## Bill Carteaux

## Never, Never Quit

"You didn't just hit it out of the park, you hit it out of the universe," came the headhunter's voice over the phone.

The higher-ups at Van Dorn, now Demag Plastics Group, had originally told Bill Carteaux that they were not going to entertain any internal candidates to fill the vacant position of President and CEO of the Americas. "If you want an opportunity, you're going to have to convince our CEO in Germany that you're capable of doing this," they had told him. After traveling to

Germany only to have the CEO cancel their meeting, Bill pulled a series of maneuvers to obtain a twenty-minute window with the man several days later, which proved enough to get his name thrown in the hat. Maximizing his nuanced knowledge of the business through the proactive creation of a discussion document, he came to his first interview with copies of the piece for each person at the meeting. The document predicted the questions of the interviewers to a tee,

winning him the position over 28 other candidates worldwide. "No one else was close," he was told. You can bet that, when it came to dogged determination, no one else came close either.

That same determination became a matter of life and death on April 22, 2016. Bill had contracted Dengue Fever while in Cuba for work, and his bloodwork detected an abnormality that required a referral to a hematologist. "If I didn't know I was here to be treated for Dengue Fever, that sign might scare the hell out of me," Bill joked with his then-girlfriend, Daniele, as they checked in at the Virginia Cancer Specialists center. Less than an hour later, his world was shattered when the doctor told him he had acute myeloid leukemia, an aggressive form of blood cancer with a survival rate of only 30 percent.

When he was in his twenties, Bill bought a sign that read, "Never, never quit." It's the saying

that saw him through chemotherapy, remission, relapse, and November 17, 2017, the day of his bone marrow transplant, which he considers his new birthday. Bill's perseverance saved not only his own life, but the lives of countless others, thanks to his decision to enroll his transplant in a clinical trial to make bone marrow transplants more widely available to minority patients. "Never, never quit, professionally or personally," he echoes. "That's the single biggest thing that defines who I am today. If I want something, I go

after it and figure out a way to make it happen."

Now the President and CEO of the PLASTICS Industry Association (PLASTICS), the largest plastics trade association in the country, Bill puts his drive to work in the service of the millions upon millions of people who rely on plastics across the country. "I absolutely love what I do," he affirms. "We're affecting the third largest manufacturing sector in America, and an industry that's

growing faster than it ever has before. Every day is different and full of opportunities to move the industry forward. Whether it's addressing outdated regulations, helping to shape tax reform, or launching a ten-year multi-million-dollar consumer awareness campaign, we never, never quit."

Originally chartered in New York City in 1937 as the Society of the Plastics Industry Inc., PLASTICS started as an individual membership organization but converted to a corporate membership model within its first five years. It grew over the decades, at one point reaching \$80 million and playing a key role in shaping new industry standards as plastic supplanted aluminum, steel, paper, and cardboard packaging materials. It also focused on bringing the industry together, launching its first trade show in the 1940s.

In the early 1990s, when Styrofoam came under greater scrutiny for its environmental impact, the association delved into state-level advocacy to turn the tides and formed a Solid Waste Division within the organization. Their highly successful "Plastics Make It Possible" campaign drew in \$25 to \$30 million a year to educate consumers across the country, but then caused the association to splinter in 1999 due to disagreements over how the funding was spent. That program went to the American Chemistry Council, and other facets went elsewhere.

Bill's immediate predecessor worked to stabilize the association through that transition, but when Bill took the helm in 2005, the organization was on the brink of bankruptcy. A particularly adrenaline-pumping period came in February of 2009, when large blocks of exhibitors began to consider withdrawing from their signature global trade show, scheduled only several short months later. Instead of watching the largest plastics trade show in the Western Hemisphere unravel before his eyes, Bill hopped a plane to Japan to meet with key exhibitors. With a persistence that refused to take no for an answer, he eventually met with each industry leader, developing friendships and collecting information to assist in molding his next move.

