

# Solon G. Vlasto

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## Took Many Paths, Found a Way

Putting on a play is a complex production, weaving together the diverse elements of lighting, scenery, costumes, sound, script and talent to tell a complete story in the way it was meant to be told. There is no detail too small and no consideration that can be left to chance, with each aspect contributing to the overall picture.

Solon Vlasto first began grasping the gravity of play production in elementary school when he began helping out behind the scenes. He got more involved each year, to the point that he began missing classes in high school to dedicate as much time as possible to theater. “I was working with a fun group of my friends, and every chance we got, we’d work on the upcoming production,” he recounts today. “I had no interest whatsoever in being onstage, but I loved the process of creating something from a blank slate, coordinating diverse elements into a clear narrative and experience that was impactful and meaningful to our audience.”

Now a co-owner and Principal at Bernhardt Wealth Management (BWM), an independent wealth management firm serving high net worth clients, Solon is still driven by his passion for distilling complexity to clarity for the benefit of others. “As a Christian, I live in faith that we all have unique talents, and that we’re meant to share those talents with the world to the best of our abilities,” he says. “In wrapping my mind around complicated ideas and then communicating them to clients, sifting through their situations to provide appropriate solutions and excellent service, I believe I’m utilizing my best talent in that way. I want to know the financial planning industry inside and out, and to share that knowledge for client success.”

BWM was founded in 1994 to break the mold of traditional commission-based financial planning services by pledging to uphold the fiduciary standard—always acting in the best

interests of clients. From asset investment to estate planning to charitable giving to retirement planning, the firm takes a holistic view of each individual client’s situation and goals. “Like coordinating the elements of a play, it’s vital that we understand how all these factors work in tandem, since none exist in a vacuum,” Solon points out. “We often work with busy clients who have complex financial lives including significant business assets who want to simplify their financial lives and ensure the financial decisions they are making protect what they have worked so hard to build so that they have the mental freedom to focus on the things that really matter to them.”

As a wealth manager, Solon’s effectiveness rests on his ability to help clients navigate complicated situations and embrace all the opportunities available to them—something that would not be possible without building a high level of trust. “Our industry is fraught with conflicts of interest, so people are right to be skeptical,” he says. “But as a fiduciary, we’re required to put the client’s best interests ahead of ours and our fee-only model aligns our clients’ performance with our compensation.”

Solon joined the firm in August of 2014 as a Senior Advisor, and in early 2017 became a partner. Through that time, he has contributed to the development of the 26 underlying fundamentals—The Bernhardt Way—that drive the focus of the firm, like honoring commitments, treating others with respect, and maintaining a standard of honesty and openness. These guidelines are in writing and are shared freely with clients for peace of mind and comfort, and they also apply to the way BWM staff interact with one another, allowing for seamless teamwork in service to clients. “The overriding culture of the firm is to do the right thing always,” Solon affirms.



"That's both rewarding and freeing, as it guides what we do every day and allows us to focus on what matters in our work."

The seeds of Solon's passion for financial planning were first sown when, as a young boy, his father would talk to him about investing. Whenever he bought an interesting stock, or learned a new investment strategy, he would explain it as his face lit up with excitement. "I remember those conversations well," Solon says. "His passion for these ideas opened my eyes to the industry."

Solon's father was a biology professor at the University of Connecticut, while his mother stayed home when he and his younger brother were small. Money was tight and was sometimes a source of tension, but he didn't think much of it. "I'd get a baseball glove, socks, and toys for Christmas, and that was all I wanted," he recalls. "We loved playing outside with the neighborhood kids, building forts or playing sports in our front yard. We'd ride our bikes all over, free to explore as long as we were back in time for dinner."

Solon has always needed to feel that the challenge at hand was meaningful and worthwhile. As a kid, school felt more like a pointless chore than a purposeful pursuit, so he preferred to invest his energy at the Stamford Farm and Nature Center nearby. The working farm and museum happened to catch his eye when he was young, and he began volunteering entirely of his own initiative. "I'd gather eggs, clean out cages, hose down the raccoon pen, make apple cider and help out with public events," he remembers. "There was nothing official about it, and I didn't get paid, but I loved stepping behind the curtain to help out and learn the inner-workings of the operation."

