



Photographed by ALEX WILSON

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A DIFFERENT KIND OF BUILDER



Mark Bowe is a different sort of guy. Different, in that, after meeting him, you feel invigorated. He's like a human vitamin.

This B&E alumnus is the poster child for hard work in every sense of the word. Bowe is the host and producer of "Barnwood Builders," a successful reality show on the DIY Network about reclaiming and restoring America's oldest barns. He also owns an insurance agency in Lewisburg, West Virginia. He runs an antique cabin and barn restoration company. And, not surprisingly, he's already got an idea for another TV show in his sights.

He describes himself as a serial entrepreneur, and says his mind, like the minds of many successful entrepreneurs before him, works in mysterious ways. For example, during one of the interviews for this article, Bowe couldn't help studying the table at the restaurant because he thought its design could be vastly improved.

But there's nothing mysterious about his attitude toward hard work, his love for his native Mountain State or his general approach to life — which is pleasantly infectious.

"My uncle said there are two kinds of people — basement people and balcony people," Bowe recalled. "Basement people are reaching up trying to pull people down to their level. Balcony people are reaching down to pull people up, to make people all they can be, to help people release their potential. And that's what business is all about. We should all want to be balcony people or surround ourselves with balcony people."

Like his father, Bowe is fiercely unafraid of work or challenges. He grew up in Glasgow, West Virginia, a small town in eastern Kanawha County, and lived in a home he describes as "between a river, a railroad track and a mountain, so that should tell you something." Not the product of an affluent upbringing, his dad worked at an underground coal mine during the day and laid the foundations of houses in the evening.

"As a child, I grew up thinking everybody had two jobs," Bowe said with a smile. His dad said he never knew if the mines would shut down and told his son he should always have a trade to fall back on. "That's why I have an insurance business and a restoration business."

He points to his father as his entrepreneurial inspiration. He believes thinking like an entrepreneur means having the ability to adapt and overcome. "I always knew I really didn't want to work for someone else."

MAKING LEMONADE OUT OF LEMONS

Bowe took his 1993 management degree from B&E and his 1994 safety management master's degree from the former WVU College of Engineering and Mineral Resources, combined them with his work ethic and his passions, and established Antique Cabins and Barns in 1996, a company specializing in the recovery and restoration of 19th century log and timber structures. It would be that knowledge and those skills that would eventually lay the groundwork for "Barnwood Builders."



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But, as many entrepreneurs before him, this journey didn't come without some speed bumps and potholes in the road. During the economic recession in 2008, Bowe was down to his last \$1,200 in his business account. He couldn't get restoration jobs and couldn't liquidate his equipment. He was between a rock and a very hard place. Still, he decided to meet with a potential restoration client in Alabama. He stayed at an upscale hotel, bought \$200 sunglasses, a \$200 pair of shoes and spent two days touring the client's farm. After all that, Bowe drove back to West Virginia with a \$100,000 check.

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The recession also forced his hand at the insurance business. "My restoration business was being hit hard. Rather than cry about it, I decided to do something about it. I realized that one thing everyone needs — regardless of the economy — is insurance." He opened his own agency, worked hard at it and made it successful. He also took much of the money he made on the first season of "Barnwood Builders" and acquired another insurance agency in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. "I merged the two agencies

and gave customers better service than they were getting before and gave them better products." His agency now acts as a broker for more than 20 insurance companies.

"Everything I look at is an evaluation," Bowe said. "I ask myself how I could improve things. That's how my mind works. A professor at B&E asked me what I wanted to do. I replied, 'I want to make money.' He said, 'Then you should be an entrepreneur.' And he was right."

That professor **was** right.

THE TV STUFF

"Barnwood Builders" is like the inner workings of Bowe's mind translated into television. The show is aired on two cable networks: DIY, whose programming focuses on home improvement, as well as its sister network GAC (Great American Country).

By organizing the TV episodes much like he does his restoration projects, the show has a natural flow. Each has eight acts — a very specific schedule used to produce the episode. "Each day on the set, there is a white board [on which] the director comes up with a plan that we want to capture. As the producer, I anticipate and inform the director what's going to happen on the job to get us the shots we hope to get."



Clockwise from left: Mark Bowe and Tim Rose stack foundation stones to move to the cabin's new location at Stonewall Resort.

Mark and "Barnwood Builders" producer Sean McCourt talk logistics.

Throughout an episode, Mark will do several "stand-ups," where he explains a situation or plan for the project.



In his dual role as host and producer, Bowe is continually coordinating with everyone on the set about the day's order of events. And he feels that experience has made him a better communicator.

"Now that I've seen the show and digested all of this, I'm much more efficient at communicating with the production company," Bowe said.

As a result of its popularity in the first season, DIY signed on for two more seasons of programming. The second season is finished and will air soon, and Mark said the third season is now in production. For the first two seasons, Mark worked as talent on the show, but in Season 3, he will be both talent and producer — a challenge he's eager to take on.

Bowe is also working on a new TV show idea. He said he's already pitched it to a network, and that network has agreed to make a pilot. Details on the show are forthcoming, but he promises it'll be a "cool show."

