

Bobby C. Christian

Breaking the Cycle

High up in the sacred thin air of the Sandia Mountains in New Mexico, 13-year-old Bobby Christian received the clearest directive of his life. "It was almost audible," he remembers now, decades later. "I heard the words, 'My job in life is to break the cycle.'"

Bobby was visiting his Aunt in Albuquerque and had attended a nearby church. During a nighttime worship service with the church's youth group, the words had come to him at the moment of conversion that would transform the rest of his life. He didn't fully understand the message at first, but through prayer and contemplation, he came to realize that his mission in life was, in part, to break free from the chains of addiction that had shackled the men in his family for generations. His alcoholic father was the most recent case in a long history of family members who had fallen victim to substance abuse, leading them to unhealthy relationships with spouses and untimely ends. "I believe the Lord put me on this Earth to demonstrate, through my life, that we have the power to end the tragedy of that kind of cycle," Bobby says today. "We have the power to define our own identities and futures."

To Bobby, "breaking the cycle" also came to mean transitioning from a scarcity mentality to an abundance mentality. He came to understand that, when measuring life through the lens of worldly possessions and material gain, one never achieves abundance. "That's because true abundance is about creating healthy, loving relationships," he says. "As I've created a socioeconomic lifestyle that grants access to more resources, I have appreciated those opportunities, but I've also come to learn that true abundance is waking up in the morning to a life where you feel happy, connected, and nourished by the positive people around you."

Now, as the founder and CEO of iMPACT

Ventures, LLC, his life mission of "breaking the cycle" has gained even more dimension. After selling his first company and completing a three-year earn-out, Bobby took time to think deeply about his next step. He thought back through his life, realizing that it had been graced time and again by mentors and helpers who paved the way for his success. "Through the good and bad times in my life, I've always had people around me that have somehow pushed me to the next stage of life, helping me overcome obstacles and giving me opportunities I otherwise wouldn't have had," he recalls. "I realized I wanted to become that for others. I wanted to take all the mistakes I've made through my career and my life and share those lessons learned for the benefit of others, so that they might be able to avoid them in their own lives and businesses."



In a sense, iMPACT Ventures is about giving businesses the information they need to avoid mistakes of the past and achieve success, in much the same way Bobby learned from the example of his father to avoid mistakes of the past and live a better life. Growing up in a lower middle class household in Falls Church, Virginia, his mother provided consistent support and unconditional love. This juxtaposed sharply with the example set by his father, a tragic figure whose good heart and strong work ethic were obscured by the disease of alcoholism. Bobby's parents separated when he was nine years old, yet held out hope that they'd be able to find a path forward for their family. "Several months later, my mom told us Dad was doing better, and that we were going to try to move on together to a new chapter in our lives," Bobby says. "I can still remember the day Dad was supposed to come home so we could formalize those goals and begin planning to move out of our apartment and into a new townhouse. But when he showed up, he was completely intoxicated. That was the end of any

hope that our family would stay together, and I remember saying to myself, 'That's not going to happen to me.' I made a commitment that I would lead an addiction-free life."

That commitment planted the seed that would grow into a remarkable strength of character—one that would be tested later in his junior year at JEB Stuart High School by the arrival of a new basketball coach. The team had lost every single game the previous year, and in the first meeting of the year, the new coach, Ed Tiernan, ordered everyone to clean up and wear respectable clothing, including a tie on game day. Of the almost 40 boys at the meeting, only a portion followed the directive and came back the next day. At the second meeting, the coach laid out the grueling trainings they would have to do, prompting more students to drop out. By the time tryouts formally began, he had whittled the team down to only those students most committed to success. "I don't think half of us knew what the heck was going on," Bobby laughs. "He taught us that success is the *feeling* you get when you've done everything you can possibly do to achieve a *worthwhile* goal. According to that definition, the concept of 'success' became something within our control—something we were free to define based on what we thought was worthwhile. To this day I am indebted to Ed Tiernan for making me a better person."

Thanks to this groundbreaking leadership style, the team won 9 of 24 games during Bobby's junior year. During Bobby's senior year, they were 21-5, advancing beyond their district to become regional runner-up. "It's amazing what you can do with very little talent but a commitment to win," he muses. "None of us were superstars, but Coach Tiernan came in and taught us that we could achieve success through unparalleled discipline. We held ourselves to a higher standard than other teams did, and our hard work allowed us to achieve some amazing things. It was truly phenomenal, and taught me that even marginal strategies and tactics executed with passion almost always outpace brilliant strategies executed without it. Ever since, I've lived my life believing in the transformative power of hard work."

