

# Tracy K. Kenny

## Moving Forward

At 9:00 AM sharp, Tracy Kenny heard her bedroom door open and the sound of footsteps approaching, just as she had every morning since the surgery. At 27, she was recovering from cancer, and the process was long and arduous. "I could have laid in bed for the reset of my life," Tracy remembers today. "But my grandmother wouldn't allow it. She came down to take care of me and made me get up everyday, eat a bowl of oatmeal, and walk down to the corner. She didn't let me dwell; she made me move." In retrospect, it was the one time in Tracy's life when she wasn't internally driven toward the relentless pursuit of her goals. And where her own inner voice fell silent, her grandmother's voice was there to fill the void, urging her to move forward in life by moving at all.

Today, Tracy brings the joy of movement to those who might not otherwise experience it as the President of Lift Me Up!, a nonprofit organization in Great Falls, Virginia, that provides therapeutic horseback riding opportunities to children and adults with disabilities. While looking for opportunities for her epileptic daughter, Keira, to get involved in the community, Tracy happened to drive by a sign for the organization. Having volunteered for one just like it when she was young, the mission resonated deeply with her. "We'll have kids come who don't speak, and then you'll hear them say their first words to tell the horse to move," she says. "It brings the freedom of movement to those who might not get to experience it as much."

Tracy is also a partner at KPMG LLP, a Big 4 global tax, audit, and consulting firm with 145,000 professionals in 152 countries worldwide. Of it's more than 23,000 U.S. employees, Tracy was invited to participate in "the Chairman's 25", a program to train and advance 25 future leaders of the firm. Two times during the 18-month-long program, the Chairman's 25 from the U.S. convene

with 25 Asia Pacific partners and 25 European partners to discuss the firm's identity and prospects. And in this context, just as with Lift Me Up!, Tracy is mission-driven to move forward for the betterment of others. "KPMG has started an internal campaign to better understand our higher purpose," she explains. "What do we do? We're a Big 4 firm that helps in all areas of business process, but why? Life is about taking a step back and answering those questions. We all have a purpose, and KPMG, at its core, believes in digging deep, accessing meaning, and giving back."

As part of this campaign, the firm has begun to connect to the broader impact its work enables. KPMG counted the votes when Nelson Mandela was elected as the first non-white President in South Africa's history. When Tracy's work helps an alternative fuel producer access markets, she understands that she's ultimately helping the environment. And above all, she and KPMG play a vital role maintaining

the very integrity of the fabric that weaves societies together. "I believe in the capital market system, and I believe we need to make sure people from all walks of life can invest in it and expect its protection," she says. "It's not a perfect system, but accounting and audit firms help it to be more perfect."

Though she's driven by the prospect of helping to secure millions of investors around the world, Tracy is most immediately inspired by the people she works with at the firm, many of whom have been game-changing mentors. She worked with the chairman of the firm through the first ten years of her career, and when she took five months off after the birth of her daughter, he urged her to come back as a partner with a flexible schedule. It was only later, after the birth of her son, that she came back full-time. "That was a time in my career where I could have easily chosen to go down a



completely different path," she remarks. "But the firm was willing to help me and give me options. Above all, it was willing to sponsor my success and push me to do things outside of my comfort zone. Coming back as a partner was truly a defining moment." Tracy went on to mentor others, and many have gone out to start their own companies.

Though she focuses in audit, Tracy is also a lead partner for tax and advisory on a Fortune 200 company, where she has helped to drive significant revenue growth over the past several years. She focuses on relationship building, broad thinking, leading teams, and bringing in the right skills for a given scenario. She's also responsible for alumni relations and the women's network for the DC area, which includes a leadership program. As a Senior People Management Leader at the firm, she monitors the performance of thirty individuals from a human resources perspective. She also heads the Contributions Committee, which makes decisions about KPMG's sponsorships. "The firm has allowed me to do things I really enjoy which aren't typically part of the journey," she says. "I love change, and challenges, and not sitting still, so it's a perfect environment for me."

