

Katie Crotty

Say Yes

Long before Katie Crotty served in the Iraq surge, and even longer before she founded her own company, her worldview was shaped by the mantra held sacred by her father. “He told me to say no to drugs, but say yes to everything else,” she smiles. When he was working as a military doctor, he was asked if he wanted to go to flight school to double as the team’s helicopter pilot on a mission to Central America. “He told me he had no business doing that, but he said yes anyway,” Katie explains. “In learning how to fly, he also learned the value and the joy that comes from succeeding in situations that seem frightening at first.”

Katie’s parents would tell her other stories of opportunities that had come to them through life—opportunities they may not have wanted at first, but which always proved to be character-defining experiences. “My parents encouraged me to push myself outside my comfort zone, and I’m a very experientially-driven person because of that,” she says. “So much of life can surprise and delight you if you give it a chance. Saying yes is the most important thing we can do.”

Katie’s mother is the embodiment of this philosophy. “Growing up, life was never about the things we owned,” Katie recalls. “It was about experiences we shared.” Their home never held a lot of presents, and to this day, Katie and her brothers’ spouses wryly joke about how unceremoniously her family treats traditional gift-giving affairs like birthdays and Christmases. Instead of big festivities, Katie remembers January, when flights were cheap and the family would travel somewhere together. The tradeoff was material gifts for the world. “My mother wanted to experience everything, and because of that, there was nothing that didn’t hold wonder in my childhood,” she says. “My upbringing taught me how experiences make you a better person and

ultimately challenge you to be the best part of yourself through seeing the goodness other people are bringing to the world. I try to think of that on a daily basis, and on hard days, I challenge myself to engage life fully. Saying yes makes you truly purposeful with your life.”

Purpose. Drive. Determination. Confidence. These are the things a business owner, entrepreneur, and leader owes her employees and clients, and when they are imparted, great things happen. Praescient Analytics (Praescient), a big data analytics consultancy that works to solve problems for both commercial and government clients, is one of those things, and Katie Crotty is one of those business owners, entrepreneurs, and leaders. With courage and conviction, she seeks to bring passion and purpose to each person at her company, from the highest-ranking leadership to entry-level team members. “I truly believe that what we do is changing the world, and it’s my job to convey that depth of conviction to my employees and clients,” she says. “At the end of the day, I’m doing my job well if my team is proud, because we know what we do is meaningful.”

Katie formed Praescient in 2011 with her cofounder and partner, Yvonne Soto. With its team of tech-savvy analysts and mission-savvy engineers, the company works with clients to combat fraud, investigate crime, and run intelligence operations around the globe. They ensure national security not only through defense operations, but also through protection of the commercial realm, such as ensuring banks are safe places for consumers to store their money. From combating health insurance fraud to putting a stop to human trafficking, their mission is far reaching because they see safety as an interconnected, domain-transcending concept. “Right after the Paris attacks, some of my analysts identified an



ISIL agent and were able to support federal agencies in his apprehension,” Katie reports. “They also helped identify Western Union transactions that linked that terrorist group to a human trafficking operation here in the U.S. In this line of work, you come to see how interconnected these problems are, which makes you really good at seeing them—both down range in Afghanistan, and here working with our commercial counterparts and the very significant role they play in protecting the public.”

An anti-terrorism mission demands the examination of terabytes of data. In this context, one analyst reading a report is no longer relevant. Rather, you need one analyst reading 500,000 reports in an hour—something that cannot be done without technology. “We help the fight because we know the ins and outs of how to maximize the use of technology,” Katie affirms. “Back when I was conducting intelligence operations in the military, we were only trained to use a fraction of the capabilities available to us. Today, empowering our clients to maximize the power of data and tech is where we provide value. It’s about using tools smarter and gaining the capabilities to differentiate between a typical anomaly and a vital trend.”

With this mission, Praescient is a services company, living and dying through the strength of its remarkable team. Yet in 2013, one of its primary clients was charged with a mandate to shift its spending away from services. As a result, Katie was faced with the devastating task of letting almost fifty people go within only a few hours’ notice. People she considered colleagues, friends, and family—people who had helped build the company side-by-side with her—were forced to walk out the door that day.

