

Susan M. Evans

Strong Like Glass

Transformation can be awe-inspiring—a concept that has captivated the attention of Sue Evans and her husband, Paul. They embrace a physical manifestation of the process through their passion for studio glass. “I love that artists take silica, soda, and limestone, and with craft, pressure, and teamwork, they transform it into something that’s unique, fragile, and strong, all at the same time,” Sue says. “Every piece of studio glass made is different, as each transformation is its own process, and it’s not always easy. But the ability to transform is one of the most powerful attributes we have—present in all of us, and ready in case we need it.”

When Sue’s company, Evans Incorporated, had its twentieth anniversary in 2014, she knew the only way to commemorate the significance of the milestone was through glass. “Goodness knows we broke a lot of glass along our own path of transformation as a company,” she laughs. “But more importantly, glass represents our team’s work to give our clients the power to transform.” Sue commissioned an artist team from Wisconsin to make glass pendants and paperweights to honor the moment—each different, yet each symbolizing the power and poignancy of the company’s commitment to betterment and excellence.

Sue’s own experience with transformation marks the impact one person can have on the breaking of glass ceilings. When she was in grade school, she had grand ambitions to be class president. She ran competitive campaigns for office, but in the end, the top leadership roles always went to boys, while Sue was assigned the secretary or treasurer title. “It was a do-nothing role, and I knew I was cut out for more,” Sue says today. “My mother was always very supportive of my goal to lead and defy the mold of what women traditionally pursued in life, and that support

helped give me the confidence to make career choices later in life that led me into fields that weren’t very traditional for women.”

Indeed, when most other female math majors pursued careers as math teachers, Sue pioneered down the route of computer science. She went on to earn her Ph.D. in engineering and her credentials as a Certified Professional Ergonomist, and though she never intended to be an entrepreneur launching a macro-ergonomics company, that’s exactly what she did. Now the

founder, President, and CEO of Evans Incorporated, Sue is hopeful that her impact can help other women grasp their ability to make a difference. “From our employees, to our clients, to our partners, my purpose is about enabling others to understand that they have the tremendous ability to change and grow,” she says.

Founded in January of 1994, Evans Incorporated is guided by the mission of giving its clients the power to transform, and is itself the product of Sue recognizing that power in herself. She was working for Vector Research, a defense contractor in Arlington, Virginia, when she was approached by Ford Motor Company to continue some work she had done for them when they had sponsored her Ph.D. in industrial engineering and ergonomics at the University of Michigan. Sue saw it as an opportunity to step away from her present situation, which offered limited room for growth, and launch her own business.

While Ford would remain an important client for Sue, she knew diversification was the key to long-term success. Through prior relationships, she was able to maintain contracts in the federal government and defense industries, while also landing work through partnerships and new relationships with international organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. When sequestration hit in 2013, the company



lost one contract, but they were able to pick up enough work that they ultimately reported double-digit growth. This helped solidify the firm's identity as a strategic advisor successful in helping clients deal with transformative change.

Excellence in service offering, as well, has been a key driver of the company's success. "As we've grown, we've consistently remained focused on the people who are at the root of any kind of organizational transformation," she says. "When you're developing a manufacturing line, for instance, you want to assess the potential human risks while you're in the design phase so you don't pose physiological or biomechanical risks to workers that force you to go back with costly retrofits after the fact. You've got people connecting with organizations and IT systems, and then you've got IT developers in the mix as well. Evans Incorporated acts as the translator between the individuals and all parts of the ecosystem."

When people in the U.S. hear the term "ergonomics," they generally think of people sitting at desks and interacting with computer screens. Sue and her team deal with another aspect of ergonomics, macro-ergonomics, which includes organizational design and assessments of how people work within an organizational system. "We've grown and expanded our services to the point that we have more depth in organizational change, program management, and optimization, though at our core we're still focused on process improvement and human experience," Sue affirms. In one instance, her team was able to bring together stakeholders from twenty different locations on a quarterly basis to develop a unified set of requirements for a major infrastructure system, saving the government \$10 million. "The human side of things is often considered the 'soft' stuff, but it's not easy. You have to have the right skills to build trust, particularly with unionized workforces that tend to distrust management. You have to convey fairness and neutrality, ensuring people feel they're being heard."

