

Dan Aldridge

The Family Man

Dan Aldridge walked out of his high school basketball coach's office, spirits low after delivering the news that he wouldn't be able to play his sophomore year. It had been a hard choice, but the time required for practices and games was becoming too much with two jobs and his father needing him home. He realized then that the promise he'd show as an all-star club player and in high school would never be realized. His dreams to play college ball were over.

Since his mother's untimely death to cancer and his father's ensuing depression over the loss of his wife, Dan had at the age of 16 become the man of the house and breadwinner for the family. "After Mom died, my father collapsed emotionally. There were times we couldn't get him to come out of his room, so I took over," Dan recalls. "I drove my siblings around, bought the groceries, prepared meals, and worked several jobs. It was very tough, and all the things I had done before, like playing basketball and having a social life, went out the window. But I kept our family going. It made me man up. I had to take control and be strong, especially with my younger siblings depending on me."

Adulthood may have been thrust upon Dan too early, but with the help of his maternal grandfather and second-oldest brother, he was able to carry the family through their hardest time. He became a family man, developing the values, insight, stamina, and compassion that would later make him a successful business leader, able to keep a company afloat through good times and bad as well. "We could have very easily ended up in a shelter," he notes of his youth. "But we stuck it out."

Today, Dan is the founder and CEO of Performa Apps, a company that sells enterprise software for manufacturing and, more recently, for the public sector. "The Enterprise Resource

Planning (ERP) software we implement basically runs the nuts and bolts for an entire manufacturing company, from taking sales orders to doing floor planning to handling purchase and production orders," he explains. "Lately we've been focusing on financials, business intelligence, customer relationship management, and financial budgeting systems."

The company recently went through a merger, but has kept its mission intact. While Dan has come a long way since the days of counting his pennies in order to afford dinner for his family, he keeps a strong sense of family values at the forefront of his day-to-day thinking. "I started my business with a family-oriented feeling," he explains. "I was close with the people I hired, and I felt responsible to take care of them as a family. I wanted people with similar values, so that if we faced adversity, such as the downturn in the economy, we could stay strong together."

Before his mother's death, Dan and his three younger siblings enjoyed a relatively carefree childhood in Prince Georges County, Maryland. His father had been in the Navy as a petty officer, and his mother was a homemaker. His father retired to help raise the four children, and while they got by on savings and some Social Security benefits, the children had to hold jobs as soon as they were eligible to. Dan's first job was working a newspaper route around the age of twelve, and he eventually moved on to working in food service by the age of fifteen.

Dan had a close relationship with his parents growing up and took specific values from each of them. From his father, who always had high standards for his children, he learned that integrity was essential in both business and in life. "He believed in being self-reliant and resilient," Dan explains. "He would never let us entertain the mindset that the world was against us. If we



had problems, he expected us to internalize them and fight for ourselves.” His mother, on the other hand, taught him kindness, which she demonstrated through her avid charity work and attentive care of her family.

Both of his parents routinely stressed the importance of education and hard work in school, and they sent Dan to Eleanor Roosevelt High School, a challenging institution with a focus on science and technology. Even after the responsibility and turmoil that followed his mother’s death, Dan remained devoted to his schoolwork and won a scholarship for college. He attended the College of William and Mary for undergrad, where he majored in economics. He found he had a deep interest in econometrics, and for one class, he performed a study that predicted the potential success of a baseball team in the Washington area. “It was based on the geography of the city as well as the demographics, and found that it would be a lousy place to have a team,” he laughs. “They would have to have a well-above average record to generate enough ticket sales.” While his paper may have disappointed local baseball players, it impressed the economic analysis firm National Economic Research Associates, and he was hired shortly after graduation.

He worked at N/E/R/A as a programmer analyst for three years, after which he spent a short time working for the Washington Consulting Group doing government contract work. Then, in 1991, he enrolled at George Mason University, where he attained his MBA. While he had been turned off by accounting in undergrad, he devoted himself to understanding the financial side of business in graduate school, leading his class in the subject and acquiring skills that would prove invaluable down the road at Performa Apps.

After finishing his MBA, Dan was hired by Baan International, a Dutch company that at the time was the #2 company in the ERP market behind SAP. He worked there for three years as a consultant until he received a call from a recruiter inviting him to work for FlowServe, Inc., a multi-billion dollar manufacturer of oil pumps. Their office in Los Angeles was looking for independent consultants around the same time that Baan began running into financial trouble. Shortly after Dan accepted the job with FlowServe, Baan was bought out, making him glad he had made the tough call to uproot his wife from their newly-built house in

D.C. to move to Huntington Beach in California.

“It really was a once in a lifetime opportunity,” he laughs, recalling the fun he and his then-new wife, Liz, had living on the California shore. “They gave me a great contract, and rates were really high back then because they were looking for good people. They gave us a nice salary and a large expense account, so we had a nice life for the three years we were there.” As well as being a positive business experience, Dan and Liz were able to save most of their money since their living expenses were small and they were able to rent out their home in Washington while they were away. It had been a comfortable lifestyle, but when Liz became pregnant with their first son in 2001, she decided it was time they moved home to be closer to their families.

