

# Benjamin L. Grimley

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## From Language Barriers to Language Bridges

In 1916, Benjamin Grimley's maternal grandfather made his plans to escape the First World War and immigrate to the United States. And once he finally arrived two years later at age fourteen, he did more than just embrace the American Dream for himself and his family. He launched a benevolent society providing interest-free loans, building a bridge to help other immigrants find their place in American culture so they could pursue that dream, too. "He always taught us to welcome strangers," Ben recalls. "He received help when he first arrived, and then he turned around to help the next person along."

On the paternal side of his family, Ben's great grandfather got his start making shoes and boots, and in time, he succeeded in opening several shoe stores of his own. After a few years, he had done well enough to buy his family a nice Kiddush cup—a silver wine goblet which, coincidentally, he also inscribed with that same year: 1916. Now, one hundred years later, Ben keeps the goblet to honor a century of his family's success in America, connecting him with the entrepreneurial relatives he never knew personally but relates with in spirit.

But the family story shows that even hard-won success can face setbacks. Ben's great grandfather lost six of his seven stores in the Great Depression when his business partner emptied the company bank account, but nothing and nobody could keep him down. His success continued in his son, Ben's grandfather, who started a business making pilot lights for car manufacturers like Ford. He always treated his employees and vendors fairly and gave generously. He passed away of a heart attack before Ben got the chance to meet him, but through the goblet, the two remain connected.

Now the cofounder and CEO of Speak Agent, Inc., a software company that helps non-

English speakers succeed in school through academic language instruction, Ben's work continues his family's grand tradition of paying it forward by helping people turn language barriers into language bridges. Today, 85 percent of English language learners at the elementary level were born in America, and 20 percent are third generation Americans. They are the product of societal pockets where other languages are spoken and people can get by with little to no English exposure. "Over the last several decades, we've

seen a coalescing of this trend where individuals or groups aren't integrating into American society," Ben explains. "It's starting to look a bit like some countries in Europe, where balkanized groups don't talk to each other. My work is motivated by the desire to keep our country an open and socially-cohesive land of opportunity, and broad-based academic success is the key to achieving that."

Fueled by this overarching concept, Speak Agent is dedicated to closing the academic achievement gap by providing tools to help kids master the language of academic success. Success in any subject, including math, science, and fine arts, depends on a student's ability to grasp the vocabulary of that subject, and the academic concepts associated with those words. "If they don't understand the vocabulary, they don't understand the instructions," Ben explains. "They get turned off, and they fail the class."

Some English as a Second Language (ESL) students are newcomers to the country who have little to no experience in English, but the vast majority speak English colloquially without issue. Due to their limited proficiency in academic English, however, success is an uphill climb from elementary through high school. With this in mind, Speak Agent provides vocabulary, listening, reading, and composition instruction in ten



elementary school subjects.

Speak Agent's "software as a service" solution is an online language learning platform that allows teachers and school districts to customize programs to their specific needs. Existing software solutions are off-the-shelf products that cannot be adapted to the individual plans and targets of the nation's 13,500 school districts. As a result, many school districts lack access to critical software tools that could markedly improve success rates for their students. "By fourth grade, 92 percent of English language learners are not hitting their reading proficiency level," he points out. "In Montgomery County, where I live, those kids are dropping out of high school at a rate six times higher than the general education population. If we're going to have a successful, productive society, we need to help them better acquire the reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills they need to understand other subjects, and to maximize their potential as contributing members of our communities."

To address this tremendous need, Speak Agent provides a highly customizable online learning platform that excels at engaging kids of all ages. Vijay Lakshman, a cofounder and the company's COO, is a videogame creator focused on applying his talent to the educational gaming realm. Speak Agent is also collaborating with school district partners to build out assessment tools that actually provide real time, actionable information. The company's solution embraces the role and efficacy of the teacher, rather than sidelining educators with an adaptive software algorithm. "We leave an element of control with the educator that off-the-shelf solutions don't," he says. "In a sense, the teacher is the programmer, creating the digital lessons that fit with their plan and student population."

