Kimberly "Kymm" McCabe

The Science of Transformation

Growing up, Kymm McCabe's parents told her bedtime stories, including Russian fairy tales from a book that had been in her family for many years. One story was the tale of a princess held captive by an evil czar in a castle high among the clouds. Her true love was told he could only rescue her by climbing the immense staircase to the castle without looking back.

The catch was each stairstep was haunted by the soul of someone who had tried and failed to climb to the castle. With each step the prince took,

the trapped soul exclaimed words of discouragement and whispered tales of disappointment from underneath his feet. However, his desire and faith drove him on until ultimately persevered and rescued the princess. "My parents' point in sharing this fairy tale was to impress upon me that I could accomplish anything I set my mind and heart to, and that I needed have the confidence, tenacity, and passion to persevere through adversity," Kymm explains today. "I have

grown to value this lesson so deeply that the fairy tale gave rise to my son's name."

Willing her professional journey to embody the spirit of the ascent up that staircase, Kymm is now the President and CEO of ASI Government (ASI), a company dedicated to providing the Federal Government with full spectrum acquisition and program management services and products. Founded in 1996, the company began as the vision of three former federal acquisition "revolutionaries" who believed "Big A" acquisition was key to achieving government outcomes. "I would say that's even truer now, knowing that half of the federal discretionary budget is spent on acquisitions, even during this time of budget austerity," Kymm comments. "Back then, as now, the members of Acquisition Solutions believed acquisition could be strategically positioned to take advantage of the power of this function in finding savings while driving results."

Fueled by this mission, these three visionaries set out to transform federal acquisition. Their first accomplishment was creating the "Seven Steps to Performance-Based Acquisition," which they developed through interagency collaboration and turned into government-wide guidance. They went on to crack the nut on knowledge management and created the Virtual Acquisition OfficeTM (VAO), which provides

original research, online training, tools, and templates that help acquisition professionals federal excel in their respective roles. Today, ASI's acquisition program management products leverage leading technology, supporting 130 government than organizations and 45,000 federal acquisition professionals. continue to face the market with the philosophy workforce is the key to driving outcomes," Kymm confirms.

In addition to modernizing the world of "Big A" acquisition, ASI's founders left an important legacy in the company's values of teamwork, integrity, and excellence. "The integrity of our team, our culture, and our brand were constructed with care and intention from day one, and the spirit of teamwork and positive impact that permeates ASI is critical to maintaining it," Kymm remarks. "Even through significant transformation over the years, those values have been the common threads, and as a result, ASI has one of the healthiest cultures I've ever encountered."

Today, the company's mission has broadened to include program management. ASI's client base cuts across every cabinet-level agency, with half of the 250-person company dedicated to the intelligence space. "The entire company has reach-back to our incredible ASI Research



InstituteTM. That allows us an unparalleled line of sight and depth of understanding across the federal sector, and the ability to deliver invaluable data to our clients," she says. "I believe the team is successful because, in addressing our market, we've developed this unique attitude that we are both here to deliver solutions to the country's most challenging problems and to uplift our clients. The way we see it, when it comes to serving the public and the country, ASI and the client are in this together, and we can accomplish anything as long as we are united and believe in our ability to have an impact. I'm extremely grateful to be at the helm of this company and to be part of a team who feels so passionately about acquisition, which I believe could be the most powerful and underutilized lever in the Federal Government."

While Kymm has worked at ASI for three and a half years, she worked alongside the company years prior when she headed her own business, Advanced Performance Consulting Group, Inc. ASI recognizes this is an extremely competitive, even crowded, space-a new dynamic for the company that launched the federal acquisition support market 18 years ago. As a result, corporate owners realized they needed a leader who could reshape the company to take it to the next level through strategy, innovation, and positioning, so they turned to Kymm. "I'm only good at two things: leading transformations and making a heck of a guacamole," she laughs. "I focus all of my professional energy on thinking about transformation and change as a science. I try to bring the soft sciences, like organizational and social behavior, to the hard sciences, like physics. When you integrate those fields, you start to see the commonalities and applicability of scientific theory to organizational change and development. For example, in organizations, you can observe patterns, like fractals, which you can then address to change the culture and organizational results."