When asked how the company survived, Katie responds plainly, “Determination and confidence is key. And belief. As a leader, you need to believe that you and your team can persevere. If not, they will know it. If you have doubt, you need to figure out what’s causing it and solve it quickly, because it will show.” Katie believes the drawdown posed a unique challenge for her employees and leaders alike, forcing them to evaluate themselves in times of great challenge. “You have to understand yourself—what you can take, what your breaking point is, and how to come back from it,” she says.

Shortly after the drawdown, Katie suffered a mid-term, stress-induced miscarriage that

required surgery. Days after the operation, in the middle of a conference room with a contentious client, she started to silently cry. “I couldn’t help it,” she recounts. “I had a momentary loss of perspective where I thought I had sacrificed literally my everything for nothing. But I breathed deep. I concentrated on regaining control. And I wiped my face, smiled, and said that we would take their constructive notes and come back with a detailed plan that we could execute on together. Perspective. Define it. Keep it close. It provides you purpose and you owe it to everyone who works with you to be that bastion, even when you are at your very worst.”

Today, Praescient is a company of 70 people. Katie couldn’t be more proud of her team, and she credits their success today as a direct outcome of how Praescient handled this crisis. And despite the heartbreak, Katie was unwavering in her belief that they would be successful, ultimately emerging stronger and better aligned than they were before.

“That experience redefined us as an organization, but it was an incredibly important test of our capacity to keep perspective,” Katie says. “You have to live and breathe your sense of purpose. As a business owner, your perspective is what defines how others view your company. Especially in character-defining moments, you have to believe in what you’re doing and the sacrifices it entails. Incredibly difficult decisions will have to be made. Waiting to make them will not change the ultimate truth that they will have to be made. Do it. Move on. Don’t look back.”

Katie has always had a strong sense of service and conviction. And while she credits her father for her strong patriotism and quirky humor, she believes she ended up being a Founder and CEO before age thirty due to her mother. “From an entrepreneurial standpoint, my mother taught me that you can be anything you want to be and that it’s okay if your dream evolves, because we do as humans,” Katie reflects. Among many things, her mother was a social sciences teacher, storm chaser, and serial business owner. “She taught me that you are the only one who can define what success means for you—that it’s not an all-in-one endeavor. You define what a successful marriage, mother, businessperson, or entrepreneur looks like. Whatever you choose, live the hell out of it.”

As a military family, Katie called Kentucky, California, Louisiana, and Washington

home, all before she entered the third grade. In Seattle, her mother attended a PTA meeting where the school explained how to look for heroin track marks on their children's arms, as a fifth grader had been caught pedaling the drug to younger children on school property. With that, Katie's mother set the wheels in motion to quit her job as a partner at a successful real estate firm, and her father transitioned out of the Army. They settled in a small town in eastern Washington, where Katie's father set up a dermatology practice and her mother stayed home. "There was absolutely nothing my parents wouldn't have done to protect my brother and me," Katie reflects proudly. "That was a defining moment for our childhood."

Growing up on a fifteen-acre farm in a small town felt both limitless and limited. With an orchard, a garden, and countless animals, work was an integral part of Katie's upbringing. Every Sunday morning, she was up working with her family at 6:00 AM. They would break for lunch at noon and then finish their tasks, which often consisted of digging an elaborate set of irrigation tunnels across their property or other character-defining chores. At three in the afternoon, they'd end the workday and go to the dollar-fifty movie theater together, or spend the rest of the day playing cards. "I'm incredibly thankful for the structure and values I got from that," she reflects. "We're such a hard-nosed, sarcastic family. You didn't come to our house to talk Aristotle or receive relationship advice, but I couldn't have wished for a better home. We aspired to work hard and create joy."

Katie loved school and is a self-proclaimed nerd. She was called to the principal's office only to take new kids on tours—save for one time when she and a good friend were intentionally late to class three days in a row to incur a detention, just to see what it was like. Curious and determined, she had a strong work ethic that earned her a 3.9 GPA, even as she was an avid athlete playing softball, basketball, and volleyball year-round. "Sports taught me a lot about team dynamics and how you can't accomplish anything alone," she says. "I'm also very grateful to my mother, who came to every single game. I didn't think twice about it as a child, but now as a mother, juggling life's many priorities, I am awe-struck by her sacrifices. It was a founding-block for the confidence I have today."

