

# Brianna Dunbar Bowling

## The Can-Do Course

The most important business lunch of Brianna Bowling's life occurred on her farm in rural Maryland. The entrée was homemade grilled cheese sandwiches, and the company was another stay-at-home mom who, like Brianna, had joined a casual networking group for women in the region interested in internet and technology opportunities. The afternoon didn't consist of much more than a leisurely stroll around the property with the children, petting cows and collecting eggs together.

Six months later, Brianna received a call from the woman, who had since taken a job with a tech company that needed help converting Word documents to HTML for a contract they had landed with the Department of Justice. She knew Brianna had grown proficient in HTML conversion in an effort to keep her mind stimulated since leaving her job to raise her two young kids—a skill that was formalized through her decision to launch Zekiah Technologies. The woman offered Brianna the contract, officially turning Zekiah into a government contractor and landing the fledgling firm enough business to warrant the full-time focus of Brianna and her husband, Dan.

"I still teach my employees the wisdom of the Grilled Cheese Theory," Brianna says today. "It's important to consider every single person you meet as a potential client, customer, or contact, treating them with the utmost respect. You never know what a person's past holds, and you never know what the future might hold for you together."

To many DC-area executives, Brianna's own past is the stuff of storybooks, and soon will be—she expects to finish her first childhood memoir in the coming months. She was born when her father was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, with the Navy, and when he finished his service, the family moved to Kentucky so he could enroll in

forestry school. They lived in a tiny trailer for two years, where Brianna slept under a table and her baby sister slept in an apple box.

The family moved around a few more times before her father landed a job as a forest ranger at Cedarville State Park in Maryland, providing adventurous terrain for Brianna's early roaming. The park was a popular destination for celebrations and family reunions, and she readily joined whatever festivity was taking place at the moment. When she was seven, her parents bought some land in Charles County and began building a house with trees they cut down themselves, sometimes sleeping under a lean-to as their home took shape.

The resulting house had no running water or electricity, so they pumped water by hand and then brought it in to heat on the wood stove. Showers consisted of hot water poured over one another from an industrial-sized mayonnaise jar, and meals were animals raised, caught, or sometimes even found dead on the side of the road. It was an unusual childhood to say the least, but a great one. "My mother stayed home with us, and we did every activity under the sun," Brianna recalls. "They believed in a free-form way of parenting, and we were poor, but it was a good life."

4-H was a hugely positive presence through Brianna's upbringing, thanks in part to organization leaders like Mrs. Marvin, who devoted her life to the children in her care. Because of 4-H, Brianna met her husband, Dan, as a young girl at the county fair, where he was showing steers and she was showing sheep. In 4-H, she learned public speaking, livestock and poultry judging, photography, and citizenship. The organization even had a program that flew her to Chicago when she was fourteen to report on a conservation project she had undertaken.

Thanks to her mother, who was passionate



about local politics, Brianna was also very civically engaged. As a child, she would make phone calls and stuff envelopes for various races, and she helped her mother in a successful campaign against the construction of an airport in their area. As her mother worked to improve substandard community housing, provide resources to those in need, and secure home building rights for people who had been living on a given piece of land long enough, Brianna helped and learned.

After growing up watching her mother dive enthusiastically into all manner of projects, Brianna now has a post-it note on her laptop written by her sister that reads, "Stop me before I volunteer again!" She currently serves on the board of her local hospital, which is transitioning from a small community hospital into a facility capable of serving a larger area. She also helps to mentor high school kids in career planning, serves as a 4-H leader, volunteers for her church, and coaches her daughter's soccer team. "I love mentoring kids and helping to build their self confidence," she says. "When I walk through the halls of the school and have kids running up to give me a hug, it's better than any professional award I could receive."

Living in a home with an outhouse never bothered Brianna, nor did the lack of heat. TV was a novelty she thoroughly enjoyed at friends' houses, but otherwise she lacked for nothing, and enjoyed having friends over to hang out. She also loved playing on the field hockey team at school, and made her first buck cleaning up trash under the bleachers after high school sporting events. She sold donuts door-to-door for 4-H and held other odd jobs to earn money for clothes, but she never dreamed of starting her own company.

Brianna's parents were always immensely supportive, attending every field hockey game and giving their three daughters room to be themselves, but they never pushed the girls to study or consider their future plans. Fortunately, Brianna decided very early that she wanted to go to college. She loved animals and thought she might like to be a veterinarian, and she knew she'd make a good lawyer because she thought arguing was fun. She landed a considerable scholarship to Goucher College in Baltimore, and worked long hours in the summers as a legal secretary at a law firm downtown to make up the rest. In the process, she decided neither legal work nor animal medicine were her cup of tea, instead opting to

major in English literature. She played field hockey, traveled to other schools to compete with the debate team, worked in the computer lab, and married Dan, whom she had begun dating in high school.

In May of 1992, the same month Brianna graduated from college, Dan was laid off from his job at Citibank. "We decided to do the responsible thing, grabbing a map and a highlighter and hopping in his Civic to set off on a month-long cross-country camping trip," she laughs. "We did almost 10,000 miles in three weeks, seeing every national park on my list. It was so much fun!"

Brianna and Dan made a few phone calls during the trip, and by the time they got home, he went back to work for Citibank while she landed a job for an expert witness firm. Ethical concerns prompted her to leave that employer nine months later, and she found work at Aerotek as the assistant for Jim Davis. "He's a genius and an incredibly hard worker," she recalls. "He helped me understand that success isn't just about being smart—it's also putting your nose to the grindstone and working your tail off. He was a huge influence in shaping my understanding of the business world."

