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# What One Man Can Do

### Bill Strickland is in the business of saving lives. After almost 40 years of teaching kids, training adults, and telling his story, he's looking to "franchise" his brand of hope.

By: John Brant

For more than 20 years Bill Strickland humped his box of slides around the country. A heavy, awkward little box that was a hassle getting through airport security, that Strickland fretted over constantly in departure lounges, taxicabs, coffee shops, and hotel lobbies, clutching on to it the way Secret Service men latch themselves to the briefcase the President could use to blow up the world if the need arose. Well, Strickland's whole world resided inside his box, too. What he had built lay as much in those pictures -- in the way they helped him enthrall and inspire audiences from the Crystal Cathedral in Los Angeles to this consultants' conference in Cambridge, Mass. -- as in the Manchester Bidwell Corp. itself back in Pittsburgh.

Nobody used slides anymore, but Strickland thought that he'd earned the right. Diz, Billy Taylor, Monk, the jazz masters on whom he'd patterned his style, all had their crotchets too. He liked the feel of a slide show, the click and chunk, the solid mechanical rhythm. It was tactile, dense, had a certain substance; slides helped him swing. He even worked wry, self-deprecating comments about slides into his routine: Strickland was just an average, old-school kind of guy, the head of a neighborhood job-training and arts center, showing people his slides.

Finally, a year or so ago, Manchester Bidwell's tech staff transferred all the slides to a PowerPoint program, reducing the clunky, pain-in-the-ass box to a single floppy disk that fit in his jacket pocket. Strickland missed his slides at first but soon grew to appreciate the convenience and even the feel of PowerPoint, the liquid shifting of images; a subtly different way to swing.

"It is my privilege and pleasure to present a friend of us all..."

Strickland stands to the crash of applause. He is a tall, loose-limbed man, heavy through the chest and shoulders, with a thick bushy mustache showing flecks of gray. At age 58 he moves with an air of weary grace, like a veteran fullback walking slowly back to the huddle between plays...no, wait a minute, Bill Strickland is not a sports fan. *Why is it that people get all excited about a kid smashing into another kid on the football field, he wonders, but not a young man playing a saxophone or a young woman designing a website?* So no, not like a fullback...Strickland moves like Thelonius Monk taking the stage at the latter part of his career, when Monk was showing his hard miles, a big man ravaged in body but not in soul, spilling his life into those piano keys.

Strickland scans the audience. Eighty or so people, mostly young nonprofit-sector M.B.A.'s from places like Wharton and Harvard, dressed in slacks and polo shirts. Strickland, for his part, wears a tailored gray business suit. He sees three or four women of color in the audience -- young, willowy, their hair attractively braided -- but no black men. He is the only one at the gathering.

"Over the next few minutes," he begins simply, "I'm gonna show you some pictures of what I do for a living."

Like the first line in a tune Nancy Wilson recorded with Toots Thielmann for MCG Jazz, the record label that is part of Strickland's company: *An older man is like fine wine*...Nancy breathing that first line as much as singing it, bringing you right in. Strickland aims for that same concise, confiding tone with this audience. The M.B.A.'s stare up at him raptly. Strickland swings into his story.

"It started back in 1965, at Oliver High School in the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh," he continues. "I was a young kid just about flunking out of school, and one afternoon I happened to walk past the ceramics studio. I glanced inside and here was this man throwing pots. Frank Ross. A Wednesday afternoon. Now, I don't know how many of you have ever seen a ceramics wheel turning, but if you have, you know it's magic. It was like a big invisible hand lifted me up and carried me over to that wheel. Mr. Ross looked up and said, 'Can I help you, son?'"

