

THE MORNING CALL

**The extreme adventure challenge
that helps guitar-maker C.F.
Martin grow as a company**



Canoeing is one of the challenges C.F. Martin employees take part in during their Outward Bound outing.

By Evan Jones - The Morning Call (TNS)
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Growing up, Chris Martin IV wasn't the type to run for class president.

"I wasn't the student that wanted to be a leader," the executive chairman of C.F. Martin & Co said. "I was a follower."

When he was 31, however, Martin found himself in charge of the family company, the Nazareth manufacturer that dates to 1833 and holds a legendary status among generations of musicians with its handmade guitars.

He was thrust into the leadership position in 1986 when his grandfather, C.F. Martin III, died and the board promptly named him CEO. Chris' father, Frank Herbert Martin, ran the company until he resigned in 1982.

"I was scared to death," Martin said.

An introvert, he knew he had to polish his leadership skills. Martin had heard about Outward Bound, an organization that specializes in personal growth experiences, including outdoors adventures such as hiking and canoe trips. It was founded by educator Kurt Hahn more than 80 years ago.

Soon, Martin was on plane to Colorado joining an Outward Bound group in the mountains

"So we all go off to Leadville, and the first thing is that it's at altitude. So nobody's sleeping, everybody has a headache and it was really severe," Martin recalled. "Our facilitator, he really laid down the law. He said, You know, you left all the comforts of home at home. Everything goes, including caffeine and sugar.' And we're all saying, 'You can't have a cup of coffee?'"

Martin said he found his leadership style that week in the Rocky Mountains.

“Through that week, I began to realize that maybe through experimentation, and teamwork, and practicing and being a leader, maybe I could be what I need and realize I needed a style that’s mine alone,” he said. “And my dad’s style of leadership was perfect ... for the ’60s and ’70s. It was ‘Mad Men,’ and it worked for them. But I thought that’s not going to work for me, it’s not my style.”

The experience changed him, and he used it to change the company. Wanting his employees to have a similar transitional experience, Martin arranged for employees to experience Outward Bound programs.

It has become a company tradition and continues to this day, even after Martin stepped down as CEO in 2021.

“I saw it as a great opportunity to bring our people together,” said Thomas Ripsam, the president and CEO at C.F. Martin. “Amidst lots of change, the trip was a mix of new and tenured employees. It was great to spend time and get to know people at a much deeper level. By doing things together we created a connection that felt very meaningful and deeper than you do everyday at work. By working together, you recognize the particulars of each person.”



C.F. Martin & Co. Inc. CEO Chris Martin IV puts his signature on the last beam for the Two City Center office building in Allentown during a June 2018 ceremony. Martin, the sixth-generation owner of global guitar maker in Upper Nazareth Township, says his experience with the Outward Bound program changed his life. (Harry Fisher / The Morning Call)

What is Outward Bound?

Sam Barnhart, associate director of specialty programs with Philadelphia Outward Bound School, said Martin's personal experience is the exact purpose of the organization's strategy.

"It's really the core of what we do," Barnhart said. "If you look across all of the programs that we offer, what we do is character curriculum. So whether that's working with a school student, or with a corporate client, we are teaching what effective communication looks like. What does problem

solving look like? What does leadership look like? And for our school students, it's more geared toward what you are doing with your classmates. What are you doing in your community? What does that transition from middle school to high school look like?"

For professional clients, such as Martin, it's a chance to create synergy among employees at all levels, Barnhart said.

"What does that cross platform communication look like? What does it look like to have Chris Martin transitioning to our brand new CEO of Martin guitar? How does that all work? What does it actually look like for a team to go from this to this?" he said.

The history of Outward Bound goes back to Europe in the 1920s, when German educators Hahn and Marina Ewald were looking for ways of fostering character development through experiential learning and team collaboration. Hahn is perhaps best known for founding the Gordonstoun School in Scotland that educated members of the British royal family.

