

# James T. George

## Self-Reliant Success

Driving south on I-85 through Virginia, the last exit before hitting the North Carolina border takes you to a resort community called Bracey. It's a well-to-do area now, but decades ago, long before the Roanoke River was flooded to create the lake and before children attended the same schools regardless of race, the area was poor and rural, relying primarily on subsistence farming. For young Jim George, it was home.

It was the waning years of the Great Depression, and Jim's father knew the modest crops and livestock he raised on their farm were no longer enough. He needed to bring in income, so he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program set up by the Roosevelt administration that put men across the nation to work building America's dams and national parks. That left Jim's mother to take care of the farm work and care for the five children living at home at the time. "Growing up, I was struck by how resourceful she was about everything, from the farming to the things we did on Sunday that made life special," Jim remembers today. "Every Sunday, we'd go to church, come home, take pictures with the Kodak box camera she had bought from the Sears Roebuck catalogue, and enjoy homemade ice cream she had made with our ice cream freezer. In all things, she relied on herself, her dreams, and her capabilities to make them a success. It taught me to do the same."

Now the founder and Chairman of Management Support Technology, Inc. (MSTI), an IT and management solutions company headquartered in the DC metropolitan area, Jim still has that very same ice cream freezer so central to those childhood days. He uses it to make ice cream for his grandkids, nieces, nephews, and cousins, connecting the generations through the ritualistic crushing of ice and blending of flavors. "I remember my mother making that ice cream like

she made her way in the world, steadily driving forward to achieve what she set her mind to," he says. "It's the self-reliant spirit that drives small businesses in America, the very engines of our economy."

MSTI is one of those businesses. Incorporated in 1990, MSTI landed its first contract in 1992. Document imaging was the cutting-edge technology of the day, and they began by converting analog microfiche military records to digital. "I had retired as Comptroller from the Army Military Personnel Center where all the records were kept on microfiche, and I knew the government would be preparing to digitize them," he recalls. "We hadn't been in business long enough to qualify for the 8(a) solicitation, so I found an 8(a) company to partner with as subcontractors on a prime contract held by PRC."

When he landed that business, Jim's business suddenly jumped from zero to twelve employees, prompting him to set up infrastructure and find office space. He took courses through the Small Business Administration and the George Mason University PTAP program, figuring out how to cover his accounting, tax, and human resources needs. "One lesson I learned early on was that it's important to factor your own labor costs in when writing a proposal," he laughs. "It was a hard lesson to learn, but that mistake never happened again."

Reflecting on the company's 26 years of business, Jim remembers the unique challenges of working with the federal government, including the certifications needed to set yourself apart in the contracting world. "It's important to differentiate yourself and have contract vehicles that allow customers to get to you," he explains. "But it's not easy to get them. We looked at 8(a), HubZone, and Veteran-Owned Small Business, as well as Service-



Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business certifications. MSTI graduated from its 8(a) certification in 2004, and has been a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business since that program started several years ago."

Fluctuating agency budgets, sequestration, and government shutdowns have also posed destabilizing challenges for businesses like Jim's. "An agency's budget is designed according to a strategic plan," he says. "When that budget was suddenly cut across the board, with no opportunity to manipulate or prioritize, it was a big challenge for our customers. And because our customers' vision is our mission, it was a big challenge for us. Customers were also forced to make acquisition decisions not based on best value, but based on "lowest price technically acceptable," which has created this very challenging atmosphere for contractors and government agencies."

Through these challenges, Jim was careful to remain cognizant that he and MSTI were two separate and distinct entities—an understanding that led to clarity of thought and enabled him to grow the company into the strong, successful business it is today, with its work focusing on two main categories. Its IT branch includes ITIL service desk and helpdesk support, independent verification and validation, cyber security and information assurance, engineering and technical analysis support, and electronic records and documents support. Its management solutions branch employs program, acquisition, budget, and human resources management, as well as process improvement, asset management support, and administrative and facilities support. "In that category, we handle an array of things that require executive goals to orient the work," he says. "We come up with budgets and plans that reflect those goals and then track progress."

