Brian Chavis

The Modern Fire Quencher

By now, Brian Chavis is very familiar with the look of deep gratitude that fills the eyes of the elders who come to see him when he visits family in Pembroke, North Carolina. Sometimes they come with drafting books in hand—the tools his father used many years ago in teaching them how to build a bridge out of poverty.

As one of two of the first Native American pilots in the Army Air Corps, Brian's father was a hero. He was captain of the basketball team at the North Carolina College for Indians, and because he was one of the tribe's best and brightest, he was sent to college and to Detroit, where he landed a position at General Motors. He did all this not with the goal of getting out, but with the goal of giving back. "For the tribe members who left to pursue success elsewhere, it was their duty to help others from the community with a hand up," Brian explains. "That was just how the culture worked."

One by one, his father's friends came to Detroit to live with him and his wife while they started jobs at GM. Once they made it into the factory, they set their sights on advancing to a desk job. "The only way you could really do that as a working-class person was to learn mechanical drafting," Brian explains. "So my father would have classes at his house to teach them. Now, all these years later, people still come up to me with tears in their eyes to tell me how my father changed their lives."

Brian's mother was five months pregnant with him when his father died of a chronic illness, so they never met on Earth. But for that brief interval between one's departure and the other's arrival, father and son knew each other on the other side. "The elders tell me my father and I were together in the spirit world, and that it gave me special powers," Brian says today. "They tell me I'm a fire quencher."

Now the Managing Partner of BoltMSP (formerly known as ARGroup before it was rebranded as BoltMSP), a managed services provider (MSP) with a commitment to robust, proactive care of client IT needs, Brian brings the everyday special powers of excellence, expertise, and care to companies across the DC metropolitan area. And he has become a community leader in his own rite, mastering the art of leadership and problem solving through his work as Chairman and Board Member of the Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce. When he found out there was no medical care available to poor people in the area, he became a founding board member of the Loudoun Community Health Center (Heathworks)—now the biggest in the area. As the Chairman of the County's Economic Development Authority, he signed a $195 million federal loan to finance the extension of the Metro's Silver Line to Loudoun. And today, he continues his work on a deal for a $30 million affordable housing project. This is what fire quenching looks like in modern-day Northern Virginia—a subtle kind of heroism that leaves the whole community better off.

Brian founded BoltMSP in 1986, and today, the company provides holistic computer support and security packages to companies of between twenty and a hundred people. Operating on a per-seat price rather than hourly contracts, their technicians are able to freely invest the time they need to do the most thorough, effective work for their clients. "We're not some absent MSP that only comes by when there's a problem," Brian says. "We're a high-end service that's actively engaged on a daily basis, remoting in to manage our clients' computers so that when we send someone on site, they come with a list of security items to check and re-check to ensure everything runs smoothly."

Cybersecurity is a top item of concern for BoltMSP, so they ensure their clients have the appropriate password controls. They check to make sure data is backed up and that cloud-based infrastructure is secure. Thanks to the automated

systems they've implemented, BoltMSP is now a team of eight people that are exponentially more productive than the sum of their parts. "I knew tech people had a reputation for being frustrating for people who don't know tech very well, particularly very successful people who are incredibly busy and don't have the time to develop an intuitive understanding of tech," he says. "So when I started my company, I always said that we'd be the computer service guys with a smile. I wanted to teach young people in tech how to deal with all these different personalities in their moments of frustration, showing them how to diffuse stress and guide people to a place of calm and understanding. I like to hire young people that are 'people' people, not just hardware people. I love being a troop leader and helping them develop those skills."

Looking back on his life, Brian marvels at how we spend so much time fretting over the decisions we make, yet it's the random events — the ones we have no control over — that most shape our futures. Had Brian's father lived, for instance, Brian likely would have grown up in an upper-middle class neighborhood in Detroit. Instead his father passed in a Detroit hospital with a blizzard whipping outside, leaving his young, pregnant wife alone in the world. She left her life as a 1950's housewife and moved back to her hometown of Marion, Indiana, where Brian was born. "It's really remarkable that she stood up to all that and figured out a way to persevere," he says. "She got a job at a chain factory and was essentially the breadwinner through my entire childhood."

Three years later, the strong, stoic, Midwestern woman married Gene, who struggled with jobs and alcohol. They lived in a rough neighborhood in Indianapolis, where Gene later bought a small tavern. "He ran numbers, booked horses, sold liquor, and held card games," Brian recalls. "And my mother was a member of the United Steelworkers. Her fingers were always black from her work, and I remember her being active in the union."

