

Barbara Ashe

Beyond No

Most people live their lives within the confines of the word “no,” both real and imagined. Some are so deterred by the very idea of the word that they go to great lengths to avoid it, eliminating risk from the equation of their destiny—and immeasurable potential along with it. Barbara Ashe, however, grew up in a world where daring suggestions were acted upon. Her parents demonstrated time and again that they weren’t afraid to sell successful businesses, move to new cities, and start all over from square one—a fearlessness that taught Barbara a unique kind of limitlessness. “I’m not afraid of people, places, and possibilities,” she affirms today. “I’m not afraid of the word no.”

In high school, she used this disposition to try her hand at leadership for the first time when she switched schools midway through her sophomore year and discovered her new environment was completely lacking in school spirit. Her classmates in Florida had lived for the football games with all their pep rallies and chants, whereas the games of her new Atlanta school were rarely brought up in conversation, let alone attended. “It’s not that they didn’t want to come together as a team—they just didn’t know how,” she recalls. “So I decided to become an officer and change it, selling the idea to the principal and transforming all aspects of student life. It was the first time I realized I could get people to take on a cause and convene to enact change.”

It’s a skill Barbara has used time and again throughout her career in corporate, community, and charity work, allowing her to bring together diverse groups to test the limits of “no.” Now, in her role as President of the Montgomery County Chamber Community Foundation, Barbara serves as the Founder and National Director of the Veteran Institute for Procurement (VIP), a high-caliber training program designed to accelerate the

success of veteran-owned small businesses doing work with the federal government. The program is the opus of her lifelong passion for bringing market-based best practices to the government arena, using them to advance the collective good.

VIP, like the many other improvements Barbara has worked to bring to the world around her, was forged through observation and discontent. In October of 2004, the federal government set the modest goal of ensuring that 3 percent of its contracting dollars go to service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. With the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in full swing and the government engaged in record spending, the goal seemed wholly attainable, yet agencies fell short year after year.

After observing this trend, Barbara had a conversation with a Lockheed Martin employee who proclaimed they should be doing more for veterans. Several years later, over coffee, a service-disabled veteran business owner named

Barry Kane said the same thing to her. Later that day, Barbara convened the two men to discuss strategy. They knew that veterans, highly trained and mission-oriented, could do the work, and after hearing of the industry’s interest in working with veterans, they knew the opportunities were out there. “That begged the question, why weren’t things lining up?” says Barbara.

Most immediately, Barbara was disappointed by the realization that America was failing the men and women who had worked so hard on the battlefield to ensure people back home were safe to thrive. “We were spending so much money on federal procurement at the time, and I just couldn’t believe that we, as a community, couldn’t figure out how to hit our service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses goals,” she remembers. “And what was even crazier to me was that people weren’t as upset as I was when I



brought it up to them. Many made excuses. There was no way we were going to be okay with the status quo."

With that, Barbara and her team at the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce began asking what veteran-owned small businesses really needed. And through this line of inquiry, they uncovered a glaring gap in the support service offerings available to this unique demographic. Indeed, veterans had the technical skills, the relentless dedication, and the top-notch leadership training necessary to succeed in the marketplace. What they needed was the business acumen, best practices, network, and resources specifically geared at making sure a small business operates effectively.

"When you come out of the military and want to be an entrepreneur, you have all these incredible assets, but you don't have the advantage of having spent the last two decades building your business resources," Barbara explains. "While the rest of us were here on American soil with easy access to these resources, our service members were focused on protecting our free enterprise. VIP is a signal that the business community is stepping up to provide veterans with an accelerator, helping to shorten their learning curve."

Thus, VIP was launched in 2009 as a way to equip veteran-owned businesses with the experience to win contracts, deliver the work, and remain compliant. The program teaches companies how to scale successfully, detect and avoid landmines before they become a problem, and mitigate risks. As well, the government has come to recognize VIP graduates as sound and attractive partners, setting it apart as a program everyone seems to be able to get behind. "There's something unparalleled about veteran business owners," she says. "It's something in their stories, in their dedication, and in their leadership. Their passion for the mission is absolutely contagious, and you're driven to be part of their success."

Today, businesses hoping to participate in VIP must be at least two years old and have a minimum of three full-time employees, demonstrating at least some success as a government subcontractor or prime contractor. These parameters ensure that the program is building on the support provided by other programs, which already provide introductions to federal procurement. "We tackle the questions that arise once you're already in," Barbara says. "How

do you scale? How do you manage HR? For multiple contracts and employees, what are the best practices? Business owners face greater risks as their companies grow because they have more on the line, with the greatest areas of concern stemming from the security of employees, partners, customers, and the owner's invested assets. VIP aims to mitigate all those risk areas."

