

Laura Degnon

Finding the Good and Falling into It

Laura Degnon's father taught her so many things in life. He taught her how to invest in the stock market, how to run a business, and to always give the other person the bigger half when you split a candy bar with someone. Among the most pivotal lessons, however, was the importance of finding the good in people. When she saw someone sitting alone in the lunchroom at school, Laura would be the one to join them. When others focused on the negative in a person, she focused on the positive. "It's become an important part of the leader I am today," she says. "I try to find a connection with everyone and to recognize the goodness in each person."

While some important things in life are for finding, others are for falling into. Laura fell into basketball when she was in fifth grade, and it came to be one of the loves of her life—a pastime that brought her closer to her parents, as it now brings her closer to her own children. And it cultivated in her an invaluable perspective on group dynamics. "When your goal is to play on a winning team, you look at the skill sets around you and what each person brings to the table to make you a greater whole," she explains. "Someone's job is to get the rebounds; another makes steals; someone else plays great defense; and another is a great shooter. It showed me that finding the good in everyone can lead to great wins when you put it to work for the good of the team."

Now the President and CEO of Degnon Associates, Inc., an accredited association management company launched by her father in March of 1979 and focused in the not-for-profit healthcare and medical research communities, Laura fell into the perfect career after an intense period of trying to find herself. Born and raised in Vienna, Virginia, she grew up the youngest of four in an idyllic community that fostered an active, engaged childhood. With a lake, a pool, a

community center, and tennis courts all nearby, she and her siblings loved participating on the swim team, where their parents helped out. "We had a bumper sticker on our car that said, have you hugged your kid today?" Laura recalls. "We always felt very loved and supported by our parents and did a lot together as a family."

Growing up, Laura's mother was the rock that grounded the family and the glue that held it together. She was very passionate about her job as a teacher, while Laura's father worked as Associate Director of the American Academy of Pediatrics. A businessman and a registered lobbyist, he was responsible for opening their federal affairs office in Washington and hiring their first director. The family then relocated to Chicago, renting out their home in Northern Virginia with the hope that they could come back soon.

Early in his career, Laura's dad had considerable success with creating new programs and services, but he confided in Laura that he was always searching for some resource that could help him determine whether what he was accomplishing was average, below par, or exceedingly good. Through his research, he learned there was an association dedicated to professional development of association leaders, and that managing associations was actually a career field. "The association management company model utilizes economies of scale for affordability and efficiency," Laura explains. A calculated risk taker who saw the value in the opportunity, he left the Academy and took a six-month crash course in the business of association management. "If my parents were stressed about losing a reliable source of income with four young kids to take care of, they never let us see it," Laura remembers. "We were all just so excited about moving back to our neighborhood in Vienna."

From the time she was eight, Laura watched as her father built an accredited company



of best practices and systems. He earned his certification as an Association Executive, and Laura's mother agreed to spend a summer helping out by answering phones. She enjoyed the work and never left, growing to become the Executive Director of a client from 1980 until her retirement in 2013. The firm still serves that client today. "My mother and father worked side by side for over three decades," Laura says. "The not-for-profit healthcare and medical education, clinical, policy, and research world is full of very bright people who are passionate about improving life for patients and their families, and both my parents were very moved to be part of that impact, as I am today."

Meanwhile, Laura cultivated a work ethic of her own, taking great pride in caring for the family's lawn. She would cut it, trim the edges, sweep, and bag the dead grass, just as her best friend next door had to do for her yard. But her friend was compensated with two sticks of chewing gum, while Laura's father only gave her half a stick. "He told me half a stick was all I needed at any one time, and that the pack of gum would last longer this way," Laura laughs. "It was such a small thing, but looking back, it had a big impact. My father is a brilliant man."

Laura made her first buck babysitting, and because she loved having fun with kids, she was a neighborhood favorite. It was this love of young people that convinced her she wanted to be a teacher when she grew up. She had a great group of friends and did well in school, but fun always took priority over academics. "I was friends with everyone, and I'd take every opportunity to be social, whether it was going to dances, hanging out at friends' houses, or going to parties," she recalls.

