

Marc S. Berman

The Grand Tradition

While other twelve-year-old children slept in on Sundays or spent their mornings leisurely watching cartoons, Marc Berman followed a markedly different agenda. He would wake up early, hop on his bike, and ride across town to a deli in Silver Spring, Maryland. Inside, he would pull up a chair at a table where three old men—his grandfather and his grandfather's two brothers—discussed business. As they talked, Marc listened and listened, week after week.

Marc's grandfather never made it past the tenth grade, but was a brilliant businessman and dealmaker with a prominent hand in building our Nation's Capital city. Much of his savoir-faire came from his own father, who invented the wire coat hanger and the screen that turned hot water into steam for use in irons. He owned 28 dry cleaning stores throughout Washington, DC, paving the way for his three sons to start Diener's carpet, one of the city's largest carpet conglomerates. Marc's grandfather went on to develop an expansive real estate portfolio that was augmented with the purchase of local and national radio stations, and he discussed these deals in detail at the Sunday morning breakfasts, with his eager grandson at his side.

"He was filled with this wisdom that permeated his whole demeanor, and I was completely in awe of him," Marc remembers. "He was like a fortune cookie, with general wisdom for everything. He'd talk to his brothers about a shopping center they were developing on Rockville Pike, and afterwards, I'd jump in his car and we'd drive up to look at the construction progress together. I've emulated and admired him my whole life." Now the President of Vector Technical Resources, Marc has wholly embraced this entrepreneurial spirit as his own, and continues in his family's grand tradition of shaping Washington, D.C. with its work and vision.



Marc was born at George Washington Hospital to one of the largest, most prominent families in town. "In those days, buildings were owned by people, not companies," he reflects. "In those days, it felt like royalty to be a Diener." Having grown up a Diener herself, his mother, Marlene, was raised with a silver spoon, but never let it go to her head, drawing the love and warmth of all she met.

Marc, the middle child of two sisters, grew into a young boy with a fierce love of sports. His father built a basketball court in their backyard, and all the neighbors would come over to play. Marc had an impressive 39-inch vertical jump and excelled at athletics, inspired in part by his father's priorities. "He pushed athletics, not school or business," Marc recalls. "But my grandfather didn't care as much about sports. He loved to discuss business and made it clear that it was his favorite topic of conversation."

As a fourth generation Washingtonian who hails from a richly entrepreneurial family history, Marc's identity as a business leader and innovator is innate, but circumstances in his early life made entrepreneurship a necessity rather than just a passion. His parents divorced when he was fourteen, and as his mother was a homemaker, it fell to Marc to provide for her and his two sisters. His character acquired new depth as he became the head of the household and launched his first business before he turned fifteen. "I was successful very early in life, and that came with a price. I made a lot of mistakes, but my grandfather had taught me that most successful businessmen fail at some point in their career," Marc says. "I was ready, and I wasn't going to let it discourage me."

With his expectations in check and his sights set on providing for his family, Marc launched a modest business at the age of fourteen, installing various kinds of stereos in cars. 8-Track

players had just come out, so he learned how to remove radios and insert the new technology. Within a year, his grandfather stepped in to help support the small family in his father's absence and began gifting Marlene pieces of real estate and other investments, as well as providing a generous monthly stipend. She was restored from rags to riches overnight, but that didn't stop Marc's drive to succeed. Before long, his business took off, and he was making \$25,000 a year—a sizeable sum for a boy of his age in the early 1970s.

As a high school student with three employees and a considerable salary of his own, Marc quickly garnered the excitement of his business teacher. The teacher assigned the class to design flyers for him and pass them out all over town. An article on his business was written for the school newspaper. "I came from a very tight-knit community in Silver Spring where everyone knew each other, so the word of this new concept got out," he says.

Meanwhile, at age fifteen, Marc was hired as a stock boy at Spring Electric Supply by the father of his best friend, Gary. Gary's father, whom Marc admired deeply, bought the company several years later. Gary went on to college at the University of Maryland to study electrical engineering, and while Marc started college as well, he ultimately decided he didn't need it. "I was trying to run my business, and my father and grandfather didn't seem to think furthering my education was important," he says. "My grandfather would say that, when we go to school, we learn our lesson and then we take our test, but in life, we take our test and then we learn our lesson. I was so successful at 17 that I thought I didn't need school, but now, I really regret that I didn't spend those years experiencing that time with my peers, playing basketball and learning in that kind of environment. I later attended The University of Maryland in the evenings because I realized how important college was, and now, as a father, I push education so much."

Instead of college, Marc focused on the radio business and was promoted to general manager of Spring Electric Supply, running the whole operation. At the age of 21, he married a young lady named Tammy and bought his first condo. They had a daughter named Lisa, and Marc went into business with Tammy's brother, Ronny, to start a property management and construction company. He had felt the pull of his grandfather's

influence and decided to try his hand at buying real estate. As he built that portfolio, he helped a friend build a hair salon in Rockville and made \$25,000, so he and Ronny decided to pursue similar opportunities in the construction business as well. They moved into an office in Wheaton and then in Silver Spring, excelling over a four-year period until several customers missed payments and the company tanked.

By that time, Marc and Tammy had divorced, and he decided to go into business with Carl Rowan to launch another construction company that focused on interiors. The venture was somewhat successful, but Marc didn't love it, so when Gary called to let him know about a new opportunity in D.C., he jumped on it. Pepco was paying \$50 rebates to people to replace their incandescent fixtures with compact fluorescents, so the two started an electrical contracting company that grew into one of the largest energy management companies in the country. "We would go into buildings, retrofit the fixtures at no charge to our customers, and collect the rebates from Pepco," he recounts. "Over the next several years, we were unbelievably successful and morphed into a service company. We eventually sold the business to a small company in Gaithersburg in 1996, and Gary still runs that company today."