Still among the only programs nationwide that focuses on later stage early companies, VIP has now trained 546 veterans from 36 states and Guam, all at no cost to them. It has also landed a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration, supplemented by \$150,000 from the State of Maryland and matched by private donations. This yields an operating budget of around a million dollars, which VIP plans to use to expand its impact far beyond the 3 percent service-disabled veteran-owned small business procurement goal that was finally attained for the first time in 2012. "I'm glad that people are starting to open their eyes to the fact that it makes no sense to plant a seed if you're not going to water it," Barbara says. "Just as a veteran-owned small business is getting its footing in the government procurement world, we stopped investing in the company's training, which made no sense. VIP shows that this training does make a difference, and this holistic way of thinking is finally starting to catch on."

Leveraging its location in the DC metropolitan area to cultivate a top-notch talent bank, Barbara has vetted and identified the very best in the government procurement industry to teach a curriculum that evolves with the marketplace, resulting in a highly relevant course of 27 hours taught over three days by 28 instructors. "In sports, it's very clear that success or failure is just as much owned by the coaches as by the teams," Barbara points out. "I firmly believe that coaches are just as important in business. We need the best coaches to help veteran business owners be the best, and VIP is a way of creating that network and knowledge base." Through this strategy, graduates from VIP's 2013 class grew an average of 46 percent in the year following the program, while graduates from the 2014 class grew an average of 49 percent during the same timeframe. In total, VIP graduates have added 2,100 jobs to the economy, and this is only the beginning.

VIP remains the Foundation's biggest

program, but Barbara also helped to launch its Green Business Certification program, a partnership with the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection and Montgomery College. The product of two years of work with industry, the program sets up a process whereby businesses can become green-certified by the county government. "This was a response to an Executive Order by the Obama Administration describing the federal government's new commitment to greening its supply chain," Barbara recalls. "I knew we needed to position our companies to understand the new marketplace quickly, helping them succeed by embracing ways they could be part of the solution." The Foundation also runs a scholarship fund for public safety and fallen officers at Montgomery College, publishes a white paper on economic development, and heads up additional educational programming.

The Foundation's inventory of aims and successes is a testament to Barbara's work ethic, fueled since the earliest days of her childhood watching her own parents defy the confines of no. Barbara was born in Chicago and raised in Glenview until she was nine. Her mother stayed at home to raise Barbara and her two siblings, getting deeply involved in community organizing and local issues. Her father, the son of a tin artisan, owned a small ductwork business in the days before prefab, drawing the systems out and then cutting and forming the sheet metal himself. "We'd all help him out in the garage when the business was just starting," Barbara recalls. "We'd help him feed the sheet metal into the break before bending and soldering it." Her father worked on the first McDonald's in Chicago.

Because he could easily maintain a building, he also got into real estate and made most of his money owning rentals in the city. He could fix most issues that arose, and for those he couldn't, he had close relationships with other plumbers and handymen who provided service at good rates. "From watching that at such an early age, I came to understand the value of a good team," Barbara says. Her mother was part of that team, handling the clerical work for the businesses and joining her husband in obtaining real estate and brokers' licenses so they could close deals on their own.

Barbara's family had always been drawn to sunshine, and when she was nine, her father

decided to sell all his assets in Chicago and move to Florida to start over. It was there that Barbara fell in love with the sun in earnest, spending all her time playing outside. She took tennis lessons with Chris Everett's father, a disciplined drill sergeant who taught her that every point mattered. His teachings threaded into her world view, setting her up to be a demanding leader with high expectations who always strives for excellence. "Now, it's important to me not to leave anything on the field at the end of the work day," she explains. "A colleague I worked with later on in life put it another way—you're either with the company, or you're against it. Like her, and like the tennis coach I had when I was young, I have no patience for in between."

Proficient at the dying art of doing fancy custom copper fixtures, Barbara's father was highly sought-after by Fort Lauderdale businesses looking to retrofit. He also invested heavily in real estate again, including a hotel and a restaurant. "When you're a small family-owned business, it's all hands on deck," Barbara remembers. "My brother had to paint every room in the hotel, which he didn't like so much. But I was in charge of the Coke machines, which meant I had a key and access to an unlimited supply of drinks. There wasn't anything better than that! My father always made business fun for me."

Barbara remembers her father taking safety incredibly seriously because he couldn't afford to have a broken leg. He knew that if he didn't work, his family didn't eat. "Even when I was a girl, I got that sense of how vulnerable a small business owner is," she recalls. "In this respect, he was aware and careful. Yet he was always fearless, unafraid to reinvent himself time and time again."