Laura also remembers the fun of family gatherings to fold and label newsletters for mailings to the members of associations being served by Degnon Associates. As a thank-you at the end, her father would bring in a huge bag of McDonald's cheeseburgers and fries which he emptied out on the ping-pong table for the kids. Laura would help out at the company as a receptionist in the summers, but because she already had to balance rigorous athletic obligations with school, her parents didn't want her to work beyond that. Laura played varsity softball all four years of high school and could have gotten a scholarship to play in college, but basketball was her true passion.

Laura's high school basketball team won district championships, and she played on an AAU team as well. To cover a team trip to Miami, she and her teammates had to sell tickets for a raffle that featured a 1980 Chevette Scooter as the grand prize. Much to her surprise, Laura won the raffle, and the car served her well through high school. Most importantly, her parents never missed a game when they were in town. "They were so incredibly supportive," she remembers. "They always made basketball a priority because I loved it, but they never pushed me the way other kids' parents did. They just wanted me to have fun, and it was an added bonus that I was really good. I so admire how they parented me, focusing on encouragement and suggestions rather than nagging and orders."

When her AAU coach handed out an article about the importance of making your bed every day, Laura didn't think much of it. But she never forgot it, and though she never made her bed through high school or college, she picked up the habit in adulthood. "It seems like a small thing, but it sets the stage for a clean and organized day," she says. "I also remember the teachers and coaches who made an effort to make things fun. That was a big motivator for me."

The summer after she graduated from high school, Laura got a job waiting tables at Bob's Big Boy, and as a people person, she loved it. That fall, she enrolled on a basketball scholarship at Shippensburg University, a Division II school in Pennsylvania with a great coach Laura enjoyed. She did well through her freshman year, but the following year, the coach was fired and replaced with a high-ranking coach who imposed a rigid, intense structure on the team.

It was one problem in a perfect storm of problems that coalesced at the same time. Laura had chosen Shippensburg because it had a great program for aspiring teachers, but she realized during her freshman year that a life in the classroom wasn't for her. She had also dated the same boy for five years, but was realizing now that she had questions about her sexuality. And the new basketball coach had drained all the fun out of the game—a real deal-breaker for Laura. "I was so confused about who I was and where I was going in life," she remembers. "I made the decision to leave school and focus on finding myself."

Laura's parents had a rule that their children should not plan on living at home after

graduating, so Laura moved to Virginia Beach, where she got a job waiting tables while she hoped her life would sort itself out. Heavy drinking became a staple of her lifestyle, and in many respects, she shut down and grew disconnected from her family. She enrolled at Old Dominion University for a semester but didn't go to class. She later tried community college, and though that went alright, Laura was in bad shape overall.

After almost two years of searching, the first hint of a real answer came one Tuesday evening when she got a phone call from her father. He asked if it would be alright for him to drive the four hours down the following day to take her to lunch. He was a busy man, so Laura knew it meant something to him to come. She agreed, and at the restaurant the next day, he told her that he and her mother loved her. They were worried about her and asked her to move back to Virginia, where she could live with her older sister and look for a job. "A week later, with my parents help loading up the U-Haul, I moved back, and it profoundly changed my life," she says. "And while I wouldn't have survived if I'd kept on the way I was going, it was the best thing that could have happened at the time, because it helped get me where I am today. I have absolutely no regrets."

Over the next several months, and thanks to the tough but unconditional love of her family, Laura underwent the tedious work of becoming a responsible adult. She got a job at a temp agency doing mailings and odd office projects, and her father would periodically present her with forms she could fill out to buy stock in various companies. "He told me that part of his success was finding out about the stock market," Laura recalls. "He encouraged me to invest extra money when I could, and said I'd be surprised by how things grow when you reinvest the dividends. It taught me to appreciate the importance of saving and investing."

It was 1991, and Laura was making \$10 an hour at her temp job. Her father pointed out that she was being hired out for \$15 an hour, so he offered her a job in the Degnon Associates mailroom for \$12.50 an hour, a win-win. Several months later, after she had proven herself as reliable and committed, her parents promoted her to an office job as Executive Assistant. "It was an important turning point for me to have my own desk and an actual title," she remembers. "I gave up drinking completely and really embraced the

work. Three years later, they promoted me again so that I was doing important work directly with the clients, and I completely fell in love with it."

