## Donna Boone

## Embracing the Adversity

Though Donna Boone grew up with a pool in her backyard, she was always extremely fearful of the water. A bad experience with a cold-hearted swim instructor at age seven underscored the apprehension she had always felt—that embracing the water was giving up a sense of control for the cautious, intelligent little girl. It wasn't until she turned eleven and saw her friends joining swim team that she decided to take the plunge, realizing a natural affinity for swimming that propelled her from last place to champion after just a few short

months of practice. As a sport, and as a life philosophy, swimming became a way for Donna to connect, evolve, strengthen, and succeed.

It wasn't until many decades later, after Donna had founded the Potomac Swim School in Loudon County, Virginia, that she heard her lifelong process put into words. Having launched a successful business teaching children crucial swimming and safety skills, she attracted a number of competitors to the area, who began waging business-to-business cyber bullying against her before the term had even been coined.

"It felt like being hit over the head by twenty baseball bats that wouldn't stop," she recalls. "Competitors were logging hundreds of negative reviews against the company, the water quality, the coaches, the curriculum—anything that might put us out of business. After calling a host of experts for advice on how to deal with it, I ended up calling my friend, Verne Harnish, on Thanksgiving Day of 2010. He said that, legally, there wasn't much I could do. The best option, as is often the case, was to embrace the adversity."

It was an eye-opening conversation for Donna because it gave her the vocabulary to talk about the life philosophy she had adapted early on. From a young age, she had been taught to doubt and discount herself, letting others define who she was based on how they saw her. It created

a cycle that led her elementary school teachers to underestimate her, overlooking her when selecting students for the Gifted and Talented Program in fifth grade. Stung by her elders' failure to see in her what she knew was there, she began performing better in school, and by the time she reached seventh grade, the stage was set for a personal revolution.

It was the first day of school, and Donna had been put into Vic Sanniota's math class. To kick off the course, he addressed the girls in the

class, emphasizing that they could actually test just as well, if not better in math and science, than boys. "Don't ever let anybody tell you that you can't do something," he told them. "You can do whatever you want to do, and planning is the key to success, so plan for your future."

In that moment, Donna's inherent intelligence dawned on her, and she resolved to never again let someone else dictate the grade she got or the success she achieved. "I was tired of other people putting me

in a box where they wanted me," she recalls today. "I always wanted to perform the best I could, and though I didn't fit the mold of what most people thought excellence looked like, I was determined to prove that I was. I began dreaming of becoming the CEO of my own company, and though I never told anyone about it, I never let it go." By putting faith in God and herself, Donna has since moved through life with an unshakable strength and grace, embracing adversity wholeheartedly and meeting challenges head-on with the conviction that nothing could knock her off course.

It was a foundation that became particularly important through her divorce in 2001, as she considered the next chapter in her life. Two weeks after completing her masters in education toward the end of 1991, she gave birth to her daughter, Brittany. "You only have your kids once, so I wanted to stay at home through that



time to give all I could to my daughter," she says. During that time, her husband had gone to work hospitals, selling roofing systems for manufacturing facilities, and schools, while Donna handled all the finances and the family's investments. When they decided to divorce, Donna had considered going back to school to pursue a professional career in psychology or psychiatry. But when a friend suggested she start a swim school, her interest was piqued, and she felt herself drawn to the basic building block of life to rebuild her own life.

Since falling in love with the water as a girl, Donna had never strayed far. She had always taught swimming lessons and coached, instructing Brittany's friends in the water at no charge as they were growing up. The concept of a swim school, however, was foreign to her, so she began researching. The idea had taken root in places like Australia, Texas, California, and Florida, so she began hopping on planes to visit the facilities and hear about their operations. "God had sent me to DC, which had no swim school," she recalls. "I knew it was an idea that could truly thrive here, so I put together my business plan and began moving forward."

With that, Donna leased space at Sport and Health, a Tysons Corner health and fitness club, in the fall of 2001, where she began accepting swim students. She drew interest from near and far, and before long, had built up 120 students, the maximum clientele allowed for the time and space. As Donna's reputation developed, she continued to refine the curriculum while building her own location in Ashburn. She approached landlords and banks, educating them on the concept of a swim school and what her vision could become. The liquid assets from the divorce provided cash for the construction, and when the facility was ready to open in December of 2003, she migrated her business to the new location. 85 percent of her clients from Mclean, Great Falls, Oakton, and Vienna came with her, including hundreds of children from the Loudoun County area, allowing her the great honor of opening her doors with 520 students.

