

# Bruce Ehlert

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## With God's Help

When Bruce Ehlert was a junior in high school, he was ecstatic to land a part-time job working for a furniture company in the Shenandoah Valley. He started at \$3.35 an hour assembling desks, and he was eager to make more. "I put those desks together as fast as I could," he recalls now. "I figured that if I made more desks, I'd be more valuable to the company and could make more money. Then, one day, a foreman came over and said, 'Hey, hotshot, slow down.' He told me it didn't matter how quickly I worked, I wasn't going to be making more on his watch."

Bruce worked full-time during the summer and remembers the periodic rest and lunch breaks the employees were supposed to take. Driven by his own resolve and enthusiasm for hard work, he kept making desks right through those breaks—until his supervisor forced him to stop. "From then on, I was determined to never allow myself to be held back by that kind of mindset," he recalls. "It was an experience that was instrumental in my life and my decision that I was one day going to work for myself. I wanted to have my own company and create an environment where people are free to work according to their own drive and potential."

Bruce had the opportunity to begin contributing to a workplace like that when, around that same time, his father bought a Minuteman Press franchise. "Dad had no background in business, but he wanted to give it a try," Bruce remembers. "I was happy to pitch in part-time to help out."

Bruce's father worked hard to grow the business, but due to changes in the local market and the recession, the business had to file for bankruptcy. It was very upsetting for Bruce's father, a man with a lot of integrity who never wants to hurt or disappoint anyone. He vowed to work his way through it

During this time, Bruce and his wife, Terri, had just welcomed their first daughter into the world, and Bruce still had college classes to finish up, but he soon decided to leave school to dedicate himself full-time to helping his father revive the business. Rolling up his sleeves, and with Terri's help, he dove in. "There was so much going on, and it was overwhelming trying to think of how we were going to get through it," he recalls. "But I leaned on my faith and put the business in God's hands. We were going to figure it out."

Breaking from the franchise, the Ehlert father and son rebranded the business as Four Star Printing, and in time, reestablished credit with their vendors. They learned to deal swiftly with industry red flags and figured out what to look for when making expansion decisions or reviewing balance sheets. "When we finally got there, our lawyer congratulated us because most people in our position would have just walked away to start over," Bruce says. "But we were fully committed to righting the ship. And with God's help, we succeeded."

Through the decades, as print and paper mills have been displaced by digital utilization, Bruce has watched countless others in his industry close their doors. But many industries still need a tangible, hands-on product, and even virtual companies still need to send out mailers to advertise their websites. "The least expensive way of communicating is still by mail," Bruce points out. "Twenty years from now, that might not still be the case, but we will continue to adapt as we always have."

Now, as the company's President, Bruce has grown the business by request, expanding to accommodate the needs expressed by their customers. With seventeen employees, Four Star has evolved into a medium-size commercial printer with both small- and large-format



capability, offering a wide breadth of services to include digital, web, traditional offset, embroidery, and perfect binding for books, as well as assistance with sales and marketing strategy. From mailings to data management, Bruce has found innovative ways to create value, like managing marketing initiatives for customers, brainstorming ideas, or offering last-minute solutions at competitive prices. "Our strategy has been to find the right customers and grow along with them, providing help along the way," he says.

From the moment he first got into printing, Bruce found the work to be a natural fit, allowing him to throw his energy into problem solving and helping others. This drive, and his unrelenting work ethic, come in part from the example set by his father, a Marine who served in Vietnam and later became a Seventh Day Adventist minister. "He is a very positive guy. He worked incredibly hard and helped a tremendous amount of people, both as a minister and as a businessman," Bruce recounts. "I give him a lot of credit for who I am today."

Born in Seattle just after his father's military service, Bruce led a transitory childhood as his father's ministry work led the family across Washington, Idaho, Wisconsin, and Oregon. The oldest of three brothers, he played intramural sports when he could, but they never stayed in one place long enough for Bruce to join a team. "There were certainly drawbacks," he admits. "But living on the road and out of hotels, and switching schools so often, I was constantly exposed to new environments and new people. My father drew crowds, and growing up in that environment, I developed a love of being around people. As well, it taught me to embrace change. I'm not afraid to be thrown into a new environment, and it taught me how to work with all different kinds of people."

The Ehlert family continued to travel with his father's ministry, and eventually moved to Virginia. When Bruce was 15, he started his freshman year of high school at Shenandoah Valley Academy, a boarding school in New Market, Virginia. That year, he lived with his mother and brothers just outside of town and drove himself into school, while his father continued to travel. He got a job bailing hay for a local farmer, and another working in the book bindery at school, where his supervisor refused to pay employees for the first half-hour of work if

they didn't clock in by 9:00 AM precisely. Bruce worked harder and faster than anyone else on staff, but he was chronically late by several minutes, to the point that his supervisor threatened to let him go. "My work quality was the best around, but he was willing to fire me because I wasn't complying with his standards," Bruce remembers. "That was a big eye-opener for me, teaching me to respect people's time. It was character-building."

Then, when Bruce was sixteen, his life changed markedly when his parents decided to divorce. Amidst that darkness, Bruce sought out light—a defining moment that helped guide his path forward. "As a born again believer, I found myself diving more into my faith and the Word of God," he says. "I also read a lot about people in tough situations and how they got through them. The works of Zig Ziglar, Norman Vincent Peale, and Dale Carnegie were all very transformative for me at that time. I was able to draw on those positive influences to help lift me up and inspire me to succeed and help others."