In the vacuum left from the sale of the business, Marc and his second wife, Margarita, decided to launch a staffing company. He had a strong relationship with several technology executives that he met through their mutual love of boating, which leant the venture an IT focus. Margarita had a strong background in staffing, and Marc learned from her round-the-clock wheeling-and-dealing. "She was a master recruiter," he remembers. "She rarely went on the various popular job boards, but instead did everything over the phone or in person. She'd be on the phone at all hours, calling up key candidates who could refer her to the best of the best to fill a given opening. It was incredibly impressive, and I learned the art of the industry from her."

Their staffing business flourished from 1996 until the bottom dropped out of the market in 2001, at which point Marc joined the leadership team of another IT staffing company, now known as ALTA IT Services. ALTA served companies like HP and Lockheed Martin, and its President,

Howard Stein, was an incredible mentor and model. As Marc's success mounted, so did his reputation, coalescing to attract even better talent. He oversaw every transaction, making sure recruits were taken care of and the right thing was done. Cognizant that his name is his word and his word is his business, he committed each day to making "Marc Berman" the brand of choice in IT staffing. He developed an extensive network built on solid credibility, and those same people became his references later, when he set out on his own in search of an opportunity to build a company according to his own vision.

After ten successful years at ALTA serving as Executive VP and Partner, that opportunity came in the form of a small government contracting company called DOMA Vector, owned by Rob Williams. It was a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business with a top-secret facilities clearance that had won some good opportunities since its launch in 2007, but Rob was ready to retire, and the company had little wind left in its sails. When Marc came across the opportunity in 2011, he was happy at ALTA, but the entrepreneurial Diener blood in his veins called for a true test. "I had often wondered if ALTA would be my last job," he reflects. "I had always felt as though I was missing something, and then the memory of my grandfather became very clear to me, and it dawned on me. I didn't want to be a partner; I wanted to be at the helm of something great. So one day, I decided to do it."

Thus, in July of 2012, Marc took over as President at Rob's company, immediately enacting a complete rebrand and reconstruction of the entity into Vector Technical Resources. And while it was a move that his trajectory had tended toward since those early days riding his bike to meet his grandfather on Sunday mornings, a marked igniting spark came with the unparalleled support of his wife, Patti. The couple married in 2009, after Marc's mother introduced them just before her death. "I have never met another person like her in my whole life," he avows. "She motivates me every single day and night. She's incredibly intuitive and brilliant, and she selflessly cares for others in ways I can't even imagine. She always helps me see the positive. She's my inspiration, and I couldn't have done it without her."

It took grit to jump from a lucrative position, to no income, to making a substantial

investment in Vector's future success, but from the shell of a business, Marc built a staffing company that is now 25 employees strong. With a focus on government contracting and services, it has grown in part through the acquisition of smaller businesses making good profit but lacking the resources to grow. The company is also focused on high-level marketing, and Marc continues to evolve his identity and brand as a leader through organizations like SmartCEO and EO. "The work is hard, and I might prefer to go home to Patti at the end of a long day, but it's important that I'm out there, networking and making a name for the company and the tremendous work that we do. We're changing the way staffing companies do business, putting an emphasis on core values and on bringing in the A players."

Vector's company culture revolves around the key tenets of honesty, equality, and respect—values that pay off in spades even as they add substance and sincerity to client and employee relationships. They are the echoes of a memory in which Marc's grandfather was preparing to buy an office building on M street. He had a meeting in one of the top-floor offices with the corresponding echelon to close the deal, but when he entered the building, he instead took the elevator down to the basement to spend some time chatting with the maintenance staff. "Without fail, my grandfather treated everyone like gold," Marc explains. "It was how he thought all people should be treated, and he ended up saving a million dollars on the building because he was able to find out what was wrong with it. His example really hit home how important it is to treat people the right way, no matter what you're doing."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Marc emphasizes the importance of finding what you love, even if it's not readily apparent with your first job. "As you move laterally or vertically through various professional opportunities, pay attention to the things that really drive you, and through it all, focus on doing the right thing," he says. "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you, always being fair and honest." Beyond that, Marc's example is one that underscores the true value of failure in building character and business acumen. After rising to incredible success at such a young age, owning a construction company by the time he was 18 and then amassing ten rental properties, he hit rock bottom at the age of 22 but emerged

from those experiences with the knowledge and skills to build solid, sustainable success.

Just as it always has been, both the root and bloom of that success goes back to family. His oldest daughter, Lisa, shares his entrepreneurial spirit and owns a successful insurance company. His son studies law at the University of Baltimore, and his youngest daughter is a senior at Loyola. Patti has two children of her own—Samantha, who attends Florida State, and Sophie, their last child at home—and the entire family blends together with beauty and balance. Their family life has elements of older generations, as Patti cares diligently for her ailing parents. Lisa's son—Marc's grandson—also lends the joy of generations to come, and all are connected through the arc of vision and achievement that is the hallmark of their family's legacy. "It's something I live and breathe, just as I am living and breathing Vector right now," he says. "My entire life force is dedicated to being the best father, husband, mentor, entrepreneur, and business leader I can, because each of those roles is

connected. It's the grand tradition of the Diener family, and it certainly won't stop with me."

© February 2014 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

— By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).



BERNHARDT
WEALTH MANAGEMENT