

Cameron Doolittle

The Path to Joy

Cameron Doolittle can still remember being in first grade, when his father lost his job in construction. He was too young to understand how money worked, but he was old enough to know that “divorce”—a new phenomenon he had heard his friends talk about at school—was possible. As he noted the stress in his parents’ voices and wondered if “divorce” was next, he made the decision that he would do whatever he could to be successful later in life. “I decided that wanting for money would not be my story,” he remembers. “Financial security seemed like the path to joy—the best way to ensure that I wouldn’t feel that way again.”

As his family’s situation stabilized and his father became a successful systems analyst, Cameron excelled in school and work, and sure enough, he was the Legislative Director to a powerful Member of Congress by the age of 24. When he realized that political power didn’t hold much meaning to him, he switched to business, earning professional degrees from top universities and attaining remarkable success by the age of 33. But the business world didn’t hold much meaning to him, either. A devout Christian from an early age, Cameron found himself understanding the Word of God with ever-increasing clarity. “Each of those experiences was a reaffirmation that the faith my parents taught me was, true and that the power and degrees and business success were meaningless without Jesus,” he says.

It was these reaffirmations that led Cameron and his wife, Carolyn, to decide to put their trust in God and not money. “The freedom that came with that decision was incredible,” Cameron notes. “I didn’t feel like I had to chase that next promotion or big bonus. It was just this realization that enough is enough. Objectively, there’s a level of money you need to be happy, and beyond that, diminishing returns kick in quickly.

With that in mind, we’ve made a really intentional effort to live our lives for others.”

Cameron is now the President and CEO of Jill’s House, a nonprofit organization committed to bringing much-needed respite to the families of children with intellectual disabilities and weaving the story of Jesus into its mission and message. He has learned a lot about true security since his days as a first-grader. He’s found that the path to joy isn’t achieved through making money; it’s achieved through bringing joy to others. “My joy comes from sharing the amazing news about God with people, developing great leaders, and building great organizations,” he affirms. “At Jill’s House, I get to do all of that, and more.”



Jill’s House was formally launched in 2010, but fundraising efforts for the organization began in 2003, when a young family in McLean, Virginia, received some news that would change its future forever. Lon Solomon was the senior pastor at McLean Bible Church, and he and his wife, Brenda, were the proud parents of three sons and a new daughter. Baby Jill seemed happy and healthy, until she started experiencing small seizures in her hand. They grew more violent and frequent, and life for the Solomons became an endless stream of doctors’ visits, trips to the ER, and sleepless nights.

The stress was evident in their marriage, their parenting, and their work. One day, after Jill had suffered a particularly difficult seizure that left Brenda in tears, the phone rang. It was a woman named Mary. “I don’t know you,” came the unfamiliar voice, “but God told me to call you.” Brenda’s story came pouring out, and Mary immediately identified the missing piece. “What you need is respite,” she said. “I know some people who can care for Jill to give you and Lon a little time to recharge.”

With Mary’s insight and assistance, life

began to stabilize for the Solomons, and as they saw the tremendous benefit wrought by the simple gift of a few hours of peace, they knew there had to be thousands of other families out there who needed the same kind of help. Indeed, they were not alone. Families of children with intellectual disabilities suffer extremely elevated amounts of stress, which manifest in divorce rates 80 percent higher than normal. They experience higher rates of suicide, and siblings don't get the attention they need. "Our solution was simple and elegant," Cameron says. "We wanted to take care of children with intellectual disabilities overnight, giving parents a night or two each month to themselves. Even with that small break, stress levels plummet. We can't cure autism or cerebral palsy, but with God's grace, we can cure the stress gap that separates these families from every other family in the country."

Over the next seven years, the Solomons raised funds and built a center that would serve as a safe, fun place for children with special needs to stay, providing parents and caregivers with precious time to rest and recharge. With Cameron's help, the center opened its doors in 2010, and families began coming in droves. The 45-bed center began filling completely each weekend, so they rented extra space at a camp nearby. The organization then extended to Colorado Springs, Los Angeles, Austin, and Seattle, growing into a team of over a hundred employees with an annual budget of \$5 million. Last year, they served 500 families, with a thousand additional families registered to receive assistance. "By God's grace, this idea of a rhythm of overnight respite is starting to change the face of disability ministry in America," Cameron affirms.

