Annette Y. Harris

The Element of Surprise

Those who were chosen to serve as crossing guards while in fourth grade at Lorton Elementary probably don't remember the honor of donning that orange belt. But Annette Harris, who was not selected, still remembers what it felt like to be overlooked.

Annette and her older brother were latchkey kids, learning to be self sufficient while their mother worked to support them. With limited support and attention from her teachers, Annette's grades had always been subpar, but she

had worked hard to improve them so she met the grade threshold to be selected as a crossing guard. "I never felt very smart in elementary school," she says today. She didn't have family or teachers constantly telling her that she could achieve anything she wanted. And then to not be chosen for crossing guard—that was a let down.

But then, in seventh grade, Annette surprised herself. She had entered Hayfield High School still earning average grades, so when she received an invitation in the seventh

grade to show her photosynthesis project in the school science fair, she thought they must have made some mistake. "I had done all the research on my own, just trying to figure it out," she says. "I couldn't believe they asked me, and I got honorable mention at the fair. Then, later that year, I made honor roll for the first time in my life, without even trying. I realized I was smart, and that I could do it. It was a defining moment and a major turning point for me, and I went on to graduate in the top ten percent of my class."

We often think we know ourselves better than anyone else could, but sometimes it takes a fresh pair of eyes and an outside perspective to bring out the strongest parts of our character. Annette still counts her lucky stars that she began finding her way to her abilities as a self-driven seventh grader. Now the founder and President of ShowUp!, a company committed to teaching the

art and science of personal brand, executive presence and image management across the U.S., Annette lives for those moments where she sees her clients light up with the same surprise and empowerment that lit her up all those years ago. "It's those moments where I can see on their face that they've discovered something new and great about themselves," she says. "I love being able to help them get there. I love that element of surprise when they recognize their strengths—the ones that lead to people walk a little taller and feel more

confident."

Formally launched in 2013, ShowUp! is rooted in the notion that excelling in business, and any other leadership position, is all about relevance, respect, reputation, and results. "These are the deciding factors in who gets ahead and who doesn't," she explains. "A fancy degree is great, but many people with fancy degrees can't lead a team or command respect. It takes something else to do that."

Through trainings, events, workshops, and one-on-one assistance,

the ShowUp! method works from the inside out, achieving a transformation that Annette describes as simple yet profound. Her intuitive ability to a person's standout qualities supplemented by discovery tools used to examine strengths, track record, personality, talent, and skills. "The key is, how do others see you, and what do you need to do so people see you the way you want them to?" she asks. "Sometimes, it's an issue of someone not being able to see themselves. I have very good instincts in terms of who someone is and is not, what their strengths are, and what makes them different. I love when I can then feed that back to them and they realize something new about themselves. The stories I tell are real and true - they're the strategic branding of what makes a person different and unique."

After the client gets to know their true constitution, they are coached through the details

of how best to appear, behave, and communicate the external elements of style and poise. Employing her training with Stacy London of the TV show What Not to Wear, the Protocol School of Washington, and with William Arruda, known as the "personal brand guru," Annette cultivates executive presence and helps clients master the outward projection of their inner strengths and self. "Our goal is to achieve alignment between someone's personal brand and executive presence," she explains. "It's that alignment of the inner self and outer package that really opens the doors for success. It's an ongoing, evolving process, and sometimes it means reinventing yourself so you stay fresh and relevant, but we're here to help through that process."

Today, the magic of ShowUp! is the confluence of experiences that have shaped Annette since the very beginning of her life. Her father passed away before she was born, and she cherishes a photograph of the man she never met. Her mother, a federal employee, was incredibly driven with an iron work ethic, which was a big influence on Annette. "Through example, she taught me a lot about being responsible with money and saving, manners, how to behave, and how to lead your life," Annette says. "She had a strong sense of style even on a stringent budget, and I saw her walk out the door everyday put together and presenting her best self to the world. And being fiscally responsible allowed her to buy a home as a young, single parent."