As she excelled at the company, Laura completed her undergraduate degree and then earned a certification in organizational management on her way to becoming a certified association executive. She held every position in the company, building up her credibility as she learned the ins and outs of each role. By 2009, she had taken over significant responsibility in the company as she and her parents discussed the transition of full leadership in the coming years. Around that time, the size of the company doubled to 25 employees managing ten associations, and the future looked bright.

Life took a sudden turn, however, on September 21, 2011. "That was the day my parents came into my office to tell me my dad had been diagnosed with metastatic prostate cancer, and that it was stage 4," Laura says. "I was a wreck, and the oncologist had absolutely no estimate of how much time he had left. He told me how proud he was of me, and that he was grateful he didn't have to worry about the future of the company. It was a defining moment for me because I genuinely felt that my role gave him the peace of mind he needed to focus on his health."

Laura took over as President and CEO on January 1, 2012, and remarkably, her father is still in extraordinarily good health today, continuing as Chairman of the Board. As a leader, her philosophy is rooted in a passion for the work that breeds commitment and dedication. It's also shaped by close observation of her father's example, which she emulated through the many years spent working by his side. "When he was the executive director in a board room for a client, he wouldn't speak often, but when he did, everyone listened," she recounts. "In watching him closely, I saw how our work was really about serving others, because in service we find fulfillment."

Laura also remains deeply connected with the healthcare and scientific fields of the company's niche—a focus that allows her to deeply connect with their mission. Currently 10 of their 15 clients are in pediatrics, with other clients focused on geriatrics, toxicology, and integrative medicine and health. "It's important to us to connect with the leaders of our client organizations to show them their underutilized power and how they can bring it to the equation," Laura says.

"Indirectly, we have an important impact on patient care by supporting quality improvement initiatives and educational leadership trainings that create better leaders and physicians. We also work to cross-pollinate good ideas from one group to another, creating collaborations and partnerships that elevate everyone."

Over the years, Degnon Associates has gone from a modest business that kept its membership dues records in a shoebox of index cards, to a modern company with its own computer network. But at its heart, the passion for service remains the same. "I have that fire in my belly of always wanting to do bigger and better, helping the team around me and the leaders and stakeholders I work with," Laura says. "I love brainstorming ideas that turn into products that help the community, whether through education, research, policy, or clinical care. There's a certain kind of passion in the healthcare arena that you just can't find anywhere else."

Family businesses are often fraught with tension and strife, but Degnon Associates is set apart by the remarkably smooth and positive family relationships that have run through the heart of its growth. "In over 25 years of working together on a daily basis, I can count on one hand the number of disagreements my parents and I have had," Laura says. "We've gone through a lot together, but we work incredibly well together. I'm so blessed to have had that."

This baseline of love, support, and constructive partnership has been a foundation of Laura's family from the very beginning, and today, she continues that tradition with her own four children, ages eight to fourteen. All of them play basketball and other sports, and like her own parents, Laura makes a point to be at every game possible. "I'm running a business, so I can't be the mom in the classroom at the elementary school, but I can be the mom who never misses their games," she says. "It's also important to me to make their lunches instead of buying. It's the little things that matter."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Laura underscores the

importance of enjoying life while working toward success. "Don't take yourself too seriously," she says. "You can excel in life while also appreciating everything around you. There were many years I was a workaholic, and maybe that's necessary for a period of time in each person's professional development, but I then transitioned to a focus on working smarter, not harder. I want my employees to be at their best, and they can't do that if they're working fifteen-hour days all the time."

Many view retirement as a coveted achievement in life where people get to fill their days with things they love to do, but Laura is a firm believer that we shouldn't wait until late in life to spend our time on what's meaningful to us. With this in mind, finding work you love may be rare, but it's worth the pursuit. "Be true to yourself and remember that there are so many things you could decide to do," she says. "Choosing a career you love is not only good for your own well-being, but also for everyone around you, because when you love what you do, you're willing to put in the time and energy it takes to be great at it. Sometimes we find the right thing when we actively search for it; other times we fall into it. However we get there, there's a lot of good in people and in life, and it's our job to bring it out."

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