

Debbie Fields

Choices in the Making

Variety is the spice of life, and Debbie Fields grew up learning how to cultivate it. Her mother, whose own mother never worked and had few options in life, wanted Debbie and her two younger sisters to attain the kind of self sufficiency that acts as a magic key, capable of unlocking any door the girls might wish to explore. "More than anything, she wanted us to have the freedom and luxury of making our own choices through life," Debbie recalls today. "Part of that was working hard so we could earn a degree that garnered financial stability. She taught us that it doesn't really matter what you end up choosing, as long as you don't end up dead or pregnant in high school. What matters is the flexibility of being able to figure out where happiness is for you, and not needing to have regrets because you were prevented from pursuing it."

Just as important as having options, however, is having the strength of will to make a choice and stand by it—something she saw her father do when he gave up the life of a DC attorney to move to Rutland, Vermont. The idyllic town of 20,000 people was a perfect setting to raise children, but worlds away from the life he had known. Yet the warm, measured man was well-versed in thinking a situation through to its conclusion, and was rarely rattled by change. "He was a pillar of calm when it came to adjusting and improvising," Debbie recalls. "We saw that, sometimes in life, you have to just go with decisions you've made and figure out how to make it work, not expending valuable energy and peace of mind on looking back or having regrets. He made the decision for his family and was committed to seeing it through."

Now a partner at KPMG LLP, Debbie has come a long way from the quaint fields of Vermont, and her ability to create options and make decisions has forged a measured, certain,

steady course toward fulfillment. Key decision points shine like bright stars in her personal history, connected by straight courses that yield a lifetime as brilliant as a constellation. "My mother would always say that I was born grown up, and it was only a matter of time," Debbie laughs. "That may be partly true, but I know that who I am and where I've landed is the thoughtful summation of everyone around me—of a lifelong interest in understanding and making the most of my place in the world."



Like the world, KPMG is a big place, with over 145,000 professionals operating worldwide in 152 countries. In the U.S., the firm employs 23,000 individuals, yet within that enterprise of bustling people and projects, KPMG carves out small offices where employees can connect with others, understand their role, and make a difference. "It supