## Ken Gosnell

## By Design

Everyday, when Ken Gosnell's father got ready to leave for second shift at the construction company where he worked, he grabbed two essential items: the hardhat with the American flag sticker which protected him for 35 years, and his Bible. For Ken, the hardhat came to symbolize all the sacrifices his father made so he could give his four sons the opportunities and education he didn't have growing up. It wasn't glamorous or fancy, but it came to represent his father's love of

country, along with the associated tenets of freedom, respect, and value.

As a child, Ken understood the need for the hardhat, but he wasn't sure why his father took his Bible too. One day, he asked. "My father explained that he read it during breaks to improve himself," Ken recalls today. "It made me realize that no matter where we are in life, we can always work on bettering ourselves. It showed me that the values in the Bible should guide our thinking, decisions, and behaviors, and that we can make an

impact wherever we find ourselves. It was a lesson in personal leadership, values, self-improvement, and hard work—one that I haven't forgotten."

This paved the way for the development of Ken's own relationship with Jesus. Through the ups and downs of growing up, his relationship with the Lord guided his thinking and development, and as the years passed, he began to truly take ownership of that relationship. He connected deeply with the idea that "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10)." "I came to understand that God has a design for my life, and for all lives," Ken affirms. "I believe I was designed with a purpose, given the unique gifts and abilities to bring out the best in the leadership, thinking, and identity of others."

Now the CEO of the Maryland and

Washington DC Metropolitan Groups of the C12 Group, Ken knows he walks in the fullness of his own life by helping others—specifically leaders—reach their full God-given potential. "I believe I was uniquely designed to make an impact in the lives of leaders by helping them lead at the highest level," he says. "Whether they're leading an organization of 2 or 200 or 2,000, I'm at my best when I'm partnering with leaders to give them honest feedback, accountability, and insights,

helping them see things that might not be readily visible otherwise."

Ken is most in his element when he's using his business mindset and personal experiences to identify and explore the struggles, visions, desires, hopes, and dreams of leaders. And with this point of view, he's able to reach to the core of leadership by helping leaders make good decisions as they work to speak truth into the lives of those who look to them. "At its essence, leadership is about decision making," Ken says. "I believe our destiny unfolds in the

future, but it's shaped by the decisions we make today. Leaders are defined by the decisions they make, so through the servant leadership practices of asking the right questions and listening to what might not be said out loud at first, my top priority at C12 is helping leaders make the best spiritual, personal, and business decisions they possibly can."

C12 was founded by Buck Jacobs, who as a 33-year-old had a successful chemical engineering business in Chicago. His personal life, however, was in shambles, marred by two divorces and a series of addictions. All that changed, however, when he crossed paths with an elderly gentleman on a business trip and learned about his faith. Buck became a Christian, embracing the idea that God didn't just want Buck on the weekends—rather, every aspect of his life should be aligned with God's will. Buck decided to run his business as if

Jesus was the CEO and God was the Chairman of the Board, achieving tremendous success with this model over the next decade or so.

Over that time, Buck received counsel through his leadership coaching groups and roundtables that often wasn't aligned with his Christian values. He envisioned starting a group of twelve Christians modeled after the twelve disciples of Christ, who would speak truth and work to bring about the best in his life and business. With that, the very first C12 group was launched in Tampa, Florida, in 1994, and still meets today.

Word of the Christian executive coaching group traveled, and Buck began franchising the model to regions across the country. Unlike other CEO groups, the program was unique in that it required each regional chairman to sell their business and focus full-time on their C12 group. The model required its leaders to be excellent stewards, 100 percent committed to the CEOs and business owners entrusted to their care. "Because we're set up this way, our business is solely dependent on providing value to our CEOs and business owners," says Ken. "You have to be committed to be a chairman here—a big selling point for me."

When Ken and his wife arrived in the Washington, DC area in 2003, he was working as a consultant, coach, and sales trainer all around the country. To augment his growth, both personally and professionally, he sought a group or roundtable that would allow him to receive counsel from other executives and business owners who shared his values and beliefs. "Proverbs 15:22 tells us that where there are many advisors, there's much success," Ken says. "I've always believed in the collective voice of many, so finding an executive group was important to me."

Ken reached out to C12, but they didn't have any groups in the DC area at the time. Eight years later, a representative from the organization planned to pass through the area to interview possible candidates to lead a new chapter there, and they had kept Ken's name. After meeting with Ken in person, the representative enjoyed their conversation so much that he knew Ken was the right person to lead a group of Washington area CEOs under the C12 banner. He asked Ken to pray on the idea of leading the effort to start the chapter.

At first, Ken thought there was no way

he'd accept, believing that limiting his work to mostly Christians would severely curtail his business opportunities. My wife agreed that it didn't seem like a smart business opportunity, but they agreed to pray about it for a total of eight months. They both did additional research on the opportunity, and in the end, they realized there was a great need for somebody to fill the void in Washington, helping Christian CEOs build great businesses for great purpose. "There were a lot of secular roundtables that offered excellent service, resources, and value to their members, but we felt there should be an opportunity for Christian CEOs to have that same experience around a table with like-minded Christian men and women," Ken recounts. "With that, in December of 2011, we launched the group."

Since that time, the Washington DC Metropolitan Group has launched six sub-groups from Baltimore to Rockville, with plans to launch two more in 2016. The growth has allowed them to leaders serve more and observe transformation in the lives of those individuals, providing real tools to help them build great businesses. From hiring the right people, to building the right culture, to developing a sales process, to hashing out real time problems with the group, C12 roundtables are about sharing insight and holding each other accountable. From small entrepreneurs to publicly traded companies, C12 business owners and executives make it clear that there's something different about the companies they run.

"Our design is to help men and women hear the words, 'well done, good and faithful servant,'" says Ken. "It's not about pomp or circumstance, it's about making a kingdom impact. Do we make a difference in people's lives? How many people have been saved because of our companies? When we get to Heaven, we don't think God's going to care if our P&L statements are more impressive. He's going to ask us if we built his kingdom and shined our lights brightly so more people were saved. He's going to care that we helped others to have a deeper and more meaningful relationship with His son because we showed them the way and talked to them about the Bible verse we read that morning."

Indeed, C12's mission extends far beyond the limits of the goals set forth by most roundtables, fully embracing the aim of changing the world by helping business owners and executives that have been called to lead for Jesus. The organization now has around ninety chairmen across the country serving 1,800 member companies in 64 metropolitan areas. And, with DC at the epicenter of change, Ken is leading the charge to bring strong Christian leaders together for accountability, encouragement, and support as they work to apply Biblical principles to their business practices and achieve true impact for Christ right here in Washington. In the past four years alone, his work has touched an estimated 150,000 lives, from the people his members employ, to the families that rely on them, to the vendors and customers they work with and the people their messages reach.

Growing God's kingdom in this way is a testament to the redemptive power Christ has enacted in Ken's own life through the transformation of his father, Brian Gosnell, who grew up in Missouri as the oldest of six children. Brian's father was killed by drunk driver when he was only fifteen, so he dropped out of school to go to work to help support his family. He became a mechanic for a few years and then went to work for a plant nursery, marrying Ken's mother at the age of nineteen. He then went to work in construction, building houses and developing enough acumen to start a business of his own. Unfortunately the 1973 oil crisis sent the company under, and the family lost everything.

The devastating blow exacerbated the alcoholism his father had suffered from since the age of eighteen. The ups and downs, which sent Brian in and out of rehab and marked Ken's earliest memories, threatened to tear the family apart. But an old man named Ernest Robinson would drive around town to occupy the time, and struck up a friendship with Brian. When they crossed paths during a particular low point for Mr. Gosnell, Ernest offered to come sit with him and read the Bible. Brian refused, but when Ernest offered again a year later, things had gotten so bad that Brian knew he needed something to change in his life. He accepted, and Ernest began coming over every Tuesday night at 7:00 PM to read and discuss the Bible with the troubled man.

