

# Ed Grenier

## It Was Done

Growing up, Ed Grenier thought all families spent time together collating and binding braille books. His older sister, Victoria, was born blind, and it was a common Grenier family tradition to celebrate, serve, and participate in her community. "I never thought of it as giving back or making the world a better place because it was just written in our DNA," he says today.

Ed watched as his parents walked side-by-side with Tori, overcoming every obstacle together and refusing to let her blindness hold her back. Sometimes that meant letting Tori learn the hard way, allowing her to navigate her own way through the family room. There were few resources for people with those challenges back then, so it also meant his dedicated, driven mother spent long hours reading books onto tapes so Tori could listen. When Tori got into college, their mother spent seven full days walking her around campus, helping her build a foundation of complete self-sufficiency. "My parents never said, 'You're blind, so you can't do it,'" Ed recounts. "It was always, 'This is how you do it. She now has her doctorate in Psychology and is married with two children. She inspires me.'"

Now the President and CEO of Junior Achievement (JA) of Greater Washington, the regional chapter of an international nonprofit organization dedicated to preparing young people for the real world by fostering work-readiness, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy, Ed has been guided by a life of service and an unbreakable will. "When I graduated from college, my mother gave me a simple plaque with a quote from Helen Keller that reads, 'While they were saying among themselves, it cannot be done, it was done,'" Ed says. "It's so much more than a cheap piece of paper and frame to me. It's kind of been the story of my life and how I was raised, and it still sits in my office today. I think of Helen

Keller's example, and I think of Tori, and I know anything is possible. Whenever someone tells me something can't be done, especially at work, I remain adamant that it can."

Founded in 1919 in Springfield, Massachusetts, JA was originally dedicated to preparing young people for success in the new industrial workplace as the country transitioned away from an agricultural economy. Embracing a mentorship model, the organization would convene groups of high school students over the course of a year, teaching them how businesses work by allowing them to simulate the creation and operation of their own business. "Over the course of a year, meeting weekly, they would come up with an idea, write a business plan, elect officers, sell stock, raise capital, build products, produce quarterly and annual reports for shareholders, and liquidate," Ed explains. "That learn-by-doing process and advisory relationship is still our foundation today."

In the mid-1980s, local school systems began to focus on ways to show children the connection between school and work. JA seized that opportunity to expand its national reach exponentially and began working directly with those school systems. "We became an academic, curricular-based organization aligned with state and local educational standards, activated through public-private partnerships with the business community and school systems," Ed says. "It was a unique model, and it allowed us to reach thousands of kids instead of dozens."

Today, JA Worldwide Headquarters has six operating centers serving 11 million children around the world, and JA USA has 107 chapters. The Greater Washington chapter, first launched in 1965, served 9,600 kids with four people on staff and a budget of \$460,000 when Ed joined the team in 1996. Under his leadership, the chapter has since expanded to 35 staff members and a budget of \$5.5



million, allowing them to serve 70,000 children.

JA has also expanded its programming, supplementing classroom content with its own facility-based experiences where students participate in entrepreneurship, business startup, budgeting, and career simulations. Ed has just opened JA's third facility, in Montgomery County, and is grateful for the infrastructure of support and participation he's cultivated in the business community. "Our model is to connect business people with young people in a meaningful way," he affirms. "We couldn't do it without the 7,500 business professionals who were willing to volunteer their time, allowing JA to spend almost 800,000 instructional hours with students this past year."

Under Ed's leadership, JA of Greater Washington's exceptional practice and performance have earned it the top 4-star rating for the past four consecutive years from Charity Navigator, the nation's premier independent charity evaluator. This is a testament not only to its financial strength, but also to its commitment to accountability, transparency, and integrity. "It's incredibly important to us that our partners and donors know they can count on us to be the best stewards possible in working toward our mission," he says. "For instance, some people believe that commission-based fundraising incentivizes development staff to work harder. It may. But opening up the mere possibility of putting personal gain above a donor's intent or their timing, it's just not something I believe in. I'm proud of how completely mission-driven our team is."

As a leader, Ed focuses on hiring the best talent and expertise, and then leading from behind, providing coaching when needed but encouraging the team in their autonomy and excellence. His humble, down-to-earth nature is modeled after his father, a lawyer who knew the name of every single person who worked at his firm. "He treated everyone with the same sense of respect, from the garage attendant to the president. I've never forgotten that—he's my role model," Ed says.