Katie was social in high school and had

genuine affection for every member of her 54-student class. With solid friends and an inclusive community, she also benefited from observing the beautiful relationship her parents shared—a model love that she and her husband emulate today. "My parents were unwaveringly unified," she says. "Even as a teenager, trying to find cracks in foundations to exploit in order to get my way, I remember admiring that strength. Their infatuation with one another was, and remains, so entirely beautiful." They taught Katie how to look past what a person says to understand what they mean and why. "Those lessons not only made me a better wife and mother, but a better analyst and leader," Katie says.

She was also profoundly inspired by her mother's belief that it was important to understand the world outside their town—an idea that compelled her to serve as the regional coordinator for the Association of International Students. Through the cultural exchange program, Katie's mother placed foreign students with American families, and Katie's own family hosted numerous students across the span of her childhood. This constant exposure to other cultures and beliefs was captivating, and Katie's brother spent six months living in Brazil during his junior year of high school. Katie was so excited to see the world herself that she applied when she was fifteen, and she wanted to be gone for a whole year.

Katie was in charge of helping fund her own experience, so she applied for jobs all over town, landing a position at the TCBY frozen yogurt shop. She spent every possible moment working, saving up enough money to pay for a year-long cultural exchange program in Italy. She left when she was sixteen and was placed with an Iranian family—a time of growth, adventure, and developing close relationships with new people. "I'm so grateful that my parents raised me to have the strength and fortitude to live in a strange place, speaking a language that was foreign to me," she says. "Talking about adventures and living them are different endeavors, and my life views changed dramatically over that year abroad—for eventual betterment, but not without its certain hiccups."

When she returned home for her last year of high school, Katie was audacious and independent. "Although I didn't go to the principal's office before Italy, I certainly spent a lot of time grounded by my parents once I returned!" she laughs now. In Italy, Katie lived very

independently. She thought she had done it all and was all grown up. The truth was, she was a teenager who had experienced some incredible things that, hopefully, would transform into wisdom one day to serve her well in the future. "Years later, in college and living on Top Ramen because I didn't budget well enough until my next scholarship stipend came, I realized my audacity as a teenager to believe that I was independent in high school under my parents' care," she says. She called her mother that day, with two dollars in her pocket, and told her she would dedicate the rest of her life to making up for her senior year and all the trials she put her mother through.

As for her final year in high school, Katie knew she wanted to join the Army, but she struggled over whether to enlist immediately or pursue an ROTC scholarship, doubling her commitment from four to eight years. "I asked my parents what I should do, but they told me the decision was mine to make," she recalls. "My parents fervently believed that the role of a parent, aside from showing unconditional love, was to ensure I became an independent, capable person who could make educated decisions."

Katie earned a full-ride ROTC scholarship to the University of Washington. "In retrospect, the consequences of that decision were huge," she says. "I'm glad my parents raised me well enough to understand that the long-haul eight-year commitment was the right decision for me."

With that, Katie started her journey in earnest, embarking on four years of rolling out of bed at 5:00 AM to do physical fitness before class. She remembers the atmosphere as supportive yet challenging. "You had to show up, give your all, and consistently prove yourself," she recalls. "If you didn't get the grades and pass the physical fitness test every month for four straight years, you could fail out of the program." Fortunately, Katie's work ethic and capabilities were exemplary, earning her the Palace Athene Award for the top cadet in the Western U.S. "I'm my hardest critic, and I believe that if I'm going to commit to something, I owe it to myself and to that organization to be the best I can be," she affirms. "I push myself very hard and enjoyed that challenge. I wanted to learn it all and be the best at it, because I knew that the day I pinned on my second lieutenant rank, I would be given twenty to thirty people to lead. I owed it to them."

Through it all, Katie grew closer and closer

to Rob Crotty, whom she had met on the first day of orientation during her freshman year. He was an English major in creative writing and the lead singer in a band, and after becoming friends, the two fell in love. Rob joined ROTC during their junior year. They shared a passion for foreign diplomacy, histories, cultures, and languages, and were both drawn to futures in military intelligence.