*Mr. Ross taught me all about clay. He respected me for who I was. He brought me into his home -- he gave me a*

*key. I remember pasta sauce always cooking on Sunday afternoons and the way the sunlight hit on the hardwood floors. Man, the music from his records just seemed to ride on that light. Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane. The music mixing up with the sunlight and the smell of that sauce.*

*When Miles or Sonny Rollins or one of those other kings came to town, Mr. Ross would take me down to the Crawford Grill in the Hill District to see him. Mr. Ross never preached at me. He would just talk while we threw pots. And as he talked that clay took shape under his hands as if by its own mind. Mr. Ross had a beautiful wife and kids, and his house was always filled with friends and conversation, and the sauce was always cooking. I was 16 years old and I knew what I wanted to do with my life: I wanted to be Frank Ross.*

> The women in the audience are especially transfixed: a big, roughed-up-looking black man in a well-cut suit, talking about respect, about common sense and decency, about the dictate that our best hopes must always be acted upon.

As he talks, Strickland's big hands dance in accompaniment, slashing and sculpting the air in front of him. The M.B.A.'s look up at him with fascinated grins. The women in the audience are especially transfixed: a big, roughed-up-looking black man in a well-cut suit, talking about respect, about common sense and decency, about the dictate that our best hopes must always be acted upon, that all people everywhere possess an innate hunger for and right to the sustaining, the good, and the beautiful. Strickland sets that groove and now...now...hits them with the first photo.

It's a shot of Fallingwater, the famous Frank Lloyd Wright-designed house in western Pennsylvania. Afternoon sunlight, trees lacy with spring, the creek foaming. "Mr. Ross took me out there," he says. "I remember walking toward this house through a growth of rhododendron and just being amazed. Here I was, a 16-year-old kid from inner city Pittsburgh, looking at this house with a creek running through the middle of it. Man, where I come from, people worry about keeping water outside the house, not inside it."

Strickland lets the laughter wash over him for a moment, then cuts it off with a slicing movement of his right hand. "It was a very interesting way of looking at water," he goes on in a husky, midrange voice, not a CEO's voice or a salesman's voice or a preacher's voice but an amalgam of each, "and a very interesting way of looking at light." He draws out this last word, cutting off the final consonant like a rim shot.

"I mean," he tells the silent room, "the way that light moved around that building."

After pausing a beat, Strickland continues. "I said to myself, if I could ever bring that light into my neighborhood -- bring it to people who deserved it as much as anybody else, and who would respond to it as wholeheartedly and as creatively as anybody else -- then I was halfway home. I thought, before I die, I am going to build that kind of place in Manchester."

Then he segues into the second photo: a vaulting, graceful building at night, light dancing through the water of a fountain in its front plaza.

"Well, it took me more than 20 years," he says, chatty now, conversational, throttling back to standard PowerPoint patter. "But I was finally able to raise enough money to hire an architect who studied with Frank Lloyd Wright -- the same architect, by the way, who designed the terminal at Pittsburgh International Airport."

But now, when in the normal rhythm of a presentation the speaker would move on to the next image, Strickland crosses you up. He lets that second picture hang up there until it burns into your mind. Then he masterfully shifts key, his next line referring back to his Nancy Wilson-Toots Thielmann opening -- brief, declarative, knock you onto the floor.

"This is Manchester Bidwell," he says. "This is what I built."

Even though the neighborhood lies less than three miles from downtown Pittsburgh, it's a challenge to find Manchester. You cross the Allegheny River over the Sixth Street Bridge and then snake around the gleaming new baseball and football stadiums, built on the ground where the city's mighty steel mills stood. The mills have been gone for more than a generation, their spark and soot increasingly confined to the memories of aging residents. Manchester lies just beyond Heinz Field, home of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

When Bill Strickland grew up in Manchester, it was a neighborhood of sturdy wood-frame row houses filled with generations of steelworking families. Slovaks, Irish, Poles, Italians, and African Americans lived side by side in tolerable harmony, supporting churches, groceries, saloons, streetcar lines, and, most important, public schools where all the kids jostled together, hassling out what it meant to be American. Then, beginning in the 1970s, the steel mills closed one by one, their skeletons torn down for scrap metal. The jobs fled to China and Korea and

Brazil, or simply vanished into the clean, melancholy air of postindustrial Pittsburgh.