In the years since Jill's House first opened its doors, families have used their respite opportunities for things the team couldn't have imagined. A single mother brought her child to the center while she was recovering from chemotherapy. Some families used the extra time granted to them through respite to get their degrees, trying to build a better life for their family. Other families have used the time to attend the out-of-town graduations of their other children, since many children with intellectual disabilities have a hard time traveling.

Jill's House offers more than the gift of time—it offers the gift of God's grace to families who want to receive it. Ninety percent of the

families who sign up with the organization have no connection to a church, and while some of them are not interested in engaging on matters of faith, others are. "Jill's House is certainly about providing resources to any family, regardless of religion," Cameron affirms. "But it's also about building relationships with those families, and through those relationships, we talk about the redemption and renewal that comes from living a life in Jesus. Giving the gift of physical rest gives us the chance to talk about that true spiritual rest and peace that comes from Jesus."

Indeed, while many people go through life pretending the world isn't fraught with pain and suffering, Jill's House is about confronting reality head-on, rather than denying it. "A lot of the families we serve are face-to-face with the brokenness of life everyday," Cameron points out. "They recognize that the world isn't what it ought to be, and we have an answer for why that is. As Christians, our hope for a better future motivates us to love and support these families. We're not just talking the talk; we're walking the walk, and I think that leads to changed lives. It's not what I expected to be doing at 37, but it's absolutely incredible work, and I love it."

Though Jill's House wasn't exactly in Cameron's plans, it allows for a wholly faith-based lifestyle consistent with the very earliest days of his childhood growing up in Gresham, Oregon. His father was a pastor at the time of his birth, though he transitioned several years later to the construction industry. Even after the career change, his parents remained heavily involved with the church, routinely leading worship with his father on the guitar and his mother on the piano. "At first, my dad thought that, if you loved Jesus, you spent your life in vocational ministry," Cameron remembers. "But he came to understand that you can love and serve God in all different ways. When the recession hit in the 1980s, he went back to school for IT and found his calling, later becoming a systems analyst."

As his father went through those years of transition, young Cameron was being formed and shaped, observing the tremendous work ethic, industriousness, and integrity that were hallmarks of his father's spirit. "I remember him building our house with his own hands," Cameron recalls. "He'd go to work early in the morning so he could make it home in time to be there for my younger brother and me." Cameron's mother, a voracious

reader, found ways to make sure her sons benefitted from cultural experiences, though the family was always strapped for cash. “I remember our church delivering a turkey to our home one Thanksgiving,” Cameron says. “That was when I realized we were poor. Still, my parents always found time to support others who were going through hardship.”

An avid football card, baseball card, and Legos collector, Cameron went on to earn his first dollar working a paper route. As soon as he was old enough to get his work permit, he got a job washing dishes at a pizza place. And as he matured, so did his faith. “In high school, I realized your faith can be more than something you just accept from your parents,” he says. “I was reading the Bible myself, developing my own relationship with God.”

Cameron’s graduating class began with around 400 students, but had dwindled to 300 by the end of the year as students dropped out. “When you’re not as affluent, you often know a limited number of stories about how life can go,” he points out. “I didn’t know what all was out there. I had heard people at church talk about the importance of having godly people in politics making good decisions, so I decided to study political science.”

With that, Cameron enrolled at Wheaton College, a Christian school in Illinois. He enjoyed the experience but missed being with nonbelievers, whose eternity might actually be changed by what he said or did. With that in mind, he transferred to Stanford University. The summer between his sophomore and junior year, he landed an internship in Washington, D.C. with Senator Mark Hatfield, a man of great integrity and faith, and one of Cameron’s heroes. “I was a kid from nowhere, but somehow, he and I connected,” Cameron recalls. “I understood his philosophy in a unique way because we came from the same faith background. We were perfectly aligned on the concept that it’s not the government who should be the agent of justice and mercy in society; it’s the church. We agreed that the purpose of a charity isn’t just to stabilize the needs of people; it’s to be a vehicle for the spread of God’s love.”

When Cameron returned to Stanford that fall, he got a call from Mr. Hatfield’s office asking him to write speeches for the Senator as he entered into retirement—a perfect way to help pay for his education. Upon graduating, he returned to

Capitol Hill to serve as a Legislative Correspondent for Representative Joe Pitts from Pennsylvania. He moved on to serve as a Legislative Assistant for Representative Steve Largent, a former Seattle Seahawks player who had been another great hero through childhood. He then became the Legislative Director for Representative Lamar Smith. “It was fun, but in terms of actual meaning and impact, it felt lacking to me,” he says.

