

Michael Riemer

Mission, Vision, Passion

At the age of 21, Michael Riemer found himself suddenly alone. He had just graduated from college with a double major in biology and philosophy, and for most of his life had been planning to go to medical school. He had even been accepted at Case Western University. He had completed his undergrad degree, taken the MCATs, and gotten the letters of recommendation. All that was left to do was simply show up.

But the year that Michael graduated from college, his mother passed away after a decade-long battle with cancer. Suddenly, the world looked very different. His father struggled to deal with the tragedy and suddenly decided to move to California. He left Michael to tie up loose ends. His sisters were off pursuing their education and careers. So as Michael was facing his new reality, he met someone who would change the course of his future. "I was introduced to Peter—an MD and Ph.D.—who was doing all sorts of interesting things with technology and medicine," describes Michael. "He was a visionary and inventor and happened to purchase glasses from my dad's optical store. We chatted by phone shortly thereafter and I guess the rest is history."

Peter was exploring the intersection of personal computers and medicine and asked Michael to join him and defer medical school. Among the projects was an opportunity to do medical research in Micronesia. Feeling both intrigued and unmoored, Michael accepted. He spent time on the islands of Kosrae and Pohnpei exploring the effects of western food culture post World War II and the increasing incidence of diabetes. It was the late 1980s and a time when understanding and using PCs was still far from normal. As Peter and Michael continued their collaboration, they explored multiple technology ventures. Eventually, they launched one of the first

anti-virus software companies.

"We sort of fell into the anti-virus side of things," remembers Michael. "We partnered with a local developer and started to build it. We raised some money and hired a few marketing consultants to help us. Keep in mind that I had never taken a business, marketing or economics class. I knew nothing about being an entrepreneur. I wouldn't have even known what to call it back then, but I took on product management and marketing and learned by the seat of my pants."

Michael points out that the timing was right to get into the anti-virus game; as computers became more prevalent, the concern around computer viruses was increasing dramatically. As the business grew, Michael learned by trial and error. While he was inexperienced, he and Peter made a great team. "I was good at taking technical concepts and ideas and putting them in terms that people who weren't technical could understand," explains Michael.

"Like many really smart people, Peter had the vision, but not the execution focus. He had brilliant ideas, and I executed them."

A few years later, the company was sold to Norton Utilities (Symantec) and became part of Norton's wildly popular anti-virus software. By now, it was the 1990s, and there was no going back to medical school. Michael had caught the entrepreneurship bug.

In the thirty years since, Michael has been involved with eight ventures, some wildly successful (including being an early executive at Nextel), others less so. He's also contributed in some manner to an estimated five dozen other start-ups as an advisor, investor, and board member. He has four fantastic children and speaks very proudly of them. To anyone observing his idyllic suburban life, Michael was a man who had it all.



But in 2012, Michael got a divorce. The separation with his wife was difficult. “I always thought you get married and stay married, but it didn’t work out that way,” reflects Michael. “That raised all sorts of other questions.”

After more than four years at his then-current venture, Michael decided to take a break and pursue something of a spiritual renewal. He and his sister set off for East Africa, where they went horseback riding across pristine savannahs, took a hot-air balloon ride over the Mara River to watch the great migration across the Maasai Mara, and visited with the gorillas made famous by Dian Fossey. While traveling in Kenya, they were lucky enough to see the so-called “big five” – the five animals people hope to see on a safari: lion, elephant, leopard, cape buffalo, and rhinoceros.

While there, Michael again hit the reset button. He got back in touch with what was important, and it wasn’t money or big houses. It was the relationships we have with one another, and the things we can do to make the world a better place. “Going to Africa was purposeful and grounding,” he observes. “I really thought about being true to myself and about being true to what’s important. I learned to keep things simple. In the end, it’s not that complicated. Focus on what’s important and do good.”

The people in East Africa were welcoming and kind, and a seed was planted in Michael’s mind after observing the changing technology in rural communities. He noticed that most people in the villages didn’t have running water or electricity, but they did have cell phones. To Michael, this spoke to the power of technology. “It can do so much good if you can make it accessible,” he points out. “So how do we democratize access to the latest technology and make it broadly available no matter where you live?”

