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# Winners Dream: A Journey from Corner Store to Corner Office

By Bill McDermott



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A leadership and career manifesto told through the narrative of one of today's most inspiring, admired, and successful global leaders.

In *Winners Dream*, Bill McDermott—the CEO of the world's largest business software company, SAP—chronicles how relentless optimism, hard work, and disciplined execution embolden people and equip organizations to achieve audacious goals.

Growing up in working-class Long Island, a sixteen-year-old Bill traded three hourly wage jobs to buy a small deli, which he ran by instinctively applying ideas that would be the seeds for his future success. After paying for and graduating college, Bill talked his way into a job selling copiers door-to-door for Xerox, where he went on to rank number one in every sales position he held and eventually became the company's youngest-ever corporate officer. Eventually, Bill left Xerox and in 2002 became the unlikely president of SAP's flailing American business unit. There, he injected enthusiasm and accountability into the demoralized culture by scaling his deli, sales, and management strategies. In 2010, Bill was named co-CEO, and in May 2014 became SAP's sole, and first non-European, CEO.

Colorful and fast-paced, Bill's anecdotes contain effective takeaways: gutsy career moves; empathetic sales strategies; incentives that yield exceptional team performance; and proof of the competitive advantages of optimism and hard work. At the heart of Bill's story is a blueprint for success and the knowledge that the real dream is the journey, not a preconceived destination.



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Bill McDermott has had a hugely successful career—from Xerox to SAP. In this very human book, he describes the secrets that led to this success." (Jack Welch)

"Bill McDermott is my good friend because, like me, in spite of great success, he never forgot his humble beginnings. The hardships and challenges his family experienced when Bill was a young boy motivated and inspired him to become the man he is today. Read this book and you too will be motivated and inspired." (Tony Bennett)

"Bill McDermott's story shows how to grow a business as well as a career with authenticity and respect. A heartfelt read, there is much to learn from Bill's journey." (Howard Schultz, chairman, president and chief executive officer, Starbucks Coffee Company)

"Bill McDermott sees ambition and compassion as comrades in the workplace rather than competitors. That's rare. He claims it's just common sense... but I claim it's the Irish in him." (Bono, lead singer of U2 and (RED) co-founder.)

"Bill McDermott shares his blueprint for winning in business and in life with a level of authenticity that reflects the Zeitgeist of our times. The world opens its arms to gifted leaders who don't push change but who skillfully release the astonishing capacities of a team to transform their dreams into possibilities and possibilities into destiny. His insights into dealing with adversity and disappointment show his courage to embrace vulnerability and humility. His pearls of wisdom for business leaders follow the same arc of excellence as his grandfather's legendary ability of sinking consecutive shots from mid-court. A truly thoughtful, exceptional and meaningful read." (Gerhard Gschwandtner, CEO of Selling Power)

"Bill McDermott understands that success is ultimately about the journey—and his has been extraordinary." (Tory Burch)

"Bill McDermott is a rare breed of leader who has used challenges in business and life to galvanize teams and create often unprecedented results. After interviewing over 400 top CEOs, I strongly recommend *Winners Dream* as a must read for every CEO, their board, executives and sales teams. Filled with practical insights, *Winners Dream* presents tools, philosophies and inspiration to help any person, team or enterprise control their own destiny." (Robert Reiss, Host & CEO of The CEO Show)

"Boston College's Chief Executives' Club of Boston has hosted hundreds of CEOs from around the globe including Bill McDermott of SAP, who stands out from the crowd as a visionary leader with a moral compass. Through poignant personal stories, Bill shares life lessons that will resonate for anyone reading his biography "*Winners Dream: A Journey from Corner Store to Corner Office*," whether they are running a Fortune 500 company or starting a paper route. Easily accessible and filled with humor and insight, this book, and the stories Bill shares, illustrates that business success is possible without deviating from one's core values." (Warren K. Zola, Executive Director of CEO Club of Boston)

"Inspiring" (*Kirkus*)

“McDermott emphasizes that a never-satisfied curiosity was the primary quality that enabled him to meet his customers’ needs and further his own goals. His wisdom should prove valuable to readers at every level of their careers, or in life in general.” (*Publishers Weekly*)

#### About the Author

Bill McDermott is the CEO of SAP, the world’s largest business software company. Before joining SAP in 2002, McDermott served as executive vice president of Worldwide Sales and Operations at Siebel Systems and president of Gartner, Inc., where he led the company’s core operations. He spent seventeen years at Xerox Corporation, where he rose from a sales professional to become the company’s youngest corporate officer and division president. McDermott holds an MBA in business management from the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University and he completed the Executive Development Program at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

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Winners Dream

## 1

### OPTIMISM

Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those who dared believe that something inside them was superior to circumstance.