A third-generation entrepreneur, Kymm has a passion and proficiency for her work that is as innate as it is seasoned. Her grandfather grew up during the Great Depression and learned at a young age how to find ways around adversity to ensure his family never went without. This determined and resourceful outlook led to his eventual ownership of several businesses. "His mindset was, if there was a road block over here, he would just find a new way around over there," she recalls. "His approach had no room for

limitations, and instead focused entirely on finding new paths around obstacles."

Kymm's family was centered in Los Angeles, California. Her father, a psychologist, worked for the government during her early childhood and later practiced psychology as one of the owners of the medical facilities in which he worked. Her mother, originally a zoology major, earned a master's degree and then a PhD in public administration while working full-time and raising two children. Kymm still remembers late-night sessions at home during which her mother poured through stacks of papers with a highlighter in her hand. While both parents did very well financially, they carried on her grandfather's mentality of careful spending and determined resourcefulness. "My parents inspired me to find that thing I really loved and was passionate about," she says. "They stressed that there was a time to work, a time to learn, a time to play, and a time to give back. Because of that work ethic and focus on contributing to the community, money never had to be a major motivator for me; rather, I found my passion in public service and never looked back."

Growing up, Kymm lived within a few miles of her extended family, including her grandparents. She grew extremely close with her grandfather, spending hours sitting beside him and soaking up his stories about seeing the first airplane and the installation of electricity in his home when he was a kid. "I hold close the lessons he taught me about resilience, the importance of family, and the value of steadfast integrity in business," Kymm affirms. "He lived those things, and I hope to follow in his footsteps."

As a young girl, Kymm was unsure of what she wanted to focus on professionally. However, her parents suspected early on that she would be a leader in business. When Kymm was six years old, her mother asked her to clean her room, which Kymm did by enlisting her neighborhood friends to do the job for her. She employed these leadership skills again in elementary school, when a rainy day created chaos in her classroom. "The kids were completely out of hand and the teachers were totally overwhelmed," she recalls. "I realized what was happening and felt uneasy about the behavior, so I stood up on a chair and convinced my friends to stop and help the teachers. Amazingly, all the kids calmed down. It reinforced my belief in the importance of taking a stand when a situation seems wrong or

negative."

Kymm's first job was working in the medical records department for her father's hospital during the summer. "We'd go to the doctors' offices and pick up these huge carts of records, which we would then wheel back for filing in a giant warehouse," she says. "It was tedious, but it was essential that we did everything right because each file represented a person, and if anything happened to the information, it could impact the patient's care."

While the filing was monotonous, this and other summer jobs with her father often required her to spend extended time in the hospital, which gave her a first-hand account of how a medical team comes together to save a patient's life. "One summer, I worked in urgent care and was right next to the gurney when a man underwent a massive heart attack," she recalls. "I could see how every job in the hospital aligned to reach the common goal of saving his life. It's really true that everyone from the janitor to the engineer plays an important part in helping get those astronauts to the moon."

When she was not working, her parents kept her busy with extracurricular activities, allowing her to try just about everything. "They got me into music, sailing, horseback riding—you name it, I probably tried it at one point," she says. "They taught me early on that I could do and be anything. They were always there to support me and be that net so that if I fell off the trapeze, I wouldn't crash. They allowed me to experiment, and even fail, so I could learn and grow."

Later, Kymm attended the University of California, Santa Barbara as an undergraduate, when she and a friend decided to create her first business providing home services in the area. "The university was adjacent to some of the wealthiest populations in the country," she says. "I knew they had money we didn't have, and we had time they didn't have—it was a match made in heaven. So we negotiated contracts with local vendors and hired friends at well above what they would normally earn to provide whatever services were needed, whether it was dog walking, house cleaning, or delivering fresh flowers. The business grew, and we were able to make decent money while having a good time."