Those evenings marked the defining transformation of Brian Gosnell's life—a process that had a profound impact on his youngest son. Ken watched as his father triumphed over his demons, developing a great respect for him. Around that time, a family friend suggested he

apply to work for a well-established Christian business in the area, which evaluated him on his values and work ethic instead of his education and credentials. He stayed with the company for the next 27 years, working as a union president who earned the respect and appreciation of the company's CEO. "When my father retired, the CEO said that if they had a whole workforce of people like him, they could have taken over the world," Ken recounts. "Life dealt my father some significant blows over the years that were not his fault, but he made the best them, and those efforts made a better future for us kids."

Ken's father took the lessons he learned through his own life and taught his own children about self-growth and self-discipline. As the youngest of four brothers, Ken saw that even though his father had never completed his high school education, he was constantly improving himself through the books he read and the experiences he put himself in. "He never stopped learning, and even to this day he continues to grow and develop," Ken says.

Ken's father also modeled genuine compassion and love for other people—a sentiment Ken himself had already begun to cultivate thanks to the loving community and neighbors who always looked out for their family. Growing up in rural Missouri had its charms, and Ken remembers fondly the hunting, fishing, and camping trips they would take as a family. His mother, an incredibly strong woman who worked in a garment factory, believed in the best in her husband and four sons, teaching them the importance of being able to cook their own meals, sew their own buttons, and clean up after themselves. Ken also grew up playing all manner of sports and bailing hay with friends on nearby farms for money. "Looking back, I wouldn't want to grow up anywhere else in the world," he says. "It wasn't someplace I wanted to stay because I wanted to see the world, but the memories I have there are very precious."

Ken was shy and quiet as a kid, but he began to find his voice at summer camp when he was fifteen. It was the summer before his sophomore year of high school, and when the campers divided into separate groups to pursue their interests, Ken was most interested in wherever the girls were going. "My plans were foiled when I was approached by a counselor I really admired," he remembers. "I think he saw

that I had a heart for other people, and he told me he thought I'd do great in the public speaking group instead. Nobody had ever told me they thought I'd do well sharing an idea in that way, and I had a lot of respect for him, so I decided to try it out."

Like a lot of kids that age, Ken was petrified at the idea of giving a fifteen-minute speech in front of his peers, but he went through with it. Instructed to speak on current topics and ideas, he gave a presentation on impartiality and the idea that everyone has value, sharing some anecdotes from his own life. Afterward, when his fellow campers approached him to say how much his words had meant to them, he began to see himself differently.

"For the first time, I realized that I may not have a lot to offer, but if I came to life and gave everything I could to offer what I had, I could improve the lives of the people around me," he reflects. "When I returned to school in the fall, I was different. I had my first entrepreneurial experience selling greeting cards around my neighborhood, meeting people and learning that even when I heard rejection, there was always another door to try. I became a leader and communicator on my sports teams, especially football, and I became student council president during my senior year. I cared about every person in our high school and made a point to talk to everyone about their thoughts, feelings, and ideas for how we could make a difference. Thanks to that experience at camp, my life became about other people, listening and formulating ideas and sharing them to achieve a collective kind of thinking."

Brian Gosnell helped each of his sons buy their first car, but he was always very clear with them that once they turned eighteen, they were out on their own. Ken inherited his father's deep desire for knowledge, and he saw college as the place to absorb the wisdom of others on his way to seeing the world. He knew his parents couldn't help him pay for college, so he spent his high school years earning as much scholarship money as possible. He enrolled at Central Christian College in Missouri with most of his tuition paid for, making up the rest by working all four years and taking out some modest loans. He majored in Communications, served in the in the local church where he had the opportunity to preach a few sermons, made lifelong friends, and went on to

become the first in his family to earn an undergraduate degree.

