

CEO, author, speaker Brendan Keegan reflects on success

By George Pelletier - Milford Bureau Chief | May 8, 2021



NASHUA – Brendan P. Keegan grew up in the Gate City, and has an appreciation for the city where he lives and raises his family. He's now an award-winning CEO of Merchants Fleet in Hooksett.

A 1987 graduate of Bishop Guertin, Keegan's fondest remembrance was the Thanksgiving Day football games.

"I just loved that," he said. "And growing up in Nashua, I grew up playing with all the kids I was playing against. For other kids from BG who came from other towns, they didn't know the kids. So, I really enjoyed it because they were kids I played football for eight years, and now we're on opposing sidelines."

Keegan said back then, BG was still all-boys and was a tight-knit school.

"You could be the coolest kid or the nerdiest kid and everyone just fit it," he shared. "At least that's how I felt."



At Guertin, he was class president all four years and participated in football, basketball and baseball along with student government and volunteering, which was a big part of his family make-up at home. That environment extended to Keegan as an adult.

"My oldest sister had Down Syndrome," he said. "When she was born 61 years ago, there just weren't many opportunities. There wasn't a school, there wasn't any place for her to go. My parents were huge volunteers and huge advocates for Down Syndrome."

Keegan recalled picking up his sister at a friend's home to take them to CCD classes at St. Christopher's, where his mother was a volunteer art teacher for decades.

"I grew up in a house where every weekend, we were doing some type of volunteering," he said. "What's interesting growing up, you don't know that it's volunteer work. You just were told, 'this is what you're going to be doing.'"

Bishop Guertin continued that tradition for Keegan, who took that mentality and philosophy into his adult life.



"I remember when I started my career in D.C.," he said. "I went out and coached youth little league. I knew I wanted to work with kids. And then I really got exposed to at-risk youth, when I was in the D.C. area and I didn't grow up with a lot of that."

Keegan's interests grew into areas such as the Police Athletic Leagues, where he saw that kids weren't shown what their best outlook in life might actually look like.

"They didn't get to see what they might be capable of," he said. "And when I moved here, my first stop was P.A.L. and just started coaching football there. But I give credit to my mom and dad for volunteerism and my sister just kind of had me continue to do that. But again, I never viewed it as work. It was just part of what I do."

Being philanthropic started at an early age for Keegan. He said his parents did everything they could do, which was a lot, when it came to his sister and activities.

"I grew up in a house where we didn't write checks, we took action," he recalled. "I've tried to instill that in my kids. That's where the bigger lessons are – where the activities are."



Keegan paid honor to his mother Barbara with the Barbara Keegan Arts Center at St. Christopher's and the Keegan Leadership Center at BG. Additionally, he created the Surprise Birthday room at the Nashua Soup Kitchen.

During COVID, as a motivator, Keegan pivoted on March 13 and saw only possibilities in the impossible.

"On that Friday the 13th in March, we got the stay-at-home work order, at 11:02 a.m., we had completed our capital raise with Bain Capital," he said. "The plan on March 17 was to have a huge corporate celebration. Instead, we were determining how we were going to take care of our employees."

Everyone was sent home, with importance on health and safety being the first goal. The announcement of the Bain Capital wasn't made for two months, again, with the focus on employees and clients.

"It was interesting because it was some of the best news but it wasn't really relevant to anybody," he said. "As an employee, you wanted to know you were safe, that you had a job and had benefits."

Keegan and his team at Merchants Fleet renamed COVID, "cool." So, instead of calling it Project COVID, it was known as Project Cool.

"We pivoted about 20 percent of the company towards 'Last Mile' delivery," he explained. "We were already in the E-commerce business with UPS, Fed-Ex and another, the world's largest E-commerce provider whose name we cannot use."

Merchants Fleet was already doing tremendous business with them and they knew their business would boom. MF took their people from Merchants Auto, who were selling cars there, and made them inside-sales people selling cargo vans to deliver household goods during the pandemic.

"As COVID goes on, we thought, what people, goods and services will be moving less?" Keegan said. "We did business with universities, summer camps, limo companies and hotels. We knew they would move less."

Moving the same, Keegan said, was oil and gas, infrastructure, construction and project management.

"We thought, what's going to move more?" he said. "E-commerce 'Last Mile.' We pivoted 20 percent of our company into the mobility group, which includes home delivery. We grew that. And last year, our industry declined by 39 percent, while MF saw an increase of 40 percent. It was just about an 80 percent swing."

Employee morale was up, Keegan said, and they would ask, *"What do you need me to do?"*

"I can't tell you how great every employee was last year," he said. "People changed roles, doing things they had never done. It was one of the greatest alignment exercises you could ever do."

Keegan called it a *"rallying cry,"* as the company invited its employees to bring their kids or pets to Zoom meetings. And it was how, he said, everybody really got to know everybody.

"I couldn't believe we were in 400 different locations, and yet we were closer than ever," he said. "People worked hard but really loved what they were doing. We weren't healthcare workers on the frontlines, but we kept deliveries to hospitals running and to keep grocery stores running. People felt a bit of a calling."

Meanwhile, Keegan said he keeps busy authoring articles, speaking on strategy and culture, and guesting on podcasts.

He said he doesn't have a favorite, but enjoys extending his experiences on to others.

"If I can give somebody a different perspective on something, that's powerful," he said. "When I look at the different mentors that I've had and the people who have said things, and I've written that down, and said, 'Wow that was really powerful.' And I think when you mature and get more experience, I just think you have a responsibility to give back."