At Potomac Swim School, Donna and her team set to work teaching swim lessons to children from age 2 months to twelve years. Just like Donna, many of their students start off extremely fearful of the water, so the instructors start off slowly, building trust with the children and

teaching them how to enjoy the water. Classes are supplemented with safety instruction, preparing them for accidents that might occur around water or in a boat. "We want to take the panic out of any situation that might arise, giving our children the best skills possible to save their lives," Donna explains. "There are no words to describe the feeling I get when a parent tells me that their child used safety skills they learned here to save their life or someone else's. At Potomac Swim School, we work for a higher mission than ourselves: drowning prevention and enjoyment of the water."

Within the first year, Potomac Swim School's enrollment quickly escalated to 900 students, almost doubling in size. By the third year, it had reached 1,400 students. Then, around 2010, other swim schools started opening in the area—some within only several miles of Donna's location. The company went through a period of adaptation, especially given the bouts of cyber bullying, but Potomac Swim School was a powerhouse with an impeccable reputation, and it quickly became apparent that nobody was going to put Potomac Swim School out of business. Indeed, with her bubbly personality and affinity for fun, Donna's tenacious business acumen is easy to underestimate but impossible to topple.

The steel and perseverance in her approach to life was forged from the earliest days of her childhood, growing up in an atmosphere that demanded she take a certain path. Donna always knew without question she was going to attend college—a luxury her parents had missed out on. Both her mother, an accountant, and father, who worked in the HVAC industry, worked very hard to put her through school. Thanks to their tenacity and financial support, Donna was able to graduate without any student loans, and with gratitude that continues to do this day.

Donna was born on Groundhog's Day in 1966 in High Point, North Carolina, amidst a blizzard so severe that her parents thought they wouldn't make it to the hospital. "My mother is a very strong, financially savvy woman," Donna reflects. "My parents had high expectations for me because they knew I had the ability, intelligence and internal motivation to achieve any goal I set for myself."

Growing up, Donna and the neighborhood kids had the freedom to roam all day long, stopping at home only to grab a sandwich for lunch. Her summer days were filled with mud pies, scavenger hunts, tree climbing, Red Rover, and kick the can, except for Sunday mornings and Sunday and Wednesday evenings, when the whole family attended church. "I can still remember the pastor standing before the congregation at the end of the service, asking people to come up if they wanted to accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour," she recalls. "At eleven years old, I walked down that aisle as if God was leading me, completely at ease, completely believing in the Holy Spirit. It was internally motivated; nobody was telling me it was something I had to do."

So, too, was Donna's work ethic. Also at age eleven, she started babysitting and picked up a newspaper route, and has held a job ever since. Whether it was lifeguarding, swim coaching, mowing lawns, or working at Putt-Putt Golf and Games, she learned the art of service and quietly assimilated the finer details of business management through her jobs and through observing her mother, father, and many business mentors.

Donna always had the same internal drive to succeed academically, but it was initially overshadowed by the context within which she was forced to operate. Because finances were tight, her mother made clothes for her three daughters, and she had sown a dress for Donna's first day of first grade. Not wanting to hurt her mother's feelings, Donna didn't tell her mother how the older kids would make fun of her. Each day, she withstood the bullying on her own, cried in the privacy of her room without telling her parents, and got up the next day to return to school and do it all over again. That cycle was eventually broken as Donna grew older and surrounded herself with the kids she shared a genuine mutual affinity with. By the time she got to high school, she had worked her way into advanced placement classes and was wholly focused on her academics, activities, and her goal of attending a top-notch university.

A daddy's girl at heart, Donna had learned from her father to love music and sports. "We would jam out together in the car, and me being very curious, I would question my parents to death," she recalls. "We would cheer for North Carolina sports, frequenting football games at Chapel Hill whenever we could." Donna came to love the school and always knew she would attend college. Knowing attendance at a great university was the surest way to a great future, she set her sights on UNC Chapel Hill.

When Donna got into Chapel Hill, everything seemed to be going just as planned. But in February of her senior year in high school, she began getting headaches everyday. Doctors discovered a tumor behind her right eye, embedded within her pituitary gland. Surgery would have been fatal, so medication was her only option, and she was advised never to have children, as it would require her to go off treatment and risk growth of the tumor. "That experience reinforced for me what I've always believed, which is that things are going to happen to people, and you just have to get up and keep going," she says. "I've been able to handle anything that's come my way through God's strength."

Through embracing the adversity of her health crisis, Donna remained a laid-back, friendly, competitive, fun teenager, and was given the senior superlative of "Best All Around" when she graduated from high school. Her mother wanted her to major in accounting, but she got a C in her Accounting 101 class at Chapel Hill and decided she was too social to spend her life working 80 hours a week in front of a computer screen. "I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew it wasn't going to be that," she remembers. "I asked myself, what can I do just for the heck of it?"