Before Kymm entered her senior year in 1990, she decided to take a year off of school to work with Senator Ted Kennedy on Capitol Hill. Leaving the home services business to her coshe founder and roommate, traveled Washington, where she had the opportunity to learn first-hand how a Senate office is run. "Regardless of your political beliefs, there is no denying that Ted Kennedy was an exceptional person to work for and learn from," she says. "He was passionate about issues, and his office was a well-oiled machine. The best of the best worked there, and I was able to learn about policy making, stewardship, being a public servant, and the business of politics."

At the end of her time on Capitol Hill, Kymm returned to Santa Barbara to finish her final year of college and met the man she would marry, Matthew McCabe. After earning her bachelor's degree, she supported the White House Advance Team while launching her first consulting firm and enrolling at the University of Southern California to earn a master's degree in public administration with an emphasis on strategy and organizational behavior. "I wanted to pursue a unique mixture of the public and private sector, so the University worked with me to create a degree that spanned the School of Public Administration and the Business School," she explains.

In 1995, Kymm and Matt married, and the newlyweds returned to Washington, D.C., so he could earn his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Maryland, College Park. They had few friends or family in the area, no money, and no jobs, so one day, Kymm began flipping through a magazine to search for clues as to what she should do next. She scanned a list of Top 50 Women-Owned Businesses and decided to reach out to a woman who ran a marketing firm in the area, introducing herself and asking if she was looking for help. Luckily, the woman was, and Kymm was hired.

Kymm stayed at the marketing firm for several months before joining EDS, where she co-managed eventually their government performance management practice. After a few years, her entrepreneurial spirit urged her to start her own business. "I was really struggling over the decision, as I had been interviewing with another firm," she says. "I called the partner who interviewed me and shared my vision for a new company. He encouraged me to run with it, so I did. He has since become a close friend and mentor and now serves on ASI's Board of Directors, offering tremendous guidance."

With the unwavering support of her husband, family, and mentors, Kymm founded her second company with another woman from EDS. "I was a 29-year-old CEO doing federal management consulting to senior government executives and general officers," she says. "It was absolutely incredible, and I couldn't help but wonder, where but in the U.S. would this opportunity present itself?" Together, Kymm and her co-founder built the company and sold it to ICF International eight years later. "We had a great run with that company," she recalls. "I grew professionally and as a leader. It was a period of introspection during which I learned about my capabilities and gained clarity on what skills I needed to develop."

After selling her company, it took Kymm a while to adjust to the influx of capital. "We've never been big spenders in my family, so my first thought was to invest it," she says. "My husband was wonderful, though. He reminded me that I needed to acknowledge and appreciate the accomplishment and urged me to buy the concert grand piano I'd been dreaming of to mark that moment. The truth is that the piano has been a great source of joy for me, especially now as I watch my children playing it."

Kymm continued to work with ICF until Charles Rossotti of the Carlyle Group contacted her. Kymm was humbled by an offer of employment, and also understandably hesitant, as working for the company would require a long commute at a time when she had a toddler at home, so she decided to commit to a short-term trial period.

Toward the end of that rewarding time, Kymm received a phone call from a friend and Army Senior Officer, asking her to lead their new transformation office, then called the Enterprise Task Force. Knowing the transformation was vital to supporting American soldiers suffering the stress of two long and active conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, she heralded it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to serve and make a meaningful contribution to her country. Thus, Kymm accepted and spent the following three years leading the Army's business transformation in the Pentagon. "At the time, the Army was engaged in two active conflicts, in the midst of the largest BRAC in its history, facing an economic decline, and in the process of a political transition. The odds were stacked against us, to say the least," she explained, "When the planes hit on September 11th, our military jumped into action and did what it does best-whatever was needed to defend our country. The system and soldiers began to experience strain after a couple of years of combat, and the historical military funding declines after every major conflict dictated the need to drive a more cost-conscious and business-minded culture. Our soldiers' deployments were too long, and so we were laser focused on getting our troops what they needed and then getting them home while preparing the Army for the austerity that is now upon us. The capability and sheer will of our military is incredible, but it must be sustainable. It came down to the fact that the Army needed to change to meet current and future mission needs. Our Army is currently the most capable it has ever been, and they wanted to transform to preserve their capability and health over time."