Today, Manchester survives as a 12-block chunk of decaying homes and defunct businesses that seem bleak and gray on the brightest spring morning. An elevated expressway bisects the neighborhood cruelly. Built in the 1960s, the highway first cut off access to a vibrant commercial district, then carried off Manchester's white residents to new homes in the suburbs. In 1987, Strickland, who still lives in the neighborhood with his wife, Rose, and the couple's 3-year-old daughter (he also has a grown daughter by a previous marriage), opened Manchester Bidwell's now-162,000-square-foot center on the north side of the highway, in an industrial park where hardware stores and haberdasheries once thrived.

Operating on a budget of $10 million to $12 million a year, the funding evenly split between public and private sources, Manchester Bidwell is a nonprofit corporation comprising two main divisions, the Manchester Craftsman's Guild and the Bidwell Training Center. The former provides after-school and summer programs in ceramics, photography, digital imaging, drawing, and painting to middle school and high school kids throughout the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. The latter offers adults training in fields such as culinary arts, horticultural technology, and medical coding, connecting its predominately African American low-income students to jobs with leading area employers such as Heinz, Bayer, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Under the MCG aegis, but operating independently, MCG Jazz presents jazz concerts in a theater located on the premises. It also produces recordings by leading jazz artists -- the Nancy Wilson-Toots Thielmann collaboration is an example.

MCG programs reach 3,200 schoolchildren a year, and more than 80% of its 500 regular students -- 70% to 80% of whom come from at-risk backgrounds -- complete high school and attend college. Bidwell, meanwhile, enrolls approximately 500 adults annually, placing 90% of its graduates in full-time jobs. MCG Jazz, for its part, has won three Grammy awards in the past four years and developed an important archive of recordings. Manchester Bidwell finds a place for every student, youth or adult, who agrees to meet its requirements for solid effort and responsible conduct. All classes and programs are offered free of charge to students.

Besides the Pittsburgh flagship, Manchester Bidwell operates smaller centers in San Francisco and Cincinnati, and in November will open a center in Grand Rapids, Mich. Strickland's long-term hope is to open 100 more "franchises," federally funded, in inner cities throughout the United States. Projected to run on annual budgets of $2 million to $3 million, these new centers would be locally owned and operated but would follow the basic Strickland formula: In a bright, clean, attractive environment, mentor at-risk teenagers through engagement with the arts; under the same gracefully built roof, offer struggling adults job-training programs specifically designed by the region's leading employers. The San Francisco center, for example, has partnered with Hewlett-Packard and IDO, and the Grand Rapids enterprise will work closely with Steelcase.

*You've got to engage the people in positions of power. You don't go to Goodwill or the Salvation Army. You go to a community's business leaders. You speak their language. You don't go in asking for a sponsorship. You look the man in the eye, explain this is what you can do for him -- you offer a partnership. Same thing with the public schools. You don't go in saying this is what you need from them. You start by asking, how can I help? With that kind of attitude you can build a center in a year, instead of 10 years. And man, with 100 centers like Pittsburgh, you can change the planet.*

At a conference of Silicon Valley executives in San Jose in October 1999, Jeff Skoll was scheduled as the day's final speaker. Skoll would stand up and do a PowerPoint presentation about the foundation he had started, aimed at promulgating social entrepreneurship, i.e., the application of private resources and the best practices of for-profit management to the sphere of social change. Executives would listen respectfully because Skoll -- the first employee and first president of eBay, billionaire, valley legend -- was doing the talking.

After his presentation they would shake his hand, tell him, Great talk, Jeff, wonderful idea, let's get together soon. Standard networking rebop that would likely lead nowhere because, as Skoll knew better than anyone, he had not yet developed a clear identity and galvanizing image for his new organization. He had not yet done for the Skoll Foundation what he had so famously accomplished for eBay: forged a brand. As Skoll was sitting in the audience, brooding over this fact and awaiting his turn to speak, the conference host introduced a man named Bill Strickland.

