

BUILDING

Lessons Learned in Real Estate and Life

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INTRODUCTION

*“We know what we are, but know not
what we may be.”*

SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*, ACT 4, SCENE 5



From the deck of a ship in Ha Long Bay, Vietnam, I become lost in another world. Mist rises off the emerald waters toward the turquoise sky as a moist breeze carries the scent of seawater, fish, and diesel fuel from the dozen barges, junk boats, and kayaks dotting the green horizon. Small, jagged limestone islands and islets tower haphazardly around the mouth of the bay, capped by lush rainforests.

Located in northeast Vietnam, Ha Long literally means “descending dragon,” a reference to the local legend that the gods sent

fire-breathing creatures to protect native people from invaders and pirates. In turn, the dragons then spit out jewels and jade to form the barrier of islands guarding the open bay. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the area's unique geographic features, along with prehistoric evidence indicating the presence of people tens of thousands of years ago, annually attract thousands of visitors eager to explore, hike, rock climb, and scuba dive.

After enjoying Ha Long's ancient beauty as well as other parts of Vietnam, I ventured southwest to Thailand. There, I was immediately struck by the differences between these two similar, yet distinct lands. If one was like going back in time, then the other was like visiting the near future. Equally beautiful with its rolling hills, azure lakes, and stunning coastline, Thailand sharply contrasts with Vietnam in terms of its economic stability, urban advancement, and cultural development. While its culture has grown and prospered tremendously in the last few years, the other has remained mired in place. Where one welcomes visitors from all around the world with ease of entrance, the other requires strict, expensive visas limited to short stays.

One country and culture is certainly not better than the other. Both are captivating, intriguing, and appealing. But Thailand has worked to embrace the future in the midst of preserving its past. Vietnam, on the other hand, reflects timeless beauty but struggles to fulfill its potential as an ambassador of its unique offerings. Simply put, one continues to focus outward, using its resources and opportunities to advance, while the other looks inward, limiting its ability to grow.

This contrast illustrates the essence of what I do as an entrepreneur. As the founder and CEO of a globally focused real estate company, Northstar Commercial Partners, I've learned the importance of honoring historical value as well as embracing a powerful vision for

future growth. Both personally and professionally, I've learned that the way a person views the world colors the way they live as well as the way they work. Our attitudes inform our actions. And our attitudes are shaped not only by our circumstances but also by the daily lessons we learn about building a firm foundation while reaching for the stars. Our present ties history to our future.

That's what this book is all about: sharing the lessons I've learned from real estate and real life. While my first book, *The 7 Rings*, focused on balancing life and work with the fulcrum of faith, this book extends those lessons in pursuit of your biggest dreams as well as your greatest gifts to those around you.

Experiencing the differences between countries during my recent visit to Southeast Asia, I realized I had more lessons to share, the kind of experience-based wisdom and hard-won insight that I wish I had known when first starting out. My hope is for this book to be a resource for you, a blueprint as you build your best life, grounded by where you come from and inspired by where you're going. Within these pages, I'll share the best business practices and life lessons gleaned from building a multi-billion dollar global commercial real estate investment firm from nothing.

Forgive me if this sounds immodest, but I know firsthand how being born in the U.S. has enabled me to enjoy a life that others may only dream about. I have been blessed to travel across all regions of our great nation, currently owning assets in 17 states in the U.S. For both work and leisure, I've also visited Central and South America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. While I'm writing from an inherently American perspective, I'm grateful for the many ways my viewpoint has expanded from my global excursions. This book offers my humble way of combining and distilling all of these experiences and sharing them with you.

So many people would do anything to experience the many privileges and freedoms you and I take for granted. Along with millions of others, I'm keenly aware of winning the historical lottery of all time to live when, where, and how we do in this world, especially in the United States of America. Many of us live better than kings and queens of antiquity, given our average life expectancies, access to clean water and healthy food, health and medical benefits, educational options, and our ability to travel around the globe in a matter of hours.

With such abundance comes a responsibility to contribute, to invest, to give back and benefit our planet and fellow human beings in some way.

As with my first book, I do not purport to have all the answers, nor have I led a perfect life. Rather, I have experienced the highs and the lows, from unimaginable achievements to unexpected challenges, that result from living life to the fullest. Because of this real world experience, I offer a uniquely human perspective with the added benefit of lessons learned from some of the world's most innovative leaders, successful entrepreneurs, and wealthiest investors.

Starting with little, I have had the opportunity to build what some consider an empire. This would not be possible without the benefits that freedom, capitalism, and free economic markets have provided throughout my lifetime. My goal is now to equip, empower, and inspire you and others around the world so you can achieve your goals and fulfill your dreams.

We only live once, and each one of us has the opportunity to make a positive or negative difference in this world. My aim is always to make a positive difference, and even if you're the only person who benefits from these lessons I'm about to share, then it's more than worth it. May these lessons ignite your passion to serve your family, your friends, your community—and the world!