Observing her mother's self sufficiency, Annette learned to take care of herself at a young age, and would often put dinner on to cook before her mother got home from work. She didn't mind that her mother occasionally missed some of her soccer and softball games during the week. Though she did wish her mom could be there for more of the school field trips that took place while she was at work, she was always there for the back-to-school nights and parent/teacher and PTA meetings that she could make it to after work. "I know she did everything she could, and I know I wouldn't be the person I am today if she didn't trust me to take care of myself," says Annette. "Self-awareness, self-motivation, drive, values, integrity-these are things she taught me which you can't get from a book or degree."

Annette's grandmother reinforced these concepts. She lived just down the hill from the family, and she helped care for Annette and her

brother until they moved to Lorton when Annette was in third grade. "She was a tough, strong woman, and I think I get that from her," Annette remembers. "She'd pray on her knees every night with her rosary beads, which I now have. Even after we moved, she took care of us a lot, and I learned so much from her about right and wrong, being well-behaved, and having integrity. She instilled in me the simple fundamentals of life — how to talk, how to act."

The lessons of her mother and grandmother shaped her into an incredibly responsible young girl, and by the time she was ten, she was the most sought-after babysitter in the neighborhood. "I was so good with kids that my mother wanted me to become a teacher," she says. "They really loved me."

Her peers, however, were a tougher crowd. "In elementary school, there were only a handful of African American students in the whole school, and I often got made fun of by the Caucasian students," she recalls. Unlike many of her friends, she couldn't afford designer jeans or expensive things, and she was sensitive to the fact that most everyone else came from two-parent households. But for what she lacked in material goods, Annette more than made up for in values and integrity, thanks to the influence of her mother and grandmother. By the time she made it to junior high, the pestering was less pronounced, and its focus was different. "I had a lot of Caucasian friends I knew from elementary school, and many of the African American students gave me a lot of flack for how I spoke and who I hung out with," she says. Ironically, Annette's communication skills, and particularly her ability to enunciate and speak properly, are exactly what helped her propel in her career and is now a key component of her company's service offering.

Annette's mother never let her stay home in the summers. Instead, she went to summer camp and then worked summer jobs when she was old enough. "My mom was always very prudent with money, and she opened a checking account for me at a young age," says Annette. "I quickly understood the power of saving when I started to watch the money in the account grow, establishing a lifelong habit." Once she turned sixteen and learned to drive, she would take her grandmother to the grocery store or the movies. "She was just always there," Annette reflects. "We were very close."

Because she had less exposure to the concept of planning for a professional future, Annette never thought seriously about what she might be when she grew up, and because she wasn't surrounded by family who had gone to college, it wasn't a topic that was front and center in her household during her younger years. When she was a freshman in high school, her mother got involved with Jack & Jill, an organization that put on activities for African American youth which exposed Annette to peers who were planning for college. She also joined the Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA), which exposed her to marketing for the first time. "I knew I wanted to do well and be able to afford the things I wanted in life," she says. "

Annette's hard work and drive landed her a spot at James Madison University (JMU), a defining moment for her that was made all the more wonderful by the fact that she didn't have to concern herself with how tuition would be covered; her mother made sure that tuition, books and room and board were paid every semester. It allowed her the time she needed to study and succeed, making the most of the experience. "I never had to worry or think about paying for college, and I'm so grateful for that," Annette says. "I had friends who often had to work hard to make ends meet while in school."

JMU also marked a defining moment when she was accepted into a highly selective, prestigious African American sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. The newfound sense of sisterhood provided a lifelong lifeline of support from like-minded women who were smart and ambitious just like Annette, and for the first time in her life, she enjoyed the kind of friendships that had been absent before. "I could really relate to them, and that was very inspiring," she says. "I saw these formidable women leaders doing great things, and I knew that's what I wanted to do too. That was huge for me."