Thus, the concept of New Urbana was born. Michael’s business is still in its infancy. He founded it this past October, and just recently brought on his first client. But the vision is clear and compelling. “The idea behind New Urbana is to use innovation to improve digital and critical infrastructure,” he describes. “Thriving communities and businesses need access to good communications, reliable energy, safe water and access to critical services. Plus, we need to address the growing environmental travesties. The focus of New Urbana is to foster innovation by providing

people, processes, and technology to help create robust ventures. It also takes a village to effectively innovate. So, we are building a global ecosystem of relationships to ensure insights across industries, value chains, and business models. Ultimately, we want to help build innovation hubs globally.”

Michael asserts that the current venture and enterprise innovation models are broken. New Urbana works with enterprises and entrepreneurs to create sustainable innovation practices that can deliver economic, environmental, and social outcomes. New Urbana also addresses two major areas of his ethos: giving back to the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs and making money while also doing good.

New Urbana engages corporations and helps them monetize their intellectual property and domain expertise. “I like helping people truly uncover the worthwhile problems to attack, and helping them solve it.,” smiles Michael. “When I came back from my trip, I didn’t want to just build another company. I wanted to contribute in ways that would create more value and have impact across a broader spectrum of society. I believe you can make money and do good; that’s really what I want to do and why I get up every day.”

Michael was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in a small community called Beachwood, a suburb east of the city. His father didn’t graduate from college; he trained to become an optician and did well for himself. His mother was a nursery school teacher. Michael was the middle child of three with a sister 18 months older and one three years younger. Beachwood was lovely but cloistered; Michael’s family was Jewish, as was much of the town, and Michael remembers chafing at the insular feel of the area. The people with whom his parents had gone to elementary school and high school all seemed to live nearby. Diversity was lacking.

Michael was an active kid but found school boring. He did very well academically even though he sometimes lacked focus in the classroom. His real passion was sports—playing them, watching them, and listening to them on the radio. He participated in baseball and soccer, but his absolute favorite sport was basketball. He loved to go to the city courts and shoot hoops. At 5’8”, he was fearless taking on the taller kids. “I think I’ve broken my nose 11 times from basketball,” laughs Michael. “At my height, you’re at the perfect elbow height for guys between 6’4” and 6’7”. But I could jump so I would go in and

mix it up with the big guys and not think twice about it!"

In the summers, Michael would leave for the basketball courts at 7 AM and not get back until way after dark. The community was safe; no one worried much. He has a particular memory of playing a high school game against Brad Sellers, a 7-foot-tall future NBA player. During a district finals game, as the young man dribbled over his head, Michael realized his opportunity in the sport was limited. "At that point, I realized I wasn't going to go much further as a basketball player," laughs Michael. "To be honest, I never really thought I'd play professionally. I was programmed at an early age that I was going to get a college education and become a nice Jewish doctor. And I did go down that path for a while. But I don't think I would've enjoyed that as much being an entrepreneur. I love building teams, products, and companies."

Michael had a bar mitzvah but didn't stay very religiously engaged after that. The family spent a lot of time with relatives, usually, Michael's mother's sisters and their children, who lived nearby. The holidays were all about family. But sometimes they traveled to Florida in the winter, and one summer they drove across the country.

Michael was only in eighth grade when his mother was initially diagnosed with cancer. "My mom was the person who kept the family together so you can imagine the dynamic when she got sick," he reflects. As Michael went through high school, his mother's health was always in the background. He used sports as a distraction and focused all his energy on athletics to avoid thinking about the difficulties at home. Although he'd never developed good study habits, Michael still graduated at the top of his class. Since his parents weren't college graduates, they could provide little guidance about college. Nevertheless, he decided to attend the University of Rochester.

As planned, Michael went pre-med and chose biology as his major. By his sophomore year, he added philosophy as a second major. "Things were pretty dark for me at that time with what was happening with my mom," explains Michael. "I'd lost my faith in organized religion, and I was looking for ways of answering other questions. Philosophy resonated with me, and it became an integral part of who I am today."

