1 Where It All Began

The Power of a Single Decision

As I packed my bags on the morning of May 26, 1975, I had no idea that a summer opportunity would change the direction of my life forever, nor did I know this single decision would affect the lives of thousands of people that I would meet in the future. A high school buddy of mine, Richard Svetlecic, had convinced me to give up summer baseball, which was a big deal to me at the time, with the promise of making $2,000 working for the Southwestern Publishing Company, now known as Southwestern Advantage.

Richard had worked with the company the previous summer and already had something I did not have—*wheels*. That's right, a car! A car purchased with the money he made last summer while I played baseball. With college staring me straight in the face, the thought of buying my own car was the number-one reason that I finally decided to accept the position.

Preparing to leave on my journey, I replayed the conversation with Richard from two weeks earlier, as I sat down with my parents, to sell them on the idea. After all, Richard may have convinced *me*, but I now had to persuade my mom and dad.

Needless to say, it was not an easy sale.

George and Shirley Cummings were full of questions, concerns, and, of course, some very serious doubts. Today, as the father of five children, all of whom share my adventurous and relentless spirit, I fully understand all of my parents' concerns.

Some of the questions that they were asking me were easy to answer; however, others had required some creativity, as this was not an ordinary summer opportunity by *any* stretch of the imagination.

Southwestern Advantage, out of Nashville, Tennessee, offers college students an opportunity to sell an array of publications, including bible libraries, cookbooks,

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and a variety of children's educational books. The sales are made door-to-door, in various cities across the United States. Now, I was about to become a "bookman," and I was going to join a fraternity of exceptional individuals from all over the country who sold these books.

Little did I know how incredibly challenging, inspiring, and invaluable this entire experience would be for me. I also did not realize that what I would learn at Southwestern would ultimately take me on a rewarding global adventure. This experience inspired me to teach people all over the world and open numerous companies that have generated millions of dollars in revenue over the past 40 years. It's incredible to realize that a single decision has the potential to become a defining moment in your life.

A Little Background

In 1855, Southwestern Publishing House was established in Nashville, Tennessee. The company's name was chosen because, at that time, Nashville was in the "southwestern" part of the United States. Founded by the Baptist minister, James Robinson Graves, Southwestern Publishing Company had initially published ***The Tennessee Baptist***, which was a newspaper, and it also sold various religious booklets by mail, for 20–30 cents each.

The Program

The company operates on a traditional direct selling model in which the student dealers participating in the program are independent contractors, not employees. Their sales revenue, minus their expenses and the cost of goods sold, solely determines the amount of money that they net.

Students entering the program are encouraged to attend a weeklong Southwestern Sales School in Nashville. While there, they learn the product line, how to make customer presentations, and about the company's requirements for running a book business. Students are responsible for the cost of their own travel to and from the training, and for their personal expenses, such as food and gas, along with $100 for company-subsidized lodging.

After the training program, students work in a sales area outside of their home or school states. Sales areas are predominantly located in suburban, small towns, or rural areas. Dealers are advised on what they should be selling, and they are strongly advised to obtain a solicitor's permit, where one is required.

The Expectations

I was told that the most successful student dealers work 80 or more hours per week, of actual time in the field, Monday through Saturday, typically from eight o'clock in the morning to nine-thirty at night. This means that you could potentially make the recommended 30 or more presentations every single day.

At the end of the summer, products are shipped to the dealers, who would then revisit each home where they had made a sale, to deliver the product and also collect any balance that was owed. Dealers generally pay their living expenses out of the down payments that they would receive, and remit the rest of the money to the company, to the extent needed to cover the wholesale and other charges on their accounts. Dealers generally return to the headquarters in Nashville, at the end of the summer, where they settle accounts and receive a check for their final credit balance.

Some dealers are invited to come back in subsequent years as team leaders, and would then, in turn, recruit their own sales teams during the school year. If they do this, they can earn a percentage from the company from the sales of their team.

Hopefully, this gives you a little bit of context into what I was attempting to sell my parents on letting me do, over the next 14 weeks.

The Conversation

My mother was by far my toughest sale. Even though I was 17 years old, I was still her "little boy." You can only imagine her shock when I admitted that I couldn't tell her where I was staying for the summer because the sales areas were not assigned until the last day of the sales school. Imagine the look on her face when I explained that there was no guarantee of income. It was simple. You would either sell something, and you would make money, or you would sell nothing, and you would make nothing.

