

# Clark Childers

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## Do the Right Thing

Clark Childers has built a life full of success and achievement. As current Partner and past Executive Board Member of Cherry, Bekaert & Holland, a southeastern regional CPA firm, Childers reflects that success in all that he does. With an unwavering moral code and a desire to help others succeed, Childers has worked his way to the top and stayed there.

Born the eldest of three children and raised in a career military family ensured that Childers grew up with a strong work ethic.

Childers recalls his first job, working at a beach concession stand selling umbrellas, "I have always had a job since I was twelve years old. I always knew that I had a skill, that I had something that people needed."

Growing up with a grandfather who was a sheriff and a father who was a Naval Officer was very influential in Childers' life.

"My father believed in honor and, in his time, everything was done by handshake. Your handshake meant everything. If you said you were going to do something, then you did it.

I remember one day we were taking a road trip, and my dad wrote a check and he was asked for his I.D. and he got so offended. He said that he had signed his name to it and that should be enough.

When we got out to the car, he was so devastated. He said, 'What is this country coming to that people have to check-up on you and make sure of who you are and that you're going to honor something?' It really makes an impact when you see your father devastated by something like that."

Childers' spent a lot of his childhood moving from school to school because of his father's transfers. He recalls the impact of those

transfers as minimal, "You just get used to it. If you are used to it then you think that it is normal to change schools frequently. We were on military bases, so everyone was in the same boat. It's a very different experience. It was great."

After graduating from high school, Childers attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and obtained his baccalaureate degree in Economics.

Childers recalls, "When I got out of college, I couldn't get a job because of the Vietnam War; everybody was going into the service. I knew that I would be too, but I wanted to experience something that I always wanted to do first, so a bunch of my friends and I took jobs at a mountain ski resort in California and we worked and skied all winter. I worked at night and skied during the day. It was fantastic."

In the spring, Childers joined the Army and volunteered for officer training school in Fort Belvoir, VA.

Serving for two years in Germany as a Construction Engineer, when Childers finished his tour, he moved back to Washington, DC, where his family was stationed. There he obtained a position with a government contractor in the Accounting Department.

"The guy that I was working for noticed that I had a knack for accounting and he suggested that I take classes at Benjamin Franklin University, which I did at night and graduated with a second baccalaureate degree in Commercial Science (which was their equivalent of an Accounting degree)."

While working towards that Accounting degree, Childers was promoted to Controller and then after completing his coursework and passing the exam to become a Certified Public Accountant



(CPA) he was then hired as an Accountant for Pricewaterhouse.

"At Pricewaterhouse I was on the fast track to making Partner. I made Senior Accountant in two years, and then became a Manager within another two years. As soon as I made Manager, they sent me to London and I spent a year there. I was handling some very successful clients. It was great."

Childers' approach to leadership and his management style reflect his intrinsic desire to help others.

"Everyone's got their own comfort zone and I try to stretch my employees to reach a little bit higher. There's a difference between leading and managing. It's easy to manage, you just tell people what to do. Leading is about empowering others. It takes a completely different set of skills."

After his rapid rise to Partner, Childers worked at Pricewaterhouse for 17 years before starting his own firm with two of his colleagues.

Founded in 1990, Offutt, Childers & Putman grew from a small start-up to a firm of 25 employees and 3 partners within ten years.

By 2001, Childers' company was so successful that it soon garnered the attention of several acquisition firms.

"When our third partner passed away, it was just the two of us and we were finding ourselves having to handle more and more administrative work. We were not looking to sell, but we were growing and many of our clients had gotten quite big and we were beginning to wonder if we would be able to continue to service them as they grew bigger or if we might lose them. That's when Cherry, Bekaert & Holland called."

In January of 2002, Offutt, Childers & Putman merged with Cherry, Bekaert & Holland. At the time Cherry, Bekaert & Holland did not have a local office in Washington, DC so Childers' company was able to stay in their own offices, but the transition was not as smooth as they thought it would be.

"A lot of the employees didn't like being with the big firm, they had worked for big firms in the past and didn't want that atmosphere, so they went out on their own. They liked the culture that we had built and so some of them went out and re-created the feeling in their own firm."

Though the transition had some bumps in the road, Childers continued his successful career as a Partner at Cherry, Bekaert & Holland.

"We have grown through acquisition of other CPA firms and last year we brought in five new firms."

With a total of 850 employees and over 100 Partners, Cherry, Bekaert & Holland has certainly benefited from the union.

Childers desire to help others succeed and his determined commitment to doing the right thing is evident throughout his professional career. Even when it cost him a substantial client, Childers still stood by his own moral code.

"A few years ago, we were working with a government contractor performing an audit when we found an unbilled receivable. When I approached the contractor about it, he said that previous auditors had overlooked it for them and when I explained that I wouldn't he said, 'Well, let me put it this way, I can't put a reserve on this because if I do, I won't be in compliance with the bank covenants, so I can't take a reserve on this.'"

Childers continues, "I told him that we definitely had a problem because I wouldn't issue the report without a reserve. So he asked me to send him a bill for the time that I had put in and then he found a firm that would issue him a report."

When asked to reflect on his life and accomplishments, Childers shares, "What I have enjoyed most about my career is that I have not only started a company from scratch and worked with one of the biggest firms in the world, but after being with Cherry, Bekaert & Holland for a few years they asked me to serve on the Executive Board. I was elected and served for three years. In a firm this size, it was really eye opening. It was a great way to finish my career."

Childers' message to those just beginning their career is, "Whatever you do, do something that you have a passion for, because you're going to spend more time on your job than with your family or even sleeping. And remember, there is the right thing to do and there is the thing you can get away with. Always do the right thing."

Though Childers has focused on his career throughout his life, he is most proud of how he and his wife raised their children. He wants his legacy to reflect how much he contributed to his children's success and the success of others.

According to the Childers' philosophy, in life we should have a passion for the things that we do, have fun, and always do the right thing. As Childers aptly shares, "I have had a few victories and a number of defeats, but I have no regrets. I can truly say, 'that was fun'."

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