Today, Sue relies on a talented and dedicated team to carry out the mission of the company. They often take a team approach to solving problems, impressing clients with the deep bench of skill sets they're able to deliver at highly competitive rates. "Our clients are often amazed at how much horsepower we get out of applying employees' skills across projects," she says. "We have team members who might be a hundred

percent continuous on a project, but not a hundred percent contiguous. We can bring in and remove talent as needed so our clients get a richer set of skills and experiences without necessarily having to pay for a full-time senior person." Evans Incorporated now has a team of around fifty employees and between 20 and 30 independent contractors—all incredibly motivated people who aspire to grow, develop, and exercise their passion as aligned with the vision of the company.

Evans Incorporated is the creation of strong, inspired, independent thinker—qualities cultivated in Sue since her childhood. She grew up in Milwaukee the oldest of four children, and for the first five years of her life, she was the only child in her family. As such, she had unique opportunities to try new things independently. When she failed, she was expected to get back up, and always, she was expected to deliver. With these standards guiding her development, she also had the opportunity to watch her father take a loan from her mother's parents to buy a failing heating and air conditioning business when she was young. "He believed he could make a go of it, and he was able to turn it around," Sue recalls. "He ended up being very successful. He was one of twelve kids growing up on a farm in central Wisconsin, and while each was very successful, he was one of the few that left the region, after serving in the Army in WWII."

Sue's parents didn't have two nickels to rub together when they married, but thanks to her father's successful entrepreneurial venture, they were able to move out of Sue's grandparents' Milwaukee bungalow and into a home of their own. As a kid, Sue loved reading and math, and her grandmother taught her how to sew clothes for her dolls on their old Singer sewing machine. Sue would grow to become a master seamstress, sewing her own wedding dress and making clothes until her son was born and she could no longer find the time.

Sue was eager to be involved in Girl Scouts through grade school, but she only pursued sports at her mother's insistence. From swimming, to tennis, to volunteer work, her mother was always encouraging her to get out in the world and try new things. "I didn't appreciate the impact she had until later, but I see now that it really made a difference," Sue reflects. "She was always active in the community, the school, and the church, and she later went to work in my father's

business.”

Growing up with these standards and values underpinned Sue’s desire to lead, so she took the initiative to attend an all-girls high school. She settled on Divine Savior, a Catholic all-girls high school. “There, I could be whatever leader I wanted to be,” she reflects. “The school had a respected newspaper, and my journalism teacher had the confidence in me to make me its editor. It was a role that combined leadership, technical competency, and creative vision, and those experiences allowed me to grow, lead, and set a precedent for change in my life later on.”

From her earliest years, Sue liked math, but at that time, most women who pursued the field were guided toward teaching math. As she approached high school graduation, she attended a college fair and noticed a brochure for computer science at the booth for the University of Dayton. “I had never touched a computer before, but it was a mathematics-related field that didn’t involve teaching,” she recalls. “I thought that sounded great.” Dayton was the only school she applied to, and until her mother dropped her off at the commencement of her freshman year, she hadn’t even set foot on campus. Fortunately, it was a good fit for Sue, and the following January, she met Paul while working in the small computer lab on campus. “We didn’t start dating until my senior year, but my mother met him during my sophomore year when I had to get an emergency appendectomy,” Sue recounts. “My hospitalization was during exams just before the end of the semester, and she and Paul got to know each other as they packed up my dorm room for me while I was stuck at the hospital for ten days.”