Topping it all off, I would be responsible for all of my own expenses. Are you starting to get a feel for how this conversation was going for me? My mom said, "Son, what kind of transportation will be provided for you?" I looked at my dad as he was patiently waiting for the answer, knowing that my summer's fate was dependent upon their final decision.

I said, "Mom, they don't provide any means of transportation. In fact, I will walk, or ride a bike, to and from my sales area every single day. We begin knocking on doors at eight o'clock in the morning and then we will knock on our last door at around nine-thirty at night, every day, Monday through Saturday."

I will never forget the look of horror in my mother's eyes. "You are *not* doing that, Son!" My heart sank. I wanted this opportunity more than anything. In a moment of either total desperation or teenage lunacy, I dropped the big bomb on Mom and Dad, thinking that it might help. "Mom, don't worry. Richard said they will teach us how to hitchhike, so I *will* have a ride every day."

Needless to say, this last revelation did not help me win over my parent's support. My dream of earning $2,000 and a car of my very own were evaporating more quickly than a raindrop on a hot summer day. Luckily for me, my parents had taught all of their children to fight for what they believed in.

In fact, they had provided us with examples of strength, courage, and perseverance regularly around our home through everyday situations. As I looked at my parents, my two best friends on earth, I then realized that I simply couldn't just give up this easily.

With all of the enthusiasm that I could possibly muster, I said, "Mom and Dad, I *have* to go. First, you taught me to honor my commitments, and I have already committed to Richard that I would be a part of his team. Second, you also taught me that I shouldn't follow the common path in life, but that it was important to take risks and to create my own path. I want this opportunity because I believe that this experience will be right for me. Most important, I *really* want to buy my own car." There was still no response, so I continued.

"You have supported me throughout all of my athletics in baseball, football, and basketball. You have always encouraged me to do my best and to work hard in both school and sports. And I want to do this more than anything else that I have ever wanted to do in my entire life. I promise that I will not fail or let you down. *Please let me go*."

I just took a deep breath and waited for their answer. My parents sat there in almost a stunned silence, trying to grasp what I had just said to them. They looked at each other for what seemed like an eternity, communicating silently as only parents know how to do.

There were no words, just a series of facial expressions, which I am certain, contained all types of nonverbal meanings that most teenagers would not understand. What would they finally say? How were they going to respond? Had I made a huge mistake with my passionate outburst? Would my parents even give me an answer now, or would I have to wait for one of their famous "private discussions" while my summer's fate remained hanging in the balance?

"Son, I think this is a *great* opportunity," my father finally said. "Do you realize how challenging this is going to be? You will not have the same support system out there that you have here in our home. Do you understand that you will have to carefully manage your money and your own expenses every single day?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I answered quickly and confidently to each question my father asked.

The questions started coming faster and I began to realize that my dad was challenging my level of commitment. He was letting me know that if I did go, that I would have to stay the entire summer and that I would be required to finish what I had started. There would be no quitting if I got homesick or if I was struggling with my sales. It was a classic George Cummings talk that was straight to the point, tough and fair.

When his barrage had finally ended, my dad just smiled and looked at my mom. Now it was Shirley's turn. She said, "Son, how do I know you will be safe? And how do I know that the people that you will be working with are the right kind of individuals?"

It was another series of questions. Unlike my dad, my mom simply asked for reassurance. She needed to believe that I could take care of myself and that I knew how to stay out of danger. I responded with a lot of smiles, reassuring hugs, and some far-reaching promises.

Finally, I felt the momentum shifting my way. Then, my parents asked me to leave the room so that they could talk privately. After what was only15 minutes, but which seemed like several hours to me, they opened the door and invited me back into the two-person jury room for the final verdict.

"Son, we have decided that you can go." You can imagine my screams of joy and hugs of thanks. There were lots of expectations, rules, and then more rules, mostly from my mother, of course. In hindsight, I now know that agreeing to all their rules was easy, compared to all the tests, trials, and tribulations that would be awaiting me over the upcoming 14 weeks of summer.