—BRUCE BARTON

I HEAR MY LITTLE brother yell, so I whip my head around and see smoke coming down our short staircase. Kevin is upstairs getting ready for bed. Our baby sister, Gennifer, is sleeping in the adjacent room at the back of our small house. Mom and I are in the kitchen washing dishes, and my father is working the night shift at Con Edison.

I race after my mom to the top of the stairs, where we see the flames.

This is real, I think. I am twelve years old, and our house is on fire. We gotta move.

I grab Kevin’s hand as Mom runs through the thickening smoke to pluck Gennifer from her crib. We bolt down the stairs and out the front door, and make it to the street, where we wait for fire trucks.

More than the screams of sirens getting closer, the sound that resonates is the calm voice of my mother, and the words she speaks as we stand by the curb, our second story ablaze.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she keeps saying, holding Gennifer in one arm and wrapping the other around Kevin and me. “This isn’t a sad moment. It’s a great moment. We’ve all gotten out safely. We’ve been through worse, and we will get through this.” Again and again she repeats this pledge, like a lullaby. I believe her because she believes it. And because Mom was right; we had gotten through worse.

### HOME BASE

I was born in Flushing, New York, in the borough of Queens, in 1961. During my first ten years, my parents, my two brothers, my sister, and I lived in a succession of working-class neighborhoods on New York State's Long Island: places such as College Point, Hicksville, Babylon, Brentwood—all blue-collar towns where my parents moved us from one rental apartment to another. Eventually we landed in a small, foreclosed house on Meadow Lane in the waterside town of Amityville, New York. The year we moved in, Amityville had yet to become known for its other house: that large Dutch Colonial on Ocean Avenue made infamous by the Amityville Horror movie posters. People in Amityville would call it the “the horror house,” and tourists drove into our town just to see it.

My family's home was a quarter the size of the horror house but roomier than any of the apartments we had lived in previously. Located on the working-class side of town, our house had been so neglected by its previous inhabitants that when we moved in, as renters with an option to buy, we found dead squirrels and rats in its walls once we started to fix it up. We rebuilt the house while living in it, which felt like changing a fan belt while driving sixty miles per hour. But we had no choice. We were lucky to have found a house we could afford, and fixing it up felt like a privilege, and a family affair.

On weekends, relatives and friends descended upon our narrow slice of property with hammers and ladders, kindness, and maybe my favorite jelly doughnuts that my grandparents brought in from Stork's, a German bakery in Whitestone, Queens. Everyone worked together, reinforcing wood girders, replacing Sheetrock, reskinning the exterior with aluminum siding, all in a flurry of camaraderie that would one day remind me of that Amish community barn-raising scene from the 1985 movie Witness. My father would write checks for the materials as he got the money, and thanks to the generosity of friends and family, most of the labor was free. For more complicated stuff, my papa, a general contractor and construction foreman for the high-rises going up along the nearby Rockaway Peninsula, called in an expert electrician or plumber to handle a job on the cheap.

The renovation brought our house up in value, and my parents were finally able to pull together enough money for a down payment on an \$18,000, thirty-year fixed-rate mortgage. For my parents, homeownership was a step up and a great source of pride. For me, it was home, and the happiest place in the world, despite its imperfections.

Even spruced up, ours was still the kind of house you could drive by hundreds of times and not notice. And because of the flooding, it was in a constant state of repair. The structure sat on an uneven slab of concrete next to the canal that ran behind the house, which meant that when big storms hit, water poured into our first floor. The canal overflowed into our house with such predictability that with every warning of heavy rains my mother began placing a two-foot-tall statue of Saint Jude—the patron saint of hopeless causes—in front of the house. If anyone could hold the flood back, it would be Saint Jude! Eventually the statue itself would also be underwater.

All that flooding formed stress cracks in the walls and the house's foundation, so as time passed, it no longer required an overflowing canal for water to find its way inside. Even after a light rainfall, one of us would have to hike to the hardware store to rent a wet vac. Sucking up puddles in our living room became as routine as shoveling snow.

## LOSS

When the doctors first told my parents that their newborn son, my little brother, James Michael, might live for only a few days, my mom had insisted on taking Jamie home from the hospital and learning to care for him. For the next five years, the poor little guy went through major surgeries, including a colostomy. Despite

all his medical complications, Jamie brought amazing joy into our family's life. We were so full of love for little Jamie, with his head of wavy, light brown hair and bright brown eyes. I swear, he just kept smiling through it all. In our eyes, he was an angel.

I was seven when Jamie passed away in his sleep. He was five. The day he was carried out of our Babylon apartment on a stretcher under a blanket, my mother channeled her energy into lifting the rest of us up and out of our grief, telling us that the death of her son was God's will because Jamie had so much good work to do as an angel in heaven. Over and over she said this, a refrain that came to nest in my head and my heart, becoming truth.