Kymm's organization first reported to the Army Chief of Staff, and then the Undersecretary of the Army, working closely with the most senior officers across the Department of Defense. She was exhilarated by the willingness to collaborate across military services, as well as by the level of capability and dedicated focus of those with whom she worked. Her boss, LTG Robert Durbin, insisted she learn as much as she could, so she visited sites across the Army, such as the National Training Center; talked with soldiers in deploying brigades and wounded warriors in returning brigades; and witnessed the breadth of what the Army offered. "My position allowed me to see our incredible military from the inside out and to witness their amazing efforts and accomplishments in the name of our nation and soldiers," she recounts reverently. "At the end of my tenure, I felt overwhelmed by our soldiers' courage and civil servants' dedication, in awe of the Army's capabilities and leaders, and deeply grateful for our military. I truly believe that the experience working with our Army made me a better leader, citizen, and person. It was a profound experience - one of the most challenging and significant of my life."

After an impressive run at the helm of the organization, Kymm left her position as the Acting Deputy Director of the Office of Business Transformation in 2011 for ASI Government, and has spent the past three-and-a-half years transforming the company from a small team of acquisition revolutionaries into a potent and

innovative professional services firm, set apart by its culture, conscience, and soul.

When she's not working, she serves on the Board of the Professional Services Council, TechAmerica, AFCEA, and NCMA, while also using her love of connecting people to organize what she calls her "Good Egg Happy Hours" — gatherings of what consistently ends up being between 50 and 90 great and trustworthy professional friends—to catch up and make meaningful connections. "I love to seek out people who not only are good at what they do, but are also good people, and to bring them all together," she says.

Kymm is also actively involved with numerous causes, including Linda's Legacy supporting the local homeless, and the ITP Program, which assisted in treating her son's speech disorder when he was young. "The government paid for his speech therapy for several years, so that today, he has all the verbal capabilities of other kids his age," she says. "We were so grateful for the assistance. It was all free, and given how small the ITP's budget is, Matt and I are honored to donate regularly so they can continue helping other families in need." She is also proud to belong to a company rooted in the principle that a good business partner also must be a good community partner. Indeed, ASI believes so strongly in community outreach that it offers employees an additional paid day off per year to volunteer. Many teams spend their day of service together, making it a team-building event as well. Additionally ASI's employee-led community relations committee, ASI Involved, sets priorities for the company's philanthropic and community outreach program, identifying opportunities to contribute to nonprofit partners like the Arlington Food Assistance Center, the Children's Inn at the National Institutes of Health, the Fisher House Foundation, Operation Jump-Start, and Toys for Tots.

While she has had many mentors and influential colleagues during her career, Kymm identifies her husband, Matt, as the single most essential person to her happiness and success. Matt, who works as a Professor of Philosophy at Washington College, is an involved father who genuinely and constantly supports her. "I literally could not have done anything that I've done without him," she says. "The most important thing

that has ever happened to me is marrying him; his love, support, and partnership enable me to do anything and everything."

If her husband's support provides the foundation of her work, Kymm's deep passion and love for her country provides the framework. While she always felt grateful to live in America, her career trajectory illuminates that the American Dream is, in fact, very much alive, and that any goal is achievable with the right amount of determination and stamina. Yet as grateful as she is to be a woman in America, where she had the ability to become a CEO at a young age, she acknowledges that being a woman in the workplace still has formidable challenges. This concept was highlighted when Kymm recently served as a guest lecturer at a Gender and Work course, where a young woman from India confided that her biggest challenge was her brothers' and father's strong disapproval of her pursuit of a higher education. "All I could tell her was that she had already done it. All she had to do was keep going," Kymm says.

"If I could offer advice to young people, it would embody the moral from my childhood Russian Fairy Tale: if someone says you can't, find another way and persist. There will always be obstacles, so you have to find a way to disregard the whispers from the souls under those stairs. If you can persevere through that, you can—and will—reach your goals."

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