Kevin Beverly

Working Wonders

Kevin Beverly remembers the day he had to start working very clearly, because it was the day after his father left. "I remember coming downstairs and finding my mother crying," he recounts. "She told me he wasn't coming back, and that I had to go to work. I was ten years old."

Kevin's mother took him outside and instructed him to pick up a cinderblock sitting by the side of the road. With the cinderblock, they walked up to the church, and then back home. Kevin didn't know why. "She made me do it

again," he says. "Then she told me I was going into the tomato fields the next day. I reminded her you had to be thirteen to work in the tomato fields, but she told me that if I could carry that cinderblock, I could work in the tomato fields."

The Beverlys didn't have an easy life in their tiny, rural community on Taylor's Island off the Maryland coast. They never had running water or electricity, and money was always tight. Kevin was in elementary school before

desegregation, and the school for black kids on the island was poorly-resourced. When his father left, his brother Larry, ten years older and in college, didn't mince words. "He came home the following weekend and told me I had to help and work too," Kevin remembers.

Larry was the hero Kevin looked up to and the mentor he needed. A total anomaly on Taylor's Island, he was the first in the family to go to college, and hell-bent on ensuring that Kevin would be the second. He never let up on Kevin, constantly asking him about his studies and reinforcing the importance of academics. "I like to say that he walked on gravel so I could walk on pavement," says Kevin admiringly. "He always told me to sit in the front row in class. He told me I didn't have to be the smartest—I just had to outwork 'em. He said, be the first one there, and work the hardest. And if someone gives you

something to do, you do it on their time, not yours. If someone's asking you to get something done, you do it as quickly and efficiently as possible. I didn't know it at the time, but he was absolutely right—hard work works wonders."

Kevin took Larry's lessons to heart and excelled in school, ultimately landing at the University of Maryland. But during his first semester, he didn't do so well. He didn't have the habits and discipline of the kids from more affluent districts and ended up on academic

probation, wondering if he belonged. He even thought about going back home—until he had another life-defining moment.

Kevin was working on an oyster boat during the break between semesters when he fell overboard. "When you work on the boats, you're pushing rakes down and pulling the oysters up," he recounts. "I couldn't swim, so they always tied a rope to me — mostly to make sure they didn't lose their rakes. They don't give a crap

whether you go over, or whether you're cold or freezing. That boat's not going back until it gets its haul. We went out at 3 o'clock in the morning and didn't come back in until around 10:00 AM, so I was sitting there, absolutely freezing. I thought to myself, I am never doing this again. That was my epiphany. I knew there had to be more to life, and I went back to Maryland with a whole new attitude."

Today, Kevin Beverly is the President and CEO of Social and Scientific Systems (SSS), a \$100 million company that works wonders by helping to improve public health worldwide. They've worked extensively on the HIV/AIDS crisis, both in the U.S. and abroad, through clinical research services, epidemiological studies, and policy outcomes. Founded forty years ago as a small minority-owned business by Herb Miller, Dennis Ables, and Mary Francis leMatt, who was CEO



when Kevin started, the company now employs nearly 500 people and is 100 percent employee-owned. "These are people who are very proud of their work, whether it's running HIV/AIDS drug trials in Africa, standing up a breast cancer epidemiological study here in the US, or doing research to help the government figure out whether Medicaid expansion is working the way it should," he says. "I'm proud to be able to lead an organization with a mission like that."

Today, the National Institutes of Health is SSS's largest client, including the Allergy and Infectious Disease Institute, and the Environmental Sciences Institute, the Cancer Institute, and the Institute for Kidney and Digestive Diseases. They specialize in clinical trials for adult and pediatric AIDS, helping to develop many of the therapies and treatments used to treat the disease today. Long-term epidemiological studies, which follow large cohorts of patients over the course of 15 or 20 years, are also a specialty, including a study of the long-term health effects suffered by workers who cleaned up the Gulf Oil Spill.

