

Guyline Saint Juste

Investing Forward

As a girl growing up in Haiti, Guyline Saint Juste lacked for nothing. She was surrounded by a strong family and community in Port au Prince. She remembers feeling safe in this strength and knew she had many people looking out for her. These early years shaped the woman she is today.

In fact, she says, "I would wish my childhood on anyone." Though they weren't materially wealthy, she had role models not many others had. Her grandmother, her grandmother's sister, her aunts and her mother made up a tight matriarchal group that lived closely within a space of a few blocks, and Guy spent much of her childhood at her grandmother's house learning to cook and sew. She learned a lot observing her older relatives quietly. "There were always people around," she smiles. "When we had a family gathering, we didn't need to invite anyone else because there were always 60 or 70 of us at every gathering. It was a strong family."

But just before Guy's 14th birthday, something drastic changed. Her beloved grandmother, the glue who held the family together, passed away suddenly. "I remember it like it was yesterday," she says. "She's been gone now 36 years, but I still talk about her in the present tense. She was an extraordinary woman, was humble, and was really a force of nature. She was the matriarch. You know the expression 'Standing room only?' Well, there was no standing room at all at her funeral. Even a half-mile radius from the church, people were packed along the street. You couldn't find a single person who wasn't wearing black. And they were from all walks of life - from wealthy businesspeople to people who sold shaved ice on the street. Everybody talked about the impact she had on their lives, and on that day I understood the meaning of the word 'legacy.'"

The death of her beloved grandmother, as well as the outpouring of support from her community, were experiences that stayed with Guy as she set about building her own life. It's no wonder, then, that she states that her most cherished goal—the reason she does the work she does—is to build a life of significance.

"I don't believe in the American way of saying 'giving back,'" she muses. "I don't think there's ever a way we can give back for all we've received. As an immigrant to this country, I've received so much. But I do believe in 'investing forward.' I believe we can do more to help solve problems by giving others the tools and the education to succeed. Investing forward, learning how to do that, is a challenge that appeals to all three dimensions of my being and I've decided to devote the rest of my career to trying to help solve it, or at least to have an impact."

That's why today, Guy is the Executive Director for the National Capital Region of Year

Up, a program dedicated to furnishing young people with the skills they'll need to succeed in the working world. Year Up caters to the demographic that is commonly referred to as "at-risk," but which Year Up terms, "opportunity youth," recognizing that behind the difficult circumstances of poverty and discrimination, there are often talented, intelligent, committed youth ready to work hard and take on challenges.

Year Up is a national organization, with a presence in 21 cities and 17 markets. Through their year-long program, they prepare young people between the ages of 18 through 24 to take on roles at partner businesses. "They spend six months with us in training for roles that have career longevity and sustainable wages," explains Guy. "So we train for cyber, IT help desk work, QA coding on software, project management, business operations, financial operations, corporate sales,



and more. We operate a very strong and robust training program.”

In order to find recruits for the program, Year Up makes use of relationships with local schools, the foster care system, the juvenile system, and groups like the Boys and Girls Clubs, as well as good old-fashioned word of mouth. “We’ll often get someone who says, ‘I used to work with my friend at Chipotle, she completed the program, and now she works at Capital One,’” says Guy. “They realize that if their friend can do it, they can do it, too.” In fact, Guy notes that 52% of their students are now finding out about Year Up via word of mouth.

The program is competitive, but for the students who do make it through the application process, the success rate is high. Approximately, 75% of those admitted to the program complete it and graduate. Students can currently choose between three area locations—Woodbridge, Alexandria, and Arlington. However, the Arlington location is currently being moved into Washington DC to allow for more geographic diversity. In two of these locations, Year Up partners with Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) to provide a top-tier education that also counts as college credit for participants. Students learn not only a typical college curriculum, but also professional skills like being on time, dressing professionally, writing business emails, and other life skills.

Once the students graduate from training, they are ready to be placed with a partner organization. Year Up works with dozens of businesses across the area, including GE, Bank of America, Capital One, Verizon, Microsoft and JP Morgan. These businesses pay Year Up for the ability to access their pool of talent. At their placement, students complete the second half of the “Year Up” program, working as an intern for six months at their partner firm. “At the end of the six month internship, our partner businesses can decide to hire the intern as a full-time employee or wish them well on their job search,” explains Guy. “You’re talking about kids in Richmond making \$65,000 to \$70,000 per year. That is life changing.”

