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Choices

If you take one lesson away from this book, let it be this: Your past does not dictate your destiny. You have choices in life. The sooner you realize that—and start making the right choices—the sooner you'll be a success. I've learned many lessons over the years, in both business and in life. If I had known sooner that I'd had more choices—was not a prisoner of my past—I would have been much more successful much sooner.

So if you're picking up this book because you're a small-business owner, or you are thinking about starting your own business, or you are frustrated that you haven't become the success that you hoped to, and feel like you're destined to make the same mistakes you've made in the past, let me tell you this: It doesn't have to be that way. You have choices, just as I did over the past 30-odd years.

In fact, if I chose one word—one theme, if you will—to describe my life—how it started, how it evolved, and what it ultimately became—it would be "choices."

As a kid growing up, I basically didn't have any choices. None. Zero. Zilch. It was that simple. My dad made all the decisions for us, in nearly every aspect of our lives. He told us what time to get up, what to eat for breakfast, and what time to go to bed. In between, we had very few choices. If we went to the store to buy school clothes, my dad would pick them out for us. He'd say, "These are the shoes I'm buying you, and you're going to wear them."

Even when I was making my own money, my dad continued to tell me what I was going to buy. A good example is my first car: It was a 1964 Dodge Dart with the Slant-Six engine in it. I hated that car. I thought it was the ugliest car in the world. I really wanted a fast car. A cool car. Like a '55 or '56 Chevy. But my father wouldn't

let me buy one. And in my house, that was that. Once the old man spoke, that was the way it was going to be.

As I got older, my choices didn't get much better. They were extremely limited, mainly because of my upbringing, my background, and my own sense of self-worth. I don't think anyone had high expectations for me, including myself. My whole childhood basically set me up to be dead or in prison, especially coming from the background that I came from. And, sadly, that's what happened to a lot of my friends. Worse yet, for the longest time I believed that the path I was on was the only option I had.

It was only after I realized that the world was full of choices that my life began to change. I realized that I had a choice of who I was, what I stood for, and what my life could be. Then I realized that my possibilities for success—in business as well as my personal life—were limited only by my own drive, ambition, and willingness to work hard. Working hard was never an issue for me. I'd been working hard my whole life. What changed everything for me was finally realizing that I could work hard toward the goals and dreams that mattered most to me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I can honestly tell you that you can overcome anything that life hands you, because that's what I've been doing most of my life: overcoming and exceeding everyone's expectations that they had for me and that I initially had for myself. I don't think it's a stretch for me to say that I've been knocked down a lot of times in my life, but I was always able to pick myself up each time, and put one foot in front of the other. For the most part, I've succeeded at that.

Against All Odds

Why the long odds against me? From the day I was born—May 1, 1949, in Yonkers, New York—no one ever really expected me to amount to much. Not my parents. Not my teachers. Nor anyone else for that matter. That's because my childhood was very dysfunctional

and violent. I grew up in a household where my mother was always belittling my father—and because of that my father abused me and my four sisters because he was so frustrated by our mother. It really was that bad.

There was no support in my house. It was not a loving experience. There was just anger. No one ever said, "I love you." The word "love" was never mentioned. Everything that was done was done with brute force. And if my parents made a mistake or gave us a beating, there was no such thing as saying "I'm sorry."

Having grown up in that environment, naturally I became a bit of a rebel. I didn't conform to the rules of school or society. That's because when you grow up like that, you don't know what normal is. You don't know if other families are like that, or you're just different. You just try and make it through every day.

As far as having any kind of role model when I was a kid, the only person I can say that I actually looked up to—because I didn't look up to my mother or my father—was my Uncle Emil. But even he wasn't the ideal role model when you think about the types of people who are often considered positive influences in a young kid's life. He was a drunk and a gambler. But he at least showed an interest in me, and that was more than I could say for most of the other people in my life.

But even my uncle wasn't around for very long. When I was seven years old, he died. He was killed in a car accident while bookies he owed money to were chasing him. He had been drinking, flipped his car over, and was killed. That was the most traumatic thing that ever happened to me in my life up to that point.

The thing I remember most about my time with Uncle Emil is that we would build scale models together—cars and vintage military biplanes, mostly. He especially liked building the planes. And these were real models, not the kind you find today where you just snap together a few parts. These models had lots of tiny parts, and you had to put every one of them together. Before putting them together, you had to sand off the rough edges on each piece and

paint them. You even had to glue on some of the engine components.

It seemed like a small thing at the time, but this was the first time that I learned to take pride in my work and pay attention to detail. Building these models was also my first passion in life. I had not realized that until just recently, but it was true.

