

Jim Annulis

Rebel with a Cause

As a college student, Jim Annulis saw how easy it was to aspire to greatness. Sitting in class one day, he read the line of a poem that summed it up perfectly: “Do I dare disturb the universe?” He had always been daring, and as Steve Jobs put it, he was here to make his dent in the universe.

With time, however, Jim came to understand that aspiring to greatness is one thing, but actually attaining it is something entirely different. “It’s easy to say you’re going to live your life a certain way, but the true test comes in how you respond to the unforeseen challenges that life throws at you,” he says today. “Life is a series of tests, and it’s how you pass those tests that really counts. Life isn’t about what you say; it’s about what you actually do in the face of adversity.”

A formidable test came when Jim and his wife, Lisa, discovered that their unborn son had Down Syndrome. “I’ve always thought of myself as pretty tough, but nothing could have prepared me for the experience of getting that news,” he recalls. “But everything has a purpose, though it might take years or decades to figure it out. We moved forward. Today, Peter’s like a normal kid with his good and his bad moments, and we’re better people through knowing and loving him.”

Life as an entrepreneur and business owner, as well, has brought its own set of challenges—dimly-lit paths that Jim has had to walk with faith in his team’s ability to navigate and succeed. Now the founder and CEO of ProQual-I.T., Inc. (ProQual), a biometrics company on the cutting edge of identity protection, he has shaped his character and identity through his work by focusing not on what he has, but on what he can do. “It comes down to my ability to make a positive impact,” he says. “What can I do to leave the world a better place? Some think of me as a rebel, and if I am, that’s my cause—to leave the

world better than it was when I got here.”

In a world of ever-increasing cyber security threats, ProQual simplifies life by providing an identity haven for its clients—an atmosphere where personal data can be securely controlled by its owner through biometrics. As the Internet of Things and the use of mobile devices, sensors, and blockchains revolutionize the way we create and connect, ProQual aims to be the identity fabric of this new terrain—an all-purpose solution for identity management. “In our lifetime, God willing, identity management will be like a utility,”

Jim explains. “I think we’re going to see a profound shift in how the internet is used in the near future. ProQual will help as we advance to that next level, and the one beyond, where business will operate as a network exercised through rapid bidding.”

When Jim started ProQual in 2003, he knew he wanted to build on the strong relationships and knowledge he had developed in the homeland and biometrics security

space. Within a year, he had hired five employees and was making good money with low overhead, and saw how easy it would be to veer off course and become just another government contractor. He decided right then and there, however, that he’d never go down that path. “My goal was to build and innovate,” he recounts. “I hadn’t yet been in a company that did those things as well as I’d like, so I setup a business model where my billable work feeds my commercial development. While we certainly aim to be a highly profitable company, the fundamental model of reinvesting back into the company is still the model we use today—one that is driven by what we do, the things we build, and the positive impact those things make on lives. If we get that right, the money will follow.”

ProQual is also driven by Jim’s vision of a better government contracting model—one that



trims excess to deliver more for less. The vast majority of its business comes in the form of subcontracts for the Department of Homeland Security, but ProQual also does commercial work in the healthcare and education spaces, which Jim sees as his beachhead for building identity solutions beyond the government. Today, the company makes 2 million in revenue and employs a team of ten, all oriented around a goal that is much greater than the sum of its parts. “I tell my team that I want us—and more people in the world—to have lives where we can do what we love,” he says. “I want to be able to help make dreams a reality. Life on earth is finite. Knowing that, what am I going to do while I’m here? I’m Catholic born and raised, and my philosophy is that one day, we’ll meet the Big Man, and he’ll ask what I did with my time. I want to have a good answer.”

These values were first cultivated when Jim was a kid growing up in Baltimore County, the fourth of five brothers. His father lost his own father when he was only three, and ultimately scraped together the means to put himself through college. A self-made man and strong believer in education, he had high expectations for Jim and his brothers. They each prioritized schoolwork and earned good grades, and though they raised hell in some respects—holding boxing matches in the living room on those rare occasions their parents went out to dinner, for example—they were taught to be very respectful of authority and discipline. “My parents did the best they could,” he recalls. “We knew where the lines were, and we had some flexibility to figure stuff out. Looking back, I have a lot of respect and appreciation for how they raised us.”

When they weren’t studying, Jim and his brothers played football, tennis, basketball, and whiffle ball in the backyard. His favorite sport, however, was always baseball, and he loved when his father took the boys to Memorial Stadium to watch the Baltimore Orioles. In their spare time, Jim and his brothers worked paper routes, which paved the way for mowing lawns and shoveling snow. “I never got a penny of allowance in my life, so it was nice to earn some spending money,” he recalls. “But more than anything, I wanted to do what my older brothers were doing.”

Like his brothers before him, Jim attended private school in Baltimore. At Mount Saint Joseph High School, he was in the honor society and

particularly remembers developing a passion for drafting and architecture—an interest he pursued studying engineering in college at Loyola University. “Looking back, it was the act of building things that I really loved,” he recalls. He excelled in his math, physics, and engineering science courses, and toughed it out through the electronics class he didn’t like so much. It was in his digital electronics work that he truly hit his groove for the first time, ultimately graduating in 1992 at the top of his class.