As a leader, Ben aspires to leave room for his team to use their own ingenuity and come up with their own conclusions about right and wrong. He also makes it a point to step down from the twenty-thousand-foot view to engage with the day-to-day work of the company—a priority that keeps him grounded in what it's like to walk in the shoes of his team members. It's all part and parcel of building Speak Agent, which is now acquiring the infrastructure and connections to advance to the next level of success. "You grow to love the thrills and chills of entrepreneurship," Ben observes. "Starting a business is a rollercoaster

ride, and I enjoy not knowing what any given day will bring. Good or bad, it will bring something that will require my talents and energy to be tapped to their potential, and I love that."

Even on the hardest of days, he's sustained by how the company's work connects with his deep love of language—an affinity that extends to his earliest days. As a small child, he was completely rapt by his father's massive unabridged English dictionary. For hours on end, he would pour through the component parts of the English language, tracing their etymologies with wonder.

Born in Washington, DC, the youngest of three boys, Ben's family moved to upstate New York when he was a baby while his father, now a retired Navy doctor, attended Albany Medical School to become a pathologist. When Ben was in kindergarten, they moved back to Montgomery County, Maryland, where his father went to work at the National Institutes of Health studying various forms of cancer. "He's incredibly driven, and one of the most published pathologists out there," Ben says. "He could have made three times as much had he gone into private practice, but he chose this path, and his research has saved countless lives."

Ben spent his early childhood tagging along with his older brothers and playing in the extensive woods and watershed behind their house. "There was a lot of freedom," he recalls. "We'd ride our bikes and run around, cutting through lawns because nothing was fenced in at that time. I was a shy kid with a close group of friends, and we had a great time." Ben's mother completed her masters degree while Ben was in elementary school, returning to work as a high school speech-language pathologist. "Despite the stress and chaos of raising three boys, my mom never complained about anything," Ben says. "Only now, as a parent, do I fully realize how amazing she is!"

While in middle school, Ben accompanied his father to Hungary for a government exchange, at a time when the country was still heavily Communist. "The Soviets were using the program as a window to the West, and I got to see what it was like to live in that kind of society," he remarks. "It was an eye opener for me." Also in middle school, Ben saw James Clavell's *Shogun* and decided he wanted to learn Japanese. It wasn't taught in any school in the area, so he took classes

at a Korean Church.

Ben played piano as a kid but fell in love with the trombone in fourth grade, going on to play in the Montgomery County Honors Jazz Band. In high school, he started getting paid gigs with the Federal Focus Jazz Band and played at the White House Easter Egg Roll. He also enjoyed soccer, football, track, and cross country. "I got pretty athletic, and the mental and physical challenges of those sports teams cultivated a discipline that has stayed with me," he says.

All through school, Ben was always interested in learning, reading 800-page history tomes in his spare time because he loved the subject matter. But he felt disconnected from classroom learning, and showed little interest in academics until he made the choice to attend Grinnell College, a small school of 1,200 students in rural Iowa. After growing up on the East Coast, he wanted to experience something different and was drawn to the laidback, down-to-earth atmosphere of the Midwest. There, where he was free to pursue interest-driven learning in choosing his own courses, he connected with his coursework in a way he never could in primary or secondary school. He had a floor mate from Shanghai who said, "Ben, Japan is the moon, but China is the sun." Ben resolved to try an introductory Chinese course and fell in love with the ideogram-based language system, deciding right then and there that it would be the focus of the next four years of his life.

Ben spent his junior year in an exchange program at Nanjing University in China, and while most of the other exchange students signed up to stay for only one semester, he enrolled for two. It was 1992, only a few years after the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the political climate was still fraught with tension. The developing country lacked modern infrastructure and reliable access to medical care, and the exchange students were left to fend for themselves. "There were no good maps, so if we wanted to go places, we had to find them by trial and error and the kindness of strangers," Ben recounts. "There was no 911, and if we got sick, the hospitals were not very advanced at the time. But Nanjing University was one of the best in China, and the professors and students were great. And Chinese hospitality to visitors was truly inspiring. It was a strange dichotomy that made me fall back on my own resources in a way I never had before. It was an amazing experience."

Ben began teaching English on the side, and when his second semester was over, he spent the summer teaching and traveling, embracing the full breadth of the experience of being immersed in a society where he was a distinct minority. He returned to the US a more worldly, confident, self-reliant person, comfortable with risk and the uncertainties of life.