Annette decided to major in marketing with a minor in fashion merchandising—a choice made through the process of elimination and her experience in DECA. "I wasn't interested in anything else, and fortunately, I found that I loved marketing," she says. "Again, I had to work to get my GPA where it needed to be to major in business, and I had to prove myself. I had to work triple time to excel in my business major, but it helped define me by testing my willingness to

keep striving."

When she graduated, she moved home and took a job in DC as an administrative assistant at an environmental consulting company. The job market was poor at that time, but she resigned after only a couple months. "All I did was make copies, and it felt so pointless," she says. "My grandmother also passed away while I was there, which was a serious struggle."

stepfather, Fortunately, her successful HR executive at ManTech International, was able to find her an opportunity at one of the company's subsidiaries. She had also worked at ManTech during the summers of her senior year in high school and freshman year of college as a where she proved herself a receptionist, consummate professional, which helped when her stepfather landed her an interview. "Kathy was a VP there at the time," she recalls. "She brought me in, and they embraced me. They treated me like a young adult starting her career, and I got into proposal management. I had a great time there."

While at ManTech, Annette made the decision to get her MBA with a concentration in marketing and enrolled at George Mason University. "There weren't a lot of great opportunities at the time, and a friend of mine had gone through that program," she says. "He inspired me." She completed the program in two years, learning about the breakup of the Bell companies and growing fascinated telecommunications after taking a challenging accounting class focused on the industry. She decided she wanted to work in telecom, so her internship in marketing at Bell Atlantic after her first year was a great launching pad for her career. As she was finishing up her degree, Annette began interviewing and was called in for a proposal manager job at telecom titan MCI. "It wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but it seemed like a good opportunity to learn about the industry," she recounts. "Bill wanted me to start the Monday after I graduated, and I decided to try it out."

There, Annette started off shadowing other proposal managers. One woman in particular, Kathy, stood out to her. "She was exmilitary and very on her game," Annette recalls. "Everyone on the team was much older than me and very good. I watched them and tried to emulate how they managed teams. There would be a conference call with an agenda, then follow up and action items. I became a taskmaster and

learned how to manage a schedule and a project, bringing together the resources and brokering the whole process of submitting a proposal." Within six months, she was leading her own proposal teams and seeing notable wins, which built her confidence and reputation and showed her where her strengths were.

Through that time, Annette was praised constantly for her poise and professionalism. She was a natural leader in meetings, in team settings, and on conference calls, and her presence and projection set her apart. "I was often the only female and African American in the meetings," she says. "I was a woman, and I was younger. But because of the way I carried myself, I commanded respect. People bought in to what I had to say, and I saw the power of being able to come across as a leader."

Annette rose through the ranks quickly at MCI, taking on more responsibility to the point that she was winning multi-million dollar deals. She knew there was something special about the way she innately carried herself—something that didn't come easily to others—but she often took it for granted. "Kids used to make fun of the way I spoke when I was a kid, but it served me very well in the workplace," she says. "It helped me get ahead and lead."

Working long hours, Annette spent four years in proposal management and then became WorldCom Marketing supporting the launch of the sales organization in the Asia Pacific Region. The company was evolving and realigning every six months, so it wasn't ideal, but she made the most of it until MCI WorldCom went under. She had just bought a house and a car, and she was sad to see the stages of layoffs as the company ground to a halt. "I really loved my team there," she laments. "I particularly remember Phuong, the hardest boss I ever worked for. I realize now that I'm a lot like her. Even though she was really tough, once she saw me deliver, she respected me. It was another lesson in the importance of proving yourself."

Annette took a proposal job at a small business for several years and was then hired by Deloitte as a Proposal Manager for their federal practice. "Again, I had to prove myself and build my reputation," she recalls. "You have to do it every time." In that capacity, she worked directly with partners who brought in business, winning their trust. She often worked long hours and went

above and beyond her role, and at one point even coached a proposed delivery team on presence and articulation in preparation for oral presentations. "I learned that, when it comes to results, it doesn't really matter where you got your degree or how smart you are," she recalls. "You have to project that presence that will enable a customer to believe in you. You have to be able to take an issue, package it, and deliver it with a marketing spin."

