

Paul Thieberger

Where the Buck Stops

Every year, you can be sure it will rain on the day Paul Thieberger and his wife, Pamela, host the annual ServiceSource picnic at their home in Northern Virginia. But nothing dampens the fun and enthusiasm of the guests—around a hundred families of individuals with disabilities—who come to take a break from the daily grind and celebrate life and togetherness. “I’ve known a lot of these folks since we were kids, and we love ServiceSource in its mission to provide the disabilities community with everything from jobs and housing to friendship and community,” Paul says. “I can’t tell you what a difference it makes for them to get to go to work, spend time with friends, and live a meaningful life.”

The ServiceSource Family and Friends Picnic is labor of love and a grand do-it-yourself effort that brings the whole community together. Paul puts up his own tents and tables, while a friend gets a discount on chair rentals. Some friends help flip burgers, others man the face painting station, and many others help out wherever they are needed. Most years, there are as many friends as there are participants, and Paul couldn’t do it without them. “Over the years, it’s taken on a life of its own,” he says. “I’m so proud of my family and friends, and the way they come together each year to make it happen. Even our young Granddaughters, Lacie and Keira, help out in a big way.”

Paul’s parents helped launch ServiceSource in the 1970s in an effort to build support and community for people like Paul’s two sisters, who were both born with Down Syndrome. “Back then, one of the very few options for help was an institution, and those were terrifying places,” he says. “You wanted better for your family members, so my parents joined with other families and helped build better.”

The Thiebergers used to host big

gatherings for the group down on their farm near Charlottesville, sometimes with hot air balloon rides. But as Paul’s parents’ generation aged, the social events ceased. That’s why Paul and Pam started going to meetings and decided to take on the annual picnic themselves.

Today, as a Chairman of the organization’s operating board, Paul also tries to visit and support its branches across the country, attending numerous ServiceSource events in Colorado, Delaware, Florida, and elsewhere. “They’ve done so much for my sisters and my family,” he says. “I love to see the incredible things our members are doing to serve and support people with disabilities.”

Paul is also the President of K&B Plumbing and Heating, founded in 1972 by Bill Minnick as part of consortium comprised of an HVAC, plumbing, electrical, and general contracting company. While the electrical and general contracting divisions eventually closed up shop, the HVAC (BILMIN Company) and plumbing division persevered. Paul came onboard in 1984 after answering an ad in the *Washington Post*, when the company had only one other employee and somewhat strained relationships with vendors. “Had I known how bad it was at the time, I probably wouldn’t have taken the job,” he laughs. “But thankfully I stuck it out.”

On paper, K&B Plumbing could be doing even better if Paul prioritized the company’s bottom line. But his top priorities are the people that work for him and the families they support. “I could have been more selfish over the years and made quite a bit more money, but we’ve always had people depending on us for paychecks,” he remarks. “I also thought about going off to start my own company before Bill left, but loyalty really bound me to the legacy he started. I was also able to build up good will and valuable relationships to



go along with the infrastructure we already had in place. All these factors became the inertia that kept me at K&B Plumbing.”

Today, K&B Plumbing specializes in commercial work and remodeling. Their project sizes range from \$1,000 to over \$2 million, and they’ve worked in almost every office building in the DC metropolitan area through their partnerships with general contractors. And just as he enjoys leadership at ServiceSource, Paul is truly in his element as a leader in the construction industry. “I love being a business owner,” he says. “You have more possibilities than if you worked for somebody else. You have freedom and agency. With that comes responsibility, stress, and constant work, but there’s something very rewarding and compelling about knowing that at the end of the day, the buck stops with you.”

Paul’s deep perseverance and resilience perhaps stems from his father, born in Vienna, Austria, where his family—of a quarter-Jewish ancestry—owned a prosperous lumber yard. Adolf Hitler’s influence was on the rise, and when Paul’s father came home one day at the age of thirteen wearing a Nazi brown-shirt uniform, his mother saw the writing on the wall. She sent him on a Quaker Boat to England, where he lived on his own for several years. Finally, at the age of sixteen, he immigrated to America with his mother, passing through Ellis Island and settling in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Two years later, in 1943, he joined the Army and was sent to assist with the Nuremberg Trials as a German interpreter. He then attended Pennsylvania State University on the GI Bill, later working for the Federal Aviation Administration and the Department of Defense. His final job was as an international logistics negotiator in the Middle East, where he was held hostage in Jordan by Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. “For my father, a hand shake was as good as an iron-clad contract,” Paul says. “He was a true model for honesty, perseverance, and service to others.”