Soon, Dan got a good job offer in Chicago, where Aerotek had an office. The Bowlings made the move, and Brianna transferred, enjoying her new post until she got pregnant. "I have three children now, and I can say without a doubt that bringing them into the world was the most momentous and defining set of experiences I've ever had," she reflects. "The day you have your first child is the day you, yourself, really become an adult. It changes how you look at the world, from egocentrism to focusing instead on how you can make things better for that person. You put them first always. Lots of other moments in life are a big deal, like leaving home to go to college, or getting married, or losing a parent. But having children is the biggest deal."

Brianna decided to quit her job to stay home with her kids—something that was incredibly important to her. Yet while the time spent at home with them was precious, it could also grow boring and mind-numbing. When she began tallying up the energy savings garnered from not using the dryer for a month, she knew she needed to find something else to engage her mind. By that time the Bowlings had moved back to rural Maryland, and there wasn't a lot she could

do on their remote farm with two children in diapers, but Dan had taken a job for a printing company that needed word documents converted into HTML—a novel task at the time. It was something Brianna could do at night after the kids went to bed, so she checked out a book from the library and taught herself HTML coding.

Aside from working as a computer lab monitor in college, it was the first tech-related task Brianna had engaged in, but she was a natural. Work flowed in steadily, to the point that she was staying up most of the night to finish it, and Goucher hired her to teach a class on HTML. One of her students happened to be a dentist in need of a website, and Brianna was hired to complete that project. Thanks to the tight-knit nature of the dentist community, she became the hot name in dentist web design, bringing in enough work that she hired her sister on as her first employee.

Dan, a quiet, technically-skilled entrepreneur who was working for Booz Allen at that point, saw tremendous opportunity in government contracting work, specifically in a Request for Proposals put out by the Naval Support Facility in Dahlgren, Virginia. He wanted to quit his job to go after that contract, but with a mortgage and two young children to feed, Brianna wouldn't allow it until they were on stronger financial ground. She began pursuing more work, but it was the Department of Justice contract attained in 1999 through the grilled cheese business meeting that ultimately made the game-changing difference. They finally had enough stability for Dan to join Zekiah full-time, and they still have that same contract today.

Zekiah did, in fact, win the Dahlgren contract Dan had set his sights on, allowing the Bowlings to hire two additional partners. The new team members brought a slew of rich expertise and more employees, spurring the company's evolution into the 30-person, \$4 million company it is today. Brianna remains the majority owner with three partners, and in 2013 she brought onboard a COO that could help fill in many of her blind spots. In 2015, she started a Board of Advisors for the same reason. "Aside from working for Jim Davis for a year and a half, I had no corporate knowledge when I started off," she recounts. "I'm really good at surrounding myself with incredibly bright people, and the partners and team members I've brought on over the years have lent a ton of specialized knowledge and connections to make

Zekiah exceptional. The company couldn't have grown without them, and now we're all deeply invested in its future."

Some of Brianna's team members have been with the company for over a decade, and her commitment to their well-being is a major driving force behind her will to succeed. "They're good people—the best of the best—both in their technical skills and in their character as people," she says. "They have great morals and work ethic, and I feel I owe them so much. They're my family. When I'm tired and don't feel like staying up a third night in a row to finish a proposal, I think of them and find the strength. Zekiah's success means good lives for the good people that stand with me."

Indeed, through the school of hard knocks and with the help of a phenomenal team, the accidental CEO became a model leader. In time, the self-taught government cost accounting student was asked to teach classes on the subject. "It helped that I knew how to research and write, but I did a lot of my learning through messing up," Brianna concedes. "After losing a proposal we should have won, I hired a proposal writing company to teach me how to do it. I wanted the fishing pole, not the fish. In learning how to be a business owner, I wasn't afraid to throw myself off a cliff and see if I could fly. I'm realistic and I definitely like my data and my spreadsheets, but if you spend too much time analyzing, you can get paralyzed. Often you just have to operate on your gut instincts and what you feel is right. Making no choice is often worse than making a bad choice, so it's important to act and learn from the results."

Today, Zekiah has the majority of its contracts with the Department of Homeland Security and the Navy, specializing in custom software applications and mapping systems. When a large public event takes place, these agencies turn to Zekiah for the lay of the land, both above and below ground. Brianna and her team can map out the sewer systems under a city to develop effective emergency response plans, and they can assess the ideal location to place a sniper responsible for protecting a public figure. They engineer custom software applications for the Department of Defense, as well as big data used to predict the way various security threats might play out.

Just as Brianna grew up perfectly happily with her modest upbringing, her interest in

Zekiah's success has never been monetary. What matters is the fact that their work makes a difference in the security of the United States, saving lives and serving the nation. "We're a small, nimble company with the power to actually deliver on our mission and achieve considerable cost savings for our customers, which actually translates into cost savings for taxpayers and the American public," she says. "Knowing we're doing a good job for our country is incredibly meaningful to me."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Brianna underscores the power of hard work. "If you don't have the education, the tools, or the affirmation you think you need to succeed, you'll quickly find that working your ass off makes up for a lot," she affirms. When it comes to her success, she credits Dan for the company Zekiah has become, praising the symbiotic partnership they've shared for so many years and the guiding light of his quiet intelligence. "He sees opportunity, and I make it happen," she explains. "We need each other, there's no doubt."

With her belief in her capacity to make things happen, Brianna's life has followed the can-do course. It's a road she walked with her parents long ago—two people who weren't afraid to make

something out of nothing, even if that something was just a lean-to out of tree trunks. "I've always believed in the mantra, 'I know how to do everything—I just may not have read the book yet,'" she affirms. "I believe that for everybody. There's really nothing you can't do in your life. With hard work and a willingness to teach yourself, you can do it."

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— 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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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