After learning that Japanese sales were down 90 percent globally, and later receiving a call that the European exhibitors were also planning to pull out of the show, Bill spent the following two weeks working with his officer group to develop a stimulus package. The committee approved the plan with no discussion of how to fund the \$3+ million package, save for a single comment: "I'm not worried; Bill will figure out how to make this work." Later that month, Bill presented the finance committee with a plan for a much-needed restructuring of the organization that would cover the cost of the package, and he met with each of the association's thirty board members over the next several months to gain support. "I learned a lot during that time, selling my concepts across a broad range of people to get the approval we needed to move forward," he reflects. "My sales background really compels me to communicate with people throughout the entire course of an issue and negotiation, allowing me to fully understand what the issue is and gain an educated idea of how to solve it."

Through his efforts to provide

subsidization to exhibitors and allow free admission to attendees, the 2009 trade show proved a ray of light amidst otherwise dark times, marking a turning point in the industry for which people are still thanking Bill today. "We can't know what could have happened to the industry had the show fallen through," Bill comments. "All we know is what did happen." Though their overall attendance was down 30 percent, unique company representation was only down 12 percent. The attendees that did show up were the buyers of their organizations, and as a result of the slimmer crowd, sellers were able to spend more quality one-on-one time with customers. In fact, the main Japanese seller sold more machines at the 2009 show than in any other year – a testament not only to the efforts of the association, but to the pure power of ingenuity to triumph in the face of adversity. "It taught me that I could do anything I set my mind to, which became incredibly important later on in my life," Bill affirms.

Drawing on his strong business background, Bill continued to guide organization to health and resilience, growing it six-fold. He also took on the herculean task of convincing the board to rebrand it as PLASTICS Industry Association, which transformed their name recognition and identifiability. In May of 2018, they hosted their biggest tradeshow yet at 1.22 million net square feet of exhibits and 22 million pounds of equipment on the show floor, selling out for the first time in its history with almost 60,000 attendees.

Today, representing the broad interest of the entire industry across material suppliers, processors, moldmakers, and equipment manufacturers, PLASTICS employs a highly diverse team of around fifty employees, the same size it was when Bill took the helm. But its breadth, depth. and productivity have increased exponentially, thanks to the high caliber of the team and the spirit of determination rooted deeply in their culture. They focus on advocacy at all levels of government; outreach to industry and consumers; business growth and development; sustainability; and workforce development to the future leaders in promote "Manufacturing in this country has over 500,000 open jobs," Bill remarks. "There's a huge skills gap, so we're working to bring our members together with veterans, inner city kids, and other underserved populations that have

potential." With its advocacy and reach spanning the local, state, federal, and international stages, PLASTICS has a global footprint and a universal relevance.

As a compassionate leader who demands a lot but is careful to remember that no one can ever really know what another person is going through, Bill's approach was first and foremost shaped by his loving parents, who taught him the importance of giving back to the community and the difference between right and wrong. His father, a committed family man who always made sure his wife and children were provided for, was so service-focused that he was honored as Man of the Year in their small community. His mother, as well, embodied the "never, never quit" spirit until the day she died in 2017. "Even at the time of her death, she was so compassionate and giving to others," Bill says. "As tough as my dad was, my mother was one tough lady herself. She loved to live and never quit."

Bill was born the youngest child with three older sisters in a modest, blue collar family in Avilla, a one-stoplight Indiana town of about 1,200 people. His father was an electrician who would work third shift at International Harvester, come home and sleep most of the day, and then spend the evening working at his and his father's tavern in town. His mother was a homemaker, and the family made a point to eat supper together every day. Growing up in the Midwest, where a handshake was really worth something, imbued Bill with a civility, integrity, and kindness that shapes him as a businessman today.

Bill's parents would grill out in the summers and make caramel corn in the winters. He enjoyed hunting with his father on the weekends, playing baseball or football with the neighborhood kids, or chasing frogs in the creek behind their house. He pitched in Little League, and though he was a shy kid, he was also very confident, energetic, and active. "I'll never forget the time I frustrated my Aunt Nelle so much that she chased me around with a wooden spoon and told me I'd never amount to anything," he recounts. "It was a defining moment because it made me set my mind to proving her wrong. There was no way I was going to let her be right. It's stuck with me for fifty years, and it's given me the drive to do some of the things I've done."

Bill attended a Catholic school for his first six years of school, which instilled a sense of discipline, and then attended seventh and eighth grade at a public school in Avilla. He attended high school in a town five miles away, and always felt like an outsider because he lived "out of town." He played football in an effort to fit in, but a football to the face in his sophomore year shattered the retina of his right eye. Even surgery couldn't save his depth perception, and sports have been a challenge ever since.

