

Steve Bartlett

The Power of Purpose

When things got tough in the halls of Congress and it looked as though his legislation might not pass, or in the midst of the constant turmoil of City Hall politics that filled his days as Mayor of Dallas, Steve Bartlett's thoughts would return to his family's farm in central Texas. He would remember how, when he was five years old, his father was just beginning to build a house on their small farm and came home one day with a newborn calf named Little Red. The calf was entrusted to Steve's care, and though neither the boy nor his father had any idea how to raise livestock, Steve began taking care of Little Red the best he knew how.

Before long, however, Little Red contracted an illness. Steve cleaned its stall everyday and tried to feed it milk, but Little Red faded fast. Soon, the calf died, and when Steve dug a hole to bury it in the pasture, his mother saw him saying a prayer.

That evening at dinner, his mother tried to comfort him by saying it wasn't his fault, and that he'd done everything he could do to save Little Red. But his father said bluntly, "Son, you didn't do everything you could have done. You could have cleaned the stall out four times a day," he said. "You could have warmed the milk and let the calf suck it from a rag to get nourishment. I could have called a veterinarian to bring antibiotics. And when the Norther blew in, you could have brought him into the kitchen to the stove and slept with him on the towels. If we had done everything we could, Little Red would still be alive."

Steve's mother couldn't believe his father could say such a thing to their son, but Steve himself realized the words were true. "I could see he was right, and it had an amazing impact on me," Steve reflects today. "Most people make excuses to shirk responsibility for the things that happen in life, but I resolved that from that

moment on, whenever I was faced with a challenge, I would do everything I could to succeed. Only after giving it my all would I let myself accept defeat or success. And as it turns out, if you face life with that tenacity and commitment, you generally do succeed."

Though he doesn't like to admit it, Steve was born in Los Angeles. After World War II, several mini-migrations swept the country, and his father rode a wave from the West Coast to Texas to work as the young manager of an apparel company in 1951. They settled in the small town of Lockhart in central Texas when Steve was four years old. There, the wives of farmers had started sewing clothes for "cash money," as they say in the country — labor that had, for the previous two decades, been the lot of immigrants in sweatshops along the coasts.

When the Bartletts decided to move from a house in town to a shack of only three rooms on some farmland five miles outside of town, Steve's father began drawing up the plans for the house they would build. Three months later, he installed indoor plumbing for the shack and set to work on the house, one room at a time. "He was an engineer, and I would watch him at night as he sat at the kitchen table with his drafting materials, finalizing the plans for that weekend," Steve recalls. "The goal was to build a good house — one that fit our family. No way we could afford to hire a builder, or even a carpenter or plumber, so we did it ourselves. Once again, it was setting a goal and doing everything possible to accomplish it. The family was purposeful in all we did, with choices we made on a daily basis aligning with our goals. We only went out to eat once a year, not because we couldn't afford it, but because eating out would slow us down from finishing the house or buying another cow."

Steve was the eldest son on the farm, an honor that carried unique and considerable



responsibility. While his father was at work managing the sewing factory, he drove the ship at home, turning off the TV on Saturday mornings and sending his siblings out to do the chores he assigned them. He learned to run a disciplined operation at an early age, managing any crisis that arose and ensuring the farm ran smoothly. He collected pecans that fell from their trees by the creek and sold them for forty cents a pound in town, setting aside ten dollars to buy Christmas presents for his family and stashing the rest in a savings account that would later cover tuition for his freshman year of college. "There wasn't any magic to it," he reflects. "If you want to go to college, you have to save money. I had learned from my parents that, if you want to save, you should focus on decreasing spending and saving the rest."

Like this lesson, the life truisms learned on the farm were simple yet powerful. If Steve didn't mend the fence today, the cows would get out and he'd have to spend tonight looking for them. Taking responsibility for little things early translated to improved outcomes later. Unfortunately, even these precautions can't always ward off unfortunate outcomes, and Steve's father lost his job in 1963, forcing him to take a job in the big city at a Dallas production factory. "It was devastating for the family to have to leave the farm and the house we built, but all in all, the move was great for me," Steve says. "I was fourteen at the time, and Dallas had two things our town did not—Republicans, and a lot more girls."