After another semester at Grinnell, Ben decided to embark on a five-month work-study program in Israel, where he worked in a citrus patch, an almond grove, and an electronics factory while studying Hebrew. When he returned to the States, he took a job with State Public Policy Group—a small consulting firm serving the Iowa state government, the state developmental disabilities council, and several corporate clients—while teaching English as a Second Language to adult immigrants in Des Moines. In 1998, he and his future wife, Julie, spent four months in Beijing, where he taught English and she worked as an editor for *China Daily*. They returned to Des Moines and married in June of 1998, and then moved to the DC metropolitan area, where Ben made a career pivot and took an opportunity with a tech startup.

The company grew sustainably, with \$400,000 in annual net profits and strong client relationships in the science and medical communities, until it changed course and obtained venture financing to pivot to a dot-com startup. At the investors' encouragement, the company's leadership team rapidly scaled from ten to fifty employees, and several months later ran out of cash. "The dot-com turned into a dot-bomb," Ben recalls. "They let two-thirds of the employees go. We'd spent years building a great company, and it was traumatic to see it suddenly disintegrate because of bad cash management. It taught me that, while I was comfortable with risk, it had to be well thought out and planned risk, especially when people's lives and careers were on the line."

It was a life lesson that inspired Ben to start his own company—an entrepreneurial venture where he wasn't just along for the ride, but instead had a considerable measure of influence over the outcome. With this goal in mind, he spent the next ten years of his life learning everything he could about running a business. Part of that meant taking MBA classes at night, where Ben managed to get straight A's despite balancing work and a young child. "I'd

come home from work around 8, kiss my baby, go to class, come home at 11, and do my homework late into the night," he reminisces. "It was three years of pain and suffering."

Upon completing his business degree in 2003, Ben took stock of his perceived weaknesses and recognized the difficulty he had with sales and the art of persuasion. "I saw that as a critical part of being a successful entrepreneur, so I decided to tackle it head-on," he says. With that, he got a sales job at an up-and-coming internet videogame company, Exent Technologies. Ben quickly moved up the ranks to become their VP of Sales and Business Development, bringing on major accounts like Verizon. Then, after nailing that skill set, he took a job at PBS Kids as the Senior Director of Interactive Publishing, where he founded the company's mobile group. They launched their first app in early 2009 and were immediately profitable. "I'm proud that a number of the apps we developed were shown to have a positive impact on literacy and language development," he says. "I took a huge demotion and pay cut to accept that job, but it was the right move for me because it set me on the path to learning how to produce effective, award-winning content for teaching a language."

After six years with PBS, Ben decided he was ready to take the leap and started Speak Agent. And he knew it would not be a partial jump with a safety net, like startup moonlighting while he kept a full-time day job. Rather, he cut the cord completely and took the plunge. "I will never forget the exhilaration I felt when I decided to go all in," he says.

Ben officially launched Speak Agent in December of 2011, but its first two years were mainly spent doing consulting work. Along with cofounders Vijay Lakshman and Katie Cunningham, the company's CTO, Ben has since grown the business with the transformative support of community organizations like the Montgomery County Business Innovation Network, the Maryland Technology Development Corporation, the TEDCO Edtech Roundtable, and the DC Mindshare Network. And through it all, Julie's faith and support have been absolutely foundational. "She's an incredibly sweet person,

and everyone she meets loves her instantly," he says. "She's the social fabric of the family and makes sure we stay on top of everything. It's incredible to have a spouse that has your back, always."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ben reminds us not to be in such a hurry to get where we think we want to be. "It's important to have a goal, but it's also important to explore alternative career paths," he says. "Don't assume the only way to get to Point B is directly from Point A. Take the time to learn skills and build relationships. If you maintain your network and build your reputation, you'll see doors open for you that will take you to places you never realized you could go."

Beyond that, Ben's journey is one of understated selflessness and unshakable appreciation—traits that reflect in the family legacy of his great grandfather's goblet. "My parents have always thought of the public good and the family good, never about themselves," he says. "And they have this tremendous energy and vitality and love of life, where no matter how good or bad it is, they're always enjoying themselves. So, however crazy or frustrating business and life can get sometimes, I just try to enjoy every moment for what it is. Life is too short not to love it, and we've got a lot of work to do."

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*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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).