Jim decided to continue his architecture studies at Virginia Tech but opted to alter his course after only a few months, discovering that the field wasn’t for him after all. He gravitated toward computer hardware and software instead, which aligned with his passion for building things. “My father had suggested that I get into computers because of the big design element there,” he recalls. He got another bachelors degree at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and then landed a job at Hughes Aircraft Company (Hughes) in 1994 in the Washington DC area. Over the next several years, he worked full-time while taking night classes toward his masters at Johns Hopkins University. “I was on my own in the big city,” he remembers. “Nobody knew me or my family, and it was the first time I really had the chance to find my own voice. I saw that there was a bigger world out there, and that you can carve your own path rather than following in the footsteps of others.”

While Jim has tremendous respect for how his parents raised him, his time in Washington led him to realize that his upbringing had lacked a focus on self-exploration and growth. “We were taught to respect authority, which can be good, but it’s also very important to break away from conformity and find your own groove,” he says. “As I got older, through my twenties and thirties, I challenged myself to become more introspective and understand my good and bad qualities. It was an intentional focus on individualism and finding my voice. I had always been passionate about changing the world for the better, and being a CEO has helped me explore my capacity to do that. It’s a part of life, finding your own voice so you can figure out what dent you want to leave in the universe.”

At Hughes, Jim worked on a biometrics project for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the precursor to the

Department of Homeland Security. The project created what later became a biometric terrorist watch list—an entity that much of Jim’s work still focuses on today. It was also there that Jim worked under Danny Chu, a passionate entrepreneur who left to start his own company. By 1997, Jim had left Hughes and was working in Baltimore at Aerotek Engineering Service, but he was more interested in joining Danny at his startup, LEX Solutions. “My father advised me not to pursue work at a startup,” he says. “He worked at one company his whole life and wanted me to have stability. I respected his opinion, but I knew it wasn’t the right path for me.”

Jim joined as LEX’s second employee, accepting a significant pay cut that was well worth the opportunity to work on additional INS projects in a dynamic small business environment. “Danny and I really clicked because of our work ethic,” Jim says. “We could have fun on the job, but the most important thing was the fact that there was a job to do.” During that time, Jim also met Lisa, the woman who would become his wife and a pivotal element in his lifelong success and happiness. “There’s absolutely no way I could be where I am today without her,” he says. “She’s incredibly hardworking and dedicated, and is a wonderful life partner.” Jim and Lisa now have four children: Calvin, Peter, Natalie, and David.

Jim worked at LEX from 1997 to 2000, when the business was acquired by an overseas company. The buyer had trouble connecting with the reality and dynamics going on at the company’s grassroots level, preferring a top-down surface-level understanding, so Jim decided to leave the company. He felt the pull to start his own company—a reflection of a feeling he had always experienced that he was meant for something different—but it wasn’t the right time. He and Lisa had recently married and bought a new home, and they were expecting their first child, so he instead took a more secure position at Northrop Grumman for the time being.

There, Jim spent the next couple years fully coming into his own professionally. But it led him to the realization, beyond a doubt, that he was ready to venture out on his own. “I felt there was a different calling for me,” he recounts. “I knew I was a small business guy. I wanted some say in the projects and choices, and to have some impact on where we were headed. It was also the wake of 9/11, when the Department of Homeland Security

was forming, so there was a lot of need. I had a solid reputation and knew it was the right time for ProQual, so I handed in my resignation on July 3, 2003.”

Now, Jim employs an innovative, inspirational leadership style that focuses on leading by example. “I’m a big believer in practicing what you preach,” he says. “It’s important to mean what you say and say what you mean, both personally and professionally.” He credits Vistage as a positive force in the evolution of his leadership, and his parents for demonstrating an invincible work ethic in the service of something bigger than themselves. “For them, it was important to have an underlying purpose in life,” Jim says. “They never lost sight of that. Their priorities were always God, family, and country, in that order, as mine are now.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jim encourages openness to learning and personal growth. “Don’t think you know it all, but don’t be afraid to contribute either, because no one knows it all,” he says. “Also, it’s important to be passionate about what you’re doing. Everyday won’t be a bed of roses, but life is short, so enjoy it.”

Beyond that, Jim underscores the wonder and brilliance of pushing the sound barrier. He recently watched *The Right Stuff* with his fourteen-year-old son, and observed that the pressure and stress is often greatest just before the moment of breakthrough. “In the movie, the whole plane is about to fall apart just before that moment of truth,” he says. “Seeing that in my business life, I’m now at the point where I have faith and know we can make it through. Sometimes you don’t have much light, and you need to make decisions without knowing the full story, and it takes faith to walk that path. But those are the tests that define your greatness. We come out on the other side better than we were before, and closer to where we want to be in the end.”

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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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](#).

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