Paul’s mother came to DC during World War II as part of the “lipstick brigade”—a wave of women drawn in to work government jobs in support of the war effort. She was working for the Navy when she met Paul’s father, and after Paul was born, she stayed at home to care for the children. “She was always very grounded,” Paul remembers. “I watched her take care of my sisters for years and refuse to listen to the doctors who

said she and my father should put them in an institution. My father, as well, worked so hard and was extremely selfless, always showing such dedication to us kids. My parents taught me that family was everything, and that you don’t shun your family just because there’s a problem.”

A native Washingtonian born in 1958, Paul grew up in Suitland, Maryland, until kindergarten and then moved to Alexandria near Mount Vernon. “The whole neighborhood was full of kids,” he remembers. “We’d leave home on Saturday morning as soon as we finished breakfast and didn’t come back till dark, spending our days playing in the woods or swimming in the river.” The most defining aspect of his childhood, however, was his sisters. At a young age, Paul was more than a brother—he was a patient caregiver, a strong defender, and a calm in the storm when situations grew stressful and chaotic. “Having them in my life made me a more tolerant, caring person,” he affirms. “Things people found unusual and shied away from, were just completely normal to me. I understood that there are folks out there that need my help, and from an early age, I was determined to give that help.”

Paul’s father was Scout Master for his Cub Scout and Boy Scout troops, and Paul remembers observing his deft negotiating and leadership skills in managing the strong personalities of the other fathers in the group. “When there was a disagreement, he would speak firmly to these other guys, some of whom were pretty high-ranking in the military,” Paul says. “He would say, ‘General, I respect everything you’ve done in life, but you all put me in charge of this troop, so this is how we’re going to do it.’ The experiences were designed for us boys to hone our leadership skills too and see how it felt to be in charge, and the dads really let us do our thing and lead the younger kids. They let us go to flourish or fall on our faces, offering guidance along the way.” In many ways, the experience would parallel the “freedom to fly or fall” environment he experienced when he first came to K&B Plumbing.

Growing up, Paul volunteered often at the Special Olympics with his sisters, and he always seemed to have a part time job somewhere. He shoveled driveways, had a paper route, and later worked at restaurants. He also volunteered from a very young age at Fairfax County’s summer special education recreation program—a great experience that helped shape his future—and

worked for four summers at Camp Tapawingo, a residential camp in Manassas, Virginia. "Given the restrictions and regulations around disability care today, I wouldn't be able to have the same opportunities if I was growing up now," he says. "But I'm so glad I had those experience when I did. They taught me to take charge of things and to be a leader in times of crisis, like when an individual in my care stuck their hand through a window and bled profusely. I learned that you don't think twice, and you don't let the stress get to you. You just step up and do what needs to be done. I also learned to never underestimate what teenagers are capable of."

Paul played baseball and soccer through high school, enjoyed his coursework to an extent, and belonged to the United Methodist Youth Fellowship. He was more social than academic, with friendships that spanned groups and social circles. Every summer through high school, he worked in special education somehow, and he always imagined he'd go to college and pursue a career in the field.

When he graduated from high school in 1976, Paul drove cross-country with a friend in a Volkswagen Beetle, visiting friends at 20 or 30 different colleges to get a better idea of where he might want to pursue his own education. "We had a lot of free meals and free nights on dorm room floors, and we ended the journey on a rooftop in San Francisco overlooking the Bay and Alcatraz," he remembers. "And despite all the campuses I saw, I most enjoyed the week we spent on a friend's ranch in Idaho putting in fence posts to pick up a few extra dollars. I decided blue collar was more my style."

By the time he returned to the DC area that fall, Paul knew he didn't want to go to college. His father wasn't happy about the decision, but he never judged his son or tried to push him in a different direction. With that, Paul took a part-time job connecting returning Vietnam War veterans with classes in the building trades, enjoying it so much that he decided to walk up the street one day to a nearby construction site and ask for a job. "It was a residential subdivision where they were building houses," he says. "Someone told me that if I wanted a job on a construction site, I had be standing there before they started in the morning. If someone was late or didn't show, they might put me in. So that's what I did. The plumbers hired me, and that was it."