Through her college years, Sue considered switching her major to Psychology, in part because of an inspiring Air Force colonel who introduced her to Human Factors, but her father cautioned her not to give up such a promising career track. The collegial atmosphere maintained by the computer science majors helped her persevere, and she began to gravitate toward systems analysis. While others in her class were more interested in the process of building an operating system, she loved the process of understanding problems and translating them into requirements that could then be built into a system solution. Sue became President of the Student chapter of the computer science club her senior year, responsible for bringing in speakers and organizing events.

Sue and Paul married two months after her graduation from college, and she landed her first job working for the University of Dayton Research Institute as a contractor at the Aerospace Medical Research Lab at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton. In that capacity, she put her programming skills and interest in human factors to work developing computer graphics programs depicting wireframe drawings of a pilot in a cockpit, conveying the consequences of various body sizes on obstructions and clearances. She also wrote and delivered papers for NATO conferences, which caught the eye of a professor at the University of Michigan and Director of their Center for Ergonomics who wanted to do some similar work relating to the design of manufacturing environments. He recruited Sue to apply for her Ph.D., and six years after finishing her undergraduate studies, she moved to Ann Arbor to pursue her next degree.

Paul was working for Hewlett Packard at the time and was transferred to their Michigan office. As Sue was finishing her degree, he enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University’s business school. Sue took the job with Vector Research, where she worked with Department of Defense clients on business process improvement, and when Paul finished his studies, he took a teaching job at George Mason University’s business school, prompting the move to the DC metropolitan area. Sue was able to transfer to Vector Research’s Arlington location, and she remained with the company until striking out on her own in 1993. Their son was in grade school at the time, but Paul was working for Mitre by then, and his stable salary and benefits provided the safety net Sue needed to take the risk.

Paul was always incredibly supportive of her efforts to launch Evans Incorporated, and his counsel ensures risk is mitigated in business choices that are made. “He’s always making sure that we’ve considered various angles of a given situation from a big picture standpoint,” Sue says. “He’s highly analytical and very stable, which is a great balance to my entrepreneurialism. He makes sure things are considered in the best interest of the company, its growth, and our goals. His passion is around decision analysis, and it’s incredibly helpful that he can bring that thought process into how we make decisions, both professionally and personally.”

Sue’s parents, as well, were supportive of

her starting her own business, and when she needed a line of credit on record for an early business proposal, her mother was the first one to step up. Both her parents were very focused through life on the importance of helping others, whether through time, talent, or treasure, and they routinely got their children involved. Today, Sue is on the Board of The Women's Center, the largest provider of mental health services in Northern Virginia. "I look for opportunities to assist women and families who need help getting through a tough spot and can come out stronger on the other side," she says. "People who are in the process of transforming and just need a little help." She also serves on the GovCon Board of Advisors at George Mason's Business School, and on the Board of Directors of the Small and Emerging Contractor Advisory Forum (SECAF), a member organization that fosters the growth of small businesses in government contracting.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Sue underscores the importance of patience and learning. "When there's a problem, first stop and listen," she says. "Be patient and absorb." She also encourages each person to take leadership into their own hands, and encourages leadership at each level of Evans Incorporated. "Leadership isn't a right, a position, or a title," she says. "It's not reserved for the few, but expected of everybody. People are responsible for managing their own professional development, for setting up teams, for the outcomes of our work." Thanks to her own leadership and vision, Sue was included in *Washington Business Journal's* "Women Who Mean Business" list for 2015, and

Evans Incorporated was one of *Washingtonian Magazine's* 50 Greatest Places to Work that same year.

Taken together, when it comes to change management and business process improvement, Sue and her team just do it differently. It comes down to the top talent they've selected and trained, giving their team members the latitude and tools needed to bring their very best to engagements. It comes down to personal leadership, top-notch expertise, and a fundamental belief in the power of transformation. And it comes down to Sue, who has mastered the science and art of craft, pressure, and teamwork, always able to see the strength in glass and the potential in people.

© March 2016 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– 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](#).