

Hannibal S. Jackson

Blessed to be a Blessing to Others

There was a time when Hannibal Jackson, President and CEO of the IT firm Y-Tech, would have preferred a more conventional name—perhaps a name like John, his father’s name. “Growing up I was often teased or asked, ‘what kind of name is that?’” he says. At a young age, he asked his father why he had given him a name that was bound to invite ridicule, and his father answered, “Son, I gave you the name Hannibal because you’re going to be a great leader.”

Now Hannibal Jackson sees the power of prophecy in his father’s decision.

“The name comes from Hannibal Barca,” he explains, “the great African general from Carthage who is considered the father of military strategy, and one of the greatest military leaders of all time. So now when I say my name is Hannibal, I say it with pride. In fact, at Y-Tech, everything we do is based on a strategy. When we hire somebody, it’s part of a larger strategy. When we pursue an opportunity, it’s strategic. We don’t go after something by happenstance. For me as a CEO, our success has been based on our strategy.”

Hannibal was born in Seoul, South Korea. His father was an American soldier from Washington D.C., and his mother was a young woman from Incheon, South Korea. When Hannibal reflects on his childhood he admits that growing up they didn’t have a lot of stuff, but they had each other. It wasn’t until he was older that he learned both of his parents cleaned government buildings and restrooms in the evening to make ends meet. That was just one of the many sacrifices that they made for their children. One of his challenges now is to not overcompensate and give his children all the stuff he wishes he had, but rather to teach them all of the things he wishes he had known at their age.

In some ways, his family was like most military families: they frequently moved from base

to base across America, Europe, and Asia. “In some ways that was hard,” Hannibal says, “because as soon as you made new friends it was time to say goodbye, but it also allowed me to travel the world, experience different cultures and customs and see how people live outside of the United States.

That itinerant lifestyle ended when Hannibal’s parents divorced, and his mother Myong Hui, settled down in Woodbridge, Virginia, so Hannibal and his siblings could grow up near their father’s extended family in D.C. and Maryland. Though her children were American, Hannibal’s mother struggled with the challenges that confront every immigrant, but she worked hard to learn English and become a naturalized American citizen. Eventually she found employment with the federal government.

Hannibal acknowledges that he was an average American teenager—he played sports, hung out at the mall, watched a lot of tv, and played video games. “My teachers encouraged me to try a little harder because they saw potential in me, but I was already getting decent grades, so I didn’t really see the point.”

As he approached his high school graduation, his mother asked about his plans for the following year. “I told her I thought I’d take a year off to think about what to do next. ‘Wrong answer.’ she said. The agreement had always been that when I turned 18, I would leave the house, either for college or for the military, or for some place of my own. And since I had let my grades slip and I didn’t put forth the effort to earn an academic scholarship, she marched me down to the recruiting office.”

Hannibal had his doubts about joining the Army Reserves. The \$1,500 signing bonus was more appealing in theory than in reality, since it was paid out over the 8-year enlistment (and



taxed), and the monies he received through the GI Bill did not cover a full-year of his college tuition. However, his enlistment in the Army Reserves would ultimately open the doors that led to the start of his own company, Y-Tech. "So, I guess mother does know best!" he comments.

Hannibal scored well on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude and Battery. "I went into the Army as a Telecommunications Record Operator (74C)—but later they phased out that MOS, so I had two choices: either get out of the Reserves or retrain as a Counter-Intelligence Special Agent (97B). The Army was paying for me to learn another skillset, so I figured, why not?" After his Army training Hannibal enrolled at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia and continued to serve in the Army Reserves throughout college and for four years thereafter.

At George Mason University, Hannibal pledged Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., and became involved in community service projects both on and off campus., "I ended up serving as the president of the chapter," Hannibal notes. "And our chapter won Chapter of the Year, which was a big deal. We were formally recognized as the top undergraduate chapter in Maryland, DC, Virginia and Bermuda. Following that honor, Hannibal was voted Top Student Leader of the Year at George Mason.