When Bruce started his junior year, he moved into the boarding school, where he embraced the experience and made lifelong friends. He studied hard, did well academically, and loved the chance to finally play sports. Meanwhile, his father took a leave of absence from the ministry to pursue a variety of entrepreneurial ventures, including the purchase of the print shop franchise.

After three years at boarding school, Bruce spent his senior year at South Lakes High School in Reston, Virginia, where he lived with his father and worked at the print shop every afternoon. Working under the tutelage of a particularly knowledgeable employee, an expert with many years of experience, he learned every aspect of the business. And as his father returned to ministry, Bruce spent more and more time with the business.

Bruce's parents never pushed their children to go to college, but education was important to him, and he hoped to become a chiropractor at that point. Upon graduating from high school in 1986, he enrolled at Washington Adventist University but quickly made the decision that science wasn't his thing. "I feel entrepreneurship in my soul," he says. "I wouldn't even know the first thing about putting together a resume or interviewing for a job. I'm all about doing business, so I decided to study business."

After two years there, Bruce transferred to George Mason University in search of a stronger academic program, all the while working to be able to afford tuition. But the class sizes were large, and he found it difficult and impersonal to learn in a large auditorium where he didn't know the professor. He transferred back to Washington Adventist University for his fourth year, and then decided it wasn't enough to be studying business in a classroom. He was ready to be out in the world, working at the print shop and using his skills to help bring his father's company back to life.

Working with family can often end in disaster, but Bruce and his father operated seamlessly together, making decisions as a team and recognizing each other's strengths. "He allowed me to take the reins and guide the direction of the company, which was really great," Bruce recounts. "In the beginning stage, I was wearing all the hats. I had a lot to learn, and I had to learn it fast."

With Terri managing the books, Bruce worked hard and got the business back on stable footing. He remembers the vendors who took a chance and actually stuck out the bankruptcy with them. "We worked it out together, and I'm very loyal to them to this day," he says. "Honestly, I'm thankful I went through all that, because now there's nothing in business that I'm afraid of. Mistakes happen, but if you're honest with people and show that you're committed to coming through in good faith, things work out."

In the clear and with bankruptcy firmly in the rearview mirror, Bruce turned his attention toward development. He got involved with the Rotary Club for networking, focused on outreach to nonprofits and trade associations, and pursued key partnerships with other companies, like print brokers, to reach diverse customer bases. In 2003, they moved the company from Tysons Corner to Dulles, and Bruce and Terri bought the business shortly thereafter.

While he appreciated his dynamic childhood, Bruce and Terri have been in the same house for fourteen years now, and he couldn't be more grateful for the stable, loving home they shared with their two daughters. "Terri has made our home a peaceful refuge, and I am so grateful for that," he says. "Running your own business can be stressful, and she keeps me grounded and drama-free. She's very even-keeled, rooted, and

strong in her faith, not to mention that she's great with numbers and managing money. She makes me a better person, both personally and professionally."

Now, as a leader, Bruce stays calm under pressure and never reacts in anger when something goes wrong, as it inevitably does in the print industry. When mistakes happen, he focuses on constructively finding out why things went off track so it can be fixed and then avoided in the future. More than anything, he remains driven by opportunities to help others—a priority that extends beyond serving customers and includes the well-being of his staff. "Many of them want to start their own businesses too one day, so it's important to me to take the time to guide and mentor them," he says. "I like to help them get there, even if it means I'll lose a good employee. I want to see them grow and succeed, and I always think about how I'd want to be treated if I was working for a manager."

Through the day-to-day ups-and-downs of print jobs, customer service, and entrepreneurial living, Bruce's mind remains cognizant of something bigger. In part, it's the legacy of his work. "I hope I've built a business that continues on after I'm gone," he says. Also in part, it's the thread of love that connects family from one generation to the next. "Raising my daughters, I try to be a positive, trusting influence in their lives, as my father was in mine," he continues. "Like him, I try to look for the best in people and take the time to help out. My mother, as well, imparted a keen eye for detail and a sense of awareness of what's going on around me. I use that to always look for the positive that exists in any environment, and to focus on that." And in whole, it's his faith, from which all things flow. "All my defining moments, and the things that mean the most to me, are in my life because of the Cross," he affirms. "There were so many times I wanted to quit, and times I just didn't want to be positive anymore. But if God had that kind of love for me, I knew I could get through it."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Bruce recognizes the differences between generations but underscores the timeless importance of working hard and seeking guidance. "Don't give up on things just because they take hard work," he says. "If you don't know what you want to do, it's always safe to learn a trade. But the most important thing is

finding something you love, and then dedicating yourself completely to learning everything you can about that field. Spend two solid years studying, seeking advice from experts in the sector, and charting a path forward. Do what it takes to learn what it takes to succeed.”

Beyond that, Bruce’s example demonstrates the power of positive thinking to transcend challenges – a story he makes a point to share with young people whenever he can. Back in 1994, he and Terri joined a colleague in launching an informal Bible study group for disadvantaged youth, welcoming kids of all ages in the neighborhood to join. “They would all come out, and we’d open the Bible and just take turns reading to each other,” he says. “We’d discuss it and then take the kids out for food and games. They just loved it, and so did we.” Bruce has also led several youth Bible study groups over the years, equipping kids with the tools they need to nurture their faith and achieve their dreams.

“Life certainly has its twists, turns, and valleys, but we’ve got all we need to persevere,”

Bruce affirms. “If you can be a force for light in the world, you’ll get where you want to go, with God’s help.”

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*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](#).*

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