The Capital Region branch of Year Up has been running for about 13 years, but since Guy took over 4 years ago it’s grown precipitously. During her first year, Year Up impacted about 220 students with 48 corporate partners each accepting two or three interns. Last year, they almost

doubled that number. They placed over 420 students among 62 companies that accepted five to ten interns each. And each student gets more out of the program, too. “We’ve grown our base, we’ve grown our revenues, we’ve created efficiencies, and we have pushed up wages,” affirms Guy. “Wages were about \$18 and change when I started, now we’re at \$23.73. We’ve also launched certifications for students, including an AWS certification, an A+ certification, and a cyber certification. We’ve included these in the program to increase their marketability. It’s just not the same business we had four years ago.”

The annual budget for the project is now \$12 million with about 60 staffers across the region. Recently, a government-funded case study found that graduates of the Year Up program fared the best among youth workforce development programs. Students one year out and five years out were earning, on average, 52% more than a counterpart who hadn’t completed the program. Surprisingly, even students who had participated in but never completed Year Up held a shocking 32% wage advantage over peers who never entered the program at all. It’s clear that Guy is successfully implementing her passion for ‘investing forward.’

She’s come a long way since her childhood in Haiti, but she had the support of strong female role models like her mother and grandmother along the way. Growing up, Guy was always very close with her mother, and that closeness persisted until her death in 2001. She always had a positive relationship with her father, who was an entrepreneur and introduced her to the business world. Divorces were very rare at the time in Haiti, but her parents divorced when she was six. Because of this, she was able to marvel at her mother’s strength and independence firsthand.

After the divorce, everyone, including Guy’s maternal grandmother, assumed that Guy and her mother would be moving back home. It was almost unheard of for a young single mother to get her own place, but that’s precisely what Guy’s mother chose to do. “My mother was fiercely independent,” smiles Guy. “I think I’ve inherited that. My mother was tough, and she decided she was going to raise her daughter by herself. She loved me and pushed me at the same time. Because nothing was ever too good for her daughter. She thought I deserved the absolute best, always.” Guy’s mother worked as a secretary

at a bank to support them.

When Guy was 14, the same year her grandmother died, her father lost his business and left for the United States. It was a hard year, and a hard adjustment; with her grandmother gone, she noticed that her mother sunk into something of a depression. Still, Guy reiterates that her mother was “tough as nails” and she remained a caring and devoted parent. She made sure that Guy remained focused on studies and continued paying for Catholic school, piano lessons, and dance lessons. Each summer, Guy would travel to the U.S. to spend time with her cousins in New York or Florida.

Guy had always been a great student, and in high school she continued to flourish and was the President of the Student Government all four years. But around the time she turned 16, her grades began to slip. She’d met her future first husband, and suddenly she began to focus more on her social life. “He was at the University and he had a car,” she laughs. “I discovered popularity because of that! Everyone wanted to be friends with me because I had guaranteed rides. His family was well-to-do, so he also had a few coins in his pocket, too.”

She had finished high school and was prepared to sit for her baccalaureate exams—exams every Haitian student takes before continuing their education at the university level—when the political situation in Haiti suddenly deteriorated. Exams were cancelled, and on July 5, 1987, Guy left Haiti to come to the U.S. “I didn’t say then that I had come to stay,” reflects Guy. “But I think deep down, I knew I had come to stay. Some part of me knew. As a leader, I think I have immense propensity for change, for seeing how things could be better. And I think that’s born out of the immigrant experience. I left everything I’d known my entire life. I left my friends, the food, everything I grew up with, and everything I defined as a part of my environment. And I started in a place where I didn’t know anybody.”

Both of Guy’s parents agreed that she would be safer in the States given the unrest in Haiti, but Guy suffered tremendous guilt over leaving her mother behind. “It was more than difficult,” she remembers. “In a way it felt like I had betrayed her because I had to leave her. But she knew that this was the best thing for me. She would never hold me back.”

