



My Story

by Dennis Kane



Tough love

Dennis Kane turns his entrepreneurial father's youthful lessons into a successful construction business

MY STORY PRETTY much begins and ends with a lawn mower.

As one of nine children in a family headed by a no-nonsense father with a growing service business, the lawn mower became my father's instructional tool, or symbol, of what the real world had in store for us. With 7 acres of grass, a barn, two horses, well-water pumps, a vegetable garden, three tractors, two push mowers, a few Weed Eaters, more electric fences and trees than I care to remember and six Kane boys for labor, Eugene Kane had it figured out. He had the perfect mix of need, resources and measurement capabilities to head out daily at sunrise and return home by dark in the effort to build his budding transportation empire, the E.I. Kane Cos. All the while keeping his children motivated, productive and out of trouble.

It's a story more typical of the agricultural Midwest than Silver Spring in the early '80s. But it's how we grew up in the Kane household. It was certainly a different upbringing — but once

you got through with the fixed-price trades and started the clock ticking on the hourly work, the pay was decent. On Sunday evenings we would bring out our time sheets and settle up with "The Man."

I attended the local Catholic grade school, Our Lady of Good Counsel High School in Wheaton, then Towson University in Baltimore. When it came to the classroom, I thought the comfortable seats were in the back. Grades didn't matter much to me anyway because working hard (at actual work mind you) was what made a person successful.

During college I worked at one of my father's businesses and was certain that upon graduation I would continue in his footsteps. It didn't quite work out that way. Mentoring his fifth son

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was not on his agenda now as a widower at 60 years old (my mother passed away in 1986). I reasoned that if I didn't do something, I might find myself working for one of my older brothers for the rest of my life. I had only worked there about a year, but my father wasn't giving up any indication of a plan, let alone spending much time with me in the business. I lived in his house at the time, but he didn't talk to me much as I was working about 80 hours a week. So I submitted my resignation. He never saw it coming — and he was not pleased.

I arranged an interview with a Bethesda firm that specialized in commercial interior construction for a position in its estimating department to do takeoffs and prepare proposals. I got the job with a \$5,000 raise from what I had been paid working for my father's company. It took me a while to figure what we really did, but I worked awfully hard, knowing what I had walked away from.

The firm was great at presentation and short on actual trade knowledge as it subcontracted 100 percent of the work. A year later I moved to a larger firm where the management structure was experienced, but loose. I was able to freelance a bit, doing whatever needed to be done in the way I thought made sense. I worked even harder and soaked up industry knowledge.

Within two years, at age 25, I was made a vice president of a \$20 million company with 120 employees and managing a team of project professionals. I was surprised, yet quite proud of myself. I enjoyed the notion that my last name had nothing to do with this little slice of success that I had found simply by working hard (thank you, lawn mower).

However, funny things happen, and I probably did something "that needed to be done" my way one too many times for the owner's liking. Soon, I realized I needed to own a firm so I could set the agenda and culture.

I then tried to put together a sweat-equity buyout of a small firm in Laurel. In this process now seven years later, my father expressed interest as to my intentions and approach. He had come to respect what I was trying to accomplish. He suggested I go see his attorney. The attorney took one look at the documents and simply put them to the side and said: "Dennis, I think this is a waste of time. You need to go see your father and start a business of your own." I was shocked, and all I could say was, "Well, isn't that why he sent me to see you?"

The answer was basically that my father knew I would never ask him, and he was too proud to offer for fear of me rejecting his help out of spite. It was a setup of sorts — but I was excited. I wasn't exactly flush with cash or time myself, and my options were limited at 32, with a wife and first child on the way. I could go back to work for my father in either the trucking, office moving or limousine service businesses, or find a job at a large construction company.

I met with my father, and we worked out an agreement in about 20 minutes. He would loan me \$100,000 to be paid back with interest to start a business, and I would use his now-retired former chief financial officer to manage the books. He insisted I own 100 percent of the stock. I then shocked him and said: "... OK, but on one condition, the legal name of the company will be E.I. Kane Construction Inc." I actually wanted it to appear as if I was "back on the lawn mower" and thus convey to him my appreciation and respect. Sometimes, fathers and sons cannot find the right words — especially in business. In such times, it is your actions that define you.

As you might guess, I don't own a lawn mower now — and never have. Ironically, my 9-year-old son recently began lobbying me for a lawn mower to use to cut our grass and make money. He offered to pay me interest if I would loan him the money.

I am torn and have not decided what to do. I know that for me, the lawn mower changed my life. @



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