MSTI is now a team of around a hundred people led by a tremendous executive team that has ensured seamless operation of the company since Jim transitioned to the role of chairman. Their employees are divided between the company's three-part model of getting business (marketing, business development, and proposal writing), performing business (working on the front lines with the customers), and controlling business (finance, HR, security, and quality), and are eligible for lateral moves or promotions between these functions. "It's important that

everyone understands the vision, mission, and objectives of the company, and is free to carry them out," he says. "And as the old saying goes, the true test of a good business is whether it can run without you when you're not there. You have to train, groom, and educate your people, building a team the way you would build a sports team. You've got the people up front blocking so the folks in back can catch passes and run with the ball. Once we get good team members, we take care of them the best we can, and we promote people from within. If we take great care of our employees, they will take great care of our customers, and that's paramount."

While Jim learned most about building a phenomenal team through his career in the Army, the most fundamental root of this understanding stems from the earliest days of his childhood watching his parents work as a team to meet the challenges before them. He was born in 1935 and was the second-youngest of seven children. With his father working away from home through the Civilian Conservation Corps and only able to visit every couple months, his mother was the glue that kept the family together and functioning. His older sisters left home to join their aunt in New York and get jobs in factories, part of the great migration from South to North spurred by the new industrial opportunity of the age. There was no electricity or running water, so Jim remembers fetching water from the spring nearby. "We got a pump in the yard when I was six years old, and I remember that being a big celebration," he laughs. "Times were tough, so I really take my hat off to my parents—to my father, for his incredible work ethic and doing what he needed to do to support us, and to my mother, for her resourcefulness and finding a way to make it all work."

As Jim grew up in the wake of reconstruction, American schools were segregated, and there were very few schools for black children in the South. Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears and Roebuck at the time, saw that the best thing that could be done to improve lives and mend the country was to establish African American schools. Through the Rosenwald Foundation, he started by setting up a school for black children in Alabama, which caught the eye of Booker T. Washington. Together, they came up with a model where each school would have between one and five teachers, with living quarters for the educators alongside the school, funded

jointly by the foundation, local government, and the local black community. Over 5,000 Rosenwald Schools were built across the southern United States, and Jim's two-room schoolhouse in Bracey was one of them. "In those early years, I never noticed segregation," he remembers. "I loved school, and when I wasn't learning, I was out doing chores on the farm, climbing trees, and playing with other kids."

When Jim was entering third grade, the family moved to Newport News, Virginia, close to where his father was then working at the Naval Mine Depot in nearby Yorktown. It was the height of World War II, and the booming shipbuilding town promised new opportunity and cheap accommodations in the form of a public housing complex called Newsome Park. Jim remembers the rationing of provisions so that as much as possible could go toward the war effort. "My mother got a job, and I felt I needed to do something to contribute, so I sold candy door-to-door," he remembers. "I learned important lessons, like 'don't eat your inventory.' I later got a job at a barbershop shining shoes. It was my first experience in customer service, where people expressed appreciation for what you do. And as I swept the floor, I watched intently while the owner did his accounting and ran the shop. I got the idea that having a business is how you get ahead in life—an idea that never left me."

As Jim entered junior high school, his mother bought a three-unit apartment building by the railroad tracks. They moved into one unit and rented out the other two—another example of her enterprising nature. Jim began playing football for the first time and loved it until he almost ruptured his appendix. He was a curious, engaged boy who loved dissecting frogs, public speaking, and writing—though practicing handwriting seemed like a waste of time to him.

Jim's high school offered a college preparatory track or a trades track, and though he chose the former, he talked his way into an auto mechanics class and a typing class. He had an old car at the time and wanted to know how to fix it himself, and he wanted to be able to type out long papers if the need ever arose. He took up recreational wrestling and loved swimming, acting, and serving on student council. "I most remember high school as the thrill of learning," he recalls. "An English teacher saw how much I enjoyed it, and he asked if I had thought about

going to college. I had, but I always thought we couldn't afford it. He was one of those great storytellers where you could see it in your mind as he spoke. I had never thought it was possible, but he helped me see the possibilities and secure a one-semester scholarship from his fraternity, which was enough to get me started."

Jim enrolled at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), living at home and working at the historic Chamberlain Hotel to pay for the rest of his tuition. He was the first of his family to attend a four-year college, and though he wanted to be a lawyer, his guidance counselor talked him out of it, citing little need for African American lawyers at that time. He instead decided to become a doctor, excelling in biology and struggling through organic chemistry. He majored in biology and minored in chemistry, balancing his coursework with mandatory service of two years in basic ROTC and two years of selective advanced ROTC. And toward the end of his college career, he made the life-changing decision to go to a basketball game, where he ran into a young woman he had met while serving on student council in high school. He and Juliette began dating, and have now been married 56 happy years.