My mother, Kathy McDermott, had an ability to feel blessed instead of cursed during times of grave sadness or instability. She could separate life's difficulties from the gifts those difficulties brought. Even after caring for and praying and loving Jamie for all those years, she rallied enough strength the day we lost him to stave off her family's heartache by giving the rest of us the gift of a powerful idea: our sweet angel Jamie was in a better place, and so are we for having known him. Now it was his turn to watch over us.

• • •

Five years after Jamie's passing, with our house on fire, my mother's bobbing optimism once again pops to the surface, unsinkable. "We'll fix it up. We've done it before, and we'll do it again," she tells us. Standing next to her on the street, I know that she isn't just trying to make us feel better. She is working her magic by refusing to dwell on the tragedy of the moment, and, instead, she is moving on by telling us what she believes: there is nothing in that house more important than what is standing outside of it.

Even on a dark, smoke-filled night, my mom has the power to convince me that the sky is blue and limitless.

## **SACRIFICE**

My brother, Kevin, and I were in the backseat of our green Chevy Impala. It was a few years before we moved to Amityville, and my parents were driving us to Bay Shore, Long Island. Dad turned onto a pretty street and slowed down the car in front of a single-floor ranch house, the kind that was a dime a dozen on Long Island, for people who had a dime. My mother, she loved this house, but Dad couldn't get the loan, even though he was moonlighting as a security guard and driving a cab in addition to his main employment. Their disappointment was palpable, even to a nine-year-old in the backseat. Driving by at five miles per hour, I sensed a rare sadness in my mom, a woman who always insisted "Money is only as good as the happiness it can buy you and those you love." My heart hurt because my parents couldn't get that house. Years later, when I had my own car, I'd take my kid sister to the wealthy parts of Long Island and do my own slow drive down the tony streets. "We're going to live in one of those houses one day," I'd tell her. The appeal of a grand house did not diminish the joy I got from our modest home, which made me as happy as living in the Taj Mahal. I gave my dad all the credit he deserved for being able to buy it and keep us in it.

My father, Bill McDermott, was a hard worker. His definition of success was punching the clock every day and showing up for work when he was needed. As a high-voltage troubleshooter for Con Edison, New York City's electric company, he descended into the dark tunnels that snaked beneath Queens and Manhattan, sometimes lowering himself into manholes that were still on fire after underground explosions. His job, as he explained to me, was to service the city's huge electric feeders by using a blowtorch to melt copper so it formed a bond on a feeder to keep water and other materials from penetrating the electrical system. His work buddies called him "the Spider" not only because he was so good at navigating the web of underground cables that powered New York City, but also because he could weave hot liquid copper around thick power

lines with the dexterity of Spider-Man shooting webs from his wrists to wrap around criminals. My dad took great pride in the craft of soldering and cable splicing. In my mind, he was a real-life superhero.

His schedule, however, was as predictable as a power outage. Sometimes our house phone would ring at one in the morning, and Dad would climb out of bed, put on jeans, a T-shirt, and industrial overalls, and then go scrape ice off the car windshield so he could drive into lower Manhattan to figure out how to get the power back on before Wall Street's opening bell. His was hard, physical, dangerous labor. Once, he was rushed to the hospital after a drunk driver plowed through safety cones and crashed into an aboveground transformer that he was repairing. By the time we got to the hospital, he had sixty-five stitches.

"Dad, how you doing?"

"Never been better," he replied, as if he had just returned home from a regular day at work. "How was your trip here?" Like Mom, Dad didn't dwell.

Yet for as hard as he worked, financial stability was elusive. Trying to support a family with four kids, dogs, while making every house and car payment, plus shouldering years of unexpected expenses, all on a cable-splicer's salary, was the epitome of the working-class treadmill. And for thirty-seven years at Con Edison, he never dialed it back, earning promotions that led him to a top-paying union job. Still, expenses just kept flowing.

My folks were not poor. We weren't impoverished. We had it much better than other families who had to go on food stamps or welfare, in many cases despite their best efforts. But the money from each paycheck went fast. Some months there just wasn't enough cash to pay for everything.

I understood all this because I had courtside seats to the pressures that come with living paycheck to paycheck, and the challenges of a young marriage. My parents had me when my mom was eighteen years old and my dad was twenty-two, so in a sense, the three of us sort of grew up together, which made it easier for me to relate to them, and was possibly why, as they gazed at their dream house through the Impala's windows, their own longing washed over me. Man, how I wanted them to have that house.