By the time Kevin began at SSS in 2003, he had an extensive background in public health, computer engineering, and business development. He was brought in by Jim Lynch, then the company's Executive Vice President and future CEO, to take over the company's Business Development operations and come up with a strategy to expand its impact. "My job was really about finding new business and creating opportunities," he explains. "SSS was very good at winning the re-competes they already had, but not as good at going out and winning new things. So that was my chore."

At that time, the company relied heavily on grants, which formed a solid infrastructure but didn't generate profit. Kevin set out to leverage it into their expertise into new contracts and transitioning their culture from a nonprofit mindset to one focused on raising share price. Thanks to this restructuring, SSS reduced its reliance on grants from 50 percent to only 10 percent, and set its sights on doing even more. "I had made it clear that I wanted to run the company one day," he recalls. "Jim was giving me more room to operate and make changes, but he was more conservative. When I told him we could be a \$200 million company, he told me he didn't want to run a company that big.' But I said, 'well I do!" His goal was realized in 2015, when Jim retired and the Board handed the reigns over to Kevin as CEO. "Jim was my biggest advocate, and I'm so appreciative that he saw something in me," Kevin affirms.

Now, with plans to double the company by 2021, Kevin is redirecting SSS toward wonders of an even greater magnitude. It may seem like a long way to go, but when measured against the ground he's already covered in life, it's nothing. "If I got to where I am today from Taylor's Island, so poor and so far out in the country that they had to pump the sunlight in, I can take SSS to the next level," he affirms confidently.

Growing up on Taylor's Island, the family kept chickens, pigs and cows, and wasn't picky about meat. "I could sit on the roof of my back porch and shoot a duck for dinner," he recounts. "We ate turtle, muskrat, squirrel, rabbit—anything that moved. We never worried much about food, but money was hard to come by."

Kevin's mother worked tirelessly picking and peeling tomatoes and shucking oysters, later picking up a waitressing job at a café. Larry had a different father, but Kevin's parents met when Larry was only five, so Kevin's father was the man he considered to be his dad. "My brother's memories of him are very different from mine," says Kevin. "He remembers when our father transported our house to the spot next to my grandmother's house, dragging it four miles with mules and a tractor. Larry remembers him working hard and being a provider. My parents were married for sixteen years, but by the time I came around, he was an abusive guy who drank too much. I thought he was a bad person when he left us, but in hindsight now, I think he just ran out of gas. It was a lot of work for me personally to start to understand him - to recognize the plight of the African-American man in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. He was one of 18 kids, with maybe a seventhgrade education. He had what skills and tools he had, and he did the best he could with them, until he just couldn't anymore."

Although his father was gone, Kevin was surrounded by extended family on Taylor's Island. His house sat between his grandmother's house and his great aunt's house, and his entire street was home to various aunts, uncles, and cousins. "We were all related, there wasn't anyone on our road that wasn't family to me," says Kevin. "It was a community dominated by our church, and especially by the women in our church. We were

raised by strong, religious women who were trying to teach us right from wrong. Thankfully, with Larry charting the course ahead of me, I was following the legend."

Until fourth grade, Kevin attended the tiny one-room schoolhouse on the island. Then, in fifth grade, the black school integrated with the larger, nicer white school on the island, presenting Kevin with his first experience with inequality. "We hadn't even had plumbing at our previous school, but the white school was a two-story building with a gymnasium," he remembers. "It was definitely a change, but I didn't pay too much attention."

The summer after his father left, Kevin was preparing to go to junior high school, when Larry made a surprising announcement. "My brother told me I wasn't going to Maces Lane, where the whole black community attended," he recounts. "He was sending me to Cambridge Junior High, the white school. I said I didn't want to go, but he told me he didn't care what I wanted!"

On the first day of school, Kevin was nervous. He watched as all his cousins got on the bus to head off to Maces Lane as he hustled to get to his new bus stop. "The bus went down and picked up all the white kids, but it didn't come down to my house," he says. "I had to get to the top of the road to catch it, and that first day of school, I don't know if the driver just drove straight by. I don't know if he didn't see me, or didn't want to see me, but I started walking." Kevin was soon picked up by a farm truck heading that direction. He was dropped at the edge of town, and walked a mile to get a ride from the restaurant where his mother worked. "The school spoke with the bus driver, and the next day, he picked me up and told me to sit in the very front seat," Kevin recounts. "I knew a few of the kids from fifth and sixth grade, but not one of them spoke to me."