Ed's parents were introduced in high school by their own parents, who had worked together on an assembly line in a factory during the war. They married at 22 and moved to Adelphi, Maryland, where Ed grew up with his older sister and a younger brother, Peter. His young life revolved around sports—particularly

baseball, in which he was an MVP. He loved playing outside with friends, riding bikes, or exploring the nearby creek. The family ate dinner together every night, and spent several weeks in Cape Cod together every summer. Holidays were spent visiting his family in the Czech-influenced Astoria neighborhood of Queens, New York, where his grandparents and great-grandparents lived together. "My grandmother would cook me breaded pork chops, and my grandfather would come home with flowers from the corner store on his way home from the milk factory," Ed recounts. "It's interesting, I still think of that as my roots."

When he finished middle school, Ed's family moved to Rockville, where he attended high school. He was a decent student but much preferred working or playing sports, including varsity baseball, football, and basketball. He was first team all interstate conference in baseball, and planned to play in college, but a separated shoulder football injury put an end to that dream. "After the injury, one night I was just doing homework, and my shoulder slipped out of the socket," Ed recounts. "That was it. I had major surgery and lost my throwing arm for years."

With athletics closed to him, Ed began considering the other forms his future might take. All the Grenier kids wanted to go to college, and many thought Ed would become a lawyer like his father, but he found himself drawn to media production instead. Upon graduating from high school, he enrolled at Villanova University, where he majored in Communications, supported the Special Olympics, and worked part-time, first in the new gym and then as head of student security for the athletic fields. In his senior year, he took a TV production class, and for the final exam, the class had to shoot a live half-hour newscast. "I was the weatherman," he laughs. "It's so much harder than people think, but I still thought I might pursue that industry after college."

Life had something else in store, however. When he graduated in 1983, he crossed paths with a former classmate who encouraged him to get into sales. He applied for what he thought was an entry-level sales job, but it turned out to be investment-focused, leading Ed to take the Series 7 and 63 securities exams. "Growing up, my dad's father always talked about stocks, and I used to think it was boring," Ed laughs. "But I had always liked math, and I guess my interest was piqued."

Ed landed in the money management

world as a stockbroker at Smith Barney and Legg Mason. Then, in 1989, he took a vacation to Miami with his two good friends from high school and happened to make a wrong move while playing basketball by the beach. Stepping down on a ball from another court, he snapped his left ankle, tore the cartilage in his left knee, and herniated a disk in his back. He was forced to take a month off of work, and with the respite came new perspective. "I felt like the job's incentives were in the wrong place, and it didn't seem right to me," he recounts. "Then, when I returned to work, I'll never forget the call I received from a client, complaining that he had been at a cocktail party over the weekend and heard that his neighbor got 17 percent on his funds when we only got 14 percent. I calmly explained to him our risk profile, but for some reason the interaction turned me off to the work. It was all about money for them, and it was time for me to make a change."

Around that time, Ed married Lynette, a young woman whose father was the first person to attend college from his small coal mining hometown in Western Pennsylvania. He went on to become the head of PR at two major universities, and he passed on to Lynette that same combination of industrial grit and ambitious creativity. They joined their lives in 1991, and shortly after that, the priest that had married them connected Ed with a development and fundraising opportunity at Georgetown University. He landed the job and took over management of a portfolio that included the Woodstock Theological Center, the national Jesuit think tank housed on campus.

Ed's new role was worlds away from the brokerage lifestyle he had known, but he remembered the fundraising work his mother had done while he was young. "She always had something going, whether it was convening an envelope stuffing party, chairing a board or gala, or hosting a fundraiser," Ed says. "Thanks to her, I had a foundational understanding of the work, so the methodologies and psychology came easily."

Several years in, Ed enjoyed the work but saw that the Georgetown environment encouraged specialization. He wanted to keep his skill set broad, and instead set his sights on running a nonprofit agency one day. "Conceptually speaking, I knew I had the skills, and eventually got the job as the Director of the Association for Healthcare Philanthropy Foundation."

In that capacity, Ed worked with

healthcare foundations across the country, providing accreditation and managing the curriculum utilized by all hospital and healthcare senior fundraisers. He also learned how to manage the foundation's board, relying on the guidance of exceptional mentors like the board's Chairman, Charlie Hiem. "He pushed me and pushed me—not just as a Chair, but as a friend. He cared," Ed recounts. "Thanks to that experience, I started to really understand the management of nonprofit volunteers and how it drives a mission."

Then, in 1996, Ed noticed a small advertisement in the business opportunities section of *The Washington Post* for the CEO position at Junior Achievement. "I had never heard of the organization before, but the more I learned about it, the more I realized I had lived my life doing what the job was all about," he says. "In addition to my upbringing, at Smith Barney, I used to help a group of kids compete in a stock market game. So I went in and just told my story."