Annette remembers Deloitte as a very progressive company always ahead of the curve – a company that recognized the high-pressure, high-stress nature of its work and sought to provide employees with the support they needed to succeed. One day, a speaker was brought in to coach the staff through a two-day training session. The former CNN employee dedicated the first day to teaching them how to deal with difficult people, and the second day to professional presence. "She talked about how people dressed and wore their hair," Annette says. "She made us walk around and pointed out telling details, and she talked to us about things as elementary as eye contact. I thought, wow, you can get paid well to teach this? The wheels started turning."

She also attended a presentation on personal branding, which brought in the marketing piece she excelled at. Connecting the dots, she realized she had a lot of innate knowledge to impart in the field of personal branding and image consulting. In 2007, she launched Harris Image Works, the earlier iteration of ShowUp!, as a side project to test the market.

Meanwhile, at Deloitte, she excelled. "I've learned to ignore the voice inside and listen to what other people say, so when I was getting praised for delivering and winning, I knew that was something I could hang my hat on," she remembers. "Partners were asking for me back on more projects, and I was helping to win business at a time when the company was relatively new to the federal space. I saw that I had a skill for being a taskmaster and having people follow me, bringing them together and making sure they were doing things well. I was working nonstop."

It was a good run, but before long, Annette was burned out to the point that she even fell asleep for a second while driving home one day. It terrified her, and she decided to make a lateral move into a marketing role for the next two years. Healthcare was getting big at that time. She was named a National Marketing Manager in Deloitte's

healthcare practice. In that capacity, she was traveling to New York City on a monthly basis for two years. "I was too busy working hard and doing a good job to realize I wasn't passionate about what I was doing," she reflects. "I thought that was normal—that it was okay to be stressed and overworked and have a career that didn't move you at the pace you wanted."

When the economy tanked, Annette was laid off and referred to a small IT firm in Herndon by Keith, a partner (and mentor) she knew from her time at Deloitte. She worked there for another two years, continuing her remarkable track record of delivering, but often felt she was giving more than she was valued for. Then, she was introduced to SM&A, a proposal consulting company that alleged to give employees the opportunity to pick and choose their projects. "I thought it would be perfect because I could cut back on the proposal management while working on my side business part-time," she said. "But it turned out to be far more demanding. I was sent to Texas and then to Ohio on two separate projects that were incredibly challenging, and again, I wasn't sleeping."

As usual, Annette was incredibly successful, helping to win two huge state healthcare deals. She then went down to Alabama to work on another project, but her whole stint with the company revealed subtle strains of discrimination that did not sit well with her. With that, in 2013, Annette left corporate America to focus on her company full-time, rebranding it as ShowUp! to reflect a new face and grander vision.

Today, Annette employs a direct, driven, collaborative leadership style that seeks to engage and learn from others. "You need to be able to be serious and lead by example to get the job done at the highest standard, but you also need to be able to have fun and have that human element to balance," she says. "Like our approach to personal branding, you have to be both holistic and strategic. That's what makes ShowUp! different—we've got the entire package of personal branding, image, and executive presence."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Annette cautions against getting labeled and boxed in until you're headed where you want to go. "I wanted to start my career in marketing, but proposal management was where I had the majority of my experience, and once I started in that direction, it was hard to start over," she says. "I hadn't planned to stay in proposals for so long, but it was hard to break that mold. Also, you have to work for what you want, be patient as you put in the time, and prove yourself. It takes time to build knowledge and skill, so watch and learn. Once you do, you'll soar."

Beyond that, Annette reminds us that the ShowUp! philosophy has something to offer everyone. "We all get a different pass in life based on our race, our gender, our background," she remarks. "Are you going to sit back and whine over it? No. I believe in leaving the emotion at home and doing what you have to do to succeed. The playing field is leveling, but we're not yet there. So get out there. You might just surprise yourself—and society—in the process."

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