

MORRIS: Hoosier's bootstrap story inspires

Greg Morris
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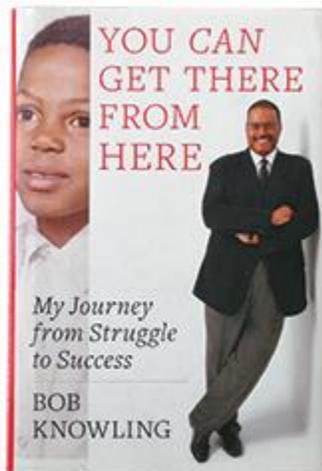
COMMENTARY

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This week, I'm avoiding all things related to the government shutdown and the political insanity playing out in Washington. Instead, I want to share some thoughts about a truly inspiring individual. He spoke to a group of entrepreneurs, angel investors and businesspeople at StepStone Business Partners' 2013 Midwest E3 Summit.

His name is Bob Knowling, and he's a native Hoosier. Bob's had a very successful business career so far, but you might not know his story. He's been on the cover and inside the pages of many national business publications, like Forbes, Fortune, Fast Company and Business Week. He's led many impressive companies.

Bob also headed up the NYC Leadership Academy, a not-for-profit created by former New York City Department of Education leader Joel Klein and Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The academy was charged with developing the next generation of principals for New York's public schools.



Bob Knowling has served on many corporate and not-for-profit boards. He was awarded the Wall Street Project's Reginald Lewis Trailblazers Award by President Bill Clinton and the Rev. Jesse Jackson in 1999. Clinton commended Knowling's efforts in developing a national agenda for the spirit and mission of inclusion, opportunity, expansion, advocacy and success in the workplace for women and people of color in the high-tech industry.

Bob, now chairman of Eagles Landing Partners, specializes in helping senior management formulate strategy, lead organizational transformations, and re-engineer businesses. And, in 2011, he published a motivational business book, "YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE: My Journey from Struggle to Success." Bob's success has provided him more financial rewards than he could have ever imagined.

But while everything I've mentioned is extremely impressive, none of this history is what moved me. No, it was how he described his humble beginnings while growing up in Kokomo and his struggle to get to where he is today.

Bob grew up in a blended family with 13 siblings. In his book, he describes a hard, but happy, childhood. He learned about poverty and racism early in life. But hard times and difficulties aside, he describes his deep love for his parents and how that kept him centered.

Bob tells of the time his family had to go on welfare, which, in Kokomo in that era, meant you got some food. He observed his mom making bologna sandwiches for everyone, but noticed she never made one for herself. He eventually figured out she ate only if there was anything left after the kids finished eating. So, he learned to eat slowly. If his siblings ate all their food, he would leave some of his for his mom.

Knowing describes basically living at the local YMCA in his childhood and all the benefits the organization afforded him. In fact, he is a very active volunteer and contributor for the Y to this day.

After high school he was heavily recruited for sports and went to Wabash College, where he earned his bachelor's in theology.

He got a job with Indiana Bell in 1977, but had only \$200 to his name. His first paycheck was 30 days away, so he lived in his car in Holliday Park on the north side of Indianapolis for about a month and showered at the YMCA.

From these humble beginnings, Bob rose in the Indiana Bell/Ameritech organization to where he reported directly to the top guy, Dick Notebaert at the time. And by 1997, Bob was named executive vice president of operations and technologies for a 30,000-member team in charge of planning, delivering and maintaining telecom services for more than 25 million customers in 14 states.

So, the next time I start to think things are getting tough, I'm going to think of Bob Knowing and how he overcame extreme obstacles to achieve success in life. That inspiration will carry me through the moment.

Pick up his book. You'll find a lot of great business advice, and I'm confident you'll be inspired by his personal story. •

Morris is publisher of IBJ. His column appears every other week. To comment on this column, send e-mail to gmorris@ibj.com.