As a junior, Michael studied art and

philosophy in Rome through the Loyola University of Chicago. "I grew up in a town that was more than 90% Jewish, and it wasn't until I got to Rome that I realized you need to know something about Christianity to study art there," laughs Michael. "Overall, it was a great experience. I was fortunate that my art history professor took me under his wing." His mother, though often tired and wearing a wig to cover her hair loss, was able to visit Michael in Rome. Her first and last trip to Europe.

Michael was also very involved in the Greek scene. He was a member of Alpha Delta Phi and ended up being elected as a representative to the Interfraternity Council upon his return from Italy. As a senior, he was elected President of the fraternity system. "It was the year New York changed their drinking age from 18 to 21," groans Michael. "It was a total disaster, but an interesting experience."

Senior year was when Michael's difficulties finally came to a head. His mother lost her battle with cancer, his father moved to the West Coast, and he began to question his dream of becoming a doctor.

After the success of his first venture, Michael embarked on a career he'd never dreamt of. He moved to Boulder, Colorado to help launch one of the first Soviet/American joint ventures. "We were working with the top minds at universities in Moscow who had all sorts of interesting technologies," relates Michael. "Everything from predicting earthquakes, to handwriting recognition, to fonts. These guys had spent their whole life building algorithms but had never had a commercial outlet."

Michael worked on the business development side and traveled the world selling their technologies to corporate buyers. He licensed the Russian handwriting technology to Apple where they used it in their Newton device—the first handheld computer. Ultimately, all the pieces were sold or spun off, and after three years, Michael had again achieved start-up success.

From there, he went on to Nextel. He helped create the go-to-market approach and became Vice President of Product Management for seven years. "That was a foundational moment for me - I worked with the Chasm Group and led a small team across the company to define our target segments and build detailed playbooks," notes Michael. "I can't take credit for everything Nextel

did, but from 1993 to 2000, we grew from a couple of hundred people to 17,000 and a \$35 billion market cap. We were knocking the ball out of the park.”

Nextel moved Michael to Seattle for a short time and then ultimately to the DC area where he has remained since. His thought leadership led to many industry firsts and was instrumental in creating the mobile data strategy, leading the way on mobile internet. Although he recalls getting “bloodied” in executive meetings for insisting people would want emails on their phones, he ultimately oversaw a bidding war between AOL (Netscape) and Microsoft executives trying to get their hands on early internet mobile tech. Microsoft came out on top and invested \$600 million.

After cashing out, Michael took a little time off. He had three young kids and had a fourth while taking his well-earned break. Today, his three sons and his daughter are thriving, and there’s nothing Michael is prouder of than their successes.

“My oldest graduated from Georgetown and played professional soccer in Germany before going back to school and getting a Master’s from Harvard. Now he’s married in Los Angeles and just joined a start-up,” Michael beams. “My middle son is 25 and works for Disney in Orlando. When he was young, he was a professional actor including playing Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol at Ford’s Theater and has worked on several productions at the Kennedy Center, the Shakespeare Theater and Arena Stage. He’s artistic, loves people, and got a degree in musical composition. He is a Disney employee, and it’s perfect for him. My daughter just graduated from Elon where she played soccer for four years and recently got accepted to graduate school to pursue a Masters in Social Work. She coaches soccer teams in Arlington and was a Volunteer Assistant Coach at Howard University this past season. My youngest is at St. John’s High School in DC. He is

going to school and will play baseball at Wright State (Dayton, Ohio) next year. They are all good kids, and they have a great mom.”

As a leader, Michael emphasizes the importance of communication and transparency. “When I hired someone at Nextel, I would always send them a paragraph on my management style,” he says. “I wanted people to understand my expectations. I encouraged my team to not be afraid to ask questions. It’s not a bad thing to ask a question. But ultimately, I always viewed my role as hiring great people and then clearing obstacles to make their jobs easier.”

To young people entering the business world, Michael advises them to do what you love. “Find things you’re passionate about,” he encourages. “Have a vision of where you want to go, otherwise you’re never going to get there. And remember that it’s okay for the plan to change. Changing is not a failure, it’s a pivot! But have a north star so you know where you’re pivoting from. Have a plan, but recognize it’s going to change.”

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– By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, 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](#).