Steve had started cultivating an interest in politics in sixth grade, when his social studies teacher picked up on his innate proclivity for the field. His family often talked politics at the dinner table, and his father had run a losing campaign for the school board in 1957 on an integration platform, but Steve himself hadn't given it too much thought. His teacher began bringing in her old copies of *Newsweek* for him, and as the young man devoured the material, he came to understand how much politics matters in the lives of people. "Reading cover to cover, I discovered that every story about politics or policy or government was actually a story about how peoples' lives were being changed," Steve explains. "Whether someone was building a highway or a bridge or a road, or making a change to how savings accounts work, or going to war, politics shapes everything. It also clicked for me that you shape policy by

getting elected, not just by running for office. After all, the stories in *Newsweek* were about the election winners, not the second place runner-ups. And I saw that the trick to getting elected was getting more votes than anyone else."

The following year, Steve took a Texas history course with Dr. Abraham Lincoln Weinburger, a forthright, headstrong, disciplined man who was both a professor at the University of Texas and an Associate Superintendent at Lockhart Public Schools. He would often tell his students to reach for the stars, because even if they didn't catch one, at least they wouldn't end up with a handful of mud. Dr. Weinburger observed Steve's passion for politics and world events, and invited him to sit down in the cafeteria one day. "Mr. Bartlett, I see you're interested in politics," he had said. "I think you can make it. I don't know what you're going to be, but if you do everything right, you can run for office, and you can win." Cocky but humbled, Steve responded, "Yes sir, I believe I will." It was the moment that things solidified for Steve, and the prospect of a life in public service became a real possibility for him.

With the move, Steve's mother was told that Lockhart wasn't accredited like Dallas. Steve was told he'd be behind when he tried to start ninth grade in Dallas, and some of the teachers even proposed holding him back, but Steve rolled his eyes and would have none of that. "Like hell I was going to be behind," he laughs today. "I convinced them to let me enroll in ninth grade, and if I flunked, then they could hold me back. And just as I did at Lockhart, I got straight A's. It turned out the Dallas schools were actually a lot easier, and I wasn't challenged there the way I had been in Lockhart."

Steve enjoyed participating in athletics in high school, but he readily admits his lack of hand-eye coordination, and his heart truly lay in academics and politics. As a fourth grader, he regularly tore through thousand-page books about the history of the universe or civilization. "I absolutely loved absorbing knowledge," he remembers. "I read all 24 volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia. There's so much to learn in the world, and I just devoured it all."

Before long, however, politics became just as important. In Dallas in tenth grade, Steve began engaging in Barry Goldwater's Presidential campaign, and when the Senator received the Republican Party's nomination for the 1964

Presidential election, Steve called GOP headquarters about joining the Young Republicans. He was literally told, "We don't have Republicans in your part of town." Undaunted, he recruited five students and called back the next day to ask about a charter. He was told five wasn't enough, so he spent the next several days gathering a group of 42 members. The next time he called headquarters, each member had filled out an application and paid dues, and they had a list of a hundred locations for Goldwater yard signs. Just like that, they went from being nonexistent to being the largest Young Republican Club in Dallas County—although his best friend from the other side of town believes to this day that his own club reigned supreme at 43 members. "From that, I learned that one person taking initiative can affect the outcome of politics," he recalls. "One person reaching out and organizing other people can change the outcome of an election. Goldwater didn't win, but we got more votes for him in my part of town than were ever expected, and I realized that if you set your goals right and focus on serving others, you can get yourself elected."