Shop Kid

Because my family was not the least bit encouraging, when I got older, I wasn't very good in school. So like a lot of troubled kids growing up in the 1950s and '60s, I was funneled into shop class. In New York State they have a fancy name for it: BOCES, which stands for Bureau of Cooperative Educational Services. But it was basically shop class, and it was where they sent all the kids they didn't have much hope for.

I didn't learn much there, except how to steal lunches out of the other kids' lockers. But I did learn how to weld, a skill that would help me start my own business one day. Other than welding, the only thing school did for me was allow me to have fun with my friends and be around good-looking women. Otherwise, I thought school was a total waste of time for me.

When I was about 10 years old, I moved on from model planes and started to get interested in cars. I could probably identify three-quarters of the cars that were on the road. I could spot most of them just by looking at their headlights. From a block away, I could tell you the difference between a '55 and '56 Ford, or a '53 Olds and a Buick Roadmaster.

This interest in cars would later become the passion that fueled me, but you don't know that at that age. And thinking about it today, no one who knew me then could honestly say that they saw my interest and knowledge in cars as something that would lead to the successful business I have today. That's because with no one

around to support or encourage me to excel at something I really cared about and liked, it remained just a passing hobby.

But here's the funny thing and, ultimately, one of the reasons why I think I succeeded. Although I had little ambition early in life, I worked very hard from about the time I was 10 or 11—hard labor mostly. When I wasn't in school, I was doing grunt work for my parents around the house. My grandfather liked to put me to work, too. He always had a pick or a shovel in my hand, making me do hard labor around his house.

I always had a job in high school. I worked at a few gas stations. During the summer, I worked for a furniture-moving company. But it wasn't some sort of deep-seated work ethic. My parents never said, ''Son, you have to get a job because it'll make you a better person'' or put a roof over my head someday. Yeah, I worked hard, and I took pride in my work. But the real reason I worked so hard was that as long as I was living at home, and I was old enough to work, I had to pay rent. I wish I could say that it was something more than that, something deeper and more meaningful, but it wasn't. I was simply expected to pull my weight, no matter what.

While that may sound harsh, I'm proud to say that nothing was ever given to me. Everything I've ever achieved in life has been through my own hard work. If I had a car, it was because I had worked hard, saved up for it, and bought that car with my own money.

No Regrets

That basically describes the first 18 years of my life. When I was about 15, I started drinking and doing drugs. And everyone around me expected me to fail. I was a prisoner of my own demons. It would take me 20 years to shake off those demons. I don't regret growing up like that. I'm not bitter about it. As bad as it was, that upbringing made me who I am today. And I honestly don't think I'd be who—or what—I am today if I hadn't gone through all that.

I don't regret being addicted to drugs and alcohol for 20 years either. I do have regrets for what my alcoholism and drug addiction did to other people, especially my family. But for me, the hardship and the struggles became my inspiration. I began drinking when I was 15 and didn't become sober until I was 35. In between, I wrecked a lot of cars and a lot of lives, including my own. But once I got through all that, sobered up, and realized that I had the ability to change my life, it became a whole new world for me.

Unfortunately, it would take me until I was 35 years old to come to that realization. That's because when you come from a family like mine and you're an alcoholic and a drug addict, you really have no self-worth. You really don't like yourself. This is especially true when you're an alcoholic and taking drugs. You really don't have a choice. You can say to yourself, "I'm not going too drink today." Well, too fucking bad, pal, you're drinking today. You're a prisoner.

When I graduated (miraculously) from high school in 1969, everyone was worried about being drafted for the war. Vietnam was in full swing, and a lot of my friends were getting drafted. So I decided to join the Merchant Marine. "How hard could it be?" I thought. Get on a boat, work hard, and see the world. It sounded like a good idea to me. I'd been working hard most of my life, and anywhere was better than where I was.

But I firmly believe that life is what you make of it, and at this point in my life, I wasn't prepared to make much of it. The Merchant Marine turned out to be exactly what I'd expected it to be. We got on a boat, worked hard, and saw the world. And in between, we did some really great drugs.

But looking back on it now, I realize that some important things happened to me in the Merchant Marine. One was boot camp. When I joined the Merchant Marine, it was the first year they had implemented boot camp. And it was for three months, not six or eight weeks, like in the Army. I joined with my best friend, Clem Lawler, and he lasted a week. He went home because of personal problems.

I'm not ashamed to say that I wanted to go home, too. While going into the Merchant Marine seemed like no big deal, it was a very big deal for me. I was a young guy, 18 years old, and I'd never been away from home before. After that first week, I wanted to go home so badly I could taste it. But somewhere deep inside myself, I said, "You have to get through this challenge." I did. And here's how I did it.