Let's roll up our sleeves and start *Building!*

CHAPTER 1

COMING FROM LITTLE, GOING FOR MORE

*“People do not decide to become
extraordinary. They decide to
accomplish extraordinary things.”*

SIR EDMUND HILLARY

As any builder will tell you, the depth and strength of your foundation determines the size and height of your structure. The firmer your foundation, the higher you can scrape the sky with multiple levels. As a second-generation American, I know firsthand the same is true for bringing your dreams to life. You need structural support to reach for the stars. While I’m indebted to many ancestors for the sacrifices they made, I hold a special place for my grandparents.

My father's parents immigrated to the United States in the early 1900's. My grandfather, Constantine Lambrigger, came from Switzerland and earned a living as a boxer and manual laborer in New York City. My grandmother, Julia Eliassen, arrived from Denmark and worked in a sweatshop as a milliner of hats, a fashion staple for ladies at the time. Both came from humble families in the Old World and risked their futures and everything they knew to build a new and better life for themselves in America.

They first met when my grandfather came to move my grandmother's piano. I'm not sure where she was moving from or moving to or how she even managed to own a piano in the immigrant community in which she lived. Obviously, though, they made some kind of favorable impression on one another. I can just imagine him rolling up his sleeves as beads of sweat poured down his back from the strain of hoisting an upright piano through a window to the ground below. And my grandmother, with all her colorful ladies' hats arranged so neatly along the shelves in her apartment.

On a shelf in my office, a framed black-and-white photograph shows my grandmother standing in front of my grandfather's moving truck at an old gas station with a sign offering "Beer 15¢" in the foreground. I have no idea when it was taken, but it perfectly captures the story of how they met as I imagine it. This picture serves as a daily reminder of my roots and my responsibility to continue fulfilling their American Dream. They sacrificed so much so that their descendants could enjoy a better life filled with opportunities and advantages they never had.

Their hard work led them to further one of their dreams as well. After many years of saving money in the city, they moved to Upstate New York, to the Catskill Mountains. With rugged peaks, open

fields, and clear blue lakes, this beautiful area must have reminded them of the homeland they left behind. Which also explains the name for their new venture: The Little Switzerland of America, a small bed-and-breakfast and a cluster of cabins nestled along the shore of the Beaver Kill River, providing modest accommodation to weary travelers.

This river remains quite famous even today as one of the birthplaces of fly-fishing in our country, and nearby the small town of Roscoe is proudly known as “Trout Town U.S.A.” I was born not too far away in Middletown and spent the early years of my youth near Roscoe, which I’ve visited many times since. The fishing is phenomenal, and the beautiful scenery connects me to my family history. When I’m wading in a trout stream beneath a green canopy of trees, I can still hear my grandmother playing the piano that first brought her together with my grandfather, a wistful melody to the rhythm of their dreams.

FAMILY MATTERS

As the first American entrepreneurs on my father’s side, my grandparents passed their work ethic and spirit of risk-taking on to my father, Bob Lambrigger, their first son, born in 1938. My father was also the first graduate of the family from high school, and though he never went to college, he started and owned various businesses in construction and real estate, including a campsite, during his life. He taught me many lessons about working hard, about staying positive, about serving your community in love, and about talking to any person about anything. He was a kind, giving, and loving person, and I am so thankful that he was my dad.

Unfortunately, my father passed away in 2016, shortly after my first book, *The 7 Rings*, was published. I remain so grateful that he had the opportunity to read that book, and to see his family name acknowledged and memorialized, as they gave so much to their country, their community, and to me. I'll forever appreciate the unique gifts I received from my dad and from his parents.

I'm also grateful for the special qualities I've inherited from my mother, Carol, and her side of the family. Adopted at birth by the Hanft family in New York—Flatbush in Brooklyn, to be exact—she too had an adventurous spirit and entrepreneurial ambition like my father, whom she married when she was only 17. Following the precedent set by his parents, my father and mother took a risk and acquired Russell Brook Campground in the same area of the Catskills on a sprawling tract of nearly 400 acres. With my father providing the brawn, my mother offered the financial brains of their operation, which included a hunting preserve, horse riding stables, swimming pool, general store, and dozens of campsites.

While sharing a tireless work ethic and entrepreneurial passion, my mother and father remained two different people their entire lives, the proverbial oil and water, and those differences only grew over time. After 21 years of marriage, when I was still quite young, they divorced. Sharing the operation of their dream was ultimately not enough to keep them together. After constantly witnessing their differences and the increased frequency of conflicts, I knew their divorce allowed them each to pursue happier lives apart.

After the divorce, my parents hired a local man named Bill Watson to help run the campsite, and over time my mother and Bill eventually started dating. Soon they decided to move to Colorado and

get married, both to start a new life together as well as for the natural beauty of the Western Slope, where we settled as a family.

