

Kim Greenfield Alfonso

Through the Lens of Passion

Gazing out of her kitchen window Kim Greenfield Alfonso notices the small contact lens that she had made for her daughter years before. This lens sits next to a small vessel of holy water that was blessed by Pope Paul for St. Lucy, the Saint of Sight. Reflecting on these objects she is transported to the moment they returned home from Johns Hopkins with the perfectly constructed eye that would make her daughter's limited vision unnoticeable to others. Kim expresses wanting the eye for her daughter in an effort to shield her from the stares and questions that she knew would continue throughout her daughter's life. However, in that moment her daughter, Alexandria, said, "I do not want it mom. I love my eye the way it is." For Kim, her daughter's protest was a testament that she was raising an independent, self-confident girl who was not afraid of the barriers she would face. "At the end of the day no matter how I feel, when my daughter greets me at the door I am okay," Kim exclaims. "Her personality, her energy, and her work ethic is motivating for me. She is who I want my daughter to be."

Kim explains that becoming a mother was not only a pivotal moment in her life, but also the spark that illuminated her passion for ensuring that everyone is afforded an independent and spectacular life. "My daughter was born with Peters Anomaly, meaning she would have very limited vision throughout her life," Kim says. "She has one prosthetic eye and one that is opaque." It was her daughter's self-esteem about who she is that helped Kim recognize that she has the ability to help others make decisions and become independent.

Currently, Kim is the Chief Operating Officer at the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind (CLB). Kim has worked with CLB for ten years, beginning when her daughter attended a camp with the organization. CLB was founded in 1900, making it a well established and respected

organization serving individuals who are vision impaired or blind from birth to end of life. Since 1900, Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind has been dedicated to helping the blind or visually impaired population of the greater Washington region overcome the challenges of vision loss.

CLB has three offices in the Washington Metropolitan area including one in downtown Washington D.C.; Silver Spring, MD; and a residential facility for seniors in Tacoma Park, D.C. CLB provides many services including early intervention programs, teen support and pre-employment transition programs, employment, senior support groups and programs to ensure seniors losing their vision can age in place, and low vision screening and comprehensive eye exams. The organization also partners with American University to provide a summer residential

program for teens to learn independence by cooking, cleaning, and living on their own. The Job Squad, a program of CLB, offers information on using assistive technologies and job-readiness trainings. "What makes our programs unique is that we look at the whole person, their needs and abilities, and then help them prepare for employment," Kim explains.

Another unique aspect of CLB is that they provide employment opportunities to individuals who are vision impaired or blind through government contracts. CLB manages 14 government contracts that employ 80 individuals who are vision impaired or blind. These employees are performing a number of tasks including, document scanning, administrative services, website accessibility and 508 work, closing out contracts, and help desk services. Kim says that, "Maintaining this high percentage of employees who are vision impaired or blind is important to living our mission of creating opportunities for independence."

CLB also provides services and support to vision impaired and blind seniors in their



residential facility and within the community. "Our goal is to help seniors keep their independence while remaining in their homes," Kim says. CLB provides them with assistive devices and the knowledge they need to cook, clean, and maintain their homes. The residential facility provides independent living skills training for individuals who want to age in place. CLB also serves individuals in lower income communities with their low vision clinic and mobile van that offers screenings, vision exams, etc.

Kim's strong work ethic and dedication to her passions began in her childhood. Kim is the oldest of four children raised in Washington, D.C. Ward 4. Kim laughs as she exclaims, "Everybody always listened to me and I had control over everything." Even as a child Kim had a passion for supporting others. As an adolescent, she volunteered at St. Anne's Orphanage where she cared for a 2-year-old boy, Jeremy. "I always felt my parents should adopt because they had so much. I was devastated when they said we could not adopt him," Kim says.

Kim's mother and father met and graduated from Howard University. Her father was an OB/GYN, until he became Chief of Staff at Columbia Hospital for Women. Kim describes her father as a brilliant, hard working and focused man whose advice is echoed in her work today. Her mother was a nurse and stayed home to raise Kim and her siblings. Later in life her mother started working in the White House during the Carter and Regan administrations and then became Chief of Protocol at the Department of Commerce. Kim says that her mother was the "glue" in her family, acting as the constant supporter and warmest mother and caregiver.

Kim recalls that her parents had very high expectations for her and her siblings to excel academically. In grade school Kim describes herself as an average student until she began attending Ursuline Academy, an all-girls Catholic school in Bethesda, MD. When she realized that the girls she wanted to be friends with were members of the National Honor Society, she knew her grades would have to improve, as she was competitive. From then on, she was an exceptional student and is still friends with many of them today. During the summers she would work during the day doing administrative work at her father's office. Then in the evenings she would take the bus to Kentucky Fried Chicken. She

explains that all of her friends from the neighborhood worked there so, "it was like a party every evening." They never realized that they were actually learning the importance of hard work.