Getting through Cambridge Junior High wasn't easy, and Kevin was beaten up by eighth graders on his second day. But over time, he began to make friends and even managed to scare the bullies away. And by the time he headed to high school, the difference in academic quality between the black and white schools became much more apparent. "I had a real 'ah ha' moment when I saw the difference in what I had learned, versus what my cousins had learned," he says, "The difference between where I was and what I had retained,

versus where they were and what they had retained, was like night and day. So I saw 'separate but equal' in a whole new light. It wasn't equal, and I had far outpaced my peers."

Kevin thrived in high school, distinguishing himself with his dedication and following his brother's advice to sit in the front row and outwork the competition. As a senior, Kevin was elected Senior Class President, a huge deal in a newly integrated school. "Looking back, the problem was the parents," he recounts. "Nobody could go to anybody's home because the parents were still fighting these battles. But the kids were figuring it out, and that was powerful and important."

Kevin had done well in his small hometown, but the University of Maryland was a whole new ballgame. He didn't get any scholarships because he didn't know how to apply, so his first order of business was to head over to the financial aid office and ask about campus jobs. The director, a man named Ulysses Glee, gave him a position shelving books in the library, and then dug a little deeper into Kevin's financial situation. "He talked to me about financial aid said he'd have to see my mother's tax returns," says Kevin. "I had been doing our taxes since I was fourteen, so I had them. My mom's annual income was about \$2,500 or \$3,000. I didn't have any idea what other people made. And he just looked at me and said, 'You're eligible for a lot!'"

The following semester, after his epiphany on the oyster boat, Kevin returned to campus rejuvenated. That semester, he met and fell in love with his future wife, Diane. The two were at a dorm meeting in the lounge, when he first heard her voice. "I couldn't get that voice out of my head," he says. "I went to the end of the hall to see which room was hers, and I just glanced in. I think that was a classic business-developer move because I looked for something I could connect to, and I saw knitting needles. So I ended up going up to her and starting a conversation about sewing. She said, 'you sew?' And I said, 'not very well, but my mom taught me a bit. Do you sew?' and she said, 'well, I knit and crochet.' I said I wanted to learn, so she offered to teach me. And that was that! I spent the next several weeks learning how to crochet."

The couple have been married for almost 35 years now, and while Diane has been a constant source of support, Kevin is particularly grateful for

the unconditional love she provided in the early days. "She saw my potential when nobody else could," he affirms. "I was just this little, black, bowlegged boy from Taylor's Island. I had two pairs of pants, and neither of them were very good. Suddenly I was smitten but not sure how it was going to go, because nobody was giving me the time of day. But she didn't care that I had nothing. She invested in me."

Diane loaned Kevin her car when he wanted to apply for a job at the mailroom at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Ulysses Glee had told Kevin about the opportunity, saying he'd need transportation, but that the mailroom gig paid a lot better than shelving books in the library. The job turned out to be a game changer when Kevin was asked to pick up the Director of the National Library of Medicine, Dr. Cummings, from the airport. The two chatted on the ride home, and the doctor was so impressed that he called the mailroom administrators and told them to keep an eye on Kevin.

Soon, Kevin was promoted from sorting the mail to delivering the mail. On his first mail run, he came back in 20 minutes, stumping his boss. The other employees took at least an hour on the same run. He called around the building, sure that Kevin had done a sloppy job or accidentally skipped people. But no, the mail had been delivered. Kevin was simply being efficient. He also set to work reorganizing the processes in the mailroom, translating his personal knack for efficiency to the entire operation. He remembered his brother's advice, and sure enough, the strategy paid off. When Kevin graduated from Maryland with a degree in Criminal Justice in 1979, Dr. Cummings was the first one on the phone to help.