The first Outward Bound program was started in Wales by Hahn and businessman Lawrence Holt during World War II to help increase the survival chances of sailors should their ships be torpedoed in the mid-Atlantic. The Outward Bound moniker was derived from the nautical term for a ship leaving safe harbor for the open sea.

In 1962, Josh Miner started an Outward Bound school in Marble, Colorado. The U.S. branch has 10 schools, including one in Philadelphia that opened in 1992.

Courses are tailored to the client and include backpacking, rock climbing and canoeing in both rural and urban areas. City-based programs can also include service-type activities, as well as things such as rope climbing.

“None of these experiences are cookie-cutter and they are super customized and tailored to what the client wants, even year over year,” Barnhart said. “We’ve worked with Martin guitar for 20 years and each expedition is very different from the last one.”

Ripsam said participants are not micromanaged.

“They give you a goal and let you go at it,” he said. “That approach creates a great connection and sense of being together as a team. Human aspect. No distractions.”

Martin said company groups have explored the headwaters of the Lehigh River in the Poconos, explored Philadelphia, canoed on the Potomac River and sailed on Chesapeake Bay. Each member is assigned a rotating task. Evenings include campfire discussions about such things as career and life goals.

“Part of the experience is putting you somewhere where you are not used to,” Martin said.

“I’m so thankful I was able to go and very fortunate our organization allows employees to participate and stretch out of their comfort zones to support each other,” said Stacey McCarty, the company’s human resources director. “I was amazed how we all supported each other. We forged relationships at all

different levels and roles. We can carry this on through other departments. People don't work well together if there is tension. It was a powerful experience.”



Climbing is one of the challenges C.F. Martin employees may face in an Outward Bound program. (Courtesy of Outward Bound)

C.F. Martin and the program

Back in his early days as CEO, Martin wanted to change the company culture that included employees struggling with each other while they competed for promotions. When he returned to a later Outward Bound adventure, it was with executives that he persuaded to come along.

Martin noted that not everyone signs up for the program, and it has always been optional, calling it “challenge by choice.”

After some years, Martin wanted to open the program to everyone in the company, and he persisted despite rumors floating around about the hardships the groups endured in the wilderness, while others thought it could be brainwashing.

“So I went to HR, and I said you’re going to love this, I want to open up any full-time employee in Nazareth and in our Mexican plant,” Martin said. “They said, ‘You want to do what?’ And I said that’s what I want to do.

“That was the best decision, because now, instead of a bunch of peers with basically the same title, you have a slice of life from Chris Martin down to someone who works second shift. That really made it what it is, now everyone can participate. Everyone can take from it what they want.”

Martin said employees that participated were able to discover abilities they didn’t realize they had. Some did it to see what it takes to move up in the company.

“I think personally that there were some people that went on Outward Bound and that was the trigger for them,” Martin said. “ ‘I have a career here. I can move beyond the job I have into a higher level position, if I apply myself because Chris likes that, he’s willing to promote from within, is willing to train, and is willing to invest in you for a long time.’ I’m just so glad I experienced that.”

The latest urban challenge for C.F. Martin employees included three days hiking, exploring and camping in Philadelphia, including activities at the Discovery Center, the area Outward Bound home base. They also conducted a scavenger hunt including murals across the city.

Jake Morrison, an assistant department manager, neck assembly, said sleeping in a 50-foot rope course in the city and experiencing nightlife sounds in Philly was memorable, as well as seeing people overcome fears on the rockwall.

“No one knew what to expect,” Morrison said. “We didn’t know where we were going or sleeping and had no choice but to embrace the time. It made us a very cohesive unit by Day 3 and came with a great sense of achievement and success.

“I grew up in PA and had been to Philly many times but I saw so many different and beautiful parts of the city. It was a piece of serenity and it was spectacular. A completely different way to see the city,” he said.

It’s hearing feedback from employees and seeing those memories posted around the office that brings a smile to Martin.

“The coolest thing is that if you have an office, very often in that office will be that person’s certificates [from the program],” Martin said. “People will have a certificate and they’ll have a group photo. For a lot of people it’s something that they would not ever do, but they come back and think that was really something special.”