Brian grew up with an older brother, two younger half-sisters, and a younger half-brother. Gene and Brian had daily conflicts, so Brian focused more on important relationships with his father's community in North Carolina. He remembers annual Christmas phone calls with Uncle Ray, his father's brother and the patriarch of the family that kept things together. "That was an important bond," Brian recalls. "He never let us fall out of touch and always made sure I knew I was an important part of their family."

The Indianapolis streets simmered with racism in the late 1960s. Bobby Kennedy even came to speak at Brian's school in an attempt to bring tolerance to a community that kept burning down the new housing projects being built nearby. A week later, he was assassinated. Times were tough through Brian's childhood, and as a result, he grew up street-smart and always hustling. His parents provided shelter, food, and clothes, but when he wanted anything beyond the bare minimum, it was up to him to figure it out. He sold newspapers, mowed lawns, and worked twelve-hour days on his teacher's horse farm.

His most impressive venture, however, came once a year when hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world stormed into town for the Indianapolis 500. "When I was ten, my brother Carl and I snuck into the track," Brian recounts. "By the time I was twelve, we had figured out that we could buy newspapers at a secret location at 4:00 AM for seven cents apiece. The roads were filled with cars at the time, all waiting for the gates to open at 6:00 AM. We'd walk through the traffic selling papers for 25 cents, spend the day at the track watching all kinds of crazy shenanigans, and then go to another secret location where a helicopter dropped down the hot-off-the-presses flash finals. We'd stuff 150 of those into our bags and then sell them, returning home at the end of the day with a hundred dollars' worth of quarters in our pockets. I've never felt so rich in my life as I did on those days!"

In many ways, fending for himself and looking for entrepreneurial opportunities amidst the chaotic Indy 500 crowd was a defining experience for Brian. He knew there was a world beyond Indianapolis because he saw it invade the city once a year before dispersing out to all the places he had never been. Realizing he could make money through entrepreneurship was like seeing the door to the rest of the world, and Brian wanted to open it. He joined Junior Achievement to begin honing his life experience and competitive edge.

When Brian entered high school, his family moved from the inner city, landing him in the largest school in the state with class sizes of around 900 kids. He played on the basketball team, took drafting classes like his father, and earned stellar grades, finishing second out of 700

graduates. He had wanted to be an architect from the time he was twelve, so with the scholarship money he earned, he enrolled at Ball State's School of Architecture. "At the time, I had no idea that I got my drafting skills from my father," Brian says. "He was an engineer, and I inherited that."

In college, Brian made the volleyball team as a freshman, where he had the opportunity to work with Dr. Don Shondell, a celebrated Hall of Fame coach. But architecture was all-absorbing, so he ended up quitting the team and joining a fraternity flag football league instead. In his sophomore year, he collided with another player and broke his shoulder, which meant he could no longer draft. Dejected at first, it then dawned on him that he could take computer science classes because he could type one-handed. "If I hadn't broken my shoulder, I may never have gotten into IT," he points out.

Brian graduated with a degree in Environmental Design and a minor in Computer Science, and went to work at an architectural firm in Indianapolis. He then got a fellowship to get his master's in architecture at the University of Illinois, provided that he earn a business degree at the same time. He completed those degrees in three years, balancing the work with a job developing CAD software at an Army construction engineer research lab. The work sometimes took him to CAD trade shows, where he met a startup company that offered him a software programming job in McLean, Virginia. He accepted and made the move in 1983, opting to live in downtown DC because it felt more his style.

The company ultimately failed in 1986 but was still in need of consulting services, so Brian signed on to do that. When several other companies enlisted him for CAD help, he decided he had pieced together enough money to incorporate, and BoltMSP was born. He sold and set up PCs, and because CAD was the first application that pushed people to network their computers, he learned to set up networks as well. He enjoyed running his own business for the next eighteen months, until a government contracting client convinced him to come launch a computer division in his company.

Brian made decent money at that company and liked the work well enough, but something felt off. In 1990, the same week his boss bought his second Ferrari, Brian decided to take a trip to North Carolina to clear his head with family. "It's a different culture there, where the layers are peeled back and you can see the truth," he says. "I realized I wanted to have my own business again, and that I was ready to go for it. As soon as I returned to DC, I quit my job and began sending tri-fold flyers around the city to let people know I could help with computer problems."

