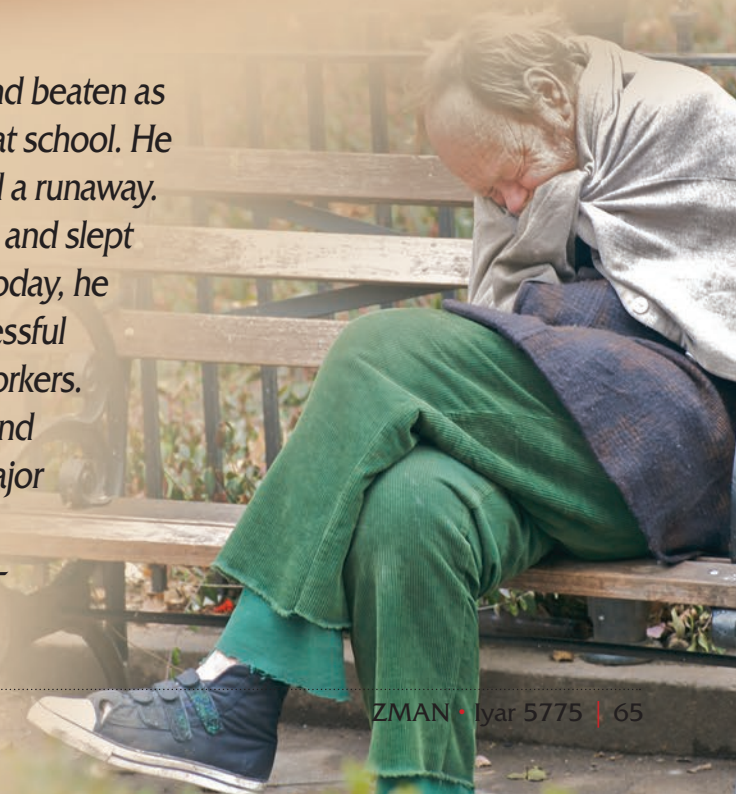




From Homeless To CEO

Aviva Sternfeld

He was neglected, abused and beaten as a child at home and taunted at school. He was friendless, a dropout and a runaway. As an adult he was homeless and slept in the freezing cold streets. Today, he is the owner of a highly successful business with hundreds of workers. His advice is widely sought and he is often interviewed by major business publications. Meet Gabriel Bristol, a real-life, feel-good success story.



“What do you mean ‘a 50% refund?’” the man on the other end of the telephone line asks in open annoyance. “Are you serious? The account is already suspended and you want to give me back just 50%? That’s not right!”

The worker at the call center stammers, unsure of how to respond. He makes a valiant attempt to calm his caller, while simultaneously trying his best to sound both sympathetic and sure of himself. He wants desperately to satisfy the caller. And that’s not all. He also has to be extraordinarily helpful and accept the caller’s complaints and accusations happily. He has to say please and thank you, and above all to make the caller happy with the most minimal refund possible.

Although the worker at the call center does not know this, a third party is listening in on the call. That person is the president and CEO of the call center, Gabriel Bristol, who sits in his office and quietly checks up on his workers without giving the slightest hint of his presence.

When the 12-minute phone call finally draws to a close, Bristol sends a message to the worker to visit him in his office. “You said ‘um’ too many times,” he chides the man. “You should never say ‘um’ when talking to a client. It shows weakness and uncertainty. Also, always speak slowly and pause every once in a while and let the caller wait for a second. That makes you sound firm.”

Customer service is a vocation that is full of techniques. A professional customer service representative must keep the client calm and at the same time make the client feel that in reality he is the winner. Gabriel Bristol knows all this. He has 10 years of experience manning the phones.

Two years ago, he took over a call center that employed 40 workers and developed it into a successful company with over 300 employees. Operating under the name Intelicare Direct, he maintains several centers in western states.

Bristol’s goal is to raise the quality of call

centers everywhere. His dream is to convert a job in a call center into a career people look forward to, which is not at all the case today. He takes the topic so personally because the call center industry is what transformed him from a homeless man wandering the streets into the CEO of a highly successful business.

The Homeless Youth

Bristol grew up in Spring Lake, Michigan, a town of 2,500, on the shores of Lake Michigan. Fourth in a family of five adopted children, the last time he saw his biological mother was when he was five years old. Officials from Child Protective Services took him away after his mother was arrested for drug trafficking.

Bristol was adopted by a cement-truck driver and his wife. The couple, both of them devout Christians, treated their adoptive children cruelly. The children were forced to recite passages from the Bible from memory every day, and if they failed they could be beaten. The children had to ask for permission to take a bath, brush their teeth or even just to take a drink of water. Failure to comply often meant a beating. It was common for young Gabriel to miss school because his adoptive mother was worried that the teachers would notice his bruises and call the police.

With that kind of a background, it is not hard to understand why Bristol had a very difficult time making and maintaining friends. He was thrilled when one day he was invited to join a group of classmates for a party. He tried to enjoy himself there, but he soon discovered that he had been invited as a joke.

“Throw him into the river!” one of the boys shouted, and the others proceeded to do exactly that. Several of them grabbed Bristol and dragged him toward the river. Bristol escaped before they could carry out their plan, but the incident traumatized him. Bristol immediately dropped out of school.

One day, after receiving another beating



Gabriel Bristol once lived on the streets. Today, he is the owner of a call center that earns millions annually.

at home, Bristol decided he had had enough. He caught a Greyhound bus to the nearest city he could think of: Lansing. There he lived in the streets until people took pity on him and allowed him to sleep indoors on their couches.

Then, one Friday in 1989, when he was 19, Bristol’s fortune took a sudden turn. He decided to donate some blood to earn a few bucks. As the pint of vital fluids was being drained, Bristol chatted with another homeless youth. That young man told Bristol that he had found a job working at a call center, and he assured Bristol that he could get him a job there as well. Bristol grabbed the opportunity.

Inborn Talent

To his delight, he discovered that this position was tailor-made for him. He had an instinctive feel for the callers he spoke to, sensing their concerns and always coming up with the right words to calm them.

Ironically, it was Bristol’s troubled childhood that trained him for this work. He grew up suffering, knowing that if he dared raise his voice to speak up for himself or used a poor choice of words he faced corporal punishment. He learned to read people’s expressions and tones, and which words to avoid so as not to anger his adoptive parents.

This ongoing need helped him understand the pain of others and honed his talent for dealing with them.

Even before he had a chance to settle down at his new job, Bristol found himself receiving bonuses, one after another. He couldn’t believe it. After suffering through such a difficult childhood, both at home and at school, he suddenly found that he was capable and worthy after all.

Still, responding to angry callers at a call center was not the greatest job and the opportunities for advancement were limited. So, Bristol looked elsewhere. He put away enough to purchase a bus ticket to Los Angeles, where he searched for another job. He was frustrated when his efforts to enter other fields were unsuccessful, but when he returned to customer service he found that he was a natural.

In 1999, Bristol was hired by MetLife to oversee a staff of 30 at the insurance company’s customer service department. He found the division in poor shape, consisting of an eclectic mix of desperate and odd characters. One of them wore three pairs of glasses—one perched atop the head, one over the eyes and a third dangling around the neck. When Bristol asked this man why he needed three pairs of spectacles to see,



People come to Bristol to hear his business advice.