While in California, Dan was essentially working for his own business as an independent consultant, and when he returned back to Washington in 2003, he incorporated the company as i-app Services LLC. “Working for manufacturing companies is what I was born to do,” he says. “I’m a finance guy at heart. I get involved in accounting, but I also like to be out there on the shop floor where things are actually being made. It’s fascinating to see how they do it.”

The company was solely owned for nearly ten years until 2012, when they decided to go through with a merger. The decision was made in large part because the company had anticipated receiving a large contract with Daimler Benz in the U.S. and Canada. To prepare, they hired several full time employees as well as various independent contractors. As it turned out, however, the project was prematurely canceled when fluctuations of the economy rendered it short of funding. At the same time, the division they were working for was shut down, leaving Dan with an overstaffed company that was bleeding money. “I had no choice but to purge in 2012,” he sighs. “Things in manufacturing had been tough, and I had to let go some employees who were also good friends. I even had to let go of my younger brother, who had worked for me as our Marketing Director. Imagine having to lay off your own brother.”

Before Performa Apps started hitting turbulence, they had worked with an Australian company as a Performa Software reseller. Dan and the CEO of Performa had met at a Channel Partner Conference in Orlando in 2011, where it quickly became clear that Dan and his company had been

on their radar for some time. “At that point, he wasn’t interested in acquiring us,” Dan explains. “He wanted us to become a reseller of his software. He was trying to break into the US market, and having a small US-based business would have given Performa the kick it needed.”

He and Dan formed a solid relationship, so when Dan ran into some personal and financial battles in the early part of 2012, his new ally came to his aid. “He knew exactly what was going on,” Dan explains. “He made a proposal to me that they become an investor in Performa Apps, since I needed time to recover and the company wouldn’t survive otherwise.” Fortunately, Dan had been hoping for such an offer, since it provided security for the company and allowed Dan to have a salary he could depend on. In July of 2012, the two companies merged, just in time to land a gigantic deal and completely turn the fortune of the company around.

Through the ebb, flow, and ultimate wave of his success, Dan has always been a family man, making it his life’s mission to look out for those who depend on him. Even though his company is no longer independent, he looks back on the merger with relief, thankful for the stability it lent him and his staff. “Performa gave me a CFO and relieved me of having to do the company finances, which did wonders for my stress level,” he remarks. “Now, generally speaking, Performa lets me do my thing and run my business the way I know how to. It also allows me to have just shy of equal shareholding in the company, so I still have a good sized stake if we sell the company down the line.”

Now that the dust has settled, Dan looks back feeling most proud that he stuck with his business despite its near collapse. “Having my own business has always been my dream,” he says. “I hope I can be remembered for having built a company that people are proud to work for. It doesn’t have to be big, just as long as it has a great reputation and is built around people who love it and share in our culture and values.”

Being a family man, as well, means honoring those that have passed just as much as he works to honor the future. Dan pays this homage through giving back. Keeping the memory of his mother alive, he actively gives to charities for the homeless, and has made a family tradition out of taking his two sons to assist organizations like Helping Hungry Kids provide meals for lower

income families.

When advising young people entering the business world today, Dan emphasizes the importance of gaining unparalleled expertise at every step of one’s academic and professional path. “Learn all you can about accounting, finance and entrepreneurship in school and in your jobs after college,” he says. “These skills will prepare you for having your own business if you choose to later in your career.”

Timing also figures into his advice. “If you do your own thing right away, there’s a lot of risk,” he explains. “There’s security in working for a larger company, and it teaches you the ropes. When and if you do opt for the entrepreneurship route, the most important thing is hiring the best people, and to then delegate and clear their path to success. By all means, hire an excellent CFO and accountant. You don’t want to do the finances yourself. Instead, you want to focus on your business. If you have a dream, you should go for it. Just strive to go after it in a smart way.”

Being smart in business also means supplementing real-world experience with extensive reading to stay knowledgeable in one’s field. Dan, for instance, keeps abreast of the news by reading the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Economist*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, *Forbes*, *Mashable*, and the *Huffington Post*, as well as monitoring social media sources like LinkedIn Today.

From his journey to this point, Dan has cultivated a leadership style centered upon leading by example. “I take great care in hiring great people that are as passionate about enterprise software and manufacturing as I am,” he explains. “I delegate responsibility and set dates for completion of tasks, but I largely leave the ‘how’ up to them. I’m not a clock-watcher. My employees can work whenever or however they choose as long as they achieve their goals, which I think lowers stress and allows them to perform at a high level.”

With this in mind, Dan leads his business through actions and example, just like he led his family in the wake of tragedy back when he was sixteen years old. “I’m a hard worker, and I just do the job that needs to be done,” he says. “Losing Mom was hard, but it made me stronger in the end. I know some people might have taken the exact opposite path, but we pulled together and waded our way through. In many ways, that’s how we kept our business afloat. You just have to

stick it out, and eventually the storm passes.”

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