

Brian Flood

Doing Better

It was during the Christmas Season of 2007 that Brian Flood decided to walk away without a plan. He was physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted from working 75-hour weeks for a market intelligence firm, delivering information to help government IT contractors compete for business. Cognizant of how money got from one end of Pennsylvania Avenue to the other, he was so adept at the politics of the government procurement process that his services were in high demand. But he was burning the candle on both ends, running himself ragged, traveling way too much, and unavailable to his family. And worst of all, he was drinking to douse the stress, just as his father had done while Brian was growing up.

So, like his father, Brian decided to turn his life around. At age fifty, his father gave up alcohol and dedicated himself to a new future—one where he became an incredible contributor to the lives of others. “Watching my father’s journey through life, I learned the courage to change and evolve,” he reflects. “I learned to never give up on myself. I saw that, when you choose a new path for yourself, redemption is possible, no matter how old you are or what you’ve encountered in the past. It’s never too late to do the right thing.”

With that guiding philosophy, Brian took a leap of faith and left the company to mindfully reassess who he wanted to be and where he wanted to go. He didn’t intend to start his own business, but as his decision gained momentum, he found his life’s course taking its own natural path toward entrepreneurship. Now, after seven years and the founding of two companies, Brian is the owner and CEO of Decision Point Corporation, an IT services firm committed to bringing sustainable solutions to intractable challenges in the most efficient, effective, low-cost approach possible.

And while it may seem counterintuitive, launching and leading his business has actually simplified his life, creating the perfect conditions to promote betterment on a day-by-day, brick-by-brick basis. “Sometimes we don’t plan on taking a given path, but then it presents itself, and we’re given an opportunity we never envisioned or imagined,” he says. “We don’t know what’s going to come next, so I just focus on taking things as they come and doing a little better each day.”

At just over twenty employees, Decision Point’s small size and culture of engagement mean that each employee’s mindset and conduct has a direct impact on the success and direction of the organization. “I view that as a privilege, and I find it invigorating,” Brian says. “We’ve all probably worked in roles where the overall momentum of the machine wasn’t affected by whether or not we got better on any given day. But at Decision Point, I can take what I learned on a Monday and apply it on a Tuesday

to improve our operation, execution, strategies, or relationships. It’s the kind of environment where, if you take care of the little things, the big things tend to take care of themselves, and where a focus on daily self-betterment impacts the organization and the lives we touch in a very positive way.”

Brian founded his Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business in January of 2011, and while it provides some general IT services and consulting for companies looking to develop an executable growth strategy, its main goal is bringing innovative solutions to some of the most challenging technology missions in government. Specializing in information management for the U.S. Departments of Defense, State, and Homeland Security, the company has begun to shift to healthcare, intelligence, and analytics. And, while traditional government IT contractors might aim to land a five-person job and grow the project to five



hundred, Decision Point believes in reversing that trend through optimization, beginning a technology mission with a set number of people that reduces as it learns to achieve the mission more efficiently. Its mission is accomplished not from increasing its presence, but reducing it.

Internally, the company's value added comes directly from its people—a reality Brian tries to highlight whenever he can. "Each of our employees is essential, so I try to make sure that's communicated," he says. "We're a company where people matter. We are absolutely committed to the success of our clients, but we also put family first. I'll take time to coach my daughter's basketball team, or to be available for the things that are important to me, whether that's spirituality or friendship." What's more, Brian focuses on the individuality of his employees, and not their resumes, giving opportunities to people that might otherwise be overlooked through a typical hiring process. "If I believe in someone's ability to think well, commit, stay nimble, and be part of something bigger than themselves, I'll give them the chance to contribute and become part of the Decision Point family. I don't give up on someone just because their path has been winding, or just because of something in their past."

Brian bets on the powers of redemption and transcendence because they were so powerful in his own life, transforming him from a rough and defiant kid growing up in the Bronx to the successful entrepreneur he is today. Raised in Inwood, a predominantly Irish Catholic neighborhood in the northernmost part of Manhattan, he spent his formative years largely left to his own devices. His mother, a nurse, was a model worker and caregiver, supporting the family as his father fought to overcome alcoholism. "Drinking was such a part of the culture that many of my friends' fathers struggled with it as well," Brian recalls. "My father worked in advertising and then became a freelance writer, which didn't help. Through that time, my mother was relentless, carrying a torch of responsibility as she did what was necessary to put food on the table for her four children and keep the family together. She had tremendous compassion for those who suffered, and I still try to emulate her commitment to service and care giving."