Guy came to Washington DC, where her

father was working at Fannie Mae, and began learning English. She didn’t waste any time; she arrived on the 5th and began working at a job on the 12th. Meanwhile, she looked into taking classes at NOVA and tested high in all the core subjects other than English. “I love numbers and did really well in math. I like numbers because numbers are universal,” she nods. “I laughed and I smiled in class, but in reality, I felt lost. I remember seeing my classmates taking notes in Psychology class, but when the class ended I would cry my eyes out and think that I was never going to get this. I didn’t think about going back to Haiti though. I’m the kind of person who considers things carefully and takes a long time to come to a decision. But once I’ve arrived at that decision, there’s no turning back.”

Despite her early struggles with English, she completed two years at NOVA in 1989. After graduation, she married her first husband, the high school sweetheart who had followed her to the states. Soon after, she went back to school at George Mason University to pursue a degree in International Relations. While at George Mason, Guy landed a job as a bank teller and would continue in banking until 2014.

In 1991, Guy had her first daughter, Joelle, while still in school and working. After graduating from George Mason in 1994, she moved from her teller job to a job at SunTrust Bank. Five years after the birth of Joelle, Guy had a second daughter, Jessica, but by then her marriage was beginning to falter. “I was growing and my then-husband was not,” she recalls. “I learned that I can deal with a lot of things, but mediocrity probably isn’t one of them.”

The couple separated when Jessica was 18 months and Joelle seven, and Guy focused on her career and the girls. Her mother took early retirement and moved to Washington DC from Haiti to help care for them. She supported Guy as much as possible in the years before she passed away, on January 25, 2001. “She died in my arms,” says Guy. “She was fighting because she knew she was going to leave me alone as a single parent to two daughters. I climbed into her hospice bed and told her that her entire life had been about me, and that now it was about her. I told her that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was going to be okay, and she needed to let go. Within two hours of that conversation, I lost my mom. It was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done, and one of the

most glorious things I've ever done, to help my mother die peacefully."

For several years Guy did manage to raise her two daughters by herself and advance her career. SunTrust paid for her to complete a graduate degree in Retail Banking Management at the University of Virginia, which she completed between 2005 and 2007. Then, in 2007, she had the blessing of meeting the love of her life, her husband Jacky. The two were married in 2008, and today he enjoys a wonderful relationship with Joelle and Jessica. "I'm eternally grateful to him," glows Guy. "He's the person who made me believe that I, too, was worthy and deserving of investing in myself. He's a very kind and generous person."

Given the challenges that come along with being a single parent, Guy remembers both of her daughters' college graduations as two great moments of celebration. Joelle graduated in 2013, and Jessica in 2019, both with no debt. "Both of them saluted their mother publicly on the day of their college graduation in words that I will never forget," remembers Guy. "Joelle thanked everyone for coming and she handed me her diploma, and said, 'This is yours. I can't imagine a life without you in it. I can't remember a moment in my life that you weren't there.' And Jessica made a collage of all of her moments with me on her graduation cap. At her dinner she said something similar; it surprised me from her. She said, 'I know you don't know how much I love you because I don't do a good job of showing you!' Those were two glorious experiences of fulfillment. I always told them, 'They're not the center of the universe, but they were the center of *my* universe.'"

In fact, Guy's love for her daughters is what motivated her to devote herself to investing forward. When she realized Jessica was about to go to college, she had a sudden revelation—she'd spent her adult life caring for these two girls. Now, she needed to find significance another way. She

had risen to become a Senior Vice President at Capital One Bank, but she was ready for something new. It was soon after she had that thought that she was contacted by the headhunter for Year Up.

As a leader, Guy says she considers herself to be 'tribal.' "Everybody talks about teams; a tribe is deeper than a team," she elaborates. "There's a pride associated with it. I'm not formal, I'm probably one of the least formal people that you'll meet, but I am about tradition. I respect and value traditions. And I think tribes have ways that they do things that are very distinct. There's a sense of belonging, like you're part of something bigger than yourself."

To young people entering the working world today, she advises them to be true to their values. "Be very clear about what are the three or four core values that define who you are," she encourages. "For me, it's truth, love and harmony. Make sure you live consistently in alignment with those values. The truth of the matter is that when you lay your head down, there is a higher truth."

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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](#)