

Todd Chamberlin

Leading Innovation through Family Focus

Struck by a sudden sense of ardent realization, Todd Chamberlin stopped rifling through his father's effects and paused with his hand on the old photograph. He could almost smell the sweat that would soak his shirt after a long day of hard labor under a hot summer sun; could again feel that sense of fulfillment from seeing the look on a customer's face when he'd exceeded their expectations. Even in his first job mowing lawns at age twelve, Todd had always earned generous praise from clients. His father, however, had been a different story. A man with unparalleled work ethic and tight-lipped sternness, Ashby Chamberlin was not apt to dispense expressions of praise or pride despite his son's best efforts. Even after assuming presidency of Kenwood Golf and Country Club in 2005, he still found himself wondering at times if he was living up to his father's unspoken expectations. But here, staring at the photograph that Ashby had kept of the young boy on a bicycle trailing his lawn mower behind him, Todd felt a whole history of commendation wash over him.

If there's one thing that makes Kenwood unique amongst its peers, it's the theme of family that so thoroughly permeates its nature and philosophy. Established in 1928 in Bethesda, Maryland, the 108-acre property became an heirloom of the Chamberlin family in the 1950s when Donal Chamberlin split ways with his business partners and acquired sole ownership of the club. His son, Ashby Chamberlin, got involved with the club at age 26. Todd, coincidentally, also began working at the club at age 26, gaining ample expertise and knowledge to assume the presidency in succession. Now, five years later, he has expanded his family's legacy into a state-of-the-art facility poised at the forefront of its industry. And, if you were to

ask Todd about his aspirations for the future, you'd find he's just getting started.

Not only is Kenwood the only family-owned country club in the area, but its entire business model is oriented around family. While clubs have historically tended to discourage the presence of children and have fostered a "boy's club" atmosphere, the country club landscape is shifting toward more family-friendly practices, and Kenwood appears to be ahead of the trend. Its emphasis on children is reflected in the various activities, events, and seasonal camps offered by the club, as well as by the welcoming and tolerant attitude of the staff and members. Kenwood has positioned itself as a place where families can spend quality time together, and the vision has paid off tremendously through the satisfaction of its membership, which holds at around sixteen hundred.

While the theme of family has remained pervasive throughout Kenwood's history, Todd's management philosophy has initiated a new era for the club. Whereas Ashby Chamberlin's method tended toward the preservation and maintenance of the club's unique charm, Todd hoped to offer new and innovative amenities to its members and redesigned its budget such that initiation fees were used for improvements rather than subsidization. The centerpiece of this visionary and disciplined approach and of his presidency to date is the club's extraordinary fitness center, which features a 75-yard swimming pool, full-service spa and locker rooms, group exercise room, childcare facilities, and an eighteen-person Jacuzzi. Serving as a gathering place for family and friends, the fitness center upholds the club's deepest values while also offering an ideal product in light of the fact that the American College of Sports Medicine has ranked DC as the most health-conscious city in America. Todd



credits the fidelity of Kenwood's membership in spite of the current recession in large part to this feature.

But not just *any* fitness center could serve as a sticking point for clientele when deciding whether to retain their membership or not. In the early 2000s, companies generally built more conservative fitness centers, which are now the chief complaint of members in today's club landscape. Had Todd followed this trend, he would now be faced with the need to upgrade a past project instead of focusing on new ones. In planning for the center, he intended to construct a facility that would remain competitive for three or four decades, he reports. So far, this goal has been realized.

So how exactly does one come to acquire this intuitive degree of forward-thinking? Todd argues that it is not bred from intuition at all, but rather from instinct—survival instinct, to be more specific. Even from the time of his lawn mowing ventures, he felt an inner drive toward the achievement of self-sufficiency and independence. He had adopted the tremendous work ethic of his father—a man who, as Todd explains, can still outwork most people even at the age of seventy-two. Compelled by this sense of discipline, he worked hard as a boy and came to understand that his own survival and independence was inextricably linked to his ability to foster truthful and genuine relationships with his customers. Thus, excellent client service was set as a cornerstone of his management philosophy and has proven to be a strong foundation for his role at Kenwood.

Patience and understanding, Todd explains, are the other crucial traits to possess from the time one first enters the workforce. In his early affiliation with the club, he worked in every department, with full years dedicated solely to golf course monitoring, housekeeping, and maintenance, respectively. He views this apprenticeship experience as a fundamental phase in his life in which he absorbed the wisdom and knowledge of those who had come before him. Recognizing that many young people today are not cognizant of this tremendous opportunity to grow through learning from their predecessors, he would advise the next generation to adopt such practices.

Taking the time to learn a business from the bottom up in this fashion also equips a leader

with the valuable ability to empathize with employees, as Todd's situation demonstrates. Maintaining a sincere respect and appreciation for his staff is an important facet of his management philosophy, and it seems that the success of his approach stems from the brand of deep compassion that can only be achieved by having stood in his employees' shoes in the past. Embracing the old adage to treat others as you would wish to be treated, he strives to maintain a hands-off management approach to give staff members the opportunity to carry out his vision in their own way. When an employee demonstrates hard work and commitment, his praise is sincere, personalized, and specific, underscoring the individual's effort in detail.

By instilling this quality of sincerity in his relationships with both club members and staff, Todd was able to transcend historical barriers between the two that had, in the past, posed them as adversaries. At the club's Seventy-Fifth Anniversary, he promised to break down the walls between management and membership to create a unified and cohesive front. With this revolution in climate and attitude, board meetings are no longer sites of conflict. Rather, management and membership are working together to decide what is best for Kenwood as a whole, fostering an atmosphere that is more conducive to innovation and progress than ever before.

Considering his remarkable ability to promote unity within his club and within the families of his community, it comes as a surprise that this great strength also manifests itself as Todd's greatest challenge—a struggle to separate work life from family life. On one level, Todd's situation is not unique from that of many other Americans with resource-intensive jobs that demand a considerable amount of time and energy. Like so many of us, he makes a conscious effort to "draw the line" at the end of the workday, liberating himself from frustrations and tensions so that he arrives home happy and ready to greet his wife and children.

On another level, however, Todd faces very individual struggles as a family business owner, in which the "line" between the work sphere and family sphere is often blurred and difficult to define. Working intimately with a family member in business can at once serve as one's greatest motivation and one's greatest insecurity, for only those close to our hearts could

inspire such perpetual examination of self and practice. In his own experience, Todd utilized the assistance of a personal business coach specializing in family dynamics as a mediator and mentor. While many family businesses fail due to the internal pressures they face, the Chamberlins were able to channel their experience into a creative force that has advanced both their familial ties and their enterprise as a whole.

Reflecting back upon the hallmarks that define Kenwood, the two themes of calculation and risk repeatedly arise and complement one another. If a family business is risky, Todd moderates the stakes through employing the knowledge of an expert coach. If constructing a cutting-edge fitness facility was risky, it was offset by thorough research and analysis of the costs and benefits. It is this combination of calculation and risk that consumes Todd's days as president of Kenwood. He may no longer be sweating beneath the hot summer sun, but he maintains the same degree of focus and commitment that he had as the young lawn mower in his father's photograph. Gathering research, experience, and the opinions of members, staff, and specialists, he synthesizes these various pieces of information into comprehensive plans for the future that are ambitious yet plausible. His next brainchild, a project in the works, is the construction of a racket and paddleball facility. One skeptic asked him why he would want to do such a thing when no other club in the area has attempted it. In characteristic fashion, Todd replied, "That's exactly why."

– By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).*