Through playing basketball, soccer, or baseball in Central Park, delivering newspapers, or going out to explore the city with friends, Brian

mastered the intricacies of New York public transportation at a young age and developed a strong sense of self-reliance. Subways and buses allowed him to traverse the city, but life revolved around his neighborhood parish, Good Shepherd Church. Catholic elementary school was free at the time, and as a naturally gifted student, Brian did well despite his high energy and restless nature. All of that changed, however, when he received a full scholarship to attend Loyola High School, an upper-echelon all-boys Jesuit school at 83rd and Park Avenue. While all his friends continued at neighborhood Catholic high schools, Brian joined some of the most elite young people in New York City at Loyola, taking a tremendous shock to the system. "Economically, I wasn't even at the bottom of the totem pole—I was well off the road," he remarks. "Every morning, I'd walk the mile to the A train, take that to the local 86th, and take the bus across Central Park to go to school with peers who lived in penthouses, summered in Nantucket, and traveled the world. I was intimidated, so I slipped into the persona of being the tough kid from northern Manhattan who got in a lot of trouble."

Still, Loyola was an incredible school, committed to teaching a love of learning and refusing to give up on Brian. And while he wasn't a high achiever amongst his classmates, being exposed to students who went on to Yale, Harvard, and Oxford had an effect on him. Even the act of rebelling was meaningful, allowing him to experience the path of most resistance with all its life lessons in adaptation and resilience. "I don't believe things are predestined," he reflects today. "I think I got where I am today because every experience, relationship, opportunity, success, and failure brought me here. Each of my after-school jobs through high school, whether it was installing fences, working behind a deli counter, or operating an elevator in Greenwich Village, taught me to respect the value of everybody's role in society. When my history teacher told me she was going to fail me the Spring semester of my senior year even though I was getting Bs, I learned that you shouldn't walk away from the gifts you've been given."

His teacher saw something in him—the ability to do better. She wanted to convey that, for a person who works hard to get a B, that grade is a fine accomplishment, yet someone who earns a B while running roughshod has clearly failed to reach their potential. Brian was completely caught

off-guard by the proclamation, terrified that he wouldn't be able to graduate with his class and would instead have to take summer school. In the end, his teacher agreed to give him a C after he completed a series of extra assignments. "It would be many more years before I was ready to hear what she was trying to tell me, but I never forgot the lesson," Brian remarks. "I wish I had really embraced those opportunities, but that was the path I decided to take, and it's led me here, so I don't spend time worrying about regrets. I just focus on doing better each day now."

Brian spent two years in college at Nova Scotia, where he played football and set out on the premed track but wasn't motivated on the academic front. He then returned to New York to attend Fordham University in the Bronx, where he began to get the feeling he was going nowhere fast. In search of structure, focus, and a new start in life, he enlisted in the Army. His father had flown B17s in World War II, becoming a Prisoner of War for seventeen months after his plane was shot down in Germany, so Brian had experienced service second-hand in the past. Enlisting as an infantry officer marked his first real job, and the first time he was required to lead. "It exposed me to a whole new set of cultures, people, and experiences," he says. "It was my first experience with a chain of command, and with being one of many. The world was no longer all about me. I was part of a unit that could only be as strong as its weakest member, and I had to do my job in order for the unit to be successful in executing its mission plan. That was a really powerful realization."

In his five years of service, Brian spent time at Fort Bragg in Alabama, and also in Korea, Turkey, Pakistan, El Salvador, and Honduras, going places and learning things he never would have experienced otherwise. In the wake of Vietnam, as America emerged from the Carter Administration and entered the Reagan years, the military had to work hard to meet its recruitment goals. Brian learned how to get a job done with people who weren't qualified, and he understood for the first time that, sometimes, you had to do things you didn't want to do in life. It was an education in teamwork, excellence, and structure that still informs his work and life philosophy today.

Then, in 1985, an injury to his knee in Korea required several surgeries and a reclassification of his physical readiness that meant

the end of his infantry days. After three weeks of training, he became a public affairs officer, responsible for issuing press releases and interacting with the media in Seoul. When he decided he didn't want a lifelong career in the Army if he couldn't do combat arms, he resigned his commission and returned to the U.S. to pursue journalism. He landed a job in Montgomery, Alabama, as the political reporter for its small NBC affiliate, and though he didn't know anything about the state or its major players, he soon became close friends with Governor George Wallace and was crossing paths with the likes of then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. Living in a stately refurbished Victorian house in downtown Montgomery near Martin Luther King's church, he and his wife, Marylen, met the civil rights activists who had bailed Rosa Parks out of jail after refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger.