These traits have been hallmarks of Tracy's character since she was young. Born in Washington, DC, she grew up in Leesburg, Virginia, when it was just a small town center and a cluster of family farms. Her parents met at St. Elizabeth's, originally a psychiatric hospital in DC, where her mother was a lead nurse. Her mother was drawn to the young assistant at the hospital who stood up for patients' rights, to the point that his life was threatened. The two later married, and Tracy's father ultimately got a job at Graydon Manor in Leesburg, where he went on to run a live-in facility for epileptic children. "My parents were incredibly passionate about public service," Tracy recalls. "I remember my mother working long hours into the night on a hotline, talking people out of committing suicide. They worked incredibly hard for low pay, signaling true passion for the things they did to help others."

With her parents' time and energy absorbed by work, it was left to Tracy to care for herself and her younger sister. She learned to be self-sufficient, completing homework and projects on her own and preparing dinner. Adding to the financial hardship, and perhaps instigated by it,

her father struggled with alcoholism, which was the root cause of her parents' sudden divorce when Tracy was eleven. "I had a really hard time with the divorce at first, and it meant even more that I was on my own and taking care of my sister. But when I think back on that time, it was extremely defining in that I responded by not dwelling on bad things that happen," she says. "My resilience and optimism, which are defining pieces of my personality, really started there, and were certainly emboldened through the example of my grandmother."

Indeed, her mother's mother was a brilliant woman who dreamed of becoming a brain surgeon, though the cultural climate of the time restricted her to secretarial school. She was the kind of woman who powered forward with tremendous strength of spirit, no matter what life threw at her. Even when she lost her husband and brother within two weeks of each other, and even through two breast cancer diagnoses, she persevered. When she died at 93, she was still playing golf and walking. "She never wasted time complaining or dwelling," Tracy remembers. "That's why she came down to take care of me through my own struggle with cancer, reminding me how important it is to hang in there and move forward. I tend to think of who I am today based on all the people I've had contact with over my life, and she was one of the greatest and most positive influences."

Sports played another pivotal role in Tracy's development, beginning when she took up soccer at age seven. Over the years, she added softball and volleyball, thriving in competitive atmospheres that fed her internal drive to succeed. And despite her parents' divorce and hectic work schedules, they never missed a game or school event that was important to their daughters. "They were always there for us," Tracy remembers. "I know it must have been hard for them, but we never felt deprived, or like we were a burden."

Support and success meant something different in Tracy's childhood than it does in today's era of childrearing, in which helicopter parents often micromanage every aspect of their children's lives. Rather, Tracy grew up with space to make her own decisions and learn from the consequences. There were certainly moments of failure, and her parents let her make her own mistakes, but each was a learning experience that allowed her a more nuanced understanding of the

world and its workings. "My mother, father, and grandmother always believed in me and gave me the sense that I could make my own decisions," she reflects. "They wouldn't have let me make a critical error that could ruin my life, but they allowed me the space to figure things out for myself, which in turn let me discover that I could believe in myself and my independence."

This intrinsic drive to succeed first expressed itself professionally when Tracy was eleven, and came across a newspaper advertisement for a babysitter. She asked her mother to drive her over to interview, and though her mom knew there was no way the family would allow an eleven-year-old to watch their infant children, she took Tracy anyway. The young girl didn't get that job, but she began babysitting within the next couple years, and as soon as she was old enough, she got a waitressing job. Then, for several summers in high school, she joined a friend in working for the General Manager of a maintenance crew in Leesburg. The teenage girls would wake up at 5:00 AM each morning, put on their work boots, and join middle-aged men on daily jobs to mow lawns, lay bricks, and paint streets around town. "Those summers helped me become comfortable working with people from all walks of life," she remembers. "I discovered that everybody has something interesting about them, and it certainly helped prepare me for success in the male-dominated field I'm in now."

While motivated in sports and work, Tracy was less interested in academics, having tested into advanced placement classes early on and then settling for grades that didn't require ample study time. All that changed, however, when she graduated and began college at Virginia Tech. She chose Virginia Tech because it was more affordable than other options. "My parents told me they would pay for my tuition and board," she says. "I knew that was a big deal, but I didn't realize at the time that they probably took out a second mortgage to put me through school. I realized how much of a sacrifice my parents were making so that I wouldn't come out of college with a financial burden, so my relationship with academics changed."