"My grades started to go up after I joined the fraternity, because then I realized I represented something bigger than myself. I had an obligation and responsibility to my family and fraternity to always put my best foot forward. I knew as a student leader, I also had a responsibility to the university.

Hannibal graduated from George Mason in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in Communications. He takes pride in being the first member of his family to earn a college degree. Later he would complete a master's degree in Information Assurance at the University of Maryland, University College. He now says that it's incumbent upon one of his children to earn a doctorate. "I don't care which one," he says, "but somebody in the next generation has to advance that standard of excellence to the next level."

The importance of education to Hannibal and his family can't be overstated. His father, John, earned his GED while in the military, and later earned his college degree in his fifties. Perseverance and persistence is a family trait. "My

dad told me the one thing they can never take from you is knowledge."

After college Hannibal went to work at an IT call center and set a personal goal of earning an annual salary of \$100,000 before the age of 27. "I started in the commercial sector during the dot com boom, when companies were offering hundreds of thousands in stock options—I was looking for something like AOL, one of the get rich quick schemes." Many of those companies wound up going bankrupt, so their stock options amounted to nothing.

Around that time an old friend's father reached out to Hannibal and suggested he leverage his military security clearance to work for the Department of Defense (DoD). Hannibal didn't realize it at the time, but his Army Reserve training in Counter Intelligence had earned him a Top-Secret clearance. "I didn't think much of it - it was just part of my job in the Army, and something I had to have."

With technical IT experience and an active security clearance, Hannibal was an attractive candidate for work with the DoD.

"When I think about what my mom did—making me join the military—that was probably the best thing that could have happened for me at that time because it got me out of the area and it allowed me to get a high-level security clearance."

Running parallel to Hannibal's professional development through college and the military is a pathway of development in Christian practice which would have profound and unexpected implications later in his life. He explains that when he was a boy, churches would send busses through his neighborhood, picking up anyone who wanted to attend services, and his mother and step-father would put him and his siblings on one of those busses. That was their time for peace and quiet in the home.

"We believed in prayer," he explains, "and we believed in God, but it wasn't something that we practiced full time. But when I started working after college there was a young man and his wife who just seemed different from other people, and one day I asked them what it was. They said, 'There's nothing different about us, Hannibal other than that we love the Lord and we believe in the power of prayer.' I wanted what they had, so I asked them to take me to church. They did, and I wound up joining their church and accepting salvation. I've been a member now for 17 years."

His new friend's parents became Hannibal's spiritual mentors in the church, making sure he understood that faith is a marathon, not a sprint, and that understanding changed the way he thought about life. "My business is a ministry," he says. "I've been blessed to be a blessing to others. My spiritual parents would laugh at me because I was always there before the church doors even opened—I was so eager to get there because it was something I had been yearning for. I wound up getting baptized, and my grandmother was able to witness that, which made her really proud."

What's more, these friends introduced Hannibal to Kellie Williams, who would later become his wife. Kellie had recently returned to the Washington area after living in Los Angeles for many years, during which time she played Laura Winslow, one of the lead actors on the television show *Family Matters*.

"After we got married and started talking about having children, I asked her to put her acting career on hold, so she could spend time with the children at home. We thought that was more important than both of us bringing in a high income while someone else raised our children. It was important that we impress our values on them in their formative years. So, she walked away from Hollywood."

That was in 2009, and since then Kellie has declined several acting offers to support the Y-Tech vision.

When people ask Hannibal, what is the best decision you've made in business, he always says, "The best decision I've made to date was marrying the woman that I married." "I told her there would be some tough times while building the business," Hannibal says. "And she said, 'No problem, Babe, I've got your back.' And there were tough times, but Kellie said, 'I trust in my husband and I believe in his vision, so I'm willing to sacrifice all that for him. It is nearly impossible to build a business without a supportive spouse. Her support and willingness to sacrifice tell me what kind of woman she really is. She said, 'I believe this is what God has called us to do.' And in the last few years, Y-Tech has been rated one of the fastest growing companies."