Immersing himself in the history and politics of the Deep South, the New Yorker found stories of redemption that mirrored his own experiences up North, and none more poignant than that of Governor Wallace. In 1963, Wallace had blocked the school house door in Tuscaloosa, only to come back and win 90 percent of the black vote in 1982. The man, regretful of his past ideals, had gone from church to church to say he was sorry and ask for forgiveness. "I learned so much from watching Wallace, who at first couldn't have been more hated in the black community and across the country," Brian remembers. "I'll never forget when Jesse Jackson, one of the most successful black candidates in the history of politics, came to visit him at the State House in January of 1987 to speak with him about running for President. Wallace's advise was, 'keep it down low where the goats can get at it,' or 'keep the message simple.'"

Brian took that same advice with him when he came to D.C. to work on Capitol Hill in 1988. Craig James, a firebrand trial lawyer from Deland, Florida, had just been elected to represent Florida's fourth district, and called Brian in for an interview. The two connected over how little they knew about Washington, and James hired Brian as his Legislative Director and Press Secretary. Congressman James had ousted a twenty-year incumbent who chaired the House Armed Services Committee, so he received a lot of attention. He lived to argue and was all over the political spectrum on various issues because, rather than

conform to the dichotomous structure of party politics, he did what he thought was right. Within six months, Brian was promoted to Chief of Staff, and he served in that capacity until James retired from Congress in 1999.

Worn out from the travel and fundraising involved in serving a Member of Congress, Brian decided to get into the market intelligence industry and accepted a position at Fed Sources, which was later acquired by Deltek. The firm consulted with companies interested in competing for government IT business, and though Brian knew nothing about IT, he knew the nuance of the procurement process. He also knew how inefficient government can be, and how to best execute a strategy to achieve a desired outcome in that context. It was this experience that led to the hyper-speed, detached, destructive lifestyle he ultimately walked away from in 2007. Through the grace of God, the accountability of Alcoholics Anonymous, the support of his family, and his own strength of will, Brian seized the gift spiritual intervention at work in his life and made a commitment to sustain that gift.

“At that time, our son was in college, and our daughters were seventeen and five,” he recalls. “Walking away from Fed Sources was terrifying for me from a financial perspective. It was even more terrifying to tell Marylen that I was thinking about starting my own business. We talked about it a lot, and once we decided that to start on this journey, she’s done everything to sustain and support it through the ups and downs. Without her love, support, understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, there’s zero chance I’d be a successful business owner today.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Brian visualizes two boxes—one with a straight line ascending skyward, and another with a winding line that weaves this way and that. The former represents the journey of success for a select few people, who know exactly where they want to be at various stages in life and largely adhere to that vision. The latter represents success for the majority of people—a path of exploration and discovery that’s no less elegant in design. “It’s never too late to become the man or woman who’s life garners respect and provides true value to others,” he affirms. “Even when times are darkest, you can choose to change and become something different. Never give up on yourself.”

Brian’s sister, especially, never gave up on him, believing in good things for him more than he ever dared believe in for himself. When she passed away several years ago, he spoke at her funeral about the transformative power of this belief, and how much of a difference it made in his darkest hours. “I get to do what I do today because of the love, forgiveness, compassion, and cooperation of others,” he says. “Whether it’s Marylen, my children, my friends, my employees, or my clients, I know that success and growth in business is a ‘we’ proposition. Without people who are fully invested in trying to be part of something bigger than themselves, we could never be successful by any measure.”

For Brian, that measure gauges the progress made from the days when he was sixteen, talking animatedly with his friends about how extraordinary their futures would be if they could just pay their bills. It’s measured in the margins by which his company is able to expand opportunities for others to succeed. It’s measured in the quiet consistency with which he and his family give time and talents to benefit the lives of others, especially in socioeconomic conditions that mirror his own origins. And most of all, it’s measured in the trail of burning bushes he sees in his wake. “I once heard someone say he never had one of those epiphany burning bush moments, until he looked back at his life and saw nothing but a trail of burning bushes,” Brian says. “These transformational moments occur all the time, whether we recognize them or not. That’s why I treat every day as an opportunity to transform a little more, doing better for my family, employees, company, and community in the process.”

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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