Upon graduating, Jim commenced with his four-year commitment to the Army, planning to leave as soon as it was over. But he found himself deeply compelled by the leadership and discipline of service, beginning with his time at Fort Benning, Georgia. He was a captain alongside the renowned Colin Powell, and when he completed the basic training course, he stayed for the airborne course, where he was selected to become a paratrooper. "After several months of ground school, you go up in the airplane and do your first jump," he explains. "It was my first time ever in a plane, so it was odd that I experienced taking off but didn't experience landing. My maiden voyage in a plane was with a parachute strapped to my back."

Jim's first duty assignment was doing basic training for draftees at Fort Dix, New Jersey, where he brought men together from all different backgrounds and education levels to work as a team. "It was fascinating to see how the noncommissioned officers, the drill masters, worked with the draftees," Jim recounts. "To see them start at the reception station in their civilian clothes, this group of different and conflicting

personalities and backgrounds, and eight weeks later they've been transformed into a focused, effective unit of soldiers who know how to follow and can step into leadership roles themselves if necessary. That's what the military is built upon — being able to do your part, but understanding that the roles can change quickly. I also saw that you can motivate people by demonstrating that you're serious about what you're doing and you have great expectations of them. And I saw that the reward of doing something well is more than about how other people feel about you — it's about how you feel about yourself. That's the power of what leadership can do."

Jim advanced through the ranks from Second Lieutenant to First Lieutenant. He learned the art of motivation through leadership, and the critical task of how to build a team. He and Juliette married in 1960, and in 1961, he began his second tour with the First Calvary Division in South Korea, close to the DMZ. As a 20-something-year-old platoon leader in charge of a platoon sergeant and four squads of about nine soldiers each, he learned the importance of division of duties and established lines of communication. "I gave orders through my platoon sergeant and only went directly to the squads if it was an unusual circumstance," he says. "You learn to let each member of the team do his or her job because you trust that you've trained them well. You see that once people understand their jobs, they can work as a team. It's the very same thing in business. I really believe that military experience is one of the best possible precursors to business because you learn how to build and lead a team in exceptionally stressful situations, mastering principles of leadership, management, and the art of war that are just as relevant in the boardroom as they are on the battlefield."

Though he didn't let go of his dream of owning his own business, Jim opted to stay in the infantry beyond his four years of required service, compelled by the mission of protecting the nation and being a part of something bigger than himself. In Korea, he volunteered to run a rifle range for marksmanship training, which earned him his first commendation medal. He also volunteered to be an aerial observer, which meant flying in the back seat of an L-19 light aircraft as it skirted the DMZ line, taking photographs of North Korea with a long-lens handheld camera. "When you're young and learning, you do things like that without even

thinking of how dangerous it is," he remarks. "A gust of wind could have pushed us over the line into North Korea, where we could have been shot down. It's important to remember experiences like that when you lead young people, because you know they'll do things for you even if they're dangerous. You have to remember that, as a leader, you're ultimately responsible for what you ask people to do."

When that tour completed, Jim was sent to Fort Bragg and joined the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. He still remembers when someone interrupted a staff meeting in 1963 to announce that Kennedy had been shot, prompting Jim to check if this irresponsible young kid named Kennedy was listed on his company roster. When he was notified several hours later that the President had died, he was shocked to realize they were talking about President Kennedy. "It was the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and a lot of people immediately jumped to the conclusion that Castro was behind the shooting," Jim recounts. "We had a Ready Force—the battalion of soldiers in the division that had to be ready to respond to a crisis on short notice. They were mobilized, prepared to strike if the order came. When I realized what was going on, I knew it was a moment that could change history. It meant going to war with Russia, because they had introduced guided missiles in our hemisphere within Cuba. It was a profound lesson in the importance of intelligence and keeping a cool head in a crisis that demands swift decision-making. The President had been killed, and the Vice President had just taken over. It was a terrible situation, but if a bad decision had been made in the heat of the moment, the situation would have become catastrophic."

