

Jackie Asencio

Eagles Soar Alone

When Jackie Asencio's father retired after thirty years of military service as an Infantry officer, he and her mother invested their retirement money in a large chicken farm in Purdue, going back to his roots as a farmer's son. But they knew the best, safest investment of all was their own strong-willed, hardworking daughter. When Jackie decided to start her own business and was looking for investors, they immediately stepped up and took a loan out on their farm to give her the seed money to realize her entrepreneurial dream.

Jackie agreed to pay back the \$100,000 investment, plus interest, in a series of increments, so she knew she didn't have a lot of time to prove herself. "Nervous, I asked my parents what would happen if I failed," she recounts today. "My dad said, 'I guess your mother and I will have to walk chickens for the rest of our lives.' He was smiling because he knew that wouldn't happen."

Jackie's parents raised her to be a leader. "When I was young, my father always told me that he wasn't raising me to be a chicken so that I could peck with the other hens," she says. "He'd say he was raising me to be an eagle, and eagles soar alone."

Looking back, Jackie felt as if she were standing on a diving board, unsure of whether there was water or concrete beneath her. But she also knew failure was not an option. With her parents' faith behind her, she dove headfirst and founded C2 Portfolio, Inc. (C2), a boutique and niche-oriented human resources organization serving professional services firms and federal contractors. And today, as the company's President and CEO, she continues to soar.

Launching the company out of the basement of her townhouse, Jackie hired her first employee in 1997. Now an expert professional employer organization (PEO) specializing in HR outsourcing, the company is a team of around fifty

employees. Ninety-five percent of their clients are federal contractors across the defense civilian, and intelligence agencies, and they support work across the United States and in 30 countries around the world. "We've had large PEOs try to acquire us, but I love this company too much to let it go," she says. "Some of my employees and clients have been with me for nineteen years. It's a wonderful dynamic and I love coming to work every day."

In many ways, C2 is like a family, and as a leader, Jackie ensures each member is clear on the importance of mission, integrity, morals, and character. She believes in leading by example and empowering her employees to succeed, and the open-door culture of the office indicates the premium C2 places on honesty and straightforward communication. "We're humans dealing with other humans, so of course we're going to make mistakes," she says. "We need complete transparency and ownership, and we always take personal fiduciary responsibility to fix mistakes and make our clients whole. Those are our values as a company."

To help clients that were failing to meet their small business and women-owned business contracting goals, Jackie decided to launch another company, Valorous. The company applies Jackie's strengths in a new industry, and specializes in language translation and interpretation services, cultural awareness training, multi-intelligence analytical and technical solutions, and collection management for the Department of Defense and U.S. intelligence community. Thanks again to her strong interpersonal relationships and proven effectiveness on crucial proposals, Valorous has grown phenomenally and continues to be very profitable in its mission to provide and support the unsung heroes that work alongside the warfighter in the service of America.

Jackie has also dedicated her time and



expertise to the Veterans Institute of Procurement, a training program launched in 2008 to help veterans as they transition out of military service and into the civilian job market. She is one of only two trainers who have been with the Institute since its inception, and has trained over 500 CEOs about human capital management and best practices in supporting our veterans. "I think a lot of my drive to help veterans comes from my dad," she says. "The well-being of his soldiers was always his top priority. He was incredibly charismatic and always made sure his soldiers and their families were okay."

While her father served as an Infantry officer in the Army, fighting through conflicts like the Vietnam War and the Panama Invasion, her mother worked full-time in civil service while raising her three children and providing support for other military families. "My mother juggled a lot of balls and kept everything running smooth as glass, and she always put other peoples' best interests ahead of her own," Jackie reflects. "My parents were very much pillars in the community," she reflects. "From an early age, I observed their compassion as they helped needy families who didn't have food or couldn't pay their bills. We didn't have a lot of money, but my parents still extended a hand to those in need, which really laid a foundation for me growing up. It's one reason I care so much about people and pursued a career in HR."

Jackie was born in Columbus, Georgia, when her father was stationed at Fort Benning. With an older sister and younger brother, she got used to moving every three years, just like clockwork. "Moving around actually helped me a lot," she says. "I don't stereotype people, and I'm like a chameleon that can adapt to different environments. The military is, itself, a hometown, and military installations are melting pots where all different nationalities, races, and religions are connected through the common theme of military service. It provided a sense of uniformity and strength."

