

CHAPTER 1

PINEHURST: THE BLUEPRINT

I was born in Detroit and raised on Pinehurst.

It was not the kind of street people romanticize later in life. There were no oversized homes, no manicured entrances, and no illusion of perfection. Pinehurst was a working-class Detroit neighborhood where people woke up early, worked hard, and rarely complained about either. Garage doors rattled open in the dark while the rest of the city still slept.

That was the environment I grew up inside.

Nobody sat around discussing dreams or personal fulfillment. Nobody talked about “finding themselves.” People worked. They provided. They kept moving. You learned far more by observation than conversation. In our house especially, lessons never delivered through speeches. My father taught everything without realizing he was teaching it at all.

Every morning at 3:30, the alarm went off.

Not occasionally. Every single day. Winter. Summer. Rain. Snow. Sick. Exhausted. It did not matter. The alarm sounded and my father moved.

During Michigan winters he woke up even earlier because before he ever left for work at General Motors, he was already outside shoveling snow. Not just our driveway. The sidewalks too. I can still picture the streetlights reflecting off fresh snow while the sound of his shovel scraped across frozen concrete in the darkness. Most of the neighborhood remained asleep while he was already outside clearing paths for everyone else.

By 4:00 he was gone.

No lingering over coffee. No complaints about being tired. Just movement.

My father worked for General Motors for forty-one years in Research and Development. Not the glamorous side of the company and not the executive offices either. He worked in the part of the organization where things are built, tested, broken apart, rebuilt, and tested again. Future executives and division presidents routinely sent through his shop as part of their training. If you were moving up through General Motors during that era, at some point you learned under men like my father. That was always the irony.

These young executives would arrive wearing crisp shirts and polished shoes, asking questions while my father stood there with grease under his fingernails and decades of knowledge in his head. They learned from him. They studied him. Then they moved upstairs into the corporate structure while he stayed exactly where he was.

Over the years, some of those men became division presidents. Not one ever came back for him.

There was always an unspoken understanding in our house that talent and advancement were not always connected. My father believed there was an invisible ceiling over Jewish men in corporate Detroit during that era. You would think the years after World War II would have changed things completely. In some ways they did. In other ways prejudice simply became quieter and more sophisticated. It lived behind closed doors instead of out in the open.

My father never talked about it bitterly because that was not his personality. He simply accepted it and kept working.

But there was another side of him too, one I appreciate much more now looking back. My father understood machinery instinctively. He could look at something broken for thirty seconds and somehow already know where the problem lived

inside it. Long before people spoke about engineering as some prestigious profession, he was designing and building things constantly simply because he could not tolerate the idea of something not working properly.

The basement became his world after work.

There was always some project partially disassembled somewhere under harsh overhead lights. A milling machine. A drill press. Pieces of aluminum or steel spread across the workbench beside tools that looked intimidating to me as a kid. The smell of machine oil and metal filings mixed with sawdust and cigar smoke while an old radio played in the background. Some afternoons it was Tigers baseball. Other nights opera. Sometimes in the same evening depending on his mood.

Looking back now, that basement shaped me as much as anything else in my childhood.

When I was in Boy Scouts, everybody was building slot cars from identical kits. Most fathers assembled them exactly according to the instructions. My father could not approach anything that way. He redesigned the entire car from scratch in our basement. He adjusted the weight distribution, reshaped parts of the frame, and modified details nobody else would have even considered touching.

By the time we arrived at the competition, the thing was so fast it almost became embarrassing.

We destroyed everybody.

And then, of course, we were disqualified.

I still remember my father trying not to smile afterward.

That was him perfectly. Competitive. Creative. Slightly rebellious. Completely convinced he could improve anything if given enough time around tools and machinery.

He used to say “Son, with a big enough stick I can move the world”.

He even made me a custom baseball bat by hand.

Most of my friends’ fathers were doctors, lawyers, or professionals who came home wearing clean shirts and loosened ties. They rarely built anything themselves. Their hands looked untouched by physical work. My father came home with grease under his fingernails carrying ideas around in his head long after he left General Motors for the day.

At the time, I did not fully appreciate the difference. Now I realize how much respect I developed for people who could create something tangible with their hands.

Even small moments became unforgettable performances. During the summer, sprinklers would create giant humps of trapped water underneath the lawn, little swollen mounds rising from the grass like miniature pitcher’s mounds. My father would walk over carrying a screwdriver or some long metal tool, stab one of the mounds suddenly, and water would explode high into the air while I stood there laughing hysterically.

