

## CHAPTER 37

# AIM HIGHER THAN INCOME

BY LOUIS BRINDISI

Poll a group of high school graduates or fledgling college students why they've selected their specific major and many will respond, "Money" or "Income." Although, I compliment these ambitious individuals for understanding the need to become self-supporting, those of us who have lived a little, or, in my case a lot, realize that our goals must become much larger. Don't get me wrong, the desire to make money and not to struggle financially was certainly a goal of mine when I started out. However, as I contemplate my life's work and the challenges and successes I have encountered along the way, I am compelled to share what has become apparent to me during the 53 years that I have practiced law. I have come to appreciate that it was not solely the monetary gains but truly the challenges that made my life fulfilling, and the achievement of overcoming them that has made my life meaningful. What I learned from the challenges applies to all businesses. When, at any stage in life, you reach an impasse or commence something new, I would suggest that you apply these basic principles to excel:

What are your core values? What is important to you is always your guiding light.

- Make your business or career choices based on fulfilling a need.
- It is not always important to have the "right" people like you.
- Be your own barometer. Sometimes the winds of change blow

you in a different direction.

- Do not be afraid to change the course of your business. Get to know your community and care about the people with whom you work.
- Aim larger than the income you want. Set your goals to have impact.

I was born just after the Great Depression in Utica, New York to Italian and Armenian immigrant parents. Utica, located on the Erie Canal approximately halfway between New York City and Buffalo, and called the gateway to the Adirondacks, drew many immigrants intrigued by the area's industrial development.

My father, Angelo Brindisi, emigrated as a baby with my grandparents from the Calabrian region of Italy. My mother, Mary Murad, was also an infant when she arrived here with her Armenian family from Syria. Both families knew the hardships of war and poverty. My father had to quit school at a very young age to help support his family and consequently never received a high school education. My mother, on the other hand, had the privileged opportunity to attend high school.

My parents eloped very young, having met when my father's taxi stand was fortuitously located near my maternal grandparent's grocery store, where my mother worked as a cashier. After their marriage, his lack of education resulted in subsequent fluctuations with regards to his capacity to earn a consistent wage. This monetary instability, coupled with the unlikely blending of Italian and Armenian culture, created a dysfunctional family environment complete with parents who argued constantly.

In addition to my father's unpredictable employment history, he also had a gambling addiction that resulted in multiple occasions when he would come home and throw money on the bed and say, "We're rich" – only to return the next night to say, "We have to move," because he lost our home in an unlucky bet. Losing my childhood home on numerous occasions caused me to attend five different grammar schools during an eight-year period.

Because both of my parents were working, I was primarily unsupervised and out on the streets when I was approximately 6 years old. I grew up

in East Utica, which was a predominantly Italian neighborhood. At that time, there were many “tough guys” living in this part of the city.

The neighborhood influence to be a lackluster student and barely scrape by was strong, but I was very close to my mother’s youngest brother, John, who was only two years my senior. I respected him greatly, especially for his strong educational convictions. He became my mentor and helped me navigate through some very difficult times. When my Uncle John attended LeMoyne College in Syracuse, New York, I followed him there shortly thereafter.

*What are your core values?* During college, I gained a considerable amount of weight. After completing college, I went on a very strict diet and with great determination lost what I had gained. It was at this time that I began to develop the necessary skills to overcome what I considered the challenges in my life. I decided I no longer wanted to be heavy and began to value my health, knowing that it was a vital component of my future successes. It was also a strong desire of mine not to experience the financial struggles that I witnessed as a child. It was with this mindset, fostered by my mother, that I chose to attend Albany Law School. I actually did quite well in law school because I focused on my studies and my goal of obtaining a law degree.

After clerking for a year following my law school graduation, I went into practice with my Uncle John, fittingly also a lawyer, into the newly created firm of Murad & Brindisi. Somewhere between college and the opening of our law firm, I learned that determination often arises out of core values and what is important to you. It became apparent to me that my core values needed to become the foundation of my successes and I began to measure each future decision against the standard core values that I had set for myself. I focused on the skills that my father seemed to have lacked in his ability to support himself monetarily. I used the lessons learned from this situation as my guiding light to chart a course of success for my own business by determining and fulfilling a need providing a particularly specialized type of legal counsel in the Utica area.