Academics were a struggle for Jackie, and she didn't discover that dyslexia was the root cause of her issues until she was 32. "The school system back then didn't have programs in place for people with learning disabilities," she says. "They didn't even really know what they were. So I learned to overcompensate in other areas, and part of that was being able to relate to people,

engage them in conversation, and retain information. I focused on building my strengths, and they happened to be the exact strengths you need for a career in HR. It's really at my core and how I was brought up."

She also excelled in sports, where her leadership qualities shined. The family was stationed in Germany starting in her high school years, and she became the first female golfer at her school, earning medals and awards. "I picked up golf because my dad loved to play, and it was a way to hang out with him on the weekends," she laughs. She was also competitive in gymnastics and cross country, running at least three miles a day all through high school. A social butterfly, she always had friends from all walks of life. "Like my grandfather, I never met a stranger," she says. "He was a role model for me."

During her first summer in Germany, Jackie had an opportunity to work in the HR department of the Civilian Personnel Office on base—her first foray into HR. "I worked for a phenomenal lady who was excited about the people she served and the problems she got to fix," Jackie recalls. "I remember the joy on her face as she helped people who came in. She was so passionate about making a difference through her work, and I thought, I can see myself aspire to have a job like this someday."

As Jackie rapped up her junior year of high school, her father's three years of service in Germany came to an end, and he offered to stay so she could finish out her senior year in the same school despite a setback in his career. But Jackie said she was ready to go, even though it meant moving to Tampa, Florida, and a class of 3,000 new students. She was ready to get her driver's license, buy some Levi's, and see her cousins—all the comforts of home she had missed during their three years abroad.

Jackie loved children and helping people, so she decided to pursue a career as a pediatric nurse. She enrolled at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee, near where her parents lived at the time, but the math and chemistry continued to give her trouble. She decided to take only business courses, echoing the entrepreneurial spirit of her grandparents. "My paternal grandfather ran a large tobacco farm and construction business, while my maternal grandmother ran several successful restaurants," she says. "I remember watching her as I grew up, observing how she

oversaw the operations and finances. I saw my family doing business all the time, so it was a natural mindset for me.”

The planned course of her life was further altered when her father introduced her to Frank Asencio. A West Point graduate and Ranger School survivor whose father served as the U.S. Ambassador to Brazil and Colombia, his grit was a perfect fit for Jackie’s feistiness. Jackie discontinued her coursework, and the two were married in 1984. Through Frank, Jackie became acquainted with the world of international diplomacy and intelligence. She can still remember traveling overseas with the ambassador, riding behind his vehicle in the chase car full of automatic weapons and being locked into their rooms at night for safety. “It introduced me to a whole new life that still fascinates me today,” she says. “It’s the foundation of the work I do at Valorous.”

Frank’s first assignment as a married man in 1986 was supposed to be Panama, but at the last minute, he was diverted to Germany—a place to which Jackie was not eager to return. Both husband and wife were brought into the strange, secret fold of the intelligence world, and Frank was shipped off for months to an undisclosed location with no telling when he would return. She got a job working in HR on the military installation until he returned and was reassigned to Vint Hill Farms Station, a US Army facility near Warrenton, Virginia. It was a stark environment without the social support structures typically seen on military bases. As Jackie remembers, she was on her own.

“It was extremely intense, and because it was so secretive, we couldn’t communicate anymore,” she remembers. “The marriage didn’t work out because of that, but I had the opportunity to see these nonmilitary folks risking their lives in support of the Intelligence Community. We never hear about them, but they’re working right alongside service members to support critical surveillance and intelligence missions. We provide and support those heroes through Valorous today.”

Jackie had gone to work in HR for Vector Research Incorporated in 1989, and was also an assistant for the facilities security officer. In that capacity, she was able to help her team achieve key goals and contracts simply through knowing how to relate with people, engaging them on their families and personal priorities to build deep relationships. Her superiors came to trust her in

ways they trusted no one else, and she saw she had a gift.