The host explained that, over a period of more than 30 years in an inner city Pittsburgh neighborhood, Strickland had built his nonprofit arts and technology organization into a model for the empowerment of poor people. She noted that Strickland had served by White House appointment on the National Council on the Arts and sat on the board of directors of several institutions, including Mellon Bank and his alma mater, the University of Pittsburgh. The host observed that Strickland was almost certainly the only individual to have been both the subject of a

Harvard Business School case study and a guest on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. In 1996, the MacArthur Foundation awarded Strickland one of its genius grants.

Skoll watched this big dude with his funky slides take the stage and start talking about Frank Lloyd Wright, fountains, and welfare moms preparing salmon almondine. He showed pictures of poor people learning organic chemistry to become pharmacy techs for Bayer, and neighborhood kids at computer monitors learning digital imaging. He told stories about the late Sen. John Heinz handing him a check for a million dollars to train food-industry workers. He showed a photo of the greenhouse he'd built to train students in horticulture and -- to make the greeenhouse self-supporting -- to grow orchids to supply a local supermarket chain.

Then he started talking about jazz, how he'd built a *Field of Dreams*-like 350-seat concert hall in the same building as the arts and job-training center. And sure enough the musicians had come -- Dizzy Gillespie and Pat Metheny and Wynton Marsalis and many others -- to perform and record at Manchester Bidwell. See, that's a shot of Dizzy right there.

Near the end of his presentation, Strickland told a story about meeting Mayor Willie Brown in San Francisco. It seemed that Brown heard Strickland talk and told him that he, Mayor Brown, wanted one of those centers in his city. So Strickland, Brown, and Herbie Hancock -- dig it, Herbie Hancock -- sat down over dinner and, on a place mat, drew out the plans for a center in Hunters Point, a San Francisco neighborhood similar to Manchester. And here it was: Strickland showed a slide, an artist's rendering of the Bayview Hunters Point Center for Arts and Technology (popularly known by the acronym BAYCAT), the Bay Bridge arching in the background, trees, fountain, plaza....

"Now, just a little bit ago I was showing this drawing to a group of schoolkids up in San Francisco," Strickland told the Silicon Valley audience. "And this girl raised her hand and said, 'Mr. Strickland, this looks wonderful. How long will it take you-all to build it?'

"And I told her, 'Well, honey, something like this is an awfully big job. Maybe, if we're lucky, three or four years.'

"And that girl looked up at me and said, 'Mr. Strickland, I don't have three or four years.'"

*The girl was right, she doesn't have three or four years. Neither does this country. Kids dropping out of high school at a 50% rate or worse because their schools look and act like prisons, not places where dreams take root. Poverty growing, neighborhoods dying -- hope dying. Jobs are out there -- you all know what I'm talking about -- but you can't fill them and people who want to work can't find them because they can't read, can't do basic math, and what's worse they can't imagine themselves reading or doing the math, much less working those good jobs to support their families. Something wrong with this picture, my friends. Something way wrong. I found Frank Ross. Millions of kids looking for their own Frank Ross. Millions of adults wanting to be Frank Ross. But they can't find each other. They can't find a place to go that treats them fairly and offers them good food to eat and beautiful things to look at and good work to do. That little girl is right, my friends -- we are going down. We don't have three or four years. But we got each other. We got our hearts and our brains and our hands, and if we work together we can do it, we can change the world. We can build this center for that little girl, ladies and gentlemen.*

Then Strickland signed off and all the Silicon Valley princes leaped to their feet, clapping and hollering, as if they were up at PacBell Park and Barry Bonds had just hit one into McCovey Cove. Tears glistened in more than one executive's eyes. Jeff Skoll's first thought was, "Oh, no, I've got to go on after this guy," followed by the realization that this man from Pittsburgh was his foundation's premise made flesh. This was the brand, Skoll thought.

"There are two kinds of power in his line of work," says Skoll, whose foundation now helps underwrite both BAYCAT and Manchester Bidwell's national replication plan, which is nearing the end of a five-year proof-of-concept phase. "The power in materially helping an individual or community discover the strength within themselves, and the power to inspire. It's fairly rare to have either one. Bill Strickland has both."