Bill skated through his high school's easy coursework, making strong grades and still enjoying ample free time for other pursuits. He had always worked, ever since he was a child cleaning spittoons and mopping floors at his father's and grandfather's tavern for five dollars a week. Later he began mowing lawns, but his big windfall came when he got a job bailing hay for a curmudgeonly preacher at age fourteen. It was incredibly hard manual labor on the hottest days of the year for a buck an hour, but those ten-hour shifts felt like winning the lottery. They also laid a strong foundation for business acumen. "The preacher was a tough old bird, and he started going weeks or months without paying me," Bill recounts. "My father refused to intervene, so I had to learn to stand up for myself, which was a defining moment. It shaped me in so many ways as I later worked with customers and became a manager."

Bill was also very passionate about cars. He took three years of vocational auto mechanics in high school and loved rebuilding engines, placing second in the state at an auto mechanic competition at the Indy 500 track. He bought his first brand new pick-up truck in 1977 for \$3,500, and went through 19 different cars by the time he was 21. He also got a job as a Packaging and Transportation Engineer at Kroger, where he found he had a real knack for interfacing with customers. It was the first time he realized he had a likeable personality and began coming out of his shell.

As Bill neared graduation, no one in his family had gone to college, and he had no intention of going himself. "I couldn't afford to go, so I didn't even think about it," he reflects. He almost took a factory job with Cummins, but in conversations with his father, he remembered the looming threat of layoffs and decided to instead take a job as a mechanic at an Oldsmobile dealership in Fort Wayne. Upon arriving, he was paired with Doug Nickson, a petulant coworker who complained incessantly about his life. "I

thought maybe I should consider a different career path, so I decided to go to college," Bill says.

His parents didn't have the money to pay for school, so Bill joined the Air Force to get an education but soon received an honorable discharge from basic training due to his detached retina. Disappointed but not discouraged, he decided to pay for college himself. "I knew the only thing I could ultimately control was my own action," he says. "I may not be the smartest guy in the room, but I had been told that drive and determination win out over raw brains any day."

With this in mind, he enrolled at Purdue University in Fort Wayne, working at a gas station and car wash in his spare time and befriending a man by the name of Bill Dice. The two shared a passion for cars and would talk avidly about them every Saturday until Bill transferred to Purdue's main campus for his junior and senior year.

The experience of campus life transformed him in ways as invaluable as they were drastic, unleashing his affinity for leadership and strategy. Mirroring his father's passion and commitment to community involvement, Bill attended summer conferences for the Trade Association, joined the American Society of Agricultural Engineers, and served as Vice Chair of its National Student chapter. He not only came into his own as a student leader, but also as a family man, marrying the summer before his senior year.

His innovation skills were further honed after college while working for the Indiana Farm Bureau Co-op, excelling through a state-operated fast-track management program and thoroughly immersing himself in dairy farm culture. He then made a considerable stir in the industry by endorsing and selling new technology that increased milk production by 25 percent. "The whole experience taught me the importance and profitability of always looking at new technology or new ways of accomplishing things, never being constrained by the status quo," he explains.

Several years out of college and amidst this success, Bill found himself randomly covering an emergency shift at the old gas station where he had worked throughout his youth, when suddenly his old friend Bill Dice showed up. Mr. Dice invited Bill to come work as a regional sales manager for him at a plastics company called Group Dekko International. He wouldn't take no for an answer, so the young man took a leap of faith and never looked back. "I'm glad I did

because it moved me into the industrial manufacturing side of things, setting me up for the career I have today," Bill reflects.

Under the influence of Chet Dekko, the visionary owner of the company and a mentor to Bill, he was thrown into any number of sink-or-swim situations in his new role, but he remained true to his mantra and never quit. "Chet expected more of people than they think they can do, which can be a motivating management style," Bill says. "But most importantly, he taught me how to solve problems." Through his efforts at assembling and implementing a strong sales team, Bill was able to quadruple the business within two years.