Jackie then spent several years at Intelligent Decisions as the VP of HR in the early 1990s before transitioning over to NCI. There, Jackie had great relationships supporting 11 VPs, again working her characteristic magic through knowing people and developing connections. One of the company’s clients was constantly coming across full and open competitive bids it lacked the bandwidth and reach back to compete for on its own, so it decided to convene a meeting of similar entities. One day, thirty small businesses met at the Sheraton Premier to launch a consortium, and Jackie was invited.

At first, she didn’t know why. But she knew all the companies at some level through their work together at NCI, and in a way, Jackie saw that she was a glue to help solidify and support their partnership. “It was 1994, and the idea of small companies banning together to compete for big federal contracts was very innovative,” she recounts. “They set their minds to pooling their resources, expertise, past performance, and proposal support and I realized a golden opportunity for them to pool HR services as well. None of them had HR departments, so I came up with the idea of starting a consultancy serving all the consortium members.”

After writing a business plan and visiting the Library of Congress for more context, Jackie discovered that the PEO concept was at that time already ten years old, but mostly utilized in California, Texas, and Florida. It had not yet been brought to life in the Washington metropolitan area in the federal contracting space, so she resolved to fill that unique niche in an area she understood so well.

The first step was educating the market, so while working at NCI, Jackie began explaining her vision and services to the law firms, brokers, and accounting firms she had to partner with to fulfill the needs of the consortium. It took her a little over a year to get her first contract after incorporating on January 4, 1996. Her company C2, stands for Call to Christ. “I’m a Christian, so in truth, Jesus is the CEO, and I work for him every day,” she says.

When she put in her resignation at NCI, they asked her to continue her work for them as a 1099 consultant, and at first, she agreed. But after three months of trying to balance NCI with finding other client work, Jackie knew it was time to cut

the cord. “NCI had over 800 employees at the time, and that work was more than an eight-hour-per-day job,” she says. “I needed time to grow my company.”

Though she started the company in a recession, the company quickly became profitable, and Jackie paid her parents back on time and in full. As the sole employee, she did everything that first year, from sales to the back-end HR to finding the right law firm and accounting firm. It was a bare-bones first year, but Jackie succeeded in putting the infrastructure and foundation in place for C2 to maintain steady growth every year since.

Jackie’s motto may be “Failure is not an option,” but she reflected on the possibility of failure often through those early years. Reading the Bible and journaling out her thoughts about each day, it weighed on her. “Maybe that’s why I worked longer hours, or worked smarter, or thought through my mistakes so I wouldn’t repeat them,” she says. “I went to seminars and listened to business books on tape whenever I drove places. I was committed to figuring it out, and through all of that, my father was a mentor and best friend. We’d bounce ideas off each other all the time.”

Though Jackie’s father passed away eight years ago, her mother is still very much a pillar within her community as she works at the hospital, in the courthouse, and at a nursing home. “She still models that helping behavior for her grandchildren,” Jackie says. “My sons Brandon and Alex are fourteen and ten, and their safety and well-being is by far the most important thing in the world to me, and I’m so grateful that their grandparents set such wonderful, loving examples of how to have a positive impact in the world.” Jackie’s father nicknamed Alex ‘Little Doc’ after his own father, ‘Big Doc,’ who had large hands and a reputation for being able to make anything better. “Grandpa would write an IOU on the back of his business card and would send us off to the store with our IOU to buy penny candy,” she recalls. “So when he passed away, all us cousins wrote IOUs that we’d see him again and placed them in his casket.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jackie encourages others to find something they’re passionate about, even if it means making a change. “If you love what you do, it doesn’t feel like a job,” she says. “It’s worth it to keep trying different things until you find the right fit. It’s also important to find positions at work or in the community where you feel you can make a footprint and add value. Mentors can help a lot with that.”

Jackie has done more than find her own passion. She’s gone out on a limb and leapt off a diving board for it, discovering—much to her joy—that the pool was, in fact, filled with water. And she’s used that passion and success to build an organization through which others can make their contributions to the world, each vital in their own way. “HR is touching people,” she says. “People are a company’s most valuable asset, and play a pivotal role in how a company starts, grows, and changes over time. Our work makes a positive impact on everything within our clients’ organizations, and we take that very seriously. In HR, soaring like an eagle means helping our people soar, and in this important mission, as always, I remember that failure is not an option.”

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— By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).