Katie and Rob graduated in 2004 and were fortunate enough to go on to military intelligence training together in Arizona. Katie was excited to see where in the world she would be stationed next, but as luck would have it, she wound up a short 35 minutes from the University of Washington at Fort Lewis. She spent a year and a half there while Rob was a reservist, writing for various travel publications and penning his first book. "He's my Hemingway," Katie says fondly, her pride in him ever-present as she beams about his achievements.

Katie and Rob married, and when Katie was deployed in 2007, Rob volunteered for deployment. They were deployed downrange in Iraq, with Rob working the human intelligence side while Katie was responsible for catching the threats. Fulfilling their two different yet complementary roles, they were apart for two years.

As an Army military intelligence officer in a unit supporting the Iraq surge, Katie was downrange for over fifteen months in a new operating space fighting a brand new enemy. Their young team had no preconceptions of Cold War tactics, free from the weight of old thinking and theory. Instead, they went into the experience asking themselves how human beings would react and behave. "Our un-indoctrinated ignorance proved a unique strength of ours," Katie reflects. "And we made up for our inexperience with lots of dedication and passion."

Because the U.S. was emerging from a peaceful state, forays like Katie's marked the first chance beltway firms had to test the utilization of various tools in a combat environment. Katie and her team were thus equipped with a lot of new technologies, but very little training on how to employ them. It took grit, smarts, and a lot of trial and error to learn the tools on the fly. "Without the technology, my analysts would have been able to process only a fraction of the information coming at us," Katie remembers. "Thanks to some key breakthroughs, we were able to identify threats in

new ways, and thanks to our tremendous operators, the missions arising from that information were executed successfully. Together, we accomplished something that had not been achieved in theater yet at that point, decreasing enemy operations in our area by over 80 percent. That deployment was hard and heartbreaking, but also character defining. It showed me the combined power of technology and people, which is what Praescient is built around today.”

Thanks to their success, Katie’s unit was tasked with overseeing the Diyala Region at large, an area fifteen times the size of their original terrain. They worked to stymie weapons and suicide bombers coming in from neighboring countries, and by the time their tour was over, they became the smallest unit to receive the highest award given by the National Security Agency.

Once Katie and Rob returned from deployment, Katie was faced with the tough decision of how best to serve her country from then on. She received a rare Vice Presidential Exception to Policy, allowing her to serve in a military role otherwise restricted to only men. Thanks to the Exception, she was permitted to be an intelligence officer serving in an infantry unit, providing unit intelligence and joining operations to capture the people she identified. Katie perceived this as the greatest honor she could have received in the military. She also knew that, in accepting the position, she would deploy again in six months’ time, departing again from a husband she had seen for only 18 days in two years.

Katie loved military service, but she yearned for an opportunity to improve upon the experience she had had downrange in Iraq. She dreamed of hand-selecting teams and technologies to provide mentorship to entities in those situations, affording the training she wished she had had while in theater herself. “Decreasing enemy operations by 80 percent was phenomenal, but what if we could have achieved 99 percent?” she poses. “With this goal, I decided to transition out of the military and move from Washington state to Washington, DC.”

Katie and Rob loaded everything they owned in the back of their car and drove across the country, to a city where they had no home and no jobs. Katie interviewed around town and was offered positions as the Afghanistan and Pakistan intelligence lead at the Pentagon, as the Intelligence Chief for Iraq, and with a counter

narcotics mission across the Caribbean with the Drug Enforcement Agency. When she was invited to breakfast with Guy Filippelli, however, the path of her future trajectory changed.

Guy, a former Army officer who had done extensive work developing the NSA’s cyber doctrine, had heard about Katie through his work with the NSA. At that time, he was engaged in building a pioneering systems engineering firm called Berico. He didn’t know the exact arc of his company yet, and he didn’t have a job title to offer Katie, but he reasoned that if she had been willing to transition out of the clear she had been on in the military, she wasn’t doing it to walk back into the kinds of jobs she’d been offered before. “I can guarantee you that Berico is going to be different,” he said. “Come help me build a company.”

Katie remembers it being such a unique pitch, starting as coffee ending in this completely unconventional job offer. “But he was right,” she recounts. “I hadn’t sacrificed a future I would have been proud living if it weren’t that I believed I could offer more. So I said yes.”