Despite his success, there's no ego here. In fact, his successful television productions have only made him more grounded. "I

understand its impermanence," he said. "And I'm genuinely having as much fun as it appears."

That was apparent on the set of an episode filmed in West Virginia near Stonewall Resort in August. It was everything a Mark Bowe project should be: historic, difficult, fun and a great story.

The project began with an 1840s-era cabin in need of dismantling. The structure would be moved seven miles to a new site at Stonewall Resort and become part of an Appalachian homestead exhibit, events center and wedding pavilion with overnight accommodations. However, according to resort representatives, the homestead exhibit will be much more than a wedding and event venue. It will have a strong educational component that will show how people in Appalachia once lived and celebrate their spirit of innovation.

THE CREW

When Mark Bowe put together his crew, it wasn't like the NFL draft. It was more important than that. "It goes beyond a sense of team," Bowe said. "You're spending significant amounts of time with these people, more time than you're getting with your family sometimes. You want people who are hardworking, dependable and would do anything for any of the rest of the crew. You want people you'd want to be in a foxhole with." Here are the members of the "Barnwood Builders" crew and some information that not only tells us something about each of them, but tells us something about Bowe as he describes each one.



JOHNNY JETT

Home: Kentucky

"Age 67. Met him in 1998 when I was driving through Kentucky looking for old cabins and houses. Johnny had one for sale. I said, 'I'm Mark Bowe, and I'm getting into the cabin

business.' He said, 'I'm Johnny Jett, and I'm getting out of the cabin business.' We've been friends ever since."



SHERMAN THOMPSON

Home: Pennsylvania

"Sherman is friends with Johnny. Pound for pound, he is the toughest, most hardworking person I've ever met. He grew up on a farm in Kentucky. He's also the most giving and

has the biggest heart. He's all heart and willpower."



GRAHAM FERGUSON

Home: West Virginia

"He's our new age hillbilly. He knows stuff about nature that would blow your mind. He knows remedies and everything that nature has to give. He has kindness

and love and everything that is good. And he also looks good in any hat we put on him."



TIM ROSE

Home: Virginia

"Tim is a former logger. He represents everybody else. Tim is a woodsman — he knows the woods. He knows the right chain to put on a chain saw to make it cut

through wood like butter. He is former military and does what it takes to complete the job. He is also the funniest guy we have. He keeps us cracking up."

With the cabin came an amazing story. The structure was donated to the Stonewall State Park Foundation by the daughters of Bill Fox, four sisters whose father's dying wish was to see the cabin restored. The day of production on August 26 was also the 10th anniversary of the death of Mr. Fox.

"Our challenge was to repurpose a cabin built in the 1840s and transform it into a structure that meets present-day code, calling on our restoration expertise," said Bowe.

Mark emphasized that the attraction for him was the story behind the story — the place where the story really began. "Elizabeth Fox came from Virginia nearly two centuries ago with 11 kids in a covered wagon and lived in a 16-by-22-foot log cabin. With 11 kids!"

And on that late-August day, distant parts of the Fox family met for the first time — on a TV production set. "It all came to be because Mr. Fox had a dying wish that this cabin would be restored. This is a vivid part of history. There wasn't a dry eye in the place when the Fox family was here. It was one of the last original structures from Old Roanoke, a Roanoke that was flooded to create Stonewall Jackson Lake to control flooding on the West Fork," Bowe said.



“This project was the combination of history, emotion and hard work. The best projects we have incorporate all of these elements.”

WORK HARD. BE KIND. TAKE PRIDE.

Mark’s humble beginnings and life experiences have shaped him, much like the weather shapes a rock formation over time. Those experiences have strengthened his philosophy for life: work hard, be kind, take pride.

“A great example is something as simple as going to the grocery store. I was checking out one day, and I said to the cashier, ‘How are you today?’ The cashier said, ‘I’ll be great soon. Almost time to go home.’ On another trip to the store, I went to check out and noticed a cashier cleaning the counter and aisle. I went to that checkout and said, ‘How are you today?’ The cashier said, ‘I’m doing great! Is there anything I can do for you today? We want to keep you coming back here, you know.’ That second cashier is the kind of person I want to hire.”

He then pointed to a philosophy that has guided him through thick and thin.

“You have to have a work ethic. [WVU Men’s Basketball Head Coach] Bob Huggins didn’t get to where he is today by not having a great work ethic. And that has to translate into being kind ... giving back to your community, giving back to the people who were instrumental in helping you succeed. And you should take pride in everything you do. You have to have a sense of pride in the job you’re doing, where you’re from and how you live. Every guy on the ‘Barnwood Builders’ crew does these things — on and off the job.”

He is also a great defender of his home state and is committed to leading the charge to change it. “I’m tired of being at the bottom of the good list and the top of the bad list,” he said. “I want to make West Virginia better.”

Bowe said he would love to teach at his alma mater and plans to look into how he can make that happen. His gritty approach to business and life can help good people build successful careers.

But no matter where he is — on television, at his insurance agency or maybe teaching future business success stories at WVU, you can bet Mark is all-in — 150 percent.



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Even with the cameras rolling, Mark and his crew have to spend time planning their next moves.