

Brendan McGinnis

Thinking Big

Even when new opportunities for success come into his life, Brendan McGinnis has a track record of staying true to the things that have shaped him. When he was working toward his MBA at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, he took classes during the day and would then hop in his car to drive back to his hometown of Alton, Illinois, where he managed the Post 126 Junior American Legion baseball team. Through his youth, he had been an American Legion player himself, and with his father and brother also deeply involved in the sport, it became a strong bond shared between the whole family.

"Being involved in American Legion Baseball takes strong character and discipline," he affirms today. "It's challenging, but you get a real satisfaction from succeeding, and from working in a team setting." Brendan learned about passion for the game from Dennis Sharp, Post 126 American Legion General Manager, who coached him, and he was committed to teaching that same passion to other young players. Baseball was a fundamental element of his character, and even as other areas of life demanded time and energy, he made sure to keep that element a vibrant part of his story.

That level of passion and commitment is mirrored in his involvement today with the Water Resources Action Project (WRAP). In 2009, he helped establish WRAP as a nonprofit organization that improves the public health of underserved communities in the Middle East through greater water stewardship. Now the Executive Director of the organization, Brendan also serves as a Founder and Managing Partner of a for-profit environmental and business development consulting firm called The Horinko Group, and while the two remain completely separate entities, each enables his involvement in the other, creating a symbiotic relationship that garners success for both.



To maintain the energy and motivation to work what essentially amounts to a second full-time job that provides no monetary compensation, Brendan thinks big. WRAP's overarching goal is to build peace in the Middle East by easing the strain on the region's scarce water resources and promoting cultural exchange. As water is dwindling in the arid lands of Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, exacerbating the tensions within the area, the organization is working to install rainwater harvesting systems in schools in each of the three areas. Water is diverted from the roofs of buildings into storage barrels or underground cement tanks, and can then be used for sanitation, community gardening, and other needs of the school.

The project also has a strong educational component, teaching conservation and the shared responsibility in caring for the environment. What's more, the water and educational programs serve as platforms for students from diverse backgrounds to begin communicating and building trust. "In the beginning, it could be as basic as, 'How much rainwater did your school save through the harvesting system?'" Brendan explains. "WRAP can provide common ground that leads to video chats, field trips, and pen pals. That very basic communication builds, leading to relationships over time. Stereotypes, hatred, and prejudice begin to break down, leaving room for understanding and peace."

WRAP is a nonprofit in the purest sense of the word. It is run entirely on volunteer efforts, and all of its funding goes toward its mission—something Brendan wouldn't be able to guarantee if not for the security he earns through The Horinko Group. "Certainly, I would be unable to pursue WRAP's mission without earning enough to make a living," he points out. "But I've seen a lot of nonprofits that spend well over 17 percent of their funding on overhead costs, and then spend

even more on extravagant things that are far from necessary. With WRAP, that's what we set out *not* to do. I've seen projects very similar to ours done at three times the cost. We're proof that you don't need to throw gobs of money around to make a real difference. What keeps me going is the challenge to be able to do more with less."

Brendan observed a similar drive modeled in his father, who grew up in a low-income, rural household. Few thought he'd attend college, but he took matters into his own hands and defined his own future by landing a football scholarship. With raw honesty and transparency, he raised his sons to have the same sense of control over their destinies, demanding perfection in everything from grades to batting averages. From his mother, Brendan learned compassion and understanding, as well as a regimented work ethic that left no task undone at the end of the day. The support of his parents meant the world to him, and his determination to make them proud is a cornerstone of his success today.

After graduating from high school and spending two years playing ball and taking classes at a junior college, Brendan's priorities began to shift away from playing baseball. "I was good at the sport, but not at the level where I would be drafted," he reflects. "I worked my ass off to get to the point where I could compete with others who were. I began to envision a different future for myself, and in the end, I decided to commit to a Business major because I knew it would provide me with a good base to build upon."

Even before he had officially earned his Bachelors Degree with honors, he began to take courses toward his MBA. Though he was taking classes, managing an American Legion team, and conducting baseball camps and private instruction to help pay his way, he was able to finish the degree in nine months. "I made enough money to pay some bills while still saving for my next step," he recalls. "My agenda at the time was to move from the Midwest. Having gone to school so close to where I grew up, I didn't really get away from home enough, so I was still yearning for that sense of freedom, independence, and adventure. I had an internship lined up at an international environmental group in Arlington, Virginia, so two weeks after I graduated, once the baseball season was finished, I packed my car and drove to the East Coast."