Every afternoon, buses arrive at Manchester Bidwell from each of the city's 13 public high schools, delivering students for after-school classes, and each evening buses take them back to their neighborhoods. MCG contracts with Pittsburgh Public Schools to provide a bulk of the district's art programs.

"Those buses are as crucial to our mission as the mentoring we give the kids once they get here," says Jesse Fife, Manchester Bidwell's executive vice president and chief operating officer. "People coming from more affluent backgrounds don't realize how difficult it is for a child from a struggling family -- or a child with no family support at all -- just to get places. Not having to worry about transportation takes a tremendous load off a kid's mind. Those buses bring girls and boys to MCG ready to learn."

Beginning this fall, MCG/Bidwell will also provide a portion (eventually to become the majority) of Pittsburgh Public Schools' vocational education program. At the same time, MCG is negotiating with the U.S. Department of Education to fashion a comprehensive arts-based curriculum for a school district in suburban Pittsburgh. The Bidwell Training Center, meanwhile, surfs waves of both public and private revenue. The enterprise forms a $3.5 million line item in the Pennsylvania department of labor's annual budget, and also maintains the dynamic partnerships with private employers that, along with its nonprofit, tuition-free status and intense academic program, distinguish Bidwell from other job-training businesses.

A deal that Strickland struck with the Pittsburgh-area supermarket chain Giant Eagle exemplifies the Manchester Bidwell style. An avid gardener, Strickland had long been interested in growing commercial orchids. He discovered that Giant Eagle's orchid supplier was a California nursery owned and operated by a Japanese American family. Strickland sent staffers out to California to learn about the business. After their return to Pittsburgh, Strickland approached Giant Eagle CEO Dave Shapira with a proposition: If MCG/Bidwell could supply locally grown orchids of equal quality and at a lower price than the California product, would Giant Eagle help finance the construction of a state-of-the-art greenhouse, then buy the flowers that came out of it? Shapira agreed, and with the technical assistance of the California growers, Strickland built the $4 million greenhouse. This year, MCG/Bidwell started supplying top-grade orchids to Giant Eagle, grown by students in the Bidwell Training Center's horticultural program.

"If that's not the whole story in a nutshell, tell me what is," Strickland crows. "You've got an African American company learning to grow orchids from a Japanese American company. The African American company sells its orchids to a grocery chain owned by a Jewish American. The orchids are grown by students -- welfare moms and laid-off steelworkers -- on the site of a former steel mill. The greenhouse is built with aluminum from Alcoa and glass from PPG, both Pittsburgh companies. And all of the other materials are local, as far as possible."

In classic CEO fashion, Strickland typically conceives such ideas, works his vast web of business and government contacts to secure funding, then turns the project over to his staff. Removed from day-to-day operations, he spends much of his time on the road, delivering his PowerPoint raps and forging alliances. When Strickland does happen to be in town, however, he is quietly but distinctly present. His modest office sits in the middle of the brick building, much in the way that a principal's office sits at the heart of a public school. And, like a good principal, Strickland displays an uncanny knack for appearing at decisive moments to greet a visitor, consult with a staffer, or speak to a student. He seems to inhabit his building as comfortably as he does his own body.

My way of working is sort of stream of consciousness. Today I'm going to be spending time in the studio throwing pots, tonight I'll be giving a black-tie dinner for sponsors and escorting them to our concert, and tomorrow morning I'll probably be emptying the trash. Every moment is important. And everybody here comes at what they're doing from a slightly different angle. But no matter their angle, people stick here because it's a hopeful place. Most people just don't get treated anywhere else the way they get treated at Manchester Bidwell.

> "Improvisation is my guiding philosophy. Dancing back and forth between public and private, arts and jobs, right brain and left brain. Corporate executives love this place, but sculptors and singers dig it too."