While I had thought that I was signing up for a "sales position," in fact, I was about to learn more about *life* over the course of a summer than I could ever possibly put into words. I left my home with hope and would ultimately return with a higher amount of self-esteem and self-worth than I had previously ever experienced. The lessons learned over the 14 weeks prepared me to approach life with a deep sense of purpose and a clear vision for my future.

I was literally provided with a "Manifesto for Life" that I have successfully utilized for over four decades. I discovered how to think in terms of the possibilities that life can offer me and not focus on the impossibilities of life generated by negative thinking. I learned how to redirect my negative circumstances into a positive reason to be more diligent in my planning and actions.

These life lessons are sprinkled throughout the fabric of my life's work. I know these experiences are substantive and real because I have lived by and in accordance with them for more than 40 years. More important, I have shared these same lessons with individuals all over the globe who have in turn found their own successes through their adoption and implementation of these ideas and strategies.

When you internalize and consistently apply these lessons, they have the potential to change your life. As you progress through the book, I hope you become engrossed with the subject and begin to take action to apply these lessons to your own personal journey. This personal story is brimming with optimism and knowledge, passion and skill, questions and answers, struggle and triumph.

As you read, you will discern that every chapter of the book features an action plan for your study, review, and personal use. You will not be left alone to navigate these plans. I will serve as your personal guide to offer clear instructions. In addition, these pages contain "125 Life Changing Lessons" along with an array of toolkits and strategies that will support you as you pursue your own goals and dreams.

I think the pursuit of real freedom in life is something we all think about but rarely act upon. We need to adamantly express that we genuinely crave a different kind of freedom, peace of mind, and true happiness. I have great news for you today. I am providing you with the tools and strategies that you will need, to craft a life that is lived on your own terms.

The questions you ask yourself, the thoughts that you process, the decisions that you make and the actions that you take have always mattered. After our journey together, you will truly understand why the book is entitled *It All Matters*. You will discover your *All*, and therefore you will be enabled to clarify with specificity the many Its in your life that must be embraced and acted upon.

You will think bigger, you will live with more intensity, and you will no longer wonder whether your highest ideals and most inspiring dreams are actually possible. You will be able to develop sustainable confidence, clarity, certainty, and creativity, which will ultimately move you forward in life, with a higher level of enthusiasm, excitement, and energy.

My personal story begins with, "Once upon a time a teenager from Louisiana went to a sales school in the foothills of Tennessee. The experience changed his life

forever." Maybe, just maybe, these same lessons will change your life, too. I learned a vital lesson as a teenager that I still value today: We *each* have the power to change our life in a positive way—so let's get started.

My Action Plan (MAP)

Each chapter ends with an MAP (My Action Plan) that is designed as a guide to assist you, the reader, in taking meaningful and massive action on the ideas, strategies, and concepts contained in that chapter. My goal is to take you step by step through each process so that you can maximize every opportunity for personal development and growth. I believe that planning is one of those 1 percent factors we will discuss in the book that will separate the "high achievers" from the "low achievers". There is a thin line that exists between winning and losing that is indeed determined by the level of action taken on a consistent basis. Top achievers do everything the achiever does, plus a little bit more. The top 2 percent in every field do everything the high achiever does, and then some. Do you want to be in the top 2 percent? Let's begin now, by completing the first MAP, which will lead you to the destiny that you so ardently desire.

It All Matters

My Action Plan 1

The level of action taken immediately after opportunity is recognized determines the level of success achieved. . . . Take massive action now.

The Proper Planning "State"

In order to get the most out of any planning session, use these affirmations to develop the progressive mindset required in order to develop total clarity.

The "I Will" Affirmations

I will operate with maximum *confidence* while planning today.

I will think in positive terms and operate with *clarity* while planning today.

I will ask great questions to achieve a state of *certainty* while planning today.

I will *create* a proactive plan that produces the results I desire today.

The Process

- Write these affirmations in your It All Matters Planning Guide, and then sign and date each statement, further reinforcing your commitment to this process.
- Please recite each affirmation out loud, with enthusiasm, in order to frame your thoughts in *possibility thinking* mode.
- Set aside a specific time each day to plan and prioritize the actions you must take to have a successful day.
- Now create one daily affirmation of your own.

What Will You Affirm Today?

My "I Will" Affirmation

I will:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Planning is the art of developing small steps that are action based and time sensitive in order to achieve important goals, objectives, and dreams. Affirm your day.