad, he ran a youth center in a settlement house serving teenage residents for one of the most difficult housing projects in Connecticut. "These kids were expected to achieve very little in life," he said. "But I was able to engage a group of them to tell a story about their lives and their community. With the help of the Audio-Visual Department of the University of Bridgeport, they got access to portable video equipment and made a very powerful documentary, getting footage from all walks of life in their community."

Shortly after he graduated, a close friend introduced John to a new program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the International City Management Association (ICMA) that had a partnership with many colleges and universities around the country to recruit minorities into the field of city management. He applied and was accepted into a fellowship to earn his Master's Degree from the University of Hartford in Public Administration. When he graduated in 1976, he went on to work for the city of Hartford and the Town of Stratford in city management, community development, employment and training, and youth development.

It was during his time working for the Town of Stratford that John, at the age of 27, suffered the massive car accident, so with his newfound stamina and determination, he applied for his MBA in the hope of learning more about economic development and the economic change process. Equipped with this deeper understanding, he went on to study at the Yale School of Management, and after graduating, he decided to enter the world of corporate America to learn more about the economics he was trying so hard to make a difference in.

Because he had earned the highest grade in his finance class at Yale, John was hotly recruited by Morgan Stanley to work on Wall Street, but he turned them down to work for a manufacturing company instead. "I wanted to see how things were actually made, and how those big decisions are tackled, which was a great experience," he says. After the manufacturing company, he worked for a telephone company for several years just after AT&T had broken up, when the regional companies were trying to re-operate in an unregulated world. "They were putting

together new business development plans, so I went to work for Southern New England Telephone Company (SNETCO) to help them think through those processes," he says.

From there, John went on to work as a Program Officer at the Ford Foundation, where he focused on making program-related investments. He got involved in their Urban Poverty grant making, where he worked for roughly five years on revitalizing neighborhoods by building their local economies. "The theory was that poor neighborhoods could become less poor by becoming self-sufficient," he explains. "These neighborhoods should create investment vehicles that allow residents to reinvest their resources back into the community, thereby creating jobs and economic growth. This led to a preference for foundations and public funders who invested in small and minority business development funds that provided financial incentives to create businesses that served local needs and hired local residents as employees. The end result, then, was a virtuous circle that led to positive economic change and, eventually, poverty reduction."

After five years with Ford, John moved to Chicago to work as Associate Director for the MacArthur Foundation. After several more years, he moved to Minnesota to serve as Vice President of Programs at the Northwest Area Foundation, where he worked with Indian tribes and rural communities.

After several years in Minnesota, his wife, who had been working at the University of Minnesota, had come up with a brilliant research project and was recruited to go to Harvard and then Johns Hopkins, so the couple relocated to D.C. John had begun working at the Urban Institute headquarters as a Senior Associate, where he directed research efforts and began working more closely with the federal government. There, he met the then-CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Services through a family friend, and they found mutual interest in working together on urban development and poverty problems. "The next day, I got a call from him, offering to hire me," he laughs. "I was familiar with their program and thought they could really make some difference, so I saw it as an opportunity to go to the next level of making impacts."

John spent the subsequent five years working as the Senior Advisor to the Director of

Research and Policy Development, and while he enjoyed it, he started feeling the itch to return to "trench work." "Fairly soon into my hunt for new leadership roles, I was introduced to people from CSR," he explains. "I went to talk with them, and they told me they wanted to hire me to oversee evaluations and research. I saw the potential to build things, and I thought it would be a great transition, so I went."

Just before starting with CSR, in 2006, John decided he wanted to further his education with a PhD, so he began the pursuit of his Doctorate at Georgetown University's Liberal Studies Program. "It was a program aimed at professionals who already had some level of accomplishment in their professional careers but might be struggling with some issue – people who wanted an opportunity to reflect with some great minds," he says. "I'm way over-educated, but I've always had this great love of learning. I read a lot and try to teach myself from those readings. Sometimes they are relevant to what I'm doing, and sometimes they just interest me."

While it was not one specific mentor who led John to where he is today, he credits the help of many people at different points along the way. "If you can find someone who is willing to spend that time and investment on you, it's a wonderful opportunity, but that can be rare," he says. "Professional development is often just about being in a place where you can learn from your experiences, as well as from the experiences of others." He often carried this perspective over to his leadership style, in which he first observes his environment and then adapts to make the right decision for the entire team. "I've found that leadership isn't just about having goals and strategies to get to where you want to go," he says. "You need to be prepared to maybe do things differently if it's in the best interest of the people you're leading. Not everyone is motivated by the same thing, so you need to learn how to reach new motivations and how to listen and experiment with your team."

Today, when John is not at the office, he serves as a board member at Insight Center for Community Economic Development and takes as many opportunities as he can to work with young people in his community, whether it's volunteering at track meets or being a volunteer coach for swim and basketball teams. His wife, Laura, is equally as invested in community

development, while also dedicating her time and energy to issues pertaining to human trafficking. The couple has been married for 24 years, and John has always admired her sharp mind and unparalleled ability to inspire him to take risks. Together, they have three daughters and a son and daughter from a previous marriage. Two of their daughters are still living at home—one a sophomore in high school, and the other is preparing to start college. Their oldest daughter recently graduated with a degree in Biology and hopes to pursue a career in medicine.

“I give my kids the same advice I would give any young person entering the business world today,” he says. “I encourage them to study many different things and to look at what they’ve learned so far as keys that can open more doors. And those doors might be avenues to success for themselves, or for others. Caring enough about what’s going on around you to go the extra mile and make real, meaningful contributions to others is one of our most important duties in life, and something we should all strive for, pitching in little by little to make a better overall picture for

everyone.” By applying this philosophy to a life he never takes for granted, John and his team move forward by giving back and achieve big changes through small steps.

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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](#).