Last night I was talking to David Baker, leader of the Smithsonian jazz orchestra. He comes up to me and says, How did you figure all this out, Bill? I told him, I think like you, David -- like a jazz musician. Improvisation is my guiding philosophy. Dancing back and forth between public and private, arts and jobs, right brain and left brain. Corporate executives love this place, but sculptors and singers dig it too.

"It's not just that Bill overcomes obstacles," reflects Rep. Melissa Hart, a U.S. congresswoman from Pennsylvania who hopes to sponsor a bill that will fund Manchester Bidwell's expansion into other cities. "It's more like he just refuses to recognize them. That greenhouse, for instance. Ten years ago he and I stood together in this grimy, bombed-out industrial area, and Bill was saying, This is where we're going to have the irrigation system, and this is going to be the computerized control room, and we're going to sell our orchids at Giant Eagle. I said, 'Sure, uh-huh, Bill.' But he actually saw that greenhouse standing in that bombed-out field. He was absolutely convinced that it was a done deal. And today, of course, Bill has his greenhouse."

The MacArthur Foundation, in short, did not bestow on Strickland a genius grant by accident. (He used part of the $295,000 award to establish a college fund for his two daughters. Strickland lives in a modest house not far from where he grew up, drives a late-model VW Beetle, and takes an annual salary of $125,000.) And yet, day to day, Manchester Bidwell displays a quality almost as rare, and perhaps as valuable, as genius. The center functions. It feels cut to a healthy human scale, like a solid public school, or the Manchester neighborhood that

once unassumingly thrived right here.

Bill Strickland aimed to become a man like his teacher, Frank Ross, and in 1965, as he graduated from David B. Oliver High School, there still seemed to be a clear path to that end. Strickland's SAT scores were lacking, but with Ross's help, he was able to win a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh and matriculate on a provisional basis. (In one of Strickland's choice PowerPoint set pieces, he informs his audience that he overcame his lack of academic pedigree to become a dean's list student. In fact, he now serves on Pitt's board, and in 2002 he delivered the university's commencement address to a crowd of 18,000. Strickland received an honorary degree at the ceremony. The other person honored that day happened to be head of the Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT.)

By this time, Strickland had developed into an accomplished potter. He liked to work fast, bright, and big. He was more of a craftsman than a fine artist, however, and didn't think he was talented enough to pursue ceramics as a profession. So he majored in history, thinking he'd become a high school social studies teacher. It was not a path to wealth or fame, but to a productive, balanced life like the one modeled by Frank Ross.

But as Strickland attended college, Pittsburgh and the world underwent a fundamental shift. The new expressway severed the heart of Manchester, and white flight and shuttered mills bled the formerly vibrant neighborhood. The stores on the North Shore boarded up and the rumble in the streets got louder. When he was still in high school, Strickland had traveled to Georgia one summer with the Freedom Riders to work on voter registration. He had met Julian Bond and other leaders of the movement. Back up in Pittsburgh, Strickland joined a youth group sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee.

"That was a great experience," Strickland recalls. "There were kids from all different races and economic classes. We used to get together and stay up all night in church basements talking about politics and philosophy. My senior year in high school I was hanging out with that group, and learning about art and jazz and life from Frank Ross, and studying Shakespeare and Dickens with this terrific English teacher. I was just sailing. But my friends at Oliver High School thought I came from another planet."

By 1968, however, the era of church-basement bull sessions and Sunday-afternoon jazz seemed quaint and distant. The times had turned increasingly violent. Events came to a head in April of that year with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. People ran through the streets of inner city Pittsburgh smashing windows. Soon Manchester, Homewood, and the Hill District were burning.

Although angry and shaken, Strickland did not take to the streets. Perhaps this was because of his parents' influence. His father was a carpenter and his mother a domestic worker. They always stood behind Bill and his younger brother. When Strickland had wanted to go south with the Freedom Riders, when he'd wanted to tear up the family basement and remodel it as a photography studio, they said go ahead. He descended from a line of builders, not destroyers.