At Berico, Katie had the opportunity to learn business and entrepreneurship inside and out, mastering the art and science of laying a strong foundation for a company. She saw how a company’s finance, legal, recruiting, and HR departments had to be top-notch in order for everything else to run smoothly. She recruited Yvonne Soto, a savvy businesswoman who quickly picked up military culture, and transitioned over to business development, growing the company from 30 to 180 employees. Once she had that down, she wanted to learn program management of distinct, high-end work, and took over management of the company’s intelligence capabilities across agencies. Katie ultimately became VP of Consulting, playing a key leadership role in a multiple-contract business unit worth over \$11 million.

After a magnificent three-year run, Katie’s final request of Guy was to spin out a small team of intelligence analysts to start her own company. With Yvonne as her partner, Katie thus launched Praescient—a bold venture that Katie has led through example from its very first month, when she traveled to Afghanistan to work alongside her analysts there. “It’s not my company, it’s our company,” Katie says, of the whole Praescient team. “My people make me better every single day, and I hope I challenge them in the same way,

because I believe that we are building something truly amazing together. We provide service to organizations that are bettering the world, and I can't tell you how honored I am to undertake that mission with such an excellent team."

Beyond the intelligence support it provides all over the world, Praescient's mission of betterment is also as immediate, interpersonal, and local as it can get. In 2013, the company was recognized as one of the top small businesses in the nation in its commitment to hiring veterans, highlighted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes initiative with SpikeTV. "Anyone who's transitioned from the military understands the very real internal conflict you feel about leaving your team," Katie says. "Praescient is a safe haven for veterans going through that, helping to show that there is life after military service. Seventy percent of our company is veterans, and we've built a community around supporting them in their new mission. That's very important to us."

Taken together, Katie's mission through Praescient serves something greater than herself—a purpose that provides ultimate meaning and fuels her through many months spent away from her husband and children. After military service, Rob became a diplomat with the State Department, and when Katie decided to launch the company, he was sent to Bolivia for two years. He came home to an eight-month-old son, and when Katie was pregnant with their first daughter, he was serving in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. At present, both children live there with their father. "There's a twelve-hour time difference, so when I go to bed at night, I use Facetime and Skype to kiss my children awake in the morning," Katie says. "It's incredibly challenging, but we're able to do it because of the unwavering sense of purpose we have. I believe wholeheartedly that Rob is designed for his job and is making the world a better place through what he's doing, as I am. We make the personal sacrifice for something greater than ourselves."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Katie refers to a study that shows how individuals are deeply influenced by the five people closest to them. Her closest friends are comprised of a Diplomat, a Silicon Valley business couple, the general manager of a brewery, the Peace Corps/American University Accessions Head, and a veteran who went back to college to

make a dramatic shift from military work. Each of them brings something very unique—perspectives she would not achieve alone. "I don't always agree with their insights, but they always grow from them as a person," she says. "I aspire to become the combination of the devout father, dogged businessman, and charismatic public figure, and to have the unwavering courage it takes to both know what you want and have the guts to pursue it—all things I see in my friends. If you want to be better, smarter, and more successful in life, choose your five people with care. I'm very grateful for mine."

Katie also underscores the importance of audacity and hard work. "If you work incredibly hard and learn how to be good at what you do, good will come," she says. "It may not take you directly down the path you thought you'd take, but if you suck the marrow out of every opportunity that comes your way, you'll get somewhere—and, more importantly, become someone—you want to be."

Indeed, we are all born with certain variables, and pursue other variables through life that add height and depth to the fundamental building blocks of our story. But in the end, our life isn't about those pieces—it's about the purpose. In aspiring to purpose, Katie's narrative transcends discrete identifiers like woman, veteran, or entrepreneur. "None of these factors were ever beginnings or endings for me," she says. "From the time I was a child, I wanted to solve problems. I was passionate about putting my skill set where I could help the most, and through a strong desire to learn and overcome challenges, I am where I am today. It's hard work, unwavering vision, and a commitment to say yes for the greater good, even if it means personal sacrifice. Regardless of who you talk to, it's a story you hear again and again. This is my version."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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