*The desire to fill a need and to make money propels most businesses.* Perhaps because of my neighborhood of origin, when I got out of law school it became evident to me that many of my childhood acquaintances

required legal counsel. In recognizing this need, I decided to become a criminal trial lawyer.

When I started practicing criminal law, the case of *United States vs. Miranda* had not yet been decided and it was common practice for the police to interrogate defendants using violently aggressive tactics to coerce confessions out of them. They would also routinely hide clients so their lawyers could not speak to them. In those days, most of the attorneys in Utica entered into plea deals. The majority of them did not want to try these cases; therefore they would plead their clients down to a lesser offense or enter a guilty plea. Contrarily, I took on the police and law enforcement. If police beat a client, I brought police brutality charges and civil rights actions against them. When they hid clients so that you could not talk to them, I would bring a *habeas corpus* proceeding. My core values guided me to see the possibilities in representing the underdog. My acquittals range from alleged murder to manslaughter, assault, robbery, burglary, grand larceny, gambling, rape, counterfeiting, money laundering, RICO and conspiracy cases, as well as cases and crimes involving criminal violations of the interstate commerce laws. The commonality among these cases was the core belief that each defendant was presumed innocent and had the right to a fair trial guaranteed to them by the Constitution of the United States. *When you find a need and fulfill it, you strengthen your business.*

*It is not important to have the "right" people like you if your core values and opportunities take you on a different course.* During that time period, I represented numerous high profile organized crime figures — including the "King of the Gypsies." I soon became an expert in First Amendment Law, arguing these constitutional law cases in a three-state territory of New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York. My clients owned private planes and would pick me up and fly me to the various cities where I would handle their cases.

In Utica, my uncle and I became known as the "Young Lions" for taking on the establishment when trying these cases. We had no fear, but the results were that many law enforcement officials disliked us immensely due to the acquittals that we attained on behalf of our clients. When my Uncle John decided to run for a judgeship and won, we dissolved Murad & Brindisi and I became a sole practitioner. I continued to be unpopular with various members of law enforcement but it was important for me to

become a champion of the “common” people. In upholding this belief, I lost the respect of the “right” people but my personal self-respect was worth more than my popularity with the opposition. I became my own barometer.

*Be your own barometer. Sometimes the winds of change will blow you in a different direction and alter your belief structure.* I soon built a very successful criminal law practice that eventually generated the financial security that I had hoped to achieve. However, my world changed on January 4, 1983 when my wife, Jackie, of almost twenty five years of marriage, died of cancer, leaving me with five children to raise. The youngest was only 4 years old. On the same day, a young associate in my office was murdered, making it the most devastating day of my entire life. From it came another life lesson and rebirth that transformed my priorities as well as the future of my law practice.

*Do not be afraid to change the course of your business.* You must believe in your business practices for it to succeed. You strengthen your business through fundamental adjustments to keep it in line with your beliefs. When I realized that a criminal had tragically taken my associate’s life, I vowed never to try another criminal case. My core value was still to help the underdog, but I was compelled to find another way to accomplish that goal. I decided that my life had to change and therefore became dedicated to assisting the community in other ways. I rechanneled my energy and found my niche handling serious personal injury and wrongful death cases.

Gerry Spence, a great, nationally-known trial lawyer, was asked, “What does it take to become a great trial lawyer?” His answer was simple. He said, “You have to care.”

*Knowing your community and caring about people changes the scope of your business.* I have cared for my clients throughout my career and have done everything in my power to obtain successful outcomes in their cases. My practice is now limited to the trial of serious personal injury and wrongful death cases arising as a result of a motor vehicle accident; defective products; medical malpractice; with a strong emphasis on construction accidents involving violations of the Labor Law of the State of New York. We protect the rights of the workers whose employers provided inadequate safety devices that resulted in

their injury. My law firm has handled and tried numerous cases and has won million dollar settlements on behalf of these injured individuals.

My serious injury cases have included everything from brain injuries, birth defects, amputations, quadriplegics, paraplegics, and those who suffered from severe brain injuries and burns. I have handled defective product cases involving SUV rollovers and tire defects, seatbelt failures, airbag injuries, seat-back collapse and roof-crush injuries. I have also handled cases involving the failure to warn, and other design and manufacturing defects. I have tried cases involving the Federal Employer's Liability Act; elevator crashes, medical malpractice, legal malpractice, discrimination, slip and falls, construction accidents and nursing home negligence. The pattern here is that I have a passion for justice and a strong desire to help others find hope and security throughout their struggles. Knowing the needs of and caring about the people living within my community has built my business into a legacy beyond the financial success for which I had originally aimed.