At the end of the campaign, Steve was elected the President of the Young Republicans for all of Dallas County. But the most seminal event during that time of his life, and indeed perhaps the most transformative moment he would ever had, came while visiting a Young Republican bake sale. There, Steve met a young woman named Gail and fell in love at first sight. He had come to ask the club for money for more yard signs, and as soon as Gail handed over the check, he asked her for a date. Now married for 46 years, her role in his life as a partner, compass, and support system cannot be overstated. They've done everything together.

Upon graduating, Steve and Gail enrolled at the University of Texas in Austin, where he was elected Vice Chairman of the Texas Young Republicans as a freshman. Shortly thereafter, the Chairman lost his position, and at age nineteen, Steve assumed leadership of the federation of 13,000 members divided amongst 150 clubs. It was a tremendous responsibility, and when Steve and Gail married after his sophomore year, she sat him down and told him he needed to focus on his studies for the rest of college. "I had been putting myself through school by working part-time, and with politics on top of that, I had little time to focus on academics," he concedes. "My grades suffered and my graduation was in doubt. She

firmly reminded me that my goal here was to get my degree, so I quit everything else and really focused. One semester, I took 22 hours of courses and still made straight A's, reminded by the memory of Little Red to do everything I could."

After college, Steve and Gail moved to Dallas, where he got his first job in real estate. It was commission-only, so she was nervous at first, to say the least, but he landed his first sale in six weeks, officially marking the start of his business career. At 24 he became the Chairman of the City's Urban Rehab Board and President of the Dallas County Republican Men's Club. He continued his work volunteering to help candidates with their campaigns, as well as learn the hopes and aspirations of the people around him with the goal of helping others accomplish their own goals. He didn't let go of his dream of running for office himself, but he also didn't set his sights on a given office and force anything. "Public service is about serving the public, and that's where you have to start," he explains. "If you want to be elected to Congress, you don't set out to get elected to Congress. Instead, you set out to help a whole bunch of people in a Congressional district, and at some point your name will come around. Public service cannot be a scheme, or a ladder for your career path. Everything in your life has to be about serving others with genuine intent."

While building political capital, the real estate market tanked, so Steve set his sights on starting his own business and invested significant time and energy into finding the right field for his entrepreneurial aspirations. After reading every business magazine and catalogue at the Dallas Public Library and conducting a series of interviews with industry experts, he decided to launch Meridian, an injection mold plastics business. He invested in the necessary equipment in 1975 and then began knocking on doors in the industrial district for customers, eventually growing the enterprise to \$5 million in sales by the time he sold it in 1999.

Two years after launching Meridian, and after fifteen years spent helping other candidates, causes, and projects, a Dallas City Council seat opened up. After several days of closed-door meetings with trusted friends and advisors, Steve felt it had his name on it. They put together a campaign plan, and in a dramatic defiance of expectations, he won in 1977. "Living a purposeful life must translate into running a purposeful

campaign," he says. "It's not about raising a bunch of money, putting up a bunch of signs, and making a bunch of speeches. You have to plan out on paper the demographics of the region, who the voters are, what they care about, and how you can best serve them in achieving their aspirations. I literally mapped the city into ten distinct neighborhoods, set a goal for number of votes for each, wrote those goals on a chart, and carried the chart with me through the entire campaign, letting it guide my focus each day."

Several years later, in the spring of 1981, Steve and his team realized he could win the Congressional race for the district in which he lived. It was a Republican district, so everything rested on the primary. Again, Steve divided the district into eight distinct neighborhoods, set a vote goal for each one, created a chart, and following that chart. All was going well until seven weeks before the election, when a federal judge redrew the district lines by an astounding 70 percent despite having five established candidates already in the race. "Don't give up, and don't let the calf die," Steve thought to himself. "Do everything you can." With that, he drew up a new chart with new goals, and to the surprise of most observers, he won the nomination and the election.

Politics is rougher now, but Steve resolved to never say an unkind word about any of his opponents, staying out of negative campaigning as he had done his whole career. Rather, he picked the three issues he believed would resonate most with voters, and which highlighted his contrast with his opponents. He won the election in 1982, becoming the representative of Texas's Third Congressional district at age 34.