In the early 1960s, Jim decided to apply for graduate school while serving, and opted for an MBA program. It was the glue that cemented the interest in business first sparked when he was a child admiring his mother's industrious spirit—a flame that was fanned by a realization he had in school. "We reviewed case studies on Kraft food, IBM, Jim Beam, and other big names," he recalls. "But there was not one small business case, and that's what I really wanted to learn about. When a local businessman came in to talk about his small stationary company, I was enthralled. When I went out for my internship at a small business making aircraft parts, I was filled with this new energy. I knew small business was what I wanted to do."

When he finished the program, he was interviewed by Ford and the CIA and saw that he had his pick between industry and government work. But he decided to stay with the Army, where he continued to observe incredible role models with the same careful attention he used while observing the barbershop owner as a young boy. He learned valuable lessons from people he interacted with directly, and from those he admired from afar; he found role models in those above him, and in people below him—like the platoon sergeant who walked him through various thought exercises over coffee in the evenings. One mentor, a three-star general serving as the Comptroller of the Army in 1976, offered him an opportunity to serve on the Board of Directors of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service. Always eager to contribute, he accepted and began traveling to Dallas every quarter for board meetings. “It was my first experience sitting on a board, and I got to learn about nationwide product distribution systems, product testing, and merchandising,” he recounts. “It was a great business experience while I was still in the Army.”

Toward the end of his 27-year military career, Jim was assigned to the Pentagon, where he worked as Assistant Controller of the Army for Financial Planning and Programs. There, he saw how the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) system for Department of Defense resource allocation operated as four separate stovepipes, creating friction and missing the mark. Jim was tasked with integrating the planning and programming processes, leading a small team in the utilization of newly adopted IT to improve the system. When he retired as a Colonel in 1985, he spent a few years working for two different small businesses and then launched MSTI.

Neither Jim nor Juliette had any family history of business ownership, and when he told her he wanted to start his own company, Juliette—a schoolteacher at the time—had many questions. It was difficult to comprehend and accept the risk involved, like putting their house up for collateral, and the fact that Jim would be responsible for creating his own paycheck. But as always, she supported him a hundred percent, trusting that he knew what he needed to do. “Juliette is an incredible partner and the greatest family builder you’ve ever seen,” Jim says. “She’s a wonderfully caring, compassionate, dependable mother to our

two children. She was a great Army wife, and she still proofreads everything I write. We make a great team, and when I started the business, her support reminded me how important trust is—not just in marriage and family, but also with your customers and employees. The trust factor is what makes a business.”

Today, MSTI is the proud recipient of several community service awards for its participation in a program to train small business owners and entrepreneurs in the tools they need to be successful. “So many small businesses consolidate or go out of business,” Jim remarks. “The past several years have seen a net loss of small businesses from the economy, so the RMOA Business Association created a training institute to help reverse that trend. Small businesses contribute so much to the community and economy, and we want to make sure they have the success they need to keep doing that.” Jim and Juliette are also contributors to the American Heart Association, the new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, and their two universities. Jim sits on the Board of Trustees at Hampton University, where he leads the Student Alumni Committee working closely with student leaders from campus.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jim echoes his mother’s emphasis on self-reliance when he stresses the importance of having a plan to pay off one’s student loans independently. He highlights the need to find a way to ensure economic security, pointing out that one of the biggest challenges to happiness in family life is not having the resources needed to cover basic needs. He also urges young people to think ahead thirty years from now, to a time when they’ll be wrapping up their careers. “Putting yourself in that mindset, what do you hope you’ve done by that point?” he asks. “What role do you want to play? If you can visualize that end point, you can figure out what you have to do now to get there. If you can visualize the end, whatever it may be, then you can structure the beginning. The greatest value of college is that it teaches you how to think, and that skill can be applied to whatever you need or want to do.”

Beyond that, his story is a testament to the legacy of small business in the nation’s story, and to the enduring importance of small business to American identity. “Small businesses are really the engine that collectively drives the economy,” he

affirms. "Large businesses are certainly important, but I'm so inspired by the innovative, agile, disruptive nature of small businesses. MSTI is driven by our mission to play a positive role in the economic success and competitiveness of our nation. National strength begins with a strong economy, and we're part of that."

And, while the power of small business can be sweeping in scope, it's important to also recognize its value in its ability to unleash the potential of one person. MSTI, after all, is the hundred-person powerhouse that began as one person working out of their home. "Small business is about looking at what you can do yourself to make a difference in the world," Jim reminds us. "Through self-reliance and hard work, you'll find that there's really no limit to what you can accomplish."

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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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