That money was tight was no secret. In our small homes and apartments, I was privy to life's real problems, hearing things that most kids don't, and always taking internal notes. I think I was a lot more curious and mature than most kids my age, listening more than I talked. And although my mom and dad did not grouse about their problems and blame anyone or anything for their money troubles, they didn't go out of their way to shelter their oldest child from reality. Instead of being sent outside or plopped in front of the TV, I'd stay at our round kitchen table listening to my parents figure out how to pay the bills and get through the cycles of daily life.

The unfiltered exposure to my family's circumstances taught me that hard work did not always pay off. I also understood that anything earned or given could be taken away: a house, a job, a brother. I developed a bias for truth, especially news no one wanted to hear, because the more I knew, the more quickly I could find a solution instead of dwelling on a problem.

## **JOY**

Every year, my dad saved enough money to get our family to the New Jersey Shore for a week or two during the summer. We'd rent a beach bungalow in the seaside town of Stone Harbor and spend our days on the beach. Dad loved to show me the paycheck that included his vacation pay added to his regular weekly salary.



The number on the check seemed so big! Even if we barely had enough gas in the car to make it back to Amityville, we cheered that Dad got his family to the shore.

Year round, good memories outweighed the rough ones: Friday nights, my dad arriving home for the weekend and turning up Ray Charles's "Busted" on the record player as my mom cooked dinner. Me, watching *The Honeymooners* reruns with my parents, having no clue what was so funny but laughing hysterically because they were. My dad, Kevin, and me sitting in our empty living room after the house had been ravaged by another flood, the three of us cheering as the New York Jets football game played on a TV that we'd propped up on a picnic table because the living room furniture was piled up on the front lawn to dry out. The whole family eating the filleted fluke I'd caught from my twelve-foot-long Sears Gamefisher, with its 7.5-horsepower Ted Williams engine that barely powered me from the canal to the Great South Bay and back. Playing hoops with Kevin next to our house, where Dad had perched a net. Treating my sister, Gennifer, to the movies the first time I watched Rocky Balboa scale those seventy-two steps in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. My mom, tucking me in and insisting, "Bill, the best part of you is you."

We laughed a lot. For years, at family get-togethers, my nana loved to retell the story of the night she was visiting us and sharing Gennifer's bed in Amityville when a scurrying sound from within the walls woke them up.

"What's that?" Nana asked.

"Don't worry, Nana, it's just the rats," replied her barely stirring granddaughter. "You can go back to sleep."

Amityville had its fair share of rats—big ones—especially near the water. And when rats have a history with a certain location, such as an abandoned house, you can bet they'll come back, even once the house is inhabited. We weren't stepping over rats, but a few did play in our walls, so my family put up with the uninvited guests. My sister especially did not like them, but in an act of heroism that night in bed, she masked her fear with nonchalance to help our nana feel safe. Nana just assumed that she had a brave little soldier lying next to her. "Don't worry, Nana, it's just the rats" was a punch line Nana would repeat for years.

If there was a reason to celebrate, we milked it. On New Year's, the whole family would stay out until the early morning hours, often dancing and eating at the home of a family we knew that owned the famous Italian restaurant Angelo's of Mulberry Street in New York City; they threw unbelievable parties at their home about a mile from our house. For big occasions, my family went all out. On Christmas Eves, after we were in bed, Dad would sneak outside and throw pebbles on the roof to simulate Santa's reindeer landing. He had us convinced that if we got up and walked around, Santa would split because he didn't like being discovered. Then, on Christmas mornings, if the present I wanted didn't appear under the tree, Dad would continue the momentum he'd started the night before.

"Come with me, Bill," he'd say and walk me to a corner of the house where a new fishing rod or bike was waiting. The holidays had to mean more debt for my parents, but they never let that dampen the Christmas spirit. For us kids, it was a magical time.

## **BETTER**

Even my brother, Kevin, who was tougher around the edges than I was, agreed that my family generated enough love to fill a mansion. So instead of feeling angry that my parents were putting me in Skips sneakers from the dollar store instead of cooler Pumas, I put myself in their shoes. I believed that they deserved better.

Not better in terms of material possessions—although they wanted to get me Pumas even more than I wanted those shoes for myself—but better stability. After seeing how much my parents gave and how little they got, I could not let that go on for another generation.

Maybe I could empathize with my parents because I was their oldest child, or because of how I was hardwired, or maybe because my mother repeatedly told me, often in the same breath, that “anything worthwhile in life does not come easy” and that “you have the potential to do anything you set your mind to.” Whatever the reasons, I wanted to come through for my family, to protect them when they got clobbered with crisis. What’s more, I’d been given, and was maybe even born with, enough confidence to believe I could do it. And even though I wasn’t starving and my parents weren’t asking for money, I saw money as a way to give myself financial independence and to give my parents the security that they gave me with their love. I wanted to be their Saint Jude.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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#### **Deloras Pinkston:**

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