

Mark Watson

Building Integrity

At age 19, Mark Watson had already been through three major moves, adapting to wildly different geographic locations and cultures. But this fourth and final uprooting, from The Netherlands to Northern Virginia, proved the most difficult of all. "European culture is very community-based, but in Virginia, it was harder to tap into that," he remembers today. "I had already graduated from high school, so I didn't have that entry point to meeting people. I felt completely alone and depressed. I was searching for something, though I didn't know what it was."

Mark was enrolled at Northern Virginia Community College at the time with an interest in international business, and a friend mentioned he was going to a job interview based on a vague advertisement suggesting the ability to make \$20,000 in a month. Intrigued, Mark tagged along and found himself interviewing at American Building Contractors (ABC), a national insurance restoration company working in exterior home improvements like roofing, siding, and gutters. "A bad hailstorm had just hit, and they told us the job would be highly intense, requiring complete dedication," Mark recalls. "Saul, the guy who interviewed us, had this infectious energy and passion for the work. I made the decision that day to drop out of school and take the job."

Mark and his friend were hired as part of a group of ten other workers to canvas for leads and do inspections in territories affected by the storm. By the end of the week, they were the only two left on the team. But Mark was used to outworking the people around him, and he had a clear picture in his head of where he was going. "At first, I drove around in my parents' van carrying a 24-foot extension ladder inside the vehicle with me," he laughs. "I had this vision of being successful, and after seven months, I had made enough money to

buy a truck, which meant I could attach the ladder on top. The harder I worked, the more I made, and the more successful I was. The money was good, but more importantly, the job plugged me back into a community through my network of coworkers. It gave me a sense of purpose, success, and confidence again, and it allowed me the freedom to be entrepreneurial. That was a big turning point for me."

Now the cofounder and partner of Exterior Medics Inc., a residential and commercial exterior home improvement and roofing contractor serving the Greater Washington area, Mark is still driven by that strong sense of purpose and service to community, dedicated to building integrity from the ground up in all aspects of life. He and his partner, Joe LeVecchi, had shared a passion for entrepreneurship and the dream of one day starting their own business since they first began working together in 2000. They decided to seriously begin working on a business plan in 2007, and in April of 2008, they made that dream a reality.

There's no shortage of home replacement contractors in the DC metropolitan area, but Exterior Medics sets itself apart through its dedication to going above and beyond. "Exterior Medics was created amidst the greatest economic recession since the Great Depression, but we were committed to making it work," Mark says. "We saw that, too often, companies just send someone out to do home improvement work based on their perception of what the customer needs. They don't know your story, your why, your family, or your plans. We wanted to take a more consultative, collaborative, personal approach to home improvements."

Exterior Medics gets the majority of its work directly from homeowners, and 60 percent of their residential leads come from either a prior



customer or a referral—a testament to their long term and enduring relationships. They also work with builders looking to contract out with exceptional partners, and are known for their refusal to cut corners. Recognizing the dramatic innovations taking place in the materials and manufacturing sectors, Mark takes his cues from leading engineers and cutting-edge science when it comes to installing roofing, siding, and windows. “We will never work on a builder’s grade level, just meeting minimum requirements,” he says. “When we do work, it’s meant to last. If you do it right and take the time to figure out how it all fits into the client’s story, then you can truly build something of integrity for your clients.”

Committed to the highest standards and best quality home improvements, Mark is also driven by the impact Exterior Medics has on the community, beginning with their thirty employees and array of subcontractors. The company’s work is only as good as its exceptional team, all brought on for their strong character, drive, and motivation. “I believe in hiring for character and training for skill,” Mark says. “I look for people of integrity who are hungry to do more and want a better opportunity. Some are from this great nation, and some immigrated here in the hopes of achieving the American Dream. Some join us as laborers and work their way up to leadership roles, growing and blossoming along with the company. Our company creates opportunities for people who might not otherwise have them, and that’s very meaningful to us.”

Mark, himself, is one of those people who ultimately came to the U.S. looking for opportunity—though he didn’t realize it at the time. He was born in Bedford, England, in 1980, where the majority of his family still resides. His father was a blue-collar roofer who also did gutters and window fittings, while his mother worked odd office and cleaning jobs to help make ends meet. His younger sister, Samantha, was born when he was two. He was very close with his cousins, Iain and Martin, and loved running around the neighborhood riding bikes and playing football (soccer). He did well when he applied himself in school, but he enjoyed socializing with friends and could have focused a bit more on coursework.