During that time, Cameron met Carolyn, a Stanford student four years his junior who grew up in McLean. “A mutual friend told me about her, so we met for coffee one day while she was home for the summer,” Cameron remembers. “By the end of the conversation, we both just had a really clear sense that God had made us for each other. I didn’t know much at 23, but I knew how to pick an amazing woman.” That spring, they got engaged, and Cameron pursued his graduate degrees in law and business at Berkeley so he could be near her.

The MBA program had been tacked on to his life plans almost as an afterthought. Cameron envisioned himself becoming a corporate attorney with a nuanced understanding of the business world. When he walked into his first MBA class, however, he fell in love. “I knew that this was what my mind was made to do,” he recalls. “I loved everything about business—the problem solving, the data analysis, the pragmatism, the art of designing great customer experiences.”

A couple weeks after Carolyn graduated from Stanford, they married and began to focus on Cameron’s post-MBA plans. He was in the final rounds of interviews at McKinsey & Company when they discovered their first daughter was on the way. “The McKinsey job would have had me traveling all the time, and I wouldn’t have been able to be the father I wanted to be,” Cameron says. “We prayed a lot and then turned the McKinsey job down.”

Instead, he took a position at a consulting firm called Corporate Executive Board, where he helped to launch new businesses for five fast-paced years. In 2006, he launched a group for Chief Financial Officers of mid-sized companies, which he grew to a \$12 million business of 700 members. In 2007, he launched a General Counsel group that grew to 400. “I loved being that ‘business launch’ guy and was doing quite well, but I wondered if God had some other purpose for me,” he says. “I

expected I'd spend my life working there, trying to be generous to causes we care about and a truly loving manager to my team, but then a friend of mine who was on the board of Jill's House approached me. He explained that they needed someone to launch the center. They wanted to run it with a focus on Jesus's love, but with the excellence of a business. I decided to give it six months before returning to my real life."

Six months became a year. One year became two. And now, Cameron feels that Jill's House may be his life's work. "One thing I love about the organization is that it's fueled by people with a lot of philanthropic passion," he remarks. "It's a beautiful thing that, through the generosity of our donors, we can take the work of IT consulting or defense contracting and turn it into the work of mercy. There are many people who wonder what the meaning of their work is, and while there's certainly inherent value in doing well and being excellent at what you do, I think there's also a layer of joy that can be added to the tougher moments of the day-to-day work of our donors when they stop to realize, this work is also becoming the work of mercy. Lives are being changed and futures are being altered because of the emails they write and the meetings they have."

Now, as a leader, Cameron works to build a great spiritual environment for his staff that encourages people to surprise themselves. He assesses what people are capable of and then asks them to deliver on those abilities, giving them chances to accomplish things they don't think they can do. Many of his protégés have gone on to assume leadership roles at Amazon and Google; others have gone on to launch their own companies. "I like to give people big jobs with big responsibilities, and I expect big results," he affirms. "It's about loving people enough to know them, push them, and support them."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Cameron highlights the lessons taught by athletics—discipline, hard work, and an awareness of the power of delayed

gratification. "Get a real job, and find ways to contribute without getting glory," he suggests. "Go in with the attitude that you have a lot to learn." Even as a leader today, Cameron remains deeply engaged in the learning process, having recently been selected as a Praxis Fellow for his excellence as a social entrepreneur.

His greatest honor, however, remains the accolades of the people Jill's House touches each year. On a scale of 1 to 10, the organization is consistently rated a 9.9 in its efforts to transform the lives of families all over the country. Yet local lives are never forsaken for national impact. Cameron and Carolyn are leaders in their small Arlington church, frequently hosting parenting seminars and mentoring young couples in marriage, even as the couple raises their own four children. "Carolyn is an incredibly wise, faithful, and giving partner," Cameron says. "I don't know why she chose me, but I'm so thankful she did. I make life efficient and well-planned, and she makes life beautiful and fun. It's awesome to have found the path to joy, and to walk together. It's not the life I expected, but it's a life lived for others and for Jesus. I wouldn't trade it."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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