The interview process was long and arduous, involving a search firm, a headhunter, and six separate meetings. At the time, the Chair of the Board was Bill Freeman, the President of Bell Atlantic, and the Chair of the Search Committee was John Dereck, the CEO of Pepco. Ed connected with them, but despite his solid skill set and personal connection to the work, he was short on experience at only 35 years of age. At the end of the last interview, they asked if he had anything else he wanted to add. He looked at them seriously and said, "You need to hear this from me: I want this job. I want this job because I can make something of this, and I wanted you to hear that." It was the first and only time he's said something so strongly in an interview, and it was enough to convince the board to take a chance on him. With that, Ed landed the job.

Ed could never have guessed then how he'd transform and grow the organization over the next 22 years and beyond. He started with a restructuring of the organizational chart, and in 1998 moved the JA offices into the Greater Washington Board of Trade building, thanks to the mentorship of the Board's then-CEO, John Tydings. "He was very instrumental in guiding me through those earlier years," Ed recalls. "We'd talk in the hallway, surrounded by the portraits of the Washington Business Hall of Fame honorees. When he retired, he agreed to keep meeting with me every third Monday until he passed away ten

years later. We would draw flowcharts and develop strategies for when to engage who in the process. He was just brilliant, and I credit a lot of my success to his quiet guidance. To this day, sometime, somewhere, every week I ask myself, 'what would John do?'"

Over the years, Ed also learned that uniformity and economies of scale might be coveted goals in business, but they weren't always appropriate parallel measures within programmatic success. "All education is local, and we can't force programs on school systems or tell them what's right for them," he affirms. "Educational reform and access on a national level is an important dialogue, and the best way to get there is a gradual move toward long-term, deeper, richer interactions with students in areas of need."

While each JA chapter is governed by the JA USA Operating Agreement, which mandates certain program implementation standards, policies, procedures, and volunteer and brand guidelines, Ed and his Board have the agency to choose their own programming. In 2006, they adopted a model focused on strategic alignment with school system needs, which led to a closer partnership with school boards, superintendents, principals, and the community at large. They now have a menu of 24 programs designed to sequentially hold kids' hands through their school years, filling in any gaps and building on their knowledge. "For example, Virginia was one of the first states to mandate financial literacy classes in schools, and our program meets every state standard, so it takes a burden off of school districts," Ed explains. "Maryland has adopted similar standards, so now every eighth grader in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties takes JA's 14-hour in-classroom financial literacy programming and then participates in our full-day simulation at one of our Finance Park facilities."

Ed and his team are responsible for raising their own budget, relying on the bridges they build with the private sector to help bring in those sorely-needed resources. Public-private partnerships with schools have proven to be effective models for funding capstone facilities, and Ed is now focused on running a capital campaign to construct a new flagship facility in DC to serve their middle and high school students and act as the worldwide JA Innovation Hub. It will include an entrepreneurship maker space for high schoolers to create and run businesses, a real-

life mini-city to teach sixth graders how an economy works, and a simulation area for students to learn about personal finance by managing an adult budget. "I guess I create my own treadmill—it seems like I'm always running toward something big on the horizon," Ed laughs. "There's just always more to do. The demand for our programming is growing exponentially, so we're always looking to adapt, improve, and be better all around."

Ed credits his wife, Lynette, as the force that allows him to reach for these lofty goals. For two decades, she headed up public relations at Zero to Three, a prominent child development nonprofit. But when their daughters, Sydney and Haley, required extra care and support, she immediately and unselfishly shifted her full attention to them. "I'm so grateful for my wonderful daughters, and for Lynette who's such a champion," Ed says. "I literally couldn't do any of this without her."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ed underscores the importance of working in an area you love so it never feels like work. "Of course it's important to be financially sustainable, and your earlier jobs may not be the dream jobs you had in mind," he says. "But don't worry about that at first. Stay focused on building your skills. Employers want problem solvers, people who show initiative, can work in teams, collaborate easily, are agile, and can lead. With the world changing so rapidly, leaders are looking for people that are adaptable, and eager to do so."

Beyond that, Ed encourages others to push through doubt to reach their goals. "Technical skills can be taught and learned, but attitude is up to you," he says. "Do you look around for the little opportunities inherent in everyday life? You can be entrepreneurial anywhere, even within a larger organization, and those creative ideas will set you apart. So, while everyone else is standing around coming up with reasons why something is impossible, be the entrepreneurial leader that gets it done every time."

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