Tracy also owes her GPA at Virginia Tech to her freshman year roommate, who was the first of her family to go to college. "She was the kind of person who would cry if she got a B," Tracy laughs. "Because I was so competitive, I

instinctively reacted to that, and I came out of my first year with a 3.9." At that point, the values she had assimilated through her childhood kicked in, compelling her to pursue an impassioned academic work ethic and take responsibility for her grades. Her naturally social nature also drew her to sorority life, where she took turns in leadership roles as the Scholarship Chairman and the Social Chairman. In these positions, Tracy would plan social events, raise awareness about important social issues facing the campus, and counsel any sorority sisters who were struggling with school. Also serving in student government, she was always busy, but was able to maintain her grades nonetheless.

While Tracy's earliest career aspirations were to become a veterinarian, she entered college intending to pursue law, but switched to the business school after her first year. A close friend at Tech who had gone to high school with her was studying accounting, and his glowing accolades convinced her to give it a try. She did well in her classes, and when KPMG came to recruit at the college at the outset of her senior year, she set up an interview.

It was only then, when she called her dad to tell him about it, that she learned her grandfather had also been a partner at the firm, launching its Cincinnati office. "He was Joseph Tracy Kropp, and I'm Tracy Ann Kropp, so I was worried about going to a place that already had associations with the name," she explains. "But he called and praised it so highly. And then, when I accepted the job and started at the firm after graduating, I received congratulatory notes from people in the Cincinnati office I had never even met. It showed me it really is like a family."

Now, her colleagues at KPMG are among her closest friends—relationships forged by working hard and playing hard. She still remembers her early years at the firm, when full-day training retreats were followed by evening socializing. "The work is challenging, but it's a fun firm," she avows. "You're continually trying to get people to give you information they may not want to give you, but as a senior accountant, I really solidified my identity as a person who could work with anybody and offer great client service." Through marrying technical expertise, people skills, and management capacity, it quickly became clear that Tracy was ideally suited for an array of roles at KPMG, and in her 25 years with the firm,

she has assumed many of them.

Through that time, other opportunities have presented themselves, but each time, consultation and reflection lead Tracy to realize that the life and possibilities KPMG affords cannot be beat. When a fast-rising company asked her to come on as its controller, she talked it out with her mentor (now KPMG's chairman), ultimately opting to pass the opportunity on to a friend. "When the company started doing even better, and my friend began really raking in the dough, I was still happy with my decision to stay loyal to the firm that was allowing me to do so much," she says. "Then, when the company got in trouble with the Securities and Exchange Commission, I was especially grateful for that decision. At KPMG, I haven't felt like I need to chase that next thing, sacrificing my quality of life and my other interests in the process. Things have come naturally and relatively smoothly, and everything in its right time."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Tracy reminds us that life is what happens when we're planning for the future. "I don't wonder where I'm going to be in ten years," she says. "Instead, I step back each year and ask myself if I like what I'm doing, who I'm working with, and what I'm learning. I ask myself if my kids are happy, and if I'm doing what I can to bring joy to other people's lives. I do that self reflection, and if things feel right, I keep going in that direction."

Beyond that, Tracy is living proof that there is no cookie-cutter background underpinning success. Hers is the product of embracing and triumphing over a broad range of scenarios, allowing her to understand the terrain of human nature and real life on true terms. Indeed, the stories of typical accountants with typical backgrounds have shaped our concept of what typically is. Yet it's the atypical stories that show

us what could be—like the one about Tracy's fourth year at the firm, working with a small nonprofit whose whole KPMG service team had turned over. The CFO, a woman in her late sixties, had fiery red hair and a temper to match. She criticized the KPMG team relentlessly, to the point that one evening, 25-year-old Tracy walked into the woman's office. "I'm really sorry we had turnover on the audit team and you now have to retrain me and the others," she said directly. "How can we get beyond this?"

To Tracy's surprise, the woman burst into tears and confessed that her husband had just died several months before. This one moment of honesty led to a relationship of mutual trust and understanding, and the woman began inviting Tracy to the Redskins games she had so enjoyed to attend with her husband. "You never know what someone's story really is," Tracy says. "Before writing someone off, take the time to ask them, because more often than not, it will form a foundation for moving forward together."

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*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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*