Thanks to a passion for environmental

conservation handed down to him from his father, Brendan proved a good fit for the organization, and the six-month internship yielded a full-time position near the end of 2005. He hadn't traveled much in his life up to that point, but when his job warranted his first international trip, he was hooked. "They sent me to Cape Town, South Africa, and there was no turning back," he remarks. "I wanted to see as much as possible."

At the firm, Brendan and several of his colleagues provided project support for Marianne Horinko, a former U.S. EPA Acting Administrator. Brendan gravitated toward working on additional projects with Marianne, as she always treated the staff with respect and interest. She had helped launch a consulting firm earlier in her career, so one day, Brendan suggested she try it again. "I felt I had grown all I could at the organization and was ready to try something new," he remembers. "I told her that, if she had any interest in running a consulting firm again, I'd definitely be onboard." Justin Oberst, who had started as an intern just before Brendan, was also interested in taking that risk. After several strategy sessions, the group resigned from the firm, and shortly thereafter, The Horinko Group was born in 2008.

While exhilarating, transitioning from a secure work environment with a steady paycheck to a situation of endless possibility but no guarantees was among the most challenging experiences of Brendan's life. "When you're an entrepreneur, success is completely dependent upon yourself," he says, reminiscent of the pressures of playing baseball. "What you get is what you put in, and in many cases, the payoffs aren't immediate."

In the beginning, each step was trial by fire. Whether it was securing office space, conceptualizing the firm's website, establishing a benefits package, or drawing in business, Brendan was at once an entry-level employee and a business partner. Initially, he wondered if he had made the right choice. "Now, looking back, I don't regret the decision one bit," he says. "I have an understanding now that would have taken me much longer to acquire otherwise. I love the work I'm able to do, and the people I'm able to do it with."

With Marianne widely known as a leading expert in finite waste and contamination issues, the boutique consulting firm now consists of seven full-time employees and a handful of specialized

advisors focused on domestic water and waste issues. From remediation selection, to transfer liability, to achieving productive reuse, to community development assistance, the group advises on a range of issues and opportunities, while looking at how high-level policymaking effects the concerns of its clients. "We do something different for each client we serve because each has unique needs and interests," Brendan affirms. "Through our core group and senior advisors, we have the expertise to address virtually any domestic water and waste issue."

At the same time, Brendan joined a mentor and colleague, Bob Cole, in helping to launch WRAP. Bob shouldered much of the minutiae of getting the organization up and running, even though he was an internationally recognized tax lawyer and could have easily passed the work on to a staff person. Once the project was on stable ground, Bob asked Brendan to assume full leadership responsibilities of WRAP. Bob passed away suddenly in 2013 of cancer, and WRAP dedicated its first project in the West Bank to him. "A lot of my passion for WRAP comes from the promise I made to him to continue the work we started," Brendan affirms. "From the groundwork he helped to lay, we have five projects currently underway, and we hope to eventually have an interconnected network of around thirty project schools. From there, our model could be replicated elsewhere."

Through The Horinko Group and WRAP, Brendan promotes work environments that thrive on the energy of independence and new ideas. As long as the work gets done, he encourages employees and volunteers to do their jobs on their own schedules, and he looks for fresh ideas to keep his process evolving. "I certainly don't have all the answers when it comes to managing WRAP," he affirms. "I have a growing understanding of running a nonprofit. It's an ongoing challenge to get various groups of people motivated about the latest effort, or to drum up grassroots support. I look to our volunteers to be active participants in growing the group's impact."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Brendan stresses the importance of shouldering responsibility and being proactive about identifying the additional

value one can contribute. "There are countless people ready to fill a position," he points out. "What value will you add to make yourself stand out? Work to make yourself invaluable." Beyond that, Brendan emphasizes the importance of networking. "A lunch at your desk is a missed opportunity," he says. "Take that opportunity to establish a relationship with someone you find of interest. Build your network by looking for ways to help and connect other people."

One's network, however, is nothing without the unparalleled inspiration and support structure that comes from family. In 2013, Brendan married Jennifer, a hardworking first grade teacher who invests in the future each day by passionately guiding and expanding the young minds entrusted to her. Both Brendan and Jen have always worked to advance society, but now that they're expecting their first child, the stakes are even higher.

"When we pass this planet on to our kids, and they ask what we did to make it better for them, we'll have something to say," he affirms. "That's why we're passionate about education, about the environment, about peacebuilding." By thinking big and acting globally, Brendan is redefining what it means to provide for one's family. He's not only providing a safe, secure life—he's providing solutions today for some of the toughest problems his children's generation will soon face.

© March 2014 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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).