So now, in the basement of a row house in fraying, smoking Manchester, Bill Strickland set up a wheel and kiln and went into business, teaching kids how to throw pots. He was good at it. Children loved him, parents trusted him. He worked hard and kept his promises. The little basement where he'd set up shop was clean, bright, and inviting. Kids told their friends about the place, the mothers noticed, and the Manchester Craftsman's Guild grew. Strickland still wanted to become Mr. Ross -- in many ways, he already was Mr. Ross -- but now he started to wonder.

He took a long look at his alma mater, where, just a few years earlier, an eager kid like Strickland could find a teacher like Mr. Ross. But things had changed at Oliver. The school had turned wild and ugly. Graffiti on the walls, bars on the windows. The more money and programs that poured into the school, the uglier it seemed to grow. Compare Oliver High School with the Manchester Craftsman's Guild -- a wheel, a kiln, a young man's dream -- and which looked better?

*After college, I kept up the center, but I also got interested in flying. I bought my own plane and took lessons. More I flew, the better I liked it. I decided I was going to learn to fly airliners. Took me seven years, flying every weekend, going to a school in Atlanta, but finally I got my commercial license. Braniff Airways hired me. I flew to Venezuela, Brazil, everywhere. All on the weekends. Come Monday morning, I was always back at the center in Manchester.*

*Man, you sit up in the cockpit of a 747 at night, 300 passengers behind you asleep in the cabin, the lights of the cities spread out 35,000 feet below, and you feel this terrible responsibility, along with this sense of confidence and power -- the feeling that if you can do this, you can do anything. Well, Braniff eventually had difficulties and laid me off, and another airline wanted to hire me. But that would've meant giving up Manchester Bidwell,*

*leaving Pittsburgh. I thought long and hard, but finally decided that as much as I loved flying, it wasn't my destiny.*

*After that was when the center really started to grow. I wasn't somebody doing social work because he couldn't do anything else. I was a professional airline pilot. I was teaching kids to throw pots, helping my neighbors learn a trade because I wanted to, not because I needed to. That made all the difference in the world.*

Josh Green arrived at MCG in 1989, fresh out of art school in New York, to interview for a job teaching ceramic arts. On his tour, Green saw that the center's kilns, wheels, studios, and working spaces were equal to the facilities of the art departments of most major universities. He was told that, after he finished teaching for the day, he was welcome to use the equipment for his own work. He was already half off his feet before he met Bill Strickland.

"At that interview I did a lot more listening than talking," Green recalls as he sits by the center's fountain one sunny afternoon.

*The kids work here, Josh. This is not a daycare center. Your job is to expect kids to perform. But you can't just say it and you can't just teach it. You've got to show the way you think about the kids every moment you're with them. They see that fountain out in the front plaza, they eat the food in our dining room, and they know before a word is spoken how we feel about them.*

> "We are not a poverty center. A poverty center looks like poverty; we look like the solution. You provide those kids with good things, you expect them to do good work, and they'll do just fine."

*We are not a poverty center, Josh. A poverty center looks like poverty; we look like the solution. A kid goes into that ceramics studio, he works with first-class equipment and materials. When he looks up on the shelves, he sees the work of world-class artists. You provide those kids with good things, you expect them to do good work, and don't worry, they'll do just fine. No big deal. Welcome to Manchester Bidwell, Josh.*

"So I signed on, of course," says Green. He now serves as director of arts and education strategies for MCG.

He smiles, closes his eyes, and tilts back his head to take in the sun. A group of culinary students, looking crisp and professional in their white tunics, come out of the building to take a break. In the distance, in a splash of orange, the greenhouse orchids sprout. That night, the center's theater will host a concert by the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra. Inside, in the ceramics studio, a half-dozen high school kids throw pots. In other rooms, welfare moms learn biochemistry and pastry presentation, knowing that their hard work will pay off in jobs. Not jobs like in the final fat years of the steel mills, but jobs that won't dry up and blow away, either. There is a little bit of elegance in learning to transcribe medical code, a little bit of grit to glazing a coffee mug. Life around the center swings.