Offering fixed-price services for minor and major repair, and with his own hand-drawn cartoon on the front of the flyer, Brian landed ten to fifteen clients within his first couple months of business. Carrying just a backpack of cables, memory cards, other gear, and a large cellular phone, he would metro around the city to call on his clients—often small nonprofits and trade associations struggling with the advent of computers and workplace tech. "I thought I was so cool!" he laughs.

At that time, organizations were just starting to use spreadsheets and software to manage their internal list and procedures. And as they did, Brian became mission-critical. He evolved with the times, moving from custom application development to web-based services. When he realized he was making a mistake by competing with big advertising firms, he pivoted back to network and security services. He went to happy hours downtown, meeting people and handing out his card. "People were so frustrated with computers all the time, so all I had to do was stay motivated," he remembers. "I think somewhere deep down, I always had this fear that I was an underachiever—a remnant of growing up without a living constructive male role model in my life."

Brian's internal drive continued to lead him to remarkable professional success in his business, but by the time he reached his thirties, he thought marriage and children weren't in the cards for him. All that changed on a December day in 1994, when he accompanied a client to a Washington Bullets basketball game. At some point that evening, he realized they were on a date, and after the game, they ended up at a bar on Capitol Hill. But it was Amy, a different girl, who ended up getting in his car that evening, and the two have been together ever since. "I have friends that have never been married, so I just figured I was in that category," he says. "But Amy was the one, and now we're married with wonderful kids. I still have the ticket from that basketball game."

Brian's life took another dramatic turn

when, in 1995, he ran into a random acquaintance who tipped him off about a tech-related RFP in Loudoun County. Though he knew nothing about Loudoun County at the time, he decided to submit a bid, and was surprised to then find out that he had a connection to the county's Head of IT. The man knew the area was poised for rapid growth, and wanted a contract for high-volume computer installation in their offices on an annual basis. Having done similar work for Prince George's County in the past, Brian landed the contract — a defining moment that changed the course of his future in unimaginable ways.

Brian and Amy were both city people who loved their lives on Capitol Hill, but they took the plunge and made the move to dreaded suburbia. And looking back, they couldn't have made a better decision. The contract transformed the BoltMSP, allowing it to scale for the first time and lending an element of security that persists even now, in its twentieth year and counting. The move to Loudoun also opened the doors for Brian to embrace his role in the community, a crucial step on the journey to becoming the leader he is today.

Along the way, Amy has always been free-thinking and artistic, and was never concerned by the risks of Brian's entrepreneurial living. Her easygoing attitude creates a positive, stress-free culture in the family, which became particularly important when Brian decided to sell the business in 2013. "I think that, at the time, I was lonely and struggling with direction," he says. "I knew that if we were going to grow, we needed a sales engine. I had paid off all my long-term debt by that time and was considering taking out a big loan to get things moving, but I was also approached by United Business Technologies (UBT). UBT had a big sales team selling copiers to an existing client base of a thousand businesses in the Washington region, so they convinced me to sell BoltMSP. All the copier companies were merging with IT companies at the time so they could handle all office tech. It was a great idea in theory, but once we went through with it, everything fell apart."

The new business struggled as it tried to merge the IT company culture of BoltMSP — more geared toward innovative, high-demand millennials — with the copier company culture of UBT, characterized by harsh sales quotas and high churn. Then, three months into the new arrangement, Brian was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He stepped aside from the business for the surgery and subsequent recovery period — a difficult time, but an experience that reconnected Brian and Amy in an incredibly deep and meaningful way. She came to all his appointments, and when he was able to walk again, they started going to noon-time movies together. Considering possible next moves, they discussed flipping houses or operating a food truck. "I came to realize, though, that I actually most wanted to do exactly what I had been doing all along — leading BoltMSP to success," he says.

A forthright, honest leader who often seems more like a coach than a boss, Brian's openness facilitates good communication and cooperation amongst the BoltMSP team. Thanks to this approach, he was honored by the Loudoun Chamber of Commerce with its Executive Leadership Award in 2013, the award's inaugural year. But his greatest achievements are the person-to-person transformation that comes from everyday fire quenching, both through BoltMSP and through his work in the community. "Life goes so fast!" he affirms. "Make your choices, but remember that the random twists and turns are the things that make us. With the right resolve and a strong spirit, you'll be able to quench the fires along the way."

– 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*.*