Donna was phenomenal in math, having aced her freshman year business calculus class. She decided instead to focus on her weaknesses, majoring in English to help her become a faster reader and stronger writer. She had always loved politics and decided to double-major in political science. She had come to Washington, DC with her parents at the age of eleven years old, and her attention had been most captivated by the energy, beauty and diversity of DC, specifically a distinct moment when they stopped at a streetlight and she looked out the window, noticing an Indian man in traditional Indian dress riding a motorcycle in the adjacent lane. "I fell in love with the city and decided that I'd move here someday," she recalls. During her freshman year at UNC, she visited the DC area again with her roommate, realizing beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was the right place for her.

It would be a long road, however, from that moment to graduation. Donna was date-raped on two separate occasions in college, both of which she kept to herself. At that time, such crimes were rarely discussed, and the lack of awareness led young women to feel that they were at fault. "I just got up the next day and kept going because I had no idea what to do," she reflects. "I had never even heard the term 'date rape' before, and didn't know it was a crime. Now, I think it's important to bring that conversation out into the open and make sure our young people have the tools they need to recognize the danger of these situations and prevent them."

Despite these setbacks, Donna did well in school and went on to graduate in 1988. True to her word, she hopped in her little red Nissan with everything she owned, feeling God leading her north to the D.C. metropolitan area in much the same way she felt Him lead her down the aisle at the church when she was eleven. She didn't know anyone in the area, but she had landed a job at Ferguson Enterprises. Through her senior year, she had interviewed with a whole host of white collar firms, but having learned HVAC from her father growing up, she was drawn to the idea of working in a warehouse and learning about piping and plumbing.

While there, Donna met Tim Boone, and the two were married in 1989. The company didn't like the idea of having a husband and wife working together in the office, so Donna decided to bow out. She instead took a job at the Special Education School in Fairfax, which served emotionally disturbed adolescents. "I absolutely loved those kids," she remembers. "They had been through some incredibly difficult, horrific experiences. Maybe one of their parents was in jail for killing the other. Most of them were medicated, and there were a lot of outbursts, but they compelled me to truly take an interest in teaching and education."

After working there for a year, Donna took a job at Edison High School in Alexandria and was awarded a full scholarship by George Washington University to get her masters in education. Then, at age 24, she became pregnant with her daughter, Brittany, and promptly went off her medication. Though she was warned that the tumor could blind or even kill her, it was a risk she was determined to take, and several weeks after she finished her thesis, Brittany was born.

Three months later, Donna waited anxiously at the doctor's office as her physicians reviewed the MRI scans of her brain to assess how much the tumor had grown. The looks on their faces made her feel she should brace herself, but

nothing could have prepared her for the news they delivered: the tumor was gone. "Why me?" Donna remembers thinking. "I was so grateful to God that I'd be there to raise my daughter."

Recognizing that she seemed to be the exception to every rule, Donna saw herself within the context of something larger and dedicated herself to a higher mission. And now, through Potomac Swim School, she has the opportunity to connect with children and teach them fundamental skills that will last a lifetime. Her immediate focus is on the local families who trust their children in her care, and the business was voted the "Best of Suburbia" top swim school for the past four years in Posh Seven Magazine, a lifestyle magazine for women. But the school's legacy of safety, quality, and loving care extend far beyond the local community, where immigrants from all over the world have settled. Many of the Indian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern families that learn from Donna end up returning to their home countries where swimming and safety skills aren't taught, bringing videos of their children learning to swim at Potomac Swim School. A small business with subtle global reaches, Potomac Swim School has big goals that will continue to unfurl over time.

Donna balances these goals with her philanthropic commitments to causes close to her heart, like the Loudon Abused Women's Center and Smashing Walnuts, an organization dedicated to child brain cancer research. And all priorities fall second to her daughter, Brittany. "She's grown up into an extremely intelligent, driven, persistent young woman, who's strong both mentally and physically," Donna says warmly. "She's just amazing. Brittany is one of the people I admire the most in the world for her strength, love, and compassion."

In advising young people like her daughter entering the working world today, Donna underscores the importance of lifelong learning. "Leaders are readers," she says, echoing a swim school friend. Her own success as a leader comes from her steadfast commitment to service leadership, focusing on making each individual's day better and meeting each child where they are. She leads by example, always willing to fill in at the front desk or in the pool if an employee is out sick. She keeps herself grounded and focuses on building a positive company culture, never putting herself above anything and never giving up.

"Above all else," she emphasizes, "know

who you are. Don't forget it, even as others try to override it. Always believe in yourself and your ability to define who you are by embracing adversity. Learn to love the waters of life, even when they get rough, because you know how to swim and how to succeed."

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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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