



BOB BUCHANAN

The Whole is Greater
Than the Sum of Its Parts

Bob once had a little-known facility for languages. During his 6-year active Navy service in the Vietnam War, he scored so high on a language aptitude test that the Navy instructed him to become fluent in Mandarin. He was then shipped out to Japan for 3 years to do top secret special operations in and around Southeast Asia, China and North Korea. Bob was an officer in charge of several small teams of highly trained experts.

In 1969 he would lose an entire team when a North Korean MIG shot down their EC-121 plane doing surveillance off the coast of North Korea. By luck, Bob was not on that leg of the operation. A week later, he and his new team were lowered by cable from a helicopter reconnoitering with a submarine surfacing just long enough for the men to get on board.

Bob's parents very much shaped the man that he would become. He recalls his mother asking him what words he lived by. He rattled off words like honor, honesty and hard work, which was met by silence. Finally, his mom replied, "You never said the word integrity, which is probably the most important word you should embody." There has not been a day since that he has not thought about what was the right thing to do and how to do it.

His mom was a very gifted woman who was accepted to Vassar, but the scholarship was not enough for her to afford attending. She was a voracious reader and never stopped trying to learn as much as she could even as she raised four kids. Bob got his intellectual curiosity and love of learning from her.

His dad was fortunate to attend the Wharton School just before WWII. It was there that he and his classmates were trained to be "captains of industry" to serve the country during and after the war. He felt his mission was to deliver what the country needed, and at that time it was affordable housing. In the early 1960s, his dad served as the President of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) where he was committed to make home building more efficient and less costly.

He arranged for a "Muddy Shoe Tour" of one of his projects in Rockville and invited his Wharton buddies and other industry leaders to attend. Fortunately it had rained the night before, and when the bus pulled up to the job, there were audible groans from the individuals who saw their unprotected products strewn haphazardly around the site and damaged by exposure to the elements. There had been no coordination about when their pristine products should be delivered from the factory, how they should be wrapped, and how they may be inadvertently used by the construction workers on site. It was one of those eureka moments when his father knew he had made a difference.

In 1970 when Bob's tour in Japan was winding down, the Navy and others were talking to him about extending his service or joining other government organizations. As a young father of two, however, he was not sure he could handle the time away from home. Then his mom phoned him and said his father needed his help running the family business. Relieved, he headed home.

He was able to convert what had been a homebuilding operation into large-scale, multi-use commercial development company. Riding the wave of suburban office park and residential expansion in Northern Virginia that began in the late '70's, his career thrived as federal contracts soared, and billions of procurement dollars poured into this region.

Bob brought different community stakeholders together to support big projects. After his being elected to the Rockville City Council from 1974-78, he had learned how the public sector worked and felt he could help bridge the gap between the public and private sectors. So when he began developing in Ballston in the mid '80's, he became a founding member of the Ballston Partnership, the public/private partnership (P3) that ultimately became the model for P3's in our region.

In 2008 he grew tired of hearing the usual outside versus inside the Beltway talk and Maryland versus Virginia or the District. That prevailing thinking was holding back the region from reaching its growth potential. He started the 2030 Group with like-minded regional business leaders to spread an awareness of regionalism. It found its moment in the successful competition for Amazon's HQ2 and the need especially continues on today.

Bob's story wouldn't be complete without his three children, nine grandchildren, two great grandchildren, and wife of 57 years, Sharon. She too has a thing for languages, picking up more Japanese than he could in their time living there. They share a love of art especially crafts—ceramics, fiber and studio furniture—which began in Japan when they visited pottery villages and admired how each had a unique style and glazing. An adventurer in her own right, Sharon volunteered to work on building a library and community center in East Africa in the early 1960's long before anyone did things like that.

Bob was never one for the spotlight. His story is built on and wrapped up in the good works and positive influence of everyone around him. That's how synergy—and integrity—work. ■