The next opportunity to do so came when Barbara was in her sophomore year of high school. Her mother's sisters had all moved from Chicago to Atlanta, and her mother longed to join them. With that, her father sold everything again and made the move. In no time, her mother realized she couldn't stand the weather, and by Barbara's senior year, they returned to Fort Lauderdale.

Barbara had always wanted to be a teacher when she grew up, but when her senior year typing teacher told her she'd hate it, she began considering other options. Her parents agreed to take her college visiting to Florida State University because it had one of the best teaching programs in

the country, and by the end of the visit, they began filling out the paperwork for her enrollment. When the enrollment counselor asked her what school she'd be joining, however, she promptly answered business instead of teaching. Her parents were shocked and dismayed at first, but Barbara was firm. "It was more than the fact that the teaching facility was part of the newer campus, away from the student union and the center of activity," she says. "It was a choice tied to my former teacher's insights, and to the fact that I had always loved my dad's businesses. Later in life, I would come to realize how much business and education actually intersect."

Barbara met her husband, Dan, at college. Upon graduation, he enrolled in graduate school at the University of Washington, so the young couple found themselves moving cross-country in two cars and a U-Haul during the oil embargo of 1979. Interest rates were 17 percent, and it was incredibly hard to land a job. Still, Barbara managed to secure a position at Burroughs Corporation, the manufacturer that later became Unisys. There, she did sales and business development for three years and then relocated to Washington, DC for the next four, discovering early on that she had a remarkable affinity for the work. "I was dead-set on hitting my numbers, and I won every award they had straight out of the block," she recalls. "I became the youngest female manager on record for the company. Later on in my twenties, I closed the largest deal in history for our division. As the youngest person on the team, I ran their Baltimore office and its sales team of 28 men. I was the most successful zone manager in the world—and then I got pregnant. I decided to leave at that point, because I knew there was no way I could do what I was doing while raising kids."

By that time, Dan had become Staff Director for the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Subcommittee in the U.S. House of Representatives. After fifteen years on the Hill, he left the Legislative Branch to work at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and in 2011 was nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate to serve as its Director. "He absorbed so much during his time on the Hill and in various leadership roles at FWS, and now runs a federal agency with a multi-billion dollar budget," Barbara says. "I've learned so much from him over the years. Going through the hoops to get things done in government is just

a different world, so it's helpful to understand the process of how you get an idea communicated, sold, and funded."

Such lessons came in handy several years after Barbara and Dan bought a house down the street from a lot that was to be turned into a park. After the birth of their two children, Barbara noticed the lot still hadn't been developed, so she called the Park and Planning Department to determine the holdup. They reported they had no money, and that she would need to call the County Council. From there, she learned she needed to form an organization and rally the voices, so she mobilized a thousand residents in favor of getting the park built. In the end, the effort was successful. "I learned what it meant to make something happen," she explains. "I read through the whole budget, and it turned out the county had plenty of money, but they just weren't choosing to spend it on the park. So I organized the neighborhoods, got our precinct to show up to vote, and made sure everyone knew who supported our park and who didn't. It was an invaluable lesson in how to channel fearlessness into action and results."

Over the fifteen years Barbara spent caring for her children while operating outside of the typical workforce, she invested her time and talent into changing Silver Spring, Maryland, for the better. She often put in more hours than she had on the payroll for Burroughs, still finding time to work as a substitute teacher for six years. "In that capacity, I had the opportunity to observe the art and skill of true teaching," she reflects. "Now, my greatest challenge at VIP is being able to identify the truly gifted educators amongst the SME's. There's no shortage of incredible government contracting knowledge around the beltway, but the question is, who can teach it?"

Barbara began working with the Chamber of Commerce in 2003 after she had done some community work with its then-president. He invited her to come onboard working 100 percent commission to bring in members and sponsorships, which Barbara's husband initially balked at. She remained wholly undeterred, however, and was soon earning more than the president at times. Her rise to Executive Vice President of the Chamber, and then President of the Foundation, was followed by the creation of VIP in 2009 as a somewhat casual regional program. It then evolved into a national program in 2011 that would come to have the structure,

impact, and prestige it has today.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Barbara stresses the importance of self-sufficiency and perseverance. "No excuses," she says firmly. "Failure's not an option, and help is not on the way. Every day, wake up and remember that success is your responsibility, so own it fearlessly. And above all else, remember that you can take no for an answer, but never for an ultimatum. If something doesn't feel right about the world, believe in your power to fix it, overcoming the roadblocks to reach that solution beyond the 'no's in your way."

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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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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