

Allen Izadpanah

The Life Raft

When Allen Izadpanah arrived in America as a 25-year-old, he faced challenges that many Americans would view as insurmountable. Mastering a new language and culture, developing professional and personal networks from absolutely nothing, and navigating success according to the stars and laws of an unknown nation would not be easy. But on June 21, 1974, when Allen landed at Dulles International Airport and came face-to-face with these challenges for the first time, he saw only opportunity.

Now, decades later, Allen remembers that period of his life like a piece of art his son made for him depicting a small clay frog awash in the troubled waters of a vast blue ocean. The frog will surely drown, except for a life raft that has been painted into the scene. "All the frog has to do is gather strength and leap onto that raft," Allen reflects today. "I've always told my sons that if you live a good life, God sends you an opportunity to save yourself when you're faced with trouble. If you work hard, stay determined, and turn every mistake into a learning opportunity, you will have what you need to persevere through any situation."

By the time he first set foot on American soil, Allen had saved \$3,000 and was awarded a scholarship to attend George Washington University. He immersed himself in the unparalleled possibility of the country's technological innovation, as well as its countless avenues for survival. From driving cabs, to working as the maître d' at the Jefferson Hotel serving wine and bloody marys to cabinet secretaries, Allen took every opportunity to learn, earn, and build his own life raft. "I knew I had more opportunity here in America than I would have gotten anywhere else in the world," he says. "This is a great country, and I've always wanted it to stay great for my children and grandchildren. I

wanted to find a way to contribute to that greatness."

With this mission firmly in his mind, Allen began looking around for opportunities to create success and give back through his work, and soon saw that the greatest opportunity lay in healthcare. Everyone needed it, yet with costs rising, people were often priced out of lifesaving treatments, while the financial toll to the nation grew more and more unsustainable. In the midst of that ocean, Allen saw technology as the life raft, and believed

he could make a real difference through the concept of telehealth. "The internet hadn't taken off yet, and I wasn't trained in healthcare, but I decided to move into that space and make it my life's work to save lives by reducing costs while elevating service," he says.

With no time for self-doubt, Allen leaned into his innate proclivity for entrepreneurship, technology, and life on the cutting edge of innovation. And just as importantly, he embraced the power of his own positive energy and outlook. "The energy we put into the world is recycled and comes back to us," he says. "If you put good into the world, you get good back. I focused on living the kind of life that finds you laughing often and sleeping well. Because I don't waste energy on being negative or hurtful, I've had more energy to put toward being successful."

Now the founder, President, and CEO of Visual Telecommunication Network, or ViTel Net, Allen has failed many times in the intervening years. But in those moments suspended alone in the open ocean, instead of withdrawing, he waited. "There were certainly times I was in deep trouble with the company," he says. "I did everything possible to turn things around. Though nothing seemed to work, I didn't give up. But then things happened that I had nothing to do with and things got better. In those moments, I felt I saw the way



God designed the universe. You get what you give, and every time I'm in trouble, a life raft comes. God has given us everything we ever needed."

ViTel Net is rooted in a company Allen first began cultivating in 1990, when digital technology was still in its infancy. In its earliest stages, the company digitized multimedia, and Allen quickly noticed that the biggest obstacle in the future of digital technology was the cultural issues to overcome. He knew he wanted to steer the rudder of the company toward healthcare, the biggest and most troubling challenge both in terms of access to care and the cost to the federal budget. Over the next decade, the company shifted its focus to law, and then to healthcare, solidifying its reputation as a change agent in providing remote healthcare in rural area.

Driven by a vision of what could be, and strategically aware that the military is often the frontrunner in America for any new technology that might be used to help soldiers, Allen began working with Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the early 2000's. As one of the first telemedicine companies out of the gate, ViTel Net landed funding from the U.S. Congress to develop remote health monitoring capabilities for elderly vets with chronic diseases. Smartphones and tablets hadn't been invented yet, so Allen ViTel Net started implementing telemedicine around the globe by creating a manufacturing line in upstate New York for a device called the Turtle.

By 2009, ViTel Net had built over 10,000 units for the Veterans Administration and many commercial home nursing agencies for patients with chronic diseases. They developed key partnerships with Partners HealthCare, an affiliate of Harvard University, and around 45 top home nursing agencies, becoming the dominant player in the U.S. home monitoring industry and winning a contract supplying remote home monitoring to Ontario Telemedicine Network, a Canadian organization. By 2009, with the advent of mobile devices, ViTel Net saw no need for continue its manufacturing work. "Manufacturing was not our expertise," Allen says. "We just did it because nothing else was available."