Yet again, working hard worked wonders for Kevin, and Dr. Cummings arranged for him to meet with Mary Corning, the Director of the International Programs Library. Mary asked Kevin what he might be interested in doing, but Kevin had no idea. "My only work experience until that point was in the mail room," he says. "I had had no real contact with professional people and hadn't done anything in an office. I hadn't thought about what a career looked like."

Without direction from Kevin, Ms. Corning matched him with a World Health Organization program setting up systems to deliver biomedical literature in developing countries. He was so accustomed to working

harder than everyone around him that he had no trouble exceling, soon opting to go to graduate school and later completing a post-graduate program at the National Library of Medicine.

Kevin worked there until 1989, when he took a job with PSI International as a project manager supporting the Food and Drug Administration. Then, in 1993, he moved on to Computer Sciences Corporation and developed some new skill sets. "I went from working as a project manager at a small 8(a) company, to working at a large, \$2 billion organization where I had the opportunity to run bigger initiatives," he recounts. "I got to see what real CFOs, COOs, and CEOs looked like, and how they behaved."

After two years at CSC, Kevin moved to BAE Systems for a technical job, but quickly demonstrated a talent for business and business development. With a personality innately suited to the task, he began learning the craft through trainings and mentors. When an important mentor, Judy Mopsik, left to take a position with Abt Associates, he followed her there and spent the next three years flourishing in business development as he helped the company through a period of transition.

Then one day, Kevin got a call from Jim Lynch at SSS. The company needed a unique technical capability to meet a client request, and Jim thought Abt Associates might be equipped to solve the client's problem. "I was brought over to consult, and I listened to what the client was trying to do," recalls Kevin. "I didn't think Abt Associates could do it, but that had never stopped me before." With that, Kevin put together a team and set about solving the problem, leaving a marked impression on Jim. He soon reached out to bring Kevin onboard at SSS, but Kevin had some questions first. "I asked him what his growth plan was, and he said they were growing between 3 and 3.5% a year," Kevin says. "I pointed out that he'd do that just with the escalation in the rates on his contracts, so why did he need me? But he reminded me that we were two very different people. I think it takes an enormous amount of courage to go out and hire someone to replace you that looks nothing like you. Jim would say, 'Kevin will go jump off a cliff just to get the rest of us to look over the edge.' I appreciated that comment, because it really does summarize how I play. I believe you have to get people outside of their comfort zones, and he was willing to do that by

hiring me."

Like his brother before him, Kevin is eager to pave the way for other underprivileged kids to achieve success. That's why he chairs the Board of CollegeTracks, a group that helps guide poor students through the college application, admission, and financial aid process. They also provide coaches to help the kids get through the tough transition into college life - a transition that almost knocked Kevin off his path to success. "My brother was my CollegeTracks," he says. "If you're from a family where nobody went to college, your chances of getting there are really low because you have no idea how to navigate everything, and nobody in your family knows how to help you. That's the single biggest indicator of whether or not you'll make it to college, so we're trying to bend that curve. CollegeTracks is an opportunity to truly invest in people in a profoundly impactful way."

Today, as a leader, Kevin stays focused on the big picture, charting a course to the future of SSS. But he firmly believes that getting there must be a collaborative process. "My first objective is to hear every voice in the room," he says. "In order to do that, you have to get everybody at the table, and you have to recognize that some people have their ideas and aren't shy about sharing them. But there are other people in the room who, unless you ask them, won't necessarily give their opinion. You have to create an environment where they know they're important too. Let everybody get their voice in, and use that information to get to the best decision. The best idea has to win."

To young people entering the working world for the first time, Kevin echoes his brother's

emphasis on hard work. "No employer is going to hire you to motivate you," he says. "They're going to challenge you and expect great things from you, but it's up to you to bring your personal strength and motivation with you every day." Indeed, this philosophy has taken Kevin to heights he never imagined he'd reach. But of everything he's built through the years, his proudest accomplishment began with tearing something down. "My goal was to demolish our old house and build my mother a new one," he says. "I finally accomplished that in 1990, and I'll never forget the day she called me just so I could hear the toilet flush. For the first time, we had running water, and to me, that was one of the greatest wonders of all. Everything else is just gravy on top."

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