

## YP Spotlight: Banker Bjorn Berg uses teaching skills to find success

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Bjorn Berg, branch manager at US Bank on Walnut Street downtown Des Moines. / David Purdy/The Register

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His calling came to him so clearly, so profoundly: He was supposed to teach. Bjorn Berg, 33, remembers the day and time it happened: Jan. 23, 2001, at 9:35 p.m.

"We were sitting around the dorm room," said Berg, who attended Luther College in Decorah. "We had just got done with intramurals and were just sitting around. I literally stood up and said 'I know what I'm going to do.' "

He had been studying pre-law and felt unfulfilled. But now, now he had wind in his sails. The future seemed clear.

Soon enough, though, the curveballs would come.

**You think I should do what?**



Bjorn Berg, 33, is branch manager at U.S. Bank on Walnut Street downtown. / David Purdy/The Register

#### Bjorn's 3 tips for defining success as a YP:

**1. Knowledge:** Know what to do. Have a firm grasp of what it is that is expected of you, and a clear path of what needs to be done. Without a rudder, even the fastest motor will propel a ship off course.

**2. Skills:** Know how to do it. Understand the skills necessary to reach your goals and be successful in what you're trying to accomplish. If you don't know how to do what you're doing, chances are you won't be doing it for very long.

**3 Attitude:** Want to do it. Without the drive or desire to move forward and reach your goals, knowledge and skills won't matter. Find what makes you tick, or what motivates you and translate that into an attitude that is positive and ready to tackle whatever is put in front of you.

**TODD ERZEN** covers young professionals in central Iowa. Have a story idea for him? Send an email to [terzen@dmreg.com](mailto:terzen@dmreg.com).

#### Bjorn Berg

**AGE:** 33

**WHAT HE DOES:** Branch manager, U.S. Bank. Board member with Goodwill Industries of Central Iowa. Education committee member of Des Moines branch of NAACP.

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Berg is now the branch manager at U.S. Bank's main office in downtown Des Moines, as well as an M.B.A. student at Drake University. None of that should be taken to mean that the above was all just a bunch of baloney.

In fact, it was his passion for teaching that fueled his critical analysis of his professional experience during two years on the job at schools in Cedar Rapids and near Ottumwa. He taught history and government, coached football and basketball, and had frequent conversations about what could be done better with an ex-Marine and fellow coach whose day job was branch manager for U.S. Bank.

The trust and respect that developed between the two men led to a question one day. "Have you ever thought about banking?"

Berg couldn't have been more certain of his answer. "No."

Yet there he was at school year's end, hanging up his blackboard and his whistle for an assistant manager job at a bank. He completed compliance training in the evening while still teaching so he could start his new job when summer came, but he still had no idea how to open up a bank account or complete a teller draw.

The ex-Marine turned banker, who has since re-enlisted in the Marines and is stationed in Japan, said it didn't matter.

"He told me something that stuck with me," Berg said. "He told me he could teach me the banking part, but what he looked for in people is a drive, a desire to learn and a willingness to grow. I think I've always had this idea that people are so blessed with special talents and abilities and that it is the idea of fulfilling those talents and abilities to help others is what drives me."

"I realized I could do that in other places besides a school. You can be a teacher without that being your title."

Berg's first four years with U.S. Bank took him to Fargo, N.D., where he became a branch manager despite having only six months of experience in the biz, and to the

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Twin Cities, where he became a teacher again in the form of a corporate training manager.

That last job came immediately after his desire to help maximize potential in others nearly exploded out of him in January of 2007 when he was in Hawaii on vacation

with some friends.

His beach reading included a book by leadership guru John Maxwell, and its themes resonated so strongly with Berg that he cut a two-week vacation in half so he could return to a wintry Fargo and get started on developing a training program to improve sales and customer service.

"When you are inspired, you have to go," Berg said. "You can't sit around on a beach all day.

### **Still more unexpected turns**

While the training program Berg created is still in use to this day, the banking industry as a whole was taking a pounding just as he was finally getting established in that world. So naturally Berg became a door-to-door salesman.

"It was a tough decision to leave but I pursued something where I could increase other skills," Berg said. "Sales really instills in you the idea of hard work."

At least 50 small business visits a day peddling office supplies and telecom services for Cydcor. He came in cold with the goal of walking out less than a half hour later with an application to purchase a service or product. If that happened twice in a day, it was a success.

He started in the Twin Cities, volunteered to move to Rhode Island so he could lead a sales force while learning how to open his own sales office, then did exactly that in Chicago — all in less than three years. Once again, Berg had played a challenging hand about as well as a person can.

"He can communicate effectively with so many different types of people and personality types," said Ryan Shetka, who made both the Rhode Island and Chicago moves with Berg. "He's a powerful storyteller and he made such a profound influence in my life because of his teaching role. It's his passion and the way he speaks about things."

But none of those skills or attributes were powerful enough to explain away the stage four cancer that attacked Berg's father while he worked in Chicago. His dad was a longtime educator himself and their bond was close. Soon, trips home to visit with him were not going to be enough.

Berg sold his independently owned Cydcor branch in February of 2011 and spent the last few months of his father's life with him near Eau Claire, Wis.

### **One door closes, several more open**

What to do next came pretty easy after the grieving was done. His dad had been working on a doctorate degree when he died. His mother has her master's degree. Those were paths he wanted to honor.

Drake had the evening M.B.A. program that suited him best, and there just so happened to be a branch manager job opening in Des Moines as well. Berg has been here for about a year and a half now and is already deeply rooted in the community.

His career has taken him to many places, but he says Des Moines feels different.

"The biggest things that jump out are the opportunities that exist for young professionals," he said. "There seems to be a conscientious commitment to them and not just an old-boys group that looks at me as a rival."

Goodwill Industries of Central Iowa, where Berg is on the board of directors; the NAACP, where he serves on an education committee; Junior Achievement's BizTown; and Drake's adult literacy program have all become beneficiaries of Berg's time and talents.

Expect that list to grow. Berg's calling, it would seem, is as clear as ever.

"He always has a vision of what is possible to achieve and everything he does is very deliberate," said Kyle Giombi, who worked under Berg in Des Moines for about a year. "He instills trust in everybody."