Naturally, large companies like Phillips and Bosch approached Allen with acquisition bids, so he sold the Turtle and its manufacturing line in 2009 to Bosch. "My wife asked why I wanted to keep working so hard after that, when I had already made all the money we needed to live

comfortably," he remembers. "But I told her, I've got a legacy and a mission in telehealth, and I've got to finish it." With that, Allen reinvested much of his fortune into ViTel Net, building it into the tour de force it is today.

The company spent the next several years retooling, building the next generation of telemedicine and an innovative new telemedicine platform. Erasing the traditional limitations of time and space, the telemedicine enabled through ViTel Net allows doctors to see patients virtually anywhere in the world, within a narrower timeframe than allowed by a conventional healthcare visit, and at a fraction of the cost. Through video and sensory technology, a provider can now remotely examine a patient as thoroughly as if they were actually there in person. With the development of ViTel Net telehealth continuum of care, patients are now brought into emergency departments, where doctors and specialists conduct remote consultations. Patients then return home or to nursing homes for remote monitoring, cutting down on costly, unpleasant hospital stays.

ViTel Net's technology has not only been embraced in diverse settings across the U.S., but also around the world. Working with Video Med Europe, ViTel Net won premier innovation award from Spain's Ministry of Health for cutting physician wait times from two months to one day, and continues to be a global leader in the increasingly-saturated healthcare IT space. "My father used to say that if you're selling jewelry, you want to be in the bazaar where they have all kinds of jewelry stands so you can compete against the best," Allen points out. "If you're afraid of competition, you can never hope to be the best. So, I say, bring it on!" ViTel Net was one of the first telemedicine companies to join the American Telemedicine Association (ATA), which Allen has served through his leadership as a board member and as chairman of their Industry Council. ViTel Net has also sponsored the leadership dinner at ATA for about 25 years.

Allen has had this aggressive drive toward achievement and purpose from the time he was a young child growing up in a small city in southern Iran. As the second of nine children and the first son of the family, Allen remembers his parents as incredibly kind and nurturing. His mother, beloved by all, stayed home to raise the children. His father, hardworking and highly-respected, worked in the international side of the major bank

in Iran because he knew English. He held a deep appreciation for the U.S. and enjoyed making friends with service members stationed at the nearby American military bases. "He loved gardening and would tell me that America was like a garden, with an enterprising spirit unlike that of any other country in the world," Allen recounts.

Allen recognized at a young age that money brings value and the opportunity to live good while giving back to the community, so he was always looking for ways to augment the \$2 weekly allowance he got from his father. He sold candy in the summer, helped manage his younger brothers' money, and was the de facto businessman of the home. "In high school, we were asked to write an article (SA) on whether we preferred money or education," he remembers. "I was the only one who said money. I knew that education didn't necessarily bring money, but money could be used to get an education. I've pursued money not because I was crazy about money, but because I was crazy about life—a good, healthy, fulfilling life that allows me to contribute and give back."

For Allen, such a life revolves around the concept of a higher purpose, and even from the time he was a small boy, he always wondered about God and the meaning of life. "From a very young age, I was interested in questions of religion, why we're on earth, and what we should do with our time here," he says. "I always wanted to do something meaningful. Every religion believes that life is a struggle between good and evil, and I believe our responsibility is to decide which side we will fight for."

Allen was born to Muslim parents who raised him to be Muslim as well, but he soon became firmly convinced that religion is a love affair that people must seek and find for themselves. "Sometimes, I think the rigid thinking associated with religion and politics puts us in a box," he says. "I believe in thinking more freely, without traditional labels. I think God is the same God across all religions. There's a saying in Farsi that sums it all up: say good things, do good things, think good things, and you can't go wrong."

As life would have it, Allen's own love affair was sparked in earnest when he first discovered God and his power while synthesizing a compound in the laboratory at George

Washington University (GWU). "I was a PhD student, and I had to put in the test tube the exact amount of different chemicals—maybe 0.002 gram of A and 1.4 gram of B, for example," he explains. "The magic was, only the exact amount of each chemical would work—not more, not less. I thought, compare that test tube with Earth itself. It would have had to contain the right and exact amounts of an unimaginable number of components, molecules, and atoms in order to create, convert, spontaneously evolve, and transform into what it is today. What an architecture that would have to be! I realized the magic of God was how he created that architecture, which isn't statistically possible otherwise. I resolved that this transformation theory proves God, not the fixation theory that religion believes Him to be. He is the divine architect that made all this possible, balanced the universe with good and bad energy, and planned all this for us to achieve. I saw that God must be the best chemist."