Eventually I started inviting neighborhood friends over just to watch him do it.

Their fathers would never have done something like that.

Mine did.

And somewhere inside those moments, I was learning something much bigger than discipline or work ethic. I was learning creativity, curiosity, and resourcefulness without realizing it. I was learning that ordinary things could become extraordinary if you looked at them differently enough.

There was also an entrepreneurial side to my family that ran much deeper than I understood as a child.

My father kept rolls of twenty-dollar bills locked inside a heavy metal desk in the house. As a kid, it fascinated me. There was something mysterious about it, almost mythical. The desk itself felt important because I knew there was money inside even if I had no idea exactly how much. Looking back, I realize that relationship with cash, risk, and opportunity had been passed down long before my father.

My grandmother kept her twenties in paper bags inside the freezer next to Black and Red licorice, Three Musketeers, Snickers, and Milky Ways.

That was completely normal in our family.

At least I thought it was.

Only later did I fully understand where some of that mentality came from. My grandmother had been involved with Detroit bootlegging operations during the Purple Gang era. She used her store in the city to help store moonshine from stills and whiskey smuggled across the river from Windsor during Prohibition.

Long before anybody in our family talked about entrepreneurship in polished language, survival and hustle already embedded into the bloodline.

By 1975, that instinct was still alive and well.

That was the year Bubble Yum exploded onto the market. A quarter a pack. Kids went crazy for it overnight. My grandmother had spent her entire life in the grocery business and knew distributors, delivery schedules, and inventory systems better than anyone. Somehow, she learned Bubble Yum was arriving every Tuesday morning at 7:30 a.m. at the F&M market in Ferndale before the store officially opened.

So, she waited in the loading area and bought all of it.

Every pack.

Just like the bootlegging days.

Then she became my partner.

Fifty-fifty.

I sold the gum out of my locker at middle school for a dollar a pack while we controlled the supply before the product fully spread across the Detroit market. The funny part was nobody ever stopped me. Teachers bought it. Kids bought it. Eventually even the Principal and his children were buying from me.

At the time, it just felt exciting.

Looking back now, I realize I was learning about scarcity, timing, inventory control, and demand before I was even old enough to drive.

There was also an entrepreneurial side to my father that never fully had the chance to develop the way it should have. At one point he traveled to Findlay, Ohio selling IV trees and curtain cars for hospitals. He believed deeply in the products and the designs behind them, but eventually he got pushed aside and lost the patent rights entirely. Looking back, I think experiences like that reinforced his belief that brilliant people are not always the ones who profit from what they create.

Still, every morning the alarm went off at 3:30.

Every afternoon he came home at exactly 4:00.

And a few minutes later came one of the defining sounds of my childhood.

The 'Thwapper.

That is what I called it.

My father invented it himself because no machine existed capable of making crushed ice exactly the way he wanted. It was

a fly-swatter handle with a giant steel ball bearing mounted at the top like some homemade industrial tool straight out of a machine shop.

He would stand at the kitchen counter holding ice cubes in one enormous hand while bringing the Thwapper down with controlled force.

Thwap.

Thwap.

Thwap.

The sound echoed through the house every weekday afternoon of my childhood.

Then he would make exactly one Bloody Mary.

One.

Never two. Never three. Never weekends. Never after retirement.

That one drink was never really about alcohol. It was ritual. A transition between the pressure of the factory and the calm of home. A brief pause before the entire process started over again the next morning.

At the time, none of it felt unusual.

That is the strange thing about childhood. The moments shaping you rarely announce themselves while they are happening. They simply repeat again until eventually they become part of your internal operating system.

What Pinehurst gave me was not ambition.

It gave me structure.

Detroit did not care how hard you tried. It cared what you produced. Nobody handed out rewards for effort where I grew

up. Either you showed up or you did not. Either you stayed in the deal, or you walked away.

Most people walked away too early.

That lesson stayed with me long before I ever negotiated my first lease or worked on a major development. Years later, when deals collapsed, financing disappeared, partnerships fractured, or pressure became overwhelming, I already understood something many people never fully learn.

You stay.

Not because it is easy.

Not because you are fearless.

Because leaving was never part of the blueprint.

That blueprint started on Pinehurst long before there was real estate, long before there were billion-dollar projects, and long before I understood where life would eventually take me. It started with a man waking up before sunrise, shoveling snow in the dark, building machines in the basement, crushing ice with a homemade tool, and teaching lessons he never once realized he was teaching.

STAY IN THE DEAL.