Upon graduating, Ken took a job with a nonprofit in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, for five years, while doing some pastoring on the side. His goal was to help people and make an impact in the lives of leaders, and he figured the best way to achieve his aim was to experience an eclectic array of organizations to gain a better understanding of leadership across a multitude of environments. He tried his hand at starting his own consulting business, and when it didn't take off, he decided to reach out to the Dale Carnegie organization. He had read Dale Carnegie's book, How to Win Friends and Influence People, and decided to cold-call the number he found in the Yellow Pages for the franchise owner in Virginia Beach. He wasn't looking for a job, but the organization is always looking for passionate people, and they offered him a sales position to start. After a three-month Dale Carnegie course, he proved himself so capable that he was given a territory to manage.

Ken later became a training consultant for Dale Carnegie, mastering and teaching the timeless principles of the international organization. In addition to public and private trainings for companies through their five hallmark programs, they developed customized trainings upon request. Ken also earned a double masters in Divinity and Business Administration and fell in love with Shonda, the woman he's now shared ten wonderful years of marriage with. The couple decided to move to the DC metropolitan area together, where both had opportunities to advance their careers.

They planned to stay for only a couple years, but the dynamic and captivating region took its hold. Ken took an executive position with Health and Human Services, where he interviewed and worked with government executives. His primary focus was evaluating agencies to help them think and operate more like businesses under a Presidential initiative. "I felt that was a way to serve my country, and I met so many hardworking and good government managers and executives who cared deeply about the organization's mission, vision, and values," Ken reflects. "I met people who cared deeply about their work but had been put into a system that didn't work as efficiently as they would like. It really gave me a different perspective of government work."

Ken served in that capacity for four years,

capping a broad range of experience from the nonprofit sector, to the broad exposure of Carnegie, and everything from small businesses to large corporations. He then went to work for a national nonprofit working on fatherhood issues, driven by the 24 million American children who grow up without a father and their heightened susceptibility to childhood poverty, homelessness, crime, and drug use. In this capacity, Ken ran a government sector aimed at working with state and local governments to help incarcerated fathers stay connected with their families for a more successful reentry, and a corporate sector geared toward advancing paternity leave policies.

Working to strengthen families while traveling across the country on consulting jobs, Ken felt almost fulfilled, but not quite. "I wanted to start my own business again at some point, and I wanted to touch multiple kinds of organizations, businesses, and leaders," Ken says. "By the time I got involved with C12, there wasn't a type of business I hadn't seen the inner workings of, and I wanted to put that knowledge to work for others."

Now, in advising young people like his oldest daughter as they prepare to enter the working world, Ken underscores the importance of making the best decision possible. "We all make mistakes in life," Ken acknowledges. "What matters is not allowing one bad decision to lead to another bad decision. If things are going wrong, stop and think to yourself, what's the best decision I can make in this moment? When we start making good decisions in our life, we lead ourselves to a good place."

Ken is also a strong believer in the importance of experiences, and that everyone should have at least eight great experiences in their life. Most of his life highlights have been moments shared with his wife and soul mate, Shonda, thanks in part to the agreement they made a decade ago to achieve joint agreement on all major decisions in their lives. Adhering to the Biblical principle that marriage is a process by which two become one, an action isn't taken unless both partners are 100 percent onboard and aligned. "Shonda is a great mother and friend, an incredible woman of God, and one of the best things that has

ever happened to me," says Ken. "We've shared an amazing spiritual journey together in sharing the journey of our youngest son, who has apraxia and difficulty learning to speak. We believe in God's ability to do amazing things, so our prayer for him has never been to just speak, but to grow up to preach to thousands of people in a multitude of languages. We see such a bright future for him and for our whole family."

This optimism extends past the Gosnells, reaching to all of society through what Ken sees as the renewing power inherent in the marketplace. He sees a future where employees are no longer disengaged from the companies they work for, but are instead brought into the work and value of the gifts and talents they share. He sees how markets touch all people in profound ways, and how that touch can be changed for the better. "I call every business owner and executive to really think about the significance of their company, and to ask, what if?" he says. "What if every business owner really saw their business as a platform for something bigger and more meaningful? What if every Christian business owner thought about the thousands of lives they could impact for God's kingdom? Our lives, each precious, are by design. Our businesses should be, too."

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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.

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