I remember being by myself one night. There was a long stretch of open space between my barracks and the beach. I don't know why, but I decided that I was going to run as fast as I could to the beach. And I wasn't going to stop, no matter how painful it was. More importantly, I said to myself, "If I can run to the water without stopping, no matter how much it hurts and how much I want to stop, then I can make it through boot camp."

I did it, and that was the end of the struggle of whether or not I was going to make it through boot camp. It may seem like a small thing, but it was important. Because looking back on it now, I recognize that I was challenging myself to succeed for the first time in my life. I was trying to prove to myself—and to others, I guess—that I wasn't going to be a failure. That I could beat the odds and not be that loser that everyone expected me to be.

Was it the last time that I failed? Of course not. I was 18 when I completed boot camp and, as I've said, I didn't get clean and sober until I was 35. For most of the next 17 years, I was often my own worst enemy. I was the obstacle that kept me from believing in myself, executing my vision, and becoming the success that I am today.

But making that run at boot camp was an important first step toward changing me. It was an important step in leaving behind the person that everyone expected to fail and becoming the success that I am today. I didn't realize it then, but I was learning that I could challenge myself and succeed. It would take a while for the message to sink in, but this was an important step on that road of transformation.

Back Home Again

After I got out of the Merchant Marine, I came home and married a girl I had dated a few times in high school, Paula Leonardo. A year later, my first son, Paul, was born.

As for work, I bounced around from job to job. I'd learned welding in BOCES and was fairly good at it. I started working for a few businesses around Rockland County. But what I learned during this period in my life was that I didn't like working for someone else. I didn't like taking orders and being told how to do something. I had my own ways and my own ideas. Having a boss just completely rubbed me the wrong way.

The last job I had working for someone else was with my brother-in-law. I worked for him for four months in 1974, and then decided to go into business by myself. I was 24 years old. I was still a drunk and a drug abuser. But I scraped up the cash and bought a truck—a '66 International—from my father. I bought a welding rig from a friend of mine who was going to jail. What was my business plan? No fucking clue. But I'd never had trouble making money. That's because I was a hard worker. So my business plan was nothing more than "Try and make money. Try and be successful."

To this day, I really don't know where I got this solid work ethic. I've just always had it. Maybe it's because I knew that no one else was going to take care of me. Maybe it's because my grandfather was a workaholic. He worked seven days a week. He built entire houses by himself. He was an animal. But I don't think that I got his work ethic, because I really don't remember what it was, except that he was always working.

I think I always worked and paid my bills because I knew that no one was going to do it for me. If I failed, then I failed. I now know that what really drove me this whole time was my desire not to fail, because I wanted to prove everybody else wrong. I had to prove that I wasn't a failure. That's because it was drilled into me—both

consciously and unconsciously—from the time that I was a little kid that I wasn't ever going to be anything. People had no expectations for me.

I even remember teachers in school telling me, "You're never going to amount to anything." That's not merely my impression of what they thought of me; teachers actually said that to me. And I think it's something that stays with you. Eventually, there comes a time in your life when you've got to make a decision: Are you or are you not going to be a failure? And, if not, what are you going to do?

I chose to challenge myself again by going into business for myself. I chose to go into business because I wanted to be my own boss and knew that I could be successful as my own boss. Once you do that, everything rests on you. There's nobody else there to blame. I knew I wanted to have the freedom to be self-employed. At the time, I thought that meant that you could do what you wanted, when you wanted, at any given time. Unfortunately, I learned the hard way that wasn't the way it worked.

Moreover, I used my own business as a shield for my alcoholism and drug abuse. I figured that if I had my own business, and I was paying the bills, it didn't matter if I was drunk and stoned in the bar at three o'clock in the afternoon. "Hey man," I'd say, "I have my own business." And that, I thought, made it okay to do whatever I wanted. That was basically my business model for the next 11 years.

I hired employees who I knew from drinking with them. My business partner, Fred Gerini, was one of them. Doing a few shots before going to the job site, drinking your lunch, and heading to the liquor store at 2 P.M. to get a couple cases of beer and a couple bottles of Black Velvet seemed normal to me. I'm not telling you all this to make you feel sorry for me. I'm telling it to you to illustrate how lost I was. And if somebody as lost and fucked up as me can get their life together, and be the success that I am today, then anyone can do it. You just have to believe in yourself and your vision.

You have to believe that no matter what your background is, no matter what people in your past told you that you were supposed to

be, you can make your future whatever you want it to be. It's just a matter of first realizing that you have choices, and then making the right ones. Unfortunately for me, it would be another 11 years before I realized that. But I'd learn some valuable lessons along the way.