Steve had run for Congress to prove what he had seen through his professional career up to that point—that one person could make a difference. He believed he could pass meaningful legislation even without seniority, and from the minority party. To guide his path, he decided to interview a hundred incumbent members of Congress. What advice did they have for a young whippersnapper looking to be an effective Congressman? "Really, there were only two answers," Steve reports. "One set advised me to focus on getting my newsletters out and getting reelected, and after a decade or two, I'd finally be able to pass legislation as a Committee Chairman. But the other set said I could do anything I wanted to do. Come up with a good idea, follow the rules,

master the subject, and never give up, and I could pass any sensible legislation I put my mind to."

Later, in comparing the two sets, Steve saw that the former never quite became effective lawmakers, even as Committee Chairmen. The other set were effective legislators, deciding the outcome of policy and the country's path. He resolved to be among the effective group through being purposeful, and within his first ninety days in office, he succeeded in passing an amendment to let the market set Federal Housing Authority (FHA) interest rates, rather than a Housing and Urban Development edict. It was a brutal eight-hour fight on the House Floor, with two roll call votes and intense rhetoric aimed at a freshman Congressman, but Steve's winning argument was sound: if you set the interest rate too high, people can't afford the loan, and if you set it too low, they can't get a loan.

Later, when the bill was signed into law, Steve found himself sitting next to the wife of a Rotary Club Chairman at a speech. She mentioned how they'd tried to get a house two years prior, but they lost it at closing "because the interest rates weren't set right at FHA." She had been devastated, thinking they'd never be able to buy a home. But they had recently tried again, and this time everything went through. She said she thought somebody had changed the law. "That was another seminal moment for me, seeing how profoundly my work had impacted her life," he says.

By the time Steve decided to retire from Congress after nine years of service, he had authored or co-authored 18 pieces of prominent legislation, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, the East Texas Wilderness Act, and amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act. It was an outstanding run that affirmed all he believed public service could be.

Then a new cause and purpose came his way: he believed the City of Dallas had lost its way, and he felt compelled to action. "The City had never truly engaged in the Civil Rights movement, and power wasn't shared with Black and Hispanic communities," he remembers. "Crime was out of control, with an increase in all four categories of violent crime every single month for twenty years and a loss of 120,000 jobs in downtown Dallas over ten years. The City Council was literally throwing punches and chairs during their sessions. I said, okay, I can fix this."

With that, Steve resigned from Congress, ran for mayor, and won. It would take all the discipline, purposefulness, and focus he had to set the city on the right course, and on his inauguration day, he publicly set the goal that the City would, within one year, reduce violent crime in all four categories of murder, rape, armed robbery, and aggravated assault. A true testament to Steve's purpose and drive, the City achieved this goal in only five months, going on to hit the target crime reductions every single month thereafter while Steve was Mayor. He helped improve race relations by bringing minorities into the decision making process, and there were no more fistfights or flying chairs at City Council meetings. Steve quickly began bringing businesses back to downtown Dallas and the rest of the city, taking the time to focus on seemingly little things like making the city brighter with the installation of energy-efficient light bulbs that put off twice as much light and saved millions of dollars in energy costs. Other times, he knew it would take the big things, like developing and passing a \$5 billion capital plan for infrastructure that guided the city for 15 years or recruiting the Dallas Stars to relocate to Dallas and make it the first sunbelt city with an NHL franchise.

Once he was sure the city was on the road to renaissance, Steve left his post to focus on running his business. It was tedious work, and though successful, the family wasn't making much money. A couple years into it, Steve was enjoying dinner with Gail when she observed that he was an average businessman at best, and maybe even below average. "But," she said, "you are the best politician I have ever known." He had already told her he wasn't running for office again, so he asked what she was getting at. "Oh, you're a clever boy, you'll figure it out," she said with a smile.