When Mark was eight, his maternal grandfather passed away, and a few months later, his parents decided to divorce. It was a tough time

for the family, but a turning point that afforded Mark an important world perspective. Divorce is never a happy thing, but it brought life-defining opportunity,” he says. “At that time, except for a vacation to New York, I had never been on a plane or out of the country. All of that was about to change.”

Mark remembers his mother as a true mainstay for him and his sister, doing whatever it took to support them. They moved to a new town, and their extended family stepped up to help. “I remember going to the post office to collect welfare,” he says. “We never went without.” Several years after the divorce, Mark’s mother met his stepfather, Mark, who was serving in the U.S. Air Force and stationed in England at the time. “I still remember when they told Samantha and I that he was being reassigned to Hawaii,” Mark says. “We asked if that meant they were getting married, and they asked us what we thought about that. I was completely naïve at the time about what it would mean to leave, I just thought moving to Hawaii sounded like fun.”

The two married in 1991, and in January of 1992, the new family moved to Hawaii, where Mark started sixth grade. When it finally sunk in that they were leaving England and everything he had ever known, things got very tough, but Mark worked through it. “It was a brand-new culture, and through my experience of both diversity and adversity, I began learning a lot more about the world. Opening up to the world taught me a lot about people, and about myself, as I learned how to fit in and connect.”

Mark tried baseball for the first time, and though he didn’t take to it, he picked up basketball and loved it. Seven months later, as soon as they had begun settling in, that education continued when the family moved to Mississippi. There, he made a concerted effort to lose his British accent and fit in. He cut grass on the weekends to make spending money, and he played basketball on a team for the first time. Two and a half years later, when he was fourteen, they moved again—this time to The Netherlands for five years. “We left the summer before I started high school, which I’m very grateful for, because the schools in Mississippi were not good,” he recalls. “I had friends who were up to bad things, and there were a lot of bad influences around.”

The Netherlands was yet another dramatically different experience, where he made

close friends of all different nationalities. He traveled to Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and elsewhere, expanding his global perspective even further. Through school, he worked as a teacher's assistant in a kindergarten class, and he decided he wanted to become an elementary-level teacher. "When they're that young, kids just absorb everything, and I remember watching these kids transform before my eyes," he recounts. "It had such a positive impact on them, which was very rewarding."

At age sixteen, he got his first job on base at the bowling alley, and transitioned around to different positions at the pizza shop, the taco shop, the hot dog stand, and the Baskin Robbins. Even at that age, he had his own ideas and didn't like taking orders from people. "I took a lot of pride in my positions," he laughs. "I wanted to make the best pizza, or the best cheeseburger. I had a strong sense of responsibility and accountability, and was often trusted to teach others and close up shop at the end of the night. I wanted to do my best, and I outworked most of my colleagues and supervisors."

Mark grew up idolizing his biological father, and didn't give his stepfather much credit. But looking back now, he recognizes the big decision his stepfather made to take on and provide for a ready-made family. His own children from previous relationships, Alex and Amy, would visit on occasion, but he also focused much of his parenting energy on Mark and Samantha. He was always supportive when I had a basketball game, soccer game, or track meet," Mark recalls. "He ran the house kind of like the military, with hard lines and a clear sense of authority. I didn't appreciate those things as a kid, but they definitely kept me out of trouble and taught me to do the right thing. I have a lot of love and respect for him."

Mark was captain of his soccer team during his senior year, which he remembers as an important leadership experience. College was not a priority in Mark's family, and he was never pushed in that direction. When he graduated in 1998, he stayed on as a coach for the high school varsity soccer team, landing them a spot in the European Championships. He also got a job at a German butcher shop, where he observed the pride and work ethic of a job well done. "My parents always taught me to truly value and respect money, and I became very self-sustaining when I turned sixteen. They provided food and

shelter, but everything else I wanted was on my dime."