Despite such pronounced success, he knew needed more intensive manufacturing experience to get where he hoped to go in the future. After four years at Group Dekko, he turned down a promotion to plant manager and instead took a job at a tier one automotive glass supplier as gaining invaluable frontline supervisor, experience in hardcore "just in time" manufacturing and then transitioning over to a commission-based job in industrial storage at Stanley Vidmar Inc. "I was making great money, but I was working out of my home, which was miserable because I need to be around people," Bill says. "I realized money isn't everything, and Chet Dekko offered me the position of Sales Manager of their plastics machinery business, Autojectors." Bill accepted the job and was promoted through the ranks to President over a period of eight years, growing the business from \$3.8 million to \$20 million in that period.

Bill then accepted a position as VP of Marketing at Van Dorn, at that time a \$210 million company in Ohio. When he rose to President and CEO, the company had grown to a \$450 million global enterprise, with plants in China, India, and Germany. Bill loved running that international business and also serving on the Finance Committee of PLASTICS. He was serving his first stint on the association's board when the former PLASTICS President and CEO submitted his resignation, and Bill began to receive calls encouraging him to consider the position. "I knew nothing about running a trade association, but I knew the industry, and I had a lot of energy," Bill explains. "They picked me for those reasons, and because they knew I never quit. And I picked them after a conversation with my dad, where he pointed out that I had been in the industry for

twenty years so maybe it was time to give back. He was right." He planned to stay for three years and then go back to running a business, but fourteen years in, he couldn't imagine anything else.

Life was unpredictable in other ways as well. In June of 2014, Bill got word that one of his star former employees, a man by the name of AJ, had fallen down a flight of stairs and died while on vacation with his family. AJ's marriage had been deeply troubled, and at a bar after the funeral, Bill found himself surrounded by people complaining about their own loveless marriages. "In that moment, I knew I had to make a change," he recounts. "I was miserable in my marriage, and I didn't want to die that way. Life is too short."

The following month, Bill and his wife separated, leaving room for him to find the positive, upbeat, happy man he had been years ago. He called his two sisters, from which he had been estranged for years, and they all agreed to put the past in the past. He revived old friendships that had drifted away due to the negativity in his life. He moved back into Washington, DC, and began volunteering with various philanthropic organizations. The following year, he became the youngest person of less than 200 global honorees to be inducted into the Plastics Industry Hall of Fame. He also reconnected with Daniele, a former colleague who had recently moved back to DC after her own separation, and the two struck up a relationship.

Most people would run when their partner of five months is diagnosed with leukemia. But Daniele stayed by Bill's side through 49 total days of chemo and radiation, a sepsis scare, and the excruciating highs and lows of battling cancer. "Telling my wonderful daughters, Whitney and Mallory, was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," Bill says. "I saw people much younger than me—a woman with two young children—pass away. And I hit a new low when I found out my leukemia was back, and when the subsequent first round of chemo didn't get it all. But I never took a day off, and I learned how truly powerful positivity can be. It literally kept me alive."

The PLASTICS board, officers, and staff were unbelievable through those trying times, providing Bill the support he needed to keep going. But Daniele was truly the hero—something Bill reflected on after his relapse left him wondering if he would make it through this time. "I knew I couldn't let this woman go," Bill

recounts. "I had no desire to get remarried after my divorce, but Daniele is truly amazing. I didn't realize there were women out there who care as much as she does. She would do anything for anybody before she does something for herself. Meeting her, I saw how everything happens for a reason, so I planned a surprise proposal party from my hospital bed." With almost thirty of their closest friends, family, and caregivers looking on, Bill popped the question, and they married on New Year's Eve.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Bill stresses the importance of relationships. "Never burn a bridge," he urges. "In the business world, there have been some situations where I might have wanted to give someone a piece of my mind, only for them to later join the association, making me thankful that I had maintained good relations. It's also important to get out there and network."

Beyond that, he reminds us to always look for a way forward. "When someone asks you to do something, or when you're faced with your own seemingly-insurmountable obstacle, never start with no," he says. "Get creative, stay determined, and see if you can figure it out. When faced with a problem, keep asking questions until you find the true nature of the issue, because you can't solve it unless you know what it is. Remember that it's easier and less effort to be positive than it is to be negative. Having a positive attitude changes your whole psyche about life. Remember you have a choice, so choose to never, never give up."

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