The next day, a light bulb went off for Steve, and he decided to find a way to use his political skills to achieve financial success. He applied to several jobs in Washington and was ultimately recruited by the nation's fifty largest banks to be CEO of their trade association, empowering it as the new face of the industry. The association was bleeding money and losing members, and would have to close its doors in perhaps 18 months, unless things changed dramatically. With his Board's support, Steve set his goals: clarify the mission, bring new energy, redefine the membership, and double its size to

one hundred large financial institutions. Soon, the Financial Services Roundtable became the premier financial services trade association in Washington.

Then the Great Recession hit, caused in part by bad lending policies at some of the banks. The industry was in the tank politically, but more importantly, Americans were being hurt by the foreclosure crisis. Setting his purpose, Steve used his role to launch HOPE NOW, a program designed to keep people in their homes if at all possible. If struggling homeowners had even a meager income, their mortgage could be modified to become manageable. People who had only gotten behind on their mortgages were quickly set on the right path again with a little help. And, for those without any prospects of income, the program offered an option to deed in lieu of foreclosure. It was neither easy nor smooth, but to date, HOPE NOW has modified 8.5 million mortgages that would otherwise have gone into foreclosure. Steve also raised \$5 million through five phone calls to create the HOPE Empowerment Center at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. and Jr.'s home church in Atlanta. The program offers financial education, home ownership counseling, and entrepreneurship education.

By the end of 2012, Steve was satisfied he had done all he could in that capacity to help America succeed through its struggle. Exhausted and ready for the next chapter, he decided to retire. Now, Steve continues his purpose driven life at Treliant Risk Advisors by advising banks in regulatory compliance. He serves on two corporate Boards, Ares Capital and Intersections, and on two Advisory Boards, Alexander Proudfoot and EverFi. EverFi, founded by Tom Davidson of DC and Jeff Bezos of Amazon, achieves a particular passion of Steve's by providing online financial education to one million students a year in 12,000 schools. He also continues to work in the nonprofit world with the Homeownership Preservation Foundation, the Easter Seals, Operation HOPE, and the African New Life Mission in Rwanda. In recent years, Gail and Steve have also encountered several individuals who just need mentorship and a little help along the way: a victim of domestic violence, a high school boy with a criminal record who was considering dropping out, several Millennials suffering from "failure to launch" syndrome, and others. "It doesn't take much—just some attention and a little help getting

over the hurdles of life,” Steve says. “The young man who almost became a high school dropout ended up graduating Valedictorian and is now enrolled at Northern Virginia Community College.

Most importantly, though, Steve and Gail are purposeful grandparents to seven amazing grandchildren. “We do everything, absolutely everything, to create a foundation for their lives,” Steve affirms. “Beyond a financial foundation, that means values, attention, kindness, time, education, and inspiration. Grandkids need someone to listen to them, to say yes as the first answer to any request, and to offer a little gentle encouragement. In all my life, the best compliment I ever received was from my eleven-year-old granddaughter when she said at the breakfast table one morning, ‘Grandpa, you are the nicest person I know.’ Whew, it doesn’t get any better than that!”

Whether it’s guiding grandkids or counseling Millennials, Steve’s advice starts with purpose. Set your goals with clarity and then do everything you can to achieve those them. “First, look at your calendar and pick a date, time, and location where you can spend four to six hours on your own,” he instructs. “Write down the goals you want to achieve in the next two years. Post somewhere you can see them every day. You can then keep them clearly in mind, using them to shape what you’ll do in the next ninety days, in the next week, and tomorrow. Decide where you want to go with great clarity, and then adjust your life

everyday to help get there. It’s really not complicated.”

Other times, Steve revives the mantra he adopted when he arrived in Congress—the purpose blueprint that achieved real results for Steve and the country he served. To wit:

- Get there early and stay late,
- Do your homework,
- Know more about the subject than anyone else,
- Follow the rules, including the rules of courtesy and civility, and
- Never, ever, ever, give up.

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