Y-Tech has thrived as an IT consulting firm working primarily with the DoD and Intelligence Communities. It was launched originally in 2005 under the name Yahya

Technologies. Yahya is a Swahili word meaning "God's gift." At first the company was a partnership between Hannibal and his friend Anthony Keys, each of whom kept whatever income they generated and wrote off whatever expenses their accountant would allow. During those early years, Hannibal had some sense that he might like to expand the company, but he needed guidance, so he started emailing people he found in the Washington Fast 50, asking for ten minutes of their time. "I'd say, 'I'm a young guy, educated, hard-working, and I just want to ask you a few questions.' No one responded," Hannibal says.

Finally, in 2014, he re-connected with people he knew from church, entrepreneurs Greg and Kathy Freeland. Greg told Hannibal that he didn't have an actual company. He told Hannibal that he had to build an infrastructure. Greg also urged him to do business under a different name, and they came up with Y-Tech. Hannibal agreed to the name change because he realized the Yahya name might be off-putting to some potential clients. Nevertheless, he maintains that his company is in fact a gift from God.

"God opened certain doors and put people in place who could help me along the way," Hannibal acknowledges, "and because he did that, I feel it's my responsibility to help others."

In the early stages of building his company's infrastructure, Hannibal incurred approximately \$200,000 in debt (credit cards, personal loans, savings, etc.) and reduced his own salary by \$100,000 to invest back into the company.

"We started off with significant debt, but we were able to trust the process and believe in each other," Hannibal says. "We've come this far by faith."

Between 2014 and 2017, Y-Tech expanded from a two-person company to a multi-faceted firm with 100 employees. As they branched out from exclusive focus on IT services to include logistics, engineering, health care and law enforcement, revenues went from \$600,000 annually to \$12 million.

Hannibal bristles at anyone who describes him as "self-made." For him, that simply rings untrue. "We're standing on the shoulders of giants," He Says. "I've benefited from a generation of people who fought, died, marched, bled and sacrificed their freedoms so that I could succeed and do the things I can do today. I can never take 100% credit for my success. Yes, I've worked hard,

taken risks, made plenty of sacrifices but I am who I am today because of them.

“I realized early on that I don’t have to know how to do everything myself,” Hannibal says. “I always tell people I’m not the smartest person at Y-Tech by far. But you hire your weakness; you hire people to do the things that you might not be good at, so you can address any deficiencies and close the gaps. I’m not the most experienced person, but I am the hardest worker. I’m also Y-Tech’s visionary and the strategist who comes up with the way we’re going to move forward.”

Now people have started emailing Hannibal asking for some of his time, the way he used to email members of the *Washington Fast 50*. “And I always say yes,” he explains. “I say, ‘Call me at midnight, because then my wife and children will be in bed and I can give you 30 minutes. Most people say that’s too late, and then I know they’re not serious. I typically work every day until 12:00 or 1:00 in the morning and then I start again around 4:30 to 5:00 AM.

Hannibal credits his parents for his work ethic. Neither of them had much formal education, but they were smart people who worked hard and sacrificed for their family. In that sense his parents also influenced his vision of leadership.

“I think leadership is about serving,” Hannibal says. “I think the best leaders understand what it means to follow, because you can’t lead if you don’t know how to follow. Though I’m the president and CEO of the company and people look up to me, I learn just as much from them as they do from me. I tell everybody there’s not a job in the company that I haven’t done, or I’m not

willing to do even today. I’ll never ask you to do something I’m not willing to do myself. Leadership is about providing other people with the same opportunities somebody else provided to me.”

Along those same lines, his advice to young people would be: make great choices, treat other people the way you want to be treated, don’t take anyone for granted, respect everyone’s time, define your purpose, and work hard. Success doesn’t come overnight. Find a mentor who can help you get there. “Do something for somebody who can never repay you.”

“Every day you get in life is an opportunity to do something great for somebody else,” Hannibal says.

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