While working for one of the biggest construction companies in the area, Paul entered into a plumbing apprenticeship program and began driving twice a week from Springfield to Greenbelt to take night classes toward his Master Plumber license, which he completed in 1982. He later got additional licenses for DC, Delaware, Richmond, and two jurisdictions in Maryland—each an important stepping stone along the path to owning his own company. "Today, I take as much continuing education I can," he says. "I also make a point to offer those opportunities to my employees, whether it's apprentice programs or English as a Second Language classes."

After several years, Paul went to work for a one-man plumbing operation owned by two non-plumbers who knew nothing about the construction business. It was a college education in hard knocks, and Paul gained invaluable experience with contracts and other aspects of the work. After several years of working 80-hour weeks, he decided he was ready for a change, making the switch to K&B Plumbing.

When Paul first joined the company, it was focused only on commercial work. And almost from day one, the buck stopped with him. "It was a highly entrepreneurial setting where you could go like hell, as long as you could make payroll," he says. "Once you understood the importance of cash flow, there was a lot of leeway."

In a short time, Bill let Paul run the plumbing company as its General Manager, while Dave Kerrigan took responsibility at K&B's quasi-partner company, Bilmin HVAC. "Bill was very good to us," Paul affirms. When he retired in 2000, Paul and Dave bought the two companies, which remain tied together today through shared staff and offices.

The Great Recession marked ten years of trying economic conditions for K&B Plumbing, but fortunately they were able sustain operations, thanks in no small part to help from Dave Kerrigan and the fact that Paul was able to put some of his own money back into the company. When their bank froze their credit line, BB&T bank saw value in the company and extended a much larger line of credit. "Our banker used to drop by our office to sign papers and chat," Paul recalls. "Things don't work like that anymore, unfortunately. Those were sleepless nights, for sure. Some people told me to walk away, but I just couldn't go through with something like that."

Today, as a leader, Paul believes in delegating but following up, and trusting but verifying. He gives others the space and freedom to excel in their own way, and continually strives to be a better communicator. "I assume people are on the same wavelength, but that's rarely the case," he acknowledges.

Just as it was when he was young, family remains the defining factor in Paul's life, with his world revolving first and foremost around the woman he met years ago as just a pretty voice on the other end of the phone line. Pamela used to work as the answering service for the emergency line at Paul's first construction company job, and when he would get a beep on his pager, he'd call in to her. "She had a nice voice, so eventually I asked her out," he laughs. "After some begging, she finally said okay, and the rest is history." Pam became a special ed teacher, doing the work Paul had once thought would be the centerpiece of his own professional career. She later retired to help care for Paul's mother and two disabled sisters, a full-time job in itself. "My wife is an angel," he says. "She's always been so supportive, even when I worked long, crazy hours when our three kids were young."

One of Paul's sons now works alongside him at K&B Plumbing. His other son is in sales, while his daughter followed in Pam's footsteps with a profession in special ed. Paul is on the board of Rising Hope Mission Church and the Lorton Community Action Center, both in southern Fairfax County, where Pam also volunteers.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Paul underscores the importance of hard work and tenacity. "Turn your hat around, pull your pants up, and go to work every day," he says with a smile. "If you work forty hours a week and do what your boss asks without complaining, chances are, you'll do pretty well in life. If you have to work a few hours beyond that, don't go looking for overtime. There will be things you don't like about it, but that's just how it is. Go to work every single day with no excuses, and you'll be just fine."

Beyond that, Paul's work has been defined by a leadership style that compels him to accept responsibility and ownership of challenges, even

when he doesn't have to. From his refusal to turn his back on his employees, to his commitment to ensure the legacy of ServiceSource, his quiet fortitude echoes the adjectives enshrined in his father's old Boy Scout Handbook: trustworthy, loyal, helpful, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent. "My father lived all those things," he affirms. "I try to live them, and I watched my own kids embrace them when I was their Scout Leader."

With these qualities, Paul is steady and reliable—a source of strength for the employees that look to him for their livelihoods, and the ServiceSource community that knows he will always speak out for them. They know he will be the one to stand before policymakers and politicians at advocacy hearings to tell the ServiceSource story, and he will be the one to make sure the annual picnic happens again and again. He's where the buck stops.

To Paul, it's all worth it when he glances at the hand-carved plank of wood from a young cub scout—a gift "for being a grate leader." It's worth it when he sees the happiness and success of his family. And it's worth it when he reads the notes of gratitude from the people counting on him, like the letter from Hailey that reads, "To: The Thieberger Family. Thank you for having me at your beautiful farm and residence. I had so much fun at the picnic. See you again next year!"

© May 2017 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](#).