*Set the bar higher than the income you want to achieve in your business.* When I was young and building my business for financial gain alone, I did not consider the legacy I would leave behind.

I married and had five children while fresh out of law school. Later in life, I had one more child from a subsequent marriage . Although I built a financially successful practice, I was not the most attentive husband or parent. Frankly, I worked all the time. Even though the long hours that I devoted to my practice, over the years, meant extended absences from their daily lives it was important for me to provide the economic stability that I had lacked as a child from my own father. This was my way of showing my love for my family.

Although we did have our occasional vacations, most of my time was spent practicing law in the courtroom. I did, however, as a father, instill in my children a great deal of love and respect and taught them that the most important thing in life is family. These core values are still a part of each of them today and they continually bring me great pride by demonstrating, on an ongoing basis, their love for one another. With regards to career advice, I have taught them to resist focusing solely on their future income-earning potential. They have learned, through my example, that you will not be remembered by how much money you

acquire but instead on how positively you impact the lives of others. Additionally, the successes you are blessed with achieving should always be shared in philanthropic ways with the community that fostered those successes.

Fifty-three years later, the knowledge that I choose to impart to the next generation hinges on a few solid beliefs. Build your business on a set of core values garnered from the strongest influences in your life including family, school and mentors. Know that the greatest businesses do not offer products; they fulfill needs. When your career or business no longer aligns with your core values, do not be afraid to change the course of your business to better reflect the evolution of your principles. Changing course requires you to rely on your own barometer. It also means in my situation, that the “right” people may not share your commitment to doing what is legally ethical for others. Believe in yourself and stay true to your core values. Acknowledge that no matter where your business is located you will reach the most people when you know and support local needs. I have demonstrated this, during my lifetime, with the legal counsel that I provide and the charitable ways that I consistently give back. Target your business objectives, not solely to gain wealth but to change your profession and ultimately people’s lives. Monetarily supporting yourself and your family are wonderful goals, but in the end the real measure of your wealth is how much you would be worth if you lost it entirely.



## About Louis

Louis T. Brindisi was born in Utica, New York on October 20, 1934 and has lived there all his life, having attended local grammar schools and high school. He attended LeMoyne College in Syracuse, New York and graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Economics in 1956.

In 1959, he graduated from Albany Law School with a Juris Doctor Degree and was admitted to the New York State Bar in 1960.

After law school, he was married to Jacqueline Brindisi, now deceased, and has six children, two of which, Eva Brindisi Pearlman and Anthony Brindisi, have become lawyers, and are now partners in the law firm that bears their names. With 54 years of trial experience, he has handled thousands of cases, both civil and criminal.

Lou is a member of the American Bar Association; Oneida County Bar Association (where he has lectured attorneys for CLE credits); New York State Bar Association; Florida Bar Association; American Association for Justice (Past ATLA District Governor updating national decisions of Courts from the field of medical malpractice, products liability and personal injury); New York State Trial Lawyers; New York State Academy of Trial Lawyers; National Board of Trial Advocates, where he holds the rank of Advocate; Multi-Million Dollar Advocates Forum; the Association of Trial Lawyers of America; American Society of Legal Advocates; the Motor Vehicle Trial Lawyers Association; Mass Tort Trial Lawyers Association; Medical Malpractice Trial Lawyers Association; the Association of Plaintiff Interstate Trucking Lawyers of America; American Society of Legal Advocates and the Association of Motor Vehicle Trial Lawyers.

He has been named by Lawdragon as one of the top 3000 Plaintiff's Attorneys in America. He is also been named as a New York State Super Lawyer.

He has also been named as one of the top 100 Trial Lawyers in New York State by the National Trial Lawyers Association. The Association is a national organization composed of the top 100 trial lawyers from each state. Membership is obtained through special invitation and is extended only to those attorneys who exemplify superior practice in the field of law.

Lou has been selected by his peers to be included in The Best Lawyers in America, and the law firm which he has founded has a ranking in the *U.S. News* - Best Lawyers "Best Law Firms" Rankings.

Lou is a featured attorney/author in the *Consumer's Advocate* book published by Celebrity Press. Lou has been named a member of the National Academy of Best Selling Authors in recognition of his best-selling book *Consumer's Advocate*.