> Strickland takes the time to talk to every person. He reads their business cards carefully and puts them in a special jacket pocket he uses for that purpose. If each moment is crucial, each person is more so.

Strickland's Cambridge talk ends the way all his talks do, with people jumping to their feet. As he steps down from the dais the M.B.A.'s crowd around him, pumping his hand, thrusting out their business cards, asking how can I get involved and is MCG/Bidwell hiring. Strickland takes the time to talk to every person. He reads their cards carefully and puts them in a special jacket pocket he uses for that purpose. When he gets back to Pittsburgh he'll give the cards to his staff and they will follow up with mailings. If each moment is crucial, each person is more so. Strickland is beginning to think about his legacy. He will tell you flat out that he wants to save the world.

And if you want to save the world, paradoxically, you've got to pay more attention to individuals, not less. It won't work any other way. At least, it won't work for long.

"Mr. Strickland, thank you," says Jehan Velji, one of the women of color in the audience. Velji explains that she had seen him give a presentation seven or eight years earlier, while she was studying at Harvard Business School. "Your talk changed my life," she tells him. "I didn't even know a career like yours was possible. You showed me that it could be done."

After earning her degree and moving to California, Velji continues, she became a consultant with a nonprofit company.

"That's cool," Strickland tells her. "You're doing it your own way."

> Strickland clearly enjoys the attention and acclaim. He likes being able to say that he's friends with Herbie Hancock, that Laura Bush has visited, and that he taught his late great fellow Pittsburgher, Fred Rogers, how to throw pots on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Velji beams and departs. Another admirer immediately takes her place. Strickland clearly enjoys the attention and acclaim. He likes being able to say that he's friends with Herbie Hancock, that Laura Bush and the Archbishop of Canterbury have visited Manchester Bidwell in recent years, and that he taught his late great fellow Pittsburgher, Fred Rogers, how to throw pots on an episode of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

When Strickland drops names, however, it is never abrasive; he's ingenuously sharing his pride at associating with people whom he admires. By the same token, he dearly loves the first-person singular, yet, somehow, does not employ it in an egotistical manner. His only topic, however variegated, is his work. No portrait of Strickland hangs in Manchester Bidwell's halls. He has spurned repeated offers to join Fortune 500 companies and to run for public office.

Strickland thanks his hosts, then breaks out of the hotel into the brisk, brilliant Cambridge afternoon, the Charles River glinting in the distance beyond the MIT campus. He is on his way to meet Jim Heskett, a Harvard Business School professor. Strickland wants to tell Heskett, an especially valued mentor, about his company's replication plans.

Strickland settles into the back of a taxi and watches the city pass. It's been a long time since the dawn flight from Pittsburgh. Last week he'd flown to Los Angeles to give a talk at evangelist Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral. Strickland had had to dig deep for that unusual audience but, in the end, had earned yet another standing ovation. The hard miles have carved dark circles under his eyes, but he doesn't seem particularly weary. "I haven't slept in 40 years," he says with a shrug.

*I don't get butterflies anymore before a talk. Last time I got nervous was 10 years ago, right here in Cambridge. Jim Heskett invited me to talk to his M.B.A. students. I sat down in the middle of this theater-in-the-round-type lecture hall and those M.B.A.'s just wailed on me. They picked apart my business, showed me all the places where I was going wrong. Man, those cats go for your throat. But it's a great experience for the small-business person. A million dollars' worth of consulting, right there. Yes, that got my stomach going a little bit, a black man from the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh speaking at Harvard.*

Strickland falls silent for a moment, looking out the window. For a man who rouses so much hope, he rarely smiles. Of course, Miles Davis never smiled much either.

"Finally I just did like always," he says. "Showed some slides of what I do for a living. The people liked it just fine."

John Brant's most recent story for Inc. was a profile of Oregon businessman Junki Yoshida in the October 2004 issue. His book *Duel in the Sun*, about the 1983 Boston Marathon, will be published next year by Rodale Press.

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