One man’s rags-to-riches tale with a Tiburon twist

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Jesse Bromberg's is a rags-to-riches story with a twist spun in the Tiburon Peninsula's unique demographics that plop low-income housing amid luxury estates. The successful wealth manager credits his bitter boyhood in the federally subsidized Hilarita Apartments — tucked within an affluence-encased enclave of poverty — with providing the launching pad for his flight to fortune.

"To my later surprise, it turned out that living in the Hilarita for 13 years of my childhood, surrounded by such significant wealth all around me but never being able to experience it for myself, was the best life lesson that I could have ever had," he assures the youngsters he mentors at the complex.

Although as a child he wished for a more typical neighborhood with a less extreme income disparity so he wouldn’t be continually reminded of all that he was missing, he came to recognize that the juxtaposition of the haves and have-nots stimulated his desire and design to realize his dreams.

"If I grew up on the 8 Mile (Road, a blighted stretch of Detroit), where everyone on my block didn’t have money … or if I grew up a wealthy child where everything was handed to me, I wouldn’t know as well as I do how the other side lives," Bromberg said.

That front-line experience armed him with the impetus to wage a winning war against the whims of fate. Drawing inspiration from injustice, he traversed the tracks to the “right side of town” — and to a flourishing career in investment banking: last month he was named managing adviser in America.

Bromberg lives in a lovely home in San Rafael and, in his off-hours, shares the wealth of his extensive experience during talks he gives at the Hilarita on such topics as “Teaching Children the Financial Facts of Life.”

"I want to express to the kids that I know what it feels like to be in their shoes and that there is hope," said Bromberg, who aims his message at 10-to-17-year-olds.

"It gave me a huge chip on my shoulder," Bromberg recalled. "I had all the wonderful accoutrements a child might need."

His idyllic life switched course abruptly when he turned 5 and his mother turned to federal assistance in the wake of an amicable divorce.

"It was frustrating to be surrounded by this uberwealth, yet at the same time to be in government housing where I could smell the exhaust from the Ferraris rolling by my window," Bromberg said. "It was like putting an ice cream cone in front of a child’s nose but not letting him lick it.”

While his friends sailed to exotic islands, sunned by the pool or served aces at the tennis club, he delivered newspapers, washed windows, taught tennis, busied tables and worked at odd jobs since age 10.

As his classmates rode to school in fancy cars, he walked or hitchhiked. "It gave me a huge chip on my shoulder," Bromberg said.

He reached a particularly painful yet poignant point in a supermarket when the cashier refused to accept food stamps for a chocolate bar she deemed "nonessential."

His mother’s reaction set him on a course toward a financially fulfilling future.

"At that moment, she looked at me and said, ‘Honey, please do one of two things with your life,’" recalled Bromberg, who was nine at the time. "Either do something you love so much, you can’t wait to jump out of bed each morning to get to work, and in that case it doesn’t matter how much money you make, or do something you can make a ton of money at so you can have anything you want.”

Taking his mother’s words to heart, Bromberg did both.

He found equal inspiration in a motivational self-help book a bank manager gave him. In “Think and Grow Rich” — a best-seller 70 years after its publication — author Napoleon Hill follows a suggestion from steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie and spends three years interviewing the nation’s most successful figures to discover their secret.

"He concludes that these people were not magical or necessarily much smarter than you or I," Bromberg said. "What they did have was a very clear and precise plan of how they were going to succeed, a mission statement."

Bromberg’s flowed naturally from his aptitude in math and interest in wealth.

"I had always had a knack for numbers, and I found out pretty early on in my career that I truly enjoyed this unique business that gave me the opportunity to reach a wide array of … bright and successful individuals (and) to live vicariously through them in many ways," said Bromberg, an economics and business graduate who started out at Bank of America Investment Services 15 years ago.

"I’m one of the lucky ones that was able to take my mother’s advice and find something that can be financially rewarding as well as something that I truly enjoy." Over the years, his focus has shifted toward spending time with his wife and three young daughters and giving back to the community.

"While my mission statement may have been more heavily weighted toward financial success earlier on, I find it morphing more to other important aspects of my life, such as my family and charitable endeavors," he said.

Relating to youngsters growing up in his boyhood home, Bromberg likes to offer his life story as proof theirs can have a happy ending.

Feature writer Lidia Wasowicz Pringle of Tiburon spent 30 years at United Press International before joining The Ark in 2009.