The farm was just one of Solon's wide-ranging interests through childhood, and his parents were always open-minded and supportive as he explored what the world had to offer. From hiking and camping to minibikes and motorcycles to cars, they never pushed him in one direction or another. "Looking back, it might have been helpful for me to pick a focus and stick with it, but overall it was great that they left me free to try things out," he says.

The Vlasto family couldn't afford fancy vacations, but with a little creativity they were able to take fun family trips during his father's long summer breaks from teaching. They went hiking

along the Appalachian Trail and loved to camp at Cape Cod, sometimes pitching their tents for a full month at a site a mile's walk from the beach. "I can still remember waking up each morning to the sound of bacon and eggs sizzling on the skillet," Solon says. "We would bike all over the place, taking the back roads from our camp site to the beach or local yacht club to go sailing."

The rest of Solon's summer days were spent biking to the Italian Center in Stamford, where he'd join friends to swim and try to score food from the snack bar. True to form, he eventually found his way behind the counter to become part of the operation, making his first buck frying burgers. "I'd work a couple hours—enough to cover my food for the day with a few extra quarters for the pinball machine," he laughs.

In his freshman year of high school, Solon faced a defining moment when he joined the football team. The coach was exceptionally tough and was known for barking orders and calling out players when they did something wrong. "It was my first experience with a coach like that, and I wasn't a great player, so I was getting yelled at all the time," he says. "It was so hard that I decided to quit, but I regretted it immediately. I felt like I let myself down, so I asked the coach to take me back. I didn't think he would, but he did, and it completely changed my attitude. While the other kids complained, I saw it as a privilege. I played harder than I had ever played and earned my way to various starting positions."

When Solon switched from football to track the following year, he applied that same focus to pole vaulting and nailed a personal best of 12.5 feet and a second year of earning a varsity letter. Any time he felt passionately about something, he dedicated himself wholeheartedly to the endeavor, like the haunted maze he would help set up every Halloween in the Community House connected to his church. "Other kids' parents would offer to write letters of recommendation for my work ethic after seeing the time and energy I put into that," he says. "At the time I didn't realize what a compliment that was."

Solon's tenacity came, in part, from watching his mother work her way through a Bachelor's and Master's program. He would come home from school to find her studying at her desk. She'd work late into the evenings after taking a break to make dinner. She became valedictorian of

her class, demonstrating to Solon and his brother the power of a strong work ethic. "I have that exact same focus now, and I think my daughter picked up on it as she watched me studying for my CFP and CFA certifications," Solon reflects. "Now she's top in her class, too."

Solon's father, as well, taught him the importance of good humor and a positive attitude through life. He was passionate about staying healthy and, above all else, making his family his top priority. "I am blessed to have grown up in a great family and a safe environment," Solon affirms. "I never felt threatened, worried, or unloved; growing up with my family was the greatest gift I could have received. As a result, fame or money have never been a top priority for me. Having a family, making a difference, and contributing to others are what's important to me."

Though Solon never did take to academics in high school, he began considering his future more concretely when he joined Junior Achievement in high school, and was particularly drawn to a class on the structure of corporations. "It was my first experience with the mechanics of how a corporation is created and grows," he says. "One semester, we launched a corporation building flashlights. We elected a president, sold stock for capital, bought and assembled parts, and sold the flashlights for a profit. My parents didn't know much about that world, and I found that I was hungry to learn more."

Solon's interest was also piqued when he scored particularly well on the vocational aptitude test for the armed forces. Though his parents both valued advanced education, neither pushed him to pursue college, so he began down the road of enlisting in the Army. "I didn't think I could get into college with my grades, but I decided to apply to the University of Connecticut just in case," he says. "I was accepted, and thanks to my father's tenure there, I got free tuition. With that, I enrolled as a Theater Major in the School of Fine Arts."

With time, however, Solon began to realize that a career in theater would be grueling. With its requisite travel and long hours on nights and weekends, it would not be conducive to the family life he wanted. By his junior year, he decided to take a different route. "I was conflicted because I had always had this image in my head of what I was going to do," he recalls. "Now I had to figure out a new path to take with my life."

After a lot of soul searching and support

from his parents, Solon decided to lean into another passion of his, flying and becoming a pilot. He enrolled in the Air Force ROTC program at school. Unfortunately, the need for Air Force pilots began to decline, and he decided to switch to civilian flight school. After graduating from college he commenced work toward the various flying licenses he would need. But expenses were adding up, and the Vlastos began to worry. When Solon's father noticed a job advertisement for a stockbroker with no experience necessary, Solon decided to apply. "The plan was to make some money and return to flying in a year," he says. "But with my career launched in finance, I never turned back."