Despite his commitments to God and hard work, Bobby was still a troublemaker through his senior year of high school. He would go out drinking with friends, get into fights, and even spend the night in jail from time to time. His

mother, desperate for a way to set her son straight, consulted Sam Espinoza, the pastor of Bobby's Methodist Church who was known for being small in stature but big in personality. One evening, as Bobby sat in his room doing homework, he was shocked when Sam walked in, grabbed him, and threw him on the bed. "I was ready to fight him, but I saw the anger in his eyes," Bobby recalls. "He ordered me to stop the drinking and straighten up my act immediately, and then walked out. My life is full of those moments when people walk into my life to give me the guidance I need. I had friends who wound up with bullet wounds or life sentences, but thanks to people like Pastor Espinoza, I am where I am today."

A wake-up call just as jarring as the pastor's reprimand came during his freshman year of college at Virginia Tech, when Bobby's father had to sit him down and break the news that he couldn't make his son's tuition payments. Having worked a paper route at the age of 13 and maintained multiple jobs at once ever since, Bobby was no stranger to hard work, but he hadn't saved up much from his years of lifeguarding and waiting tables. Still, he wasn't deterred. "I walked away from that conversation saying, 'This is on me now.' I was going to figure it out. I asked for a thousand-dollar loan from a dear friend's parents, and I got student loans and Pell grants to cover the rest. I worked double shifts on the weekends, finding a way to pay for my education."

Although he was more of a right-brain thinker, Bobby had excelled in math and science in high school and decided to pursue mechanical engineering in college at the advice of a friend's father. The coursework was extremely difficult, and by his third year, he began to consider dropping out. "It was the first time in my life when I truly felt lost," he recalls. "But through prayer, I realized I needed to just buckle down and finish that degree. At the same time, some friends urged me to join their fraternity, connecting me to athletics, a rewarding social life, and leadership." As his studies allowed him to cultivate and master a more structured way of thinking that enabled the analysis of complex problems, Bobby went on to become President of the fraternity.

As Bobby prepared to graduate and enter the workforce, a fraternity brother told him about Andersen Consulting, later to become Accenture. Bobby's engineering degree, paired with his passion for business, made him an ideal candidate

for the best management consulting firm in the world, and he landed the job in July of 1991. Several months later, he married the love of his life and his childhood sweetheart, Patti. The two had met when they were twelve years old, staying best of friends through high school and dating through college. "Patti has always had a lot of confidence and trust that whatever I decide is the right thing to do," he remarks. "Like my mom, she's a wonderful and powerful influence in my life. Even after all the years I've known her, I can't say a single bad thing about her. Spiritual, warm, welcoming, and consistent, she's the perfect balance to my personality, which is more of a roller coaster."

Through his earlier years, Bobby's professional life was driven by a desire to prove he could escape his underprivileged roots, compelling him to work long hours and pursue elusive measures of abundance and success. Seven years into the job, he had moved Patti and their two small children to Chicago and was on track to become a partner, working 80 hours a week and loving the job. It wasn't until a friend resigned that he paused to really assess what his future would look like if he maintained the status quo. "I realized I wanted to be able to control my own calendar and dictate my own terms," Bobby remembers. "I wanted a better work/family balance. With that, I decided to pursue an entrepreneurial opportunity with Netrex Secure Solutions, a Midwest company headquartered just outside of Detroit, Michigan."

Despite a lack of experience, Bobby was appointed the East Coast Regional Director and began growing the business in the DC Metro area. He was part of the management team, allowing him a front row seat to the decisions and strategies of the CEO and COO. Tasked with creating a national service model for the \$7 million company, Bobby and a former Accenture colleague were instrumental in helping the company grow tremendously over an 18-month period. The company was acquired, and Bobby was surprised to find that he had been awarded stock options when he was originally hired at Netrex. "It was my first taste of equity," he explains.

In 2000, as the now-public company began scaling back its services division to focus on its product offerings, Bobby decided to launch a services company to fill that widening gap in the market. With that, he partnered with the best

salesman and techie he knew, forming his first company, True North Solutions. "We had a great run," he remembers. "After being a sponge for 18 months at Netrex learning from incredible mentors, we each funded the business to start the company that would serve a need created by Netrex's shifting focus. From the very first quarter, we were profitable."