Kim reflects on a significant moment in her life when her father gave her advice that would carry her through life. She recalls that while on the way to look at colleges her and her father missed their flight and she became very angry because she felt a lack of control over the situation. "My father said, as you go through life before you react you stop and ask yourself can I control this and if you can't you move on or you solve it." From that moment Kim realized that when problem solving it is important to consider what you can and cannot control and to remain calm.

Once it came time for Kim to consider colleges she explains, "For each of us, our father chose which college we would go to and pretty much predicted our majors. My parents also expected that we would go to grad school." Kim's father matched her for business and encouraged her to attend University of Pennsylvania. Four years later, she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Economics from the Wharton School of Business and then worked for two years at Prudential Insurance Company. Shortly after some convincing by her father, Kim started graduate school at J.L. Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.

Upon graduating with her master's degree in Business Administration, Kim began working for Merck & Co., Inc. and moved back to the East Coast. In her first three years at Merck, she participated in a professional program to help her determine what she would want to focus on within the company. During this time she sought guidance from her mentor, Myrtle Potter, the first female African American Manager in the company. Kim decided that she wanted to work in sales for Merck and then moved to New Orleans. After two years, she moved back to Washington D.C. and became the second African American female Manager in the Sales Force at Merck.

After some time, she worked her way up from an Account Representative, to a National Account Representative and then became the Senior National Accounting Executive at Merck. In this role she had responsibility of managing all of the major healthcare organizations around the nation. She then took the job as Senior Regional Director. At Merck, she was awarded Top District

Manager, won the National Award as the Top Senior National Account Executive and in her roll as Senior Region Director won the "President's Award".

During this time, she met Pedro Alfonso at a political fundraiser and in 1993 they got married. Pedro graduated from Howard and is the owner a very successful business. He is also very active in politics, community organizations, and national associations. Kim says that they both love politics, hosting parties, and serving on boards and committees. When Pedro and Kim decided to have a child, Kim was the Senior Region Director at Merck, and actively traveling for work. She says that for three years after Alexandra was born, she would travel with her, and sometimes Kim would bring her mother or a nanny for help. Eventually, Kim and Pedro realized that it was time for Kim to consider new options for her career and her life. So, in 2003 after 25 years, Kim left Merck.

"This was a tough time for me because I was not sure of who I now wanted to be," Kim said. So I started an organization called "The Butterflies". The Butterflies began with 65 women who were in a similar phase of life, trying to determine what was their next step. Now 15 years later, The Butterflies has grown to include 185 women. Prior to the birth of her daughter, Kim says she was a workaholic. It was also during this time that Kim recognized the value to having a quality life that includes working and having a family.

In 2004, Kim began working for the biotech company Immersion Medical in Gaithersburg, MD as the Vice President of Marketing. During this time Kim's daughter attended a camp at the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind. Kim describes that she was very protective of her daughter and attended the camp with her while sitting in the back of the room. Suddenly, she realized she found her passions and "was ready to give back and wind down." She originally started with CLB as a part-time employee in the Business Development department. She later progressed to the Vice President of Operations. Now 10 years later, Kim is the COO of CLB and has over 60% of the company reporting to her.

Kim's commitment to serving individuals with visual impairments or blindness goes beyond her work at CLB. To ensure an arts education to all children, Kim serves as the President of the Board

of Trustees of Imagination Stage. Currently, Kim serves as the Mayor Appointed Chair of Age-Friendly D.C. and was appointed by the Governor to serve as a Board member for the Maryland School for the Blind. She is also a Member of Leadership of Greater Washington and Leadership Montgomery and serves on the Board of Women March-DC. She is also an active member in several social organizations including the Washington, DC chapter of Links, Inc., Carousels, the Montgomery County chapter of the Sophisticates and DC Chapter of Jack and Jill, Inc.

In 2014 Kim was recognized by the Washington Business Journal as one of the "Women Who Mean Business," and in 2015 she was awarded the Mayor's Washington Women of Excellence Award in Leadership. As a leader throughout her career, Kim encourages young businessmen and women to work hard and be patient. She says it is important to find a mentor and then learn as much as possible. Kim describes her leadership as participative saying that it is most important to her that people feel empowered to make decisions and feel inspired to do what is best for themselves and others. She says that as a leader she is someone who knows the mission and acts as a guiding force to help others discover their own paths.

In 2013, Kim was honored by CLB with an Appreciation Award highlighting her excellence as a leader naming her Creative, Outstanding and Original. Her daughter, Alexandria, is currently attending Duke Ellington School of the Arts where she is excelling academically and is a brilliant singer. "When I think about everything I have accomplished, I wonder if I would be where I am without my daughter and husband and the answer is, no."

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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*

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