Solon landed the stockbroker job for Chatfield Dean, a firm in Stamford that trained him for his Series 7 exam. "I loved the material and scored well on the test, but then I got to the sales bullpen, and it was nothing like what I had studied," he says. "Once I did 200 dials in a day, nonstop. It was a horrific experience, and I left after three months searching for a better way to serve clients."

Solon then took a job with TD Ameritrade in New York City, where he worked at a call center at 44 Wall Street, helping clients buy and sell stocks. "I enjoyed that because it was everything I had learned for the Series 7," he explains. "I was figuring out margin, working with options and even bond trading." Before long, Solon was promoted to customer service, handling the problems that couldn't be handled elsewhere in the branch. "There was no internet at the time, so the only way people could get information about the markets was from us," he recounts.

Hoping to advance as quickly as possible, Solon told the firm he was willing to move anywhere in the country. When an Assistant Manager position opened up in Arlington, Virginia, he accepted and quickly worked his way up to Manager of the D.C. branch. All went well, until the firm began shifting the branch from a client service focus to a sales focus. "I became a sales manager instead of a branch manager," Solon says. "I didn't like working only towards sales quotas or making sure people had enough dials each day, but I married my wife Kimberly around that time, and we were starting a family. The job allowed me to provide, and I was grateful for that."

On his 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the TD

Ameritrade, Solon chose a grandfather clock as his commemorative gift—something timeless to signify the time he had sacrificed to work his way up and create the life he wanted to build for his family. “I had seen my parents tough it out in jobs they didn’t love,” he says. “Work was work, so I stuck with it, and it helped that I was working with a great team. We were one of the most successful branches of the firm, and I liked that we were still focused on applying our expertise to solve problems.”

Then, in 2011, Solon decided it was time for a change. He began studying for the CFP exam, and though the material was challenging, he recognized that old, familiar thrill of studying subject matter he truly enjoyed. He began applying his CFP training to his clients at TD Ameritrade, noting how their conversations broadened and deepened. “It reenergized me and reignited a passion for helping people by translating complexity into clarity for clients,” he says.

Pursuing this passion, Solon took a job with a Maryland wealth management firm that allowed him to learn and grow as a financial planner working with high net worth clients. But many of the clients he was landing lived in Maryland, while he wanted to build a book of business closer to his home in Northern Virginia. “That’s when I learned BWM was interviewing for a Senior Advisor,” he says. “Their investment strategy and commitment to white-glove service and the fiduciary standard was aligned with my own philosophy. It’s been a perfect match.”

A lifelong learner, Solon continues to educate himself constantly on cutting-edge wealth management techniques and applies that knowledge for the benefit of his clients. “I am passionate about simplifying my client’s financial life so they can focus on the things that matter to them,” says Solon. “Things like their business or profession, their family, and the causes that are important to them.”

It also reminds him of his flying years. “Financial planning is similar to preparing for a flight,” Solon affirms. “You plan your route and prepare for what you may encounter along the way. As the trip progresses and when the unexpected happens you remain calm and react skillfully to navigate safely toward your

destination.”

As a supportive and encouraging leader, Solon advises young people entering the workforce today to pursue a career that strikes a balance between their interests and strengths. “Your first job doesn’t need to be your dream job,” he says. “Explore your options so you can figure out what you’re good at, and what you actually like. Sometimes, you won’t know until you try.”

Through the various paths Solon himself has tried over the years, his wife Kimberly has been his constant support, affirming the commitment to family that has driven him all along. “Kimberly has always encouraged me to do what I felt I needed to do along the way,” he affirms. “We’re so proud of our three kids, who are all so different and exceptional in their own ways. Through the complexity of life, one thing has always been clear to me and that is that family is the most important thing. That will never change.”

The importance of family was modeled throughout Solon’s life by his parents. “After my father’s death, my mother gave me Dad’s video files. He was known for capturing his family on film. There are videos of my father’s life before he met my mother, so you can see how our family unfolded. And there’s always a smile in his voice as he’s talking to people in the videos. Those video files are one of my most prized possessions and a constant reminder that family is everything.”

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*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.*