Bill was an entrepreneur as well, starting and owning a home improvement and construction business, while also running an insurance business. This always-hustle environment shaped my view of the world and my place in it. I was constantly reminded that I came from hard-working stock, from people who came from little but pushed to make a better life—for themselves as well as the generations that followed. Lessons I learned from Mom and Dad, as well as from Bill whom I also came to call my Dad, continue to serve me well, both personally and professionally.

From my mother I learned about tenacity, strength, and being smart about business and investments. Though she did not come from much, she built and owned businesses throughout her lifetime, and supported her family and herself for many years as a single mom. She finally retired at age 75 after working consistently all her life. Today, my mother is more financially stable than most retirees, as she has diligently saved and invested her money for many decades. I'm convinced that she's secretly one of those ladies who keeps money squirreled away in her mattress—literally—as well as in her closet, and beneath the floorboards!

THE WEIGHT OF DUTY

From a very young age, I believed that I was destined to accomplish great things, regardless of my current station in life. I started my first business before I was 12, trying to sell worms. Yes, as a startup it was as unglamorous as it sounds, but it also taught me the basics of supply and demand, profit and loss. During the summers, I also raised and

showed livestock for the Montrose County Fair, through 4-H and later Future Farmers of America (FFA).

As someone who came from a family involved in the construction and home improvement business, I learned the value of getting my hands dirty. With my stepfather, Bill, I became a quick study in construction: laying brick, pouring cement, and building with my hands. On the days when I was frustrated or tired of working in the hot sun or frigid winter conditions, Bill would tell me that one day I would be grateful to have a strong work ethic, and to know how to build something with my own hands.

I couldn't appreciate then just how right he was. While I didn't pursue a career swinging a hammer or laying concrete with my own hands, I would nonetheless build a company with my own hands from the ground up. And it's probably no coincidence that my company would help to create countless construction jobs for others willing to work hard and do the best job possible. But at the time, I was like most teens and sometimes resented having to do what felt like such hard labor.

My workload soon became even heavier. When I was 16, Bill passed away suddenly and unexpectedly from an asthma attack. This was very hard on all of us at the time, as Bill was part of the bedrock of our family, and helped to make us a happy, cohesive, family unit. Through his passing, I had to grow up fast and become the man of the house.

When my mother decided to enroll at Mesa State College in Grand Junction an hour away to earn a degree, I had to help take care of my younger sister, Amanda, whom our family had just adopted from Korea, as well as my younger brother, Mark, who was still an infant. While trying to manage at home, I juggled academic respon-

sibilities with student government, sports, Honor Society, and FFA. I also worked at City Market, the local grocery store, sacking groceries for customers and cleaning, while also raising my animals for the county fair each summer.

Most days, the weight of duty pressed in all around me, and there was little time to sit and reflect. Still, I began to feel something stirring deep in my soul. Something to do with who I was and what I wanted to do with my life. A longing for more than I could see in my immediate future. A longing to climb to the top of whatever life had to offer.

GROWING PAINS

Though I loved growing up in small-town rural America, I always felt a bit constrained, just a little too “fenced in.” It wasn’t the hard physical work and demanding schedule that bothered me as much as wanting the freedom to explore other options and learn new skills. Plus, it always bothered me when someone in my family would whisper, “We’re not like those kind of people,” referring to the apparent differences they observed in those who appeared wealthy. Curiously enough, their tone almost carried the same kind of judgment others reserved for people who had nothing as the result of laziness or lack of ambition. Somehow we were not supposed to be a part of that larger world that included trips overseas, exotic restaurants, or impromptu purchases. This limiting attitude just didn’t sit well with me.

I aspired to learn from and compete with the best, with the highest levels of society, regardless of their position, status, location, or wealth. I never believed that we were “less than” or that we could not achieve whatever we wanted in life. I felt that as being human, we had

a right to achieve whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted, as long as we worked hard and smart. I longed to see what it was like in other parts of the world, to watch the sun set behind the Matterhorn or to taste Danish sugar cookies, like the ones my grandmother used to bake, in a café in Copenhagen. People fascinated me—they still do—both our similarities as well as our differences. I longed to learn how business was conducted in other cultures and to understand the important role personal relationships often played in their transactions.

I couldn't have named it at the time, but those growing pains stretched my aspirations beyond the Western Slope. As much as I loved Olathe, the town where I grew up, I sensed that for maximum growth I would have to venture beyond the comfortable familiarity of home. I began to rethink the blueprint for my life that fate had handed me. After Bill's death I was forced to enter adulthood sooner than expected, and that jarring entry also changed my expectations about the future.

I didn't think I was better than anyone else and didn't want to become wealthy as a goal unto itself. I simply wanted to know what I was made of and to test my mettle. Just as my grandparents had left the safety of their homes to venture into an unknown world, I realized it was my turn to do the same. I didn't have to sail across the ocean to Ellis Island like they did, but I did have to travel to an exotic new land—a place called Boulder.