When Mark came to the U.S. at the age of nineteen, he got a job as a laborer on a construction site building a school. He didn't fit in with anyone he was meeting, and he made up his mind that he wasn't going to be happy. "I had decided that I hated it here, and that was that," he recalls. "I really had my blinders on, and all I wanted was to get back to Europe."

All that changed, however, when he took the job at ABC. He spent the next five years of his life focused on building integrity through his sales work, realizing his passion for the business, the opportunity, and the identity it gave him. He enjoyed considerable success at an early age but also went out with friends multiple nights a week, having a little too much fun and picking up the tab for everyone at the end of the evening. On one of those nights, at age 22, he went to dive bar called TJ Reynolds. He met a girl named Mandy who was home visiting from college. "She was poised, smart, with it, and beautiful," he remembers. "I could see that she really had it together and wasn't like the other girls I knew. I knew that if I wasn't driven and doing the right things, I wouldn't win a girl like her."

From that moment on, Mandy became a key influence in his life, inspiring him to take things to the next level. "She was the first person I met that gave me something to work for," he says. "Building my success wasn't just for me anymore—it was also going to be for her, so we could build something together. She's been my foundation and balance ever since, and we now have three amazing daughters—Cara, Evelyn, and Lila. They're a big part of my why."

In 2005, shortly before Mark and Mandy got married, he was driving one day when he heard a familiar voice over the radio. The local sports show, Sports Junkies, had just switched to a new station, and the man on the line could hardly contain his excitement. "I'm so happy to hear you guys back on the radio!" came the voice. "I was so excited that I jumped in my truck without tying down my ladder, and when I started driving, it flew off!"

When Mark realized it was Joe LeVecchi, a colleague who had left ABC several years earlier, he called up his old friend. Joe invited Mark to a party at his house that weekend, where Mark was convinced to come work for Shiner Roofing, where

Joe was employed. He and Joe quickly became the top producers on a team of eight salespeople, driven by his passion for relationship building after a lifetime of transitions from one radically-different place to another. They had deep admiration for their boss, Kevin, who set a culture of high ethical and moral standards. But they also had a strong entrepreneurial drive and ideas of their own, and decided to put together their own business plan.

When Mark and Joe decided to strike out on their own, they didn't bring along anyone from their past employer, and they weren't deterred by the state of the economy. "It was just the two of us and a truck, out selling these jobs, and in a way we felt that that put us at an advantage," he explains. "We were getting back to our roots of knocking on doors, putting out flyers, and doing whatever it took to bring in those jobs."

From April to December of that first year, Exterior Medics did an impressive \$1 million in business. That number climbed to \$2.3 million in their second year, and \$4.3 million in their fourth. By 2016, their revenues had reached \$10.5 million. "We're proud that we've maintained our margin along the way, running a profitable business and acquiring new talent that makes us better for our clients," Mark reports. In 2014, they had the great honor of receiving *Remodeling Magazine's* Big50 Award, a recognition of their vision and workplace culture. They've also won a number of other awards and recognitions typically reserved for larger design/build firms, and in 2016 were listed the 178th top remodeling company in the country.

Today, Mark credits his success to the perspective he gained not through formal classroom education, but through lessons learned out in the world. His father still lives in England with Mark's stepmother and three sisters—a window into another life he could have had, if he'd stayed. "I'm grateful to have learned strength from my father, kindness and compassion from my mother, and courage of conviction from my stepfather," he says. "The adventure and success I've achieved today is thanks to where I came

from."

As a leader, Mark is an educator committed to walking people through the nuances of a process or task. He is deeply invested in the success of his employees, and never forgets the family he comes home to each night. "Mandy and I actually wear matching bracelets, which remind me always of the bond we share and our life together," he says. "On those hard days, it's a reminder of what I'm working for. Thinking of that love brings me a lot of joy."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Mark encourages them to find their passion and run with it. Beyond that, he is living proof that our greatest tests can cultivate in us our greatest attributes, and the very qualities that go on to make us most successful. "The big moves I made through my formative years were tough at the time, but they taught me how to meet people, how to fit in, how to listen, and how to appreciate more," he recounts. "That's what commission-based sales is all about, and it is absolutely why I persevered and rose to the top. It didn't matter that I didn't have a college degree; what mattered was my ability to connect and show others how we could build integrity together."

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