

STYLE | AT LUNCH



Brian Weiner

Communicating passion

BY RUTH LANDO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX STAFFORD

Brian Weiner doesn't do anything halfway. Thinking himself a "skinny man trapped in a fat body," he plunged into a seven-month Medifast weight-loss regimen in 2010 that skimmed off 55 pounds. Now, at 57, he weighs what he did in the eighth grade: a trim 165. Since October, Brian hasn't regained so much as a half-pound. It's no surprise that he eats no carbs whatsoever and never "cheated" once while on what most would call a punishing diet. I believe him when he says he never will.

This energetic business entrepreneur, president and partner of the One to One Group — a Lakewood Ranch enterprise that runs fundraising campaigns for nonprofits — adheres to a life of high standards.

One to One Group has won both the 2006 PODi Best Practices Award in the Small Business Category and the 2006 Fundraising Success Gold Award for its technologically advanced system of "variable data" appeals, using fully customized direct mail marketing and Internet cross-promotion strategies in the service of many causes. Brian and his partners have helped charities raise \$64 million since 2003. Last year, they brought in \$12.5 million for their clients and have already tracked donations of that amount through the first half of 2011.

Life has been a series of on-the-job trainings for a self-proclaimed "black sheep of the family."

Brian started out as a "socially involved kid" in what he describes as an ethnically diverse Brooklyn neighborhood, with parents who did not appreciate his theater and writing talents. An "absolute contrar-

ian" mother could not support her son's ambitions, he says ruefully, adding that, "No matter what you did, you were going to fail." But don't ever tell this man he can't do something. When his mother proclaimed he'd never get into college, Brian won acceptance to nine of the 10 schools where he applied. He enrolled as a communications major at the prestigious Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Financial difficulties began when Brian's dad became a partner in a business that failed. He was forced to withdraw and transfer to Rutgers, working his way through to a bachelor's degree in 1977.

Later, having earned his Actors' Equity card, Brian auditioned for the repertory company in Syracuse, but his parents continued to boycott his theatrical endeavors. He finally agreed to explore "the business side of entertainment" and launched what he wryly calls the "Rock 'n' Roll" chapter of his life.

At first, Brian booked entertainment and talent for the Six Flags amusement park empire, which led to producing TV show hits including "The Newlywed Game" and "Hollywood Squares," in casinos in Atlantic City, Las Vegas and other venues. Eventually, he moved into arena management, including for the Spectrum Arena in Philadelphia, then facilities management for the City of Worcester, Mass. Brian opened what became the most successful regional arena in the U.S. at the time, the Centrum (now the DCU Center) in Worcester. His first triumph was snagging Frank Sinatra on Sept. 2, 1982. That was followed by 59 sold-out concerts in the Centrum's first 90 days.

“It was fun work and I loved it,” he says. Brian was then dispatched to London as a property manager and had a great experience there. But the job required too much time away from his first wife and their daughter, Sara. The Rock ‘n’ Roll era went out with a classical bang on New Year’s Eve 1986, in a final concert featuring Luciano Pavarotti.

By 1990, Brian had moved into a different facet of the communications world, serving as president and COO of the KMS Companies in Woburn, Mass. After mastering the specialty digital printing business, he and Dana Place, a friend and colleague, launched Noalart Graphics Inc. in Marlborough, Mass., writing and producing millions of pages of on-demand technical documentation for software companies in New England. When the partners sold the firm at the height of the dot-com boom in June 2000 to a publicly traded company, they hit the jackpot. The next three years were spent volunteering on nonprofit boards and thinking about the next steps in their careers.

After searching the east coast for a new home for their families, the men settled in Sarasota in 2003 and opened the One to One Group. Brian muses that he never planned to spend 40 years doing printing and communications work. “That would be like telling a kid he’s going to be a shepherd at age 17,” he says with typical dramatic flair. “It’s just not what I saw myself doing. I was very idealistic and I was very creative. I wanted to make a difference and I saw myself changing the world. But I’ve really made a role for myself that allows me to make a difference, to do meaningful work and to be creative. At the end of the day, you make your life.”

Creating this new business in Sarasota has coalesced all the disparate plots and themes of his life into one big, climactic chapter — one of which he is very proud.

He enables nonprofits to maximize their fundraising potential by using technology to mine their donor data. This allows Brian to see immediate results from his finely honed writing skills.

“More than anything else, I love to write,” he confesses. “If you write a magazine article or newspaper story, it’s very hard to see the smile on the reader’s face and to know that you’ve made an impact, that you’ve changed someone’s life. I wanted a job, a business where I could know instantaneously in very real, tangible ways that we are really making a difference; that there is someone on the other side of the message. Well, my work really gives me that every day. I can get income reports every day and know. ... My big rush of the year is the Season of Sharing (an annual fundraising campaign that helps families and individuals avoid falling into homelessness). Those letters go out the door every year, the Sunday before Thanksgiving ... and I see the first week’s numbers come back and they’re already in the six figures. That is very exciting!”

Yet, in spite of his triumphs, Brian philosophizes that he is still a “work in progress,” a restless soul. He doesn’t sleep much and his mind never stops. That makes for a great relationship with his laid-back friend Dana Place. “We are the yin and yang; hot and cool; itchy and comfortable,” Brian quips. Because he can never slow down, vacations are tough. But the Weiner family, including his wife of 23 years, Kathleen, and daughters Alison and Rachel, do spend long stretches of time together on their beloved Cape Cod.

In June, Brian announced that the One to One Group is merging with a North Carolina company to expand its reach and grow into new markets. This endeavor, called One to One DocuSource, offers expanded creative and sales resources, additional talent, manufacturing capacity, enhanced national reputation and longevity. Already the company has picked up fresh clients, including North Carolina State University, the University of North Carolina and two social service agencies in the Raleigh/Durham area.

“I love and am obsessed with social-service causes, especially food banks,” Brian says. “I want to make a meaningful difference before I get out. I would love to have every food bank on the east coast of the United States. ... For-profit work just doesn’t energize me in the same way.”

He believes that “every person has an obligation to live a meaningful existence, given an opportunity. Life is a blessing, and for you not to respect that blessing and to maximize it to the best of your ability is a sin. I have worked really hard to use my resources to help other people. Always.”

WHERE WE ATE:

Brasserie Belge.

WHAT WE ATE:

Brian — Warm goat cheese (chèvre) salad with chicken; me — Tuna salad in a peach and Belgian frites