



Dennis Kessler

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"History has demonstrated that the most notable winners usually encounter heart breaking obstacles before they triumphed. They won because they refused to become discouraged by their defeats."

BC Forbes

Sometimes, the turning point that shapes a person's life and success can't actually be pinned down to a single influential moment. At times, turning points take other forms, such as a philosophy that the person holds throughout their life, or perhaps a certain figure who provides them with useful and helpful guidance. In the case of Dennis Kessler, the defining element in his life is not so much any single thing that happened to him, but rather the influence of his father.

From an early age, Dennis' father exercised a positive influence over his work ethic. He himself was a successful business owner who took only one day off a month, and who encouraged Dennis to find a job at a very young age. Dennis was only 12 when he became a newspaper boy for the New York Post. He made a 2 cent profit on sales, the first money he ever earned by his own effort. Even to this day, he doesn't speak down at or belittle the position; rather, he exalts it for all the practical skills it taught him: the principles of customer service, how to keep books and financial records, how to keep track of bills and even how to fold newspapers in such a way as to streamline his

operation and cut down on wasted time. Inspired by his early success at this job, he went on to look for opportunities wherever he could find them: shoveling snow for neighbors and even beginning a coin collection that he would later sell for \$20,000.

Not all of Dennis' early years were so idyllic, though. In today's world, Dennis would have probably been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, but in the time he grew up in, that disability was unheard of and he was simply thought of as "stupid" for his inability to stay focused in long classes at school. By the time he was in high school, Dennis was placed in a classroom full of kids who were considered to have little to no future. Nevertheless, he doesn't consider that any of this ultimately held him back. Rather, it taught him that if he wanted something, he had to work hard for it, and work hard he did to overcome the challenge of his disability and succeed.

He graduated in 1966, whereupon he felt relieved to have exited the world of academia and was eager to join the workforce. He sent an application to Charles Pfizer and Co, Inc. to work as a stock clerk, and was shocked when he received a rejection letter from them; so shocked that he preserved the letter and for many years it hung on his wall as motivation, although for a time, Dennis wasn't quite sure what he should be motivated towards. Searching for direction after high school, Dennis attended a job fair hoping to find employment. There, a government worker reviewed Dennis' records and encouraged him to continue his education, assuring him that not only did he have the talent, but that he would find the atmosphere of college a lot more accommodating to individualistic learning styles than high school was.

Realizing a worthwhile job wasn't just going to be handed to him, Dennis began to consider college and his father's advice:

“If you want it, you have to earn it!”

Thus inspired, Dennis went on to City University of New York and in 1970, received a degree in sociology. Thereafter, he sought employment as a New York City cab driver, but failed the written exam that was required to secure the job. Luckily, his father was once again prepared to step in and bolster and guide the young Dennis, more or less forcing him to take the test again. Of course, he passed the second time.

Although at first his ambition was to join the workforce and escape from academia, Dennis found his impressions changing the more time he spent in a cab getting to know people. He soon felt the calling to return to school and earned his masters degree in Sociology. Not content to stop there, he went on to apply to NYU to get into their PhD program and was accepted. Dennis continued to sail forth in his academic career, having developed a newfound love for learning and the opportunities that it opened up, when he hit something of a brick wall. When it came time for him to complete graduate school, he had to turn in a dissertation. His dissertation advisor, however, was someone that Dennis described as an “extremely hostile person,” an ex-convict whose political and economic views clashed mightily with Dennis’ own. Rather than render an objective view of the quality of Dennis’ dissertation, the advisor kept him on the ropes for quite a long time. Knowing that his graduation would be held up indefinitely by this person, Dennis recalled another critical piece of advice from his father:

“Life is always full of hurdles... so move the hurdles!”

Dennis left NYU, having nearly met all the requirements for a degree, and then he went on to law school at Yale and received his degree there.

However, Dennis was never to take the bar and never to practice law. Soon after he graduated, his brother Larry (whose own story is detailed elsewhere in this book) approached him with a solid business plan that proved to be profitable for the both of them. Drawing on the skills that he had learned from all his years in school, Dennis helped his

brother in the buying and running of several restaurant franchises.

Though the two of them would go on to meet with great success, it didn't happen overnight. There was a serious downturn in the economy and interest rates skyrocketed to 17%. The time came when they owed \$100,000 to the state of New York in sales tax, and they had already spent that money on other things. It was simply no longer there to pay the bills. Desperate, Dennis and Larry borrowed the money from their father and paid it back over the next five years.

They continued to slowly build their business, a piece at a time, into the solid and successful enterprise that it's become today. It was the influence of his father that helped Dennis steer clear of disaster. Dennis and Larry tried to adhere to the philosophy of their father that **there are no "home runs" in business, and you have to build up your reputation and success slowly, a solid piece at a time.**

Though his rise to success has met with several changes of course, setbacks and outright stumbles along the way, Dennis has always held fast to his father's beliefs, including one of the most important ones:

"Don't want any business problems? Go deliver the mail."

Knowing that he could simply give up and take an easier line of work was all it really took to keep Dennis motivated. He knew that obstacles were par for the course from the moment he set out, and what's more, he knew that he had the ability to meet and overcome them.

Not surprisingly, Dennis continues to challenge himself to this day. He gives back to the community by teaching at the University of Rochester's Simon School of Business, where he holds an endowed chair in entrepreneurship. Not bad for someone who started out in a classroom full of criminals. Of course, as Dennis is always the first to acknowledge, he's had a little help along the way.