After completing high school, Allen had attended college in Tehran to study chemistry, with dreams of becoming Iran's Minister of Oil one day. Like his father, he also had a deep appreciation for America, which led him to become a leader of the Iranian American Society. The role gave him an opportunity to learn English and interact with foreigners who came to Iran—perfect preparation when his stellar academic performance landed a scholarship to get his PhD at GWU.

There, the head of the Chemistry Department tried to put Allen on a research track, but he instead insisted on pursuing a graduate teaching fellowship, since it would more fully immerse him in American culture and language. "He worried that my English wasn't good enough to teach, but I convinced him to give me a chance," Allen recounts. "He told me he would come observe my first day of class and make a decision. I'll never forget him sitting in the first row that day. I said, 'My friends, you know English, and I know Chemistry. Together, we know both.' He liked that and let me continue with a teaching fellowship."

Besides his teaching job, Allen got a job at the Jefferson Hotel, where he developed incredible connections as a waiter for George H.W. Bush and other dignitaries. Meanwhile, he began helping his other family members make the move to America.

"The Shah was strong at that time, and no one thought there would be a revolution," he explains. "But five years after I came to America, revolution swept across Iran."

Chemistry had always seemed like magic to Allen, but now that he had mastered the field and understood how chemical reactions worked, he began to lose interest. He found himself drawn to technology and the financial freedom it promised, ultimately deciding not to complete his dissertation and stayed with his master degree knowing that he can always go back and finish his dissertation for his PhD, so he could instead pursue a career in the burgeoning field of computers. "I tried to find an entry level job in computers so I could begin learning, but everyone said I was overqualified since I had my master's degree," he says. "I ended up paying a company, called Balance Computer, \$500 a month to hire me, just so I could get experience. Within six months, a company called Clinton Computers saw what I was doing and offered me a large salary to be their Director of Training." Meanwhile, Allen took courses in computer programming and became a certified programmer.

Allen was then tapped to serve as Head of Training and Marketing for Terminal Unlimited, where he provided training services to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). When that company began to go under around 1984, USACE told Allen they would hire him wherever he landed next, or he could start his own company with their \$150,000 contract. "I had always felt like having to ask permission to take a vacation was a little like slavery, in a sense," Allen remembers. "So, in 1985, I struck out on my own and started Aidant, a systems integration company. It was one of the best days of my life."

Aidant went on to become the computer distributor for AT&T and a very successful IBM reseller, landing a \$50 million Navy contract and a \$60 million NASA contract. In 1989, Allen acquired Deerfield System, Inc., a company that gave him an entry point into digital development. He then merged the companies to create ViTel Net and undertaking its first major telemedicine implementation at Washington Children's Hospital in 1992. "Children are the future, and I want to do everything I can to prevent them from dying due to insufficient medical care," Allen reflects. "The venture was incredibly successful."

As a leader, Allen strives to hire the best

people, clearly explain their goals, and then give them the space to accomplish those aims. Upholding his commitment to positivity, he never makes a decision when angry and has never fired a single employee. "If someone needs to move on, I give them enough time to find a new place of employment where they can be more successful," he says. "As well, one employee got sick with cancer and had to miss almost two years of work, but we never stopped paying him." This leadership style creates good will and fierce loyalty, allowing the team to stay focused at all times on how they can grow more and achieve more together.

For all he's accomplished, Allen knows that every successful man needs a good wife to have a truly fulfilling life, and for that, he is deeply grateful to Roshan, the woman he met in Germany in early 1990. Roshan had recently finished college in Iran, and Allen immediately hopped on a plane to meet her. Their sons, now graduates of the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech with stellar GPAs, have become productive members of society in their own rite. "I'm proud to be an immigrant who is an asset to this great country, and that my sons are continuing that legacy," Allen says.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Allen reminds us that failure is an unavoidable part of every story worth telling. "In my life, I've learned that success comes from determination, hard work, and realizing that no matter what you do, there are times you will fail," he affirms. "Life is a cycle, with highs and lows, flying and falling. The successful people—the winners—are those that get up and run faster after they fall, never giving up."

Beyond that, he reminds us that, with the strength of our own willpower and the materials of our own positive energy, we build our own life rafts. "I tell my children that if you work hard, stay positive, and focus on a mission you're proud of, it's impossible to fail irreversibly," he affirms. "If you believe strongly and focus attentively with good intention in your heart, you can bring the outcome you envision. So, believe in yourself and your country, and let's go for it."

© October 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](#).