Bobby and his partners grew the company to \$35 million over four years. They went from a team of three to a force of 120, and from one location to eight around the country. "It was a fantasy dream run that I would do over and over again if I could," he muses. "We created an organizational chart and filled it with the names of people we wanted to work with, setting our sights on bringing in those ideal people to create an ideal company. We gave our employees an extremely entrepreneurial environment, such that many of them went on to be Presidents and CEOs of their own companies. It culminated in my first liquidity event, and when I woke up the next day, I realized I was still the same person. You think everything is going to be different after that, but it's not. You're still the same person—you just have a little more money in the bank and a lot more experience on which to base future business decisions."

True North was bought by AMERICAN SYSTEMS, and Bobby agreed to stay on for three years. Six months into that time period, the CEO passed away and was replaced by Bill Hoover, a man who epitomized leadership in such a resonant manner that Bobby decided to stay on an extra year after his earn-out was up. Then, after leaving AMERICAN SYSTEMS and taking time to pray about his next move, the vision for iMPACT Ventures came to him in the form of a triangle. He saw three roles through which he could help companies achieve their goals: one as an active participant, one as a passive objective observer, and one as a board member. Through these approaches, he envisioned investing himself in companies the way others had invested in him throughout the years. He saw his life's goal etched in the company's name—an acronym that affirms, "I Make Peoples' Aspirations Come True."

Through iMPACT Ventures, Bobby gets down in the trenches with CEOs and executives by becoming an executive management team member. With a focus on growth strategies, he's not satisfied unless he's helping a company grow at 30 percent a year or more. This approach is

influenced by the work he does through his nonprofit, *Unsung Heroes*, which traverses into the darkest regions of South Africa to support individuals doing incredible work to build their communities. For over a decade, Bobby has taken frequent ministry trips to the country, providing these remarkable heroes with mentoring, management skills, and money, otherwise known as the M-cubed approach created by the Founder and CEO, Ted Carr. “The *Unsung Heroes* ministry is at the center of the triangle that led me to launch *iMPACT Ventures*,” he explains. “Through these experiences, I came to view mentoring as an extremely deep relationship and commitment. You accomplish things arm-in-arm, experiencing the setbacks and successes right alongside the people you’re mentoring. I have a heart for people that want to build companies with real meaning behind them, so I look for those opportunities everyday through my company, and I join them side-by-side in those efforts.”

Bobby officially launched *iMPACT* in 2008, offering his services for either a retainer fee or equity. So far, he’s seen two separate companies through entire life cycles. In both instances, he transformed scarcity to abundance, starting with nothing more than ideas scrawled across a sheet of paper during a lunch meeting. The first company went from \$0 to \$30 million, and the second went from \$0 million to \$25 million. “I get so much energy from having that kind of impact and creating that growth platform,” he remarks. “It absolutely thrills me to go into a business with great people and a great model, providing that element of leadership that takes it to the next level.”

Beyond these successes, Bobby has invested in eight additional companies—businesses chosen because he believes in the people, the model, and the mission. He’s also testing a new model as the CEO of *WATERFALL SOFTWARE*, a venture he shifted the focus of and is now in the process of taking in a new direction. The idea is to personally mentor each and every employee he hires, beginning with their first day on the job. “My goal is to build a team of 25 people who come without a lot of experience, but with tremendous entrepreneurial drive,” Bobby explains. “They’ll use that drive to build the experience, and will then go out in the world to become great leaders with positive impacts elsewhere in society, breaking the cycle of failure

or poverty or addiction in their own way.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Bobby points out that most people spend more time brushing their teeth than they spend thinking about their passions in life. “Spend more time thinking about what makes you tick, and less time thinking about other things,” he encourages. “I find that young people today are more willing to pursue meaning and fulfillment over financial gain, and that’s a good thing. Once you find your mission and passion in life, everything else becomes easy, because you’re willing to do whatever it takes to get there. You have to pursue meaning over a paycheck in order for things to fall into place.”

This formula for success has been reinforced by the grounding support and love of his mother and wife, and by the countless individuals who appeared in his life just when he least expected them but most needed them. It’s reinforced by the memory of a tough kid, no stranger to street fights and jail cells, who finally got enough sense knocked into him to leave one life behind so that a new one could take root. And it’s reinforced by the flag that was flown at his father’s funeral, which came too early because of an addiction he couldn’t break. “The flag reminds me that we all have our struggles—the things we can and cannot control in life,” Bobby says. “It reminds me to be thankful for what I have, and for the opportunity just to live. I don’t know why I was born into this life, but I feel as though I’ve lived the joy and excitement of a hundred lifetimes. It reminds me that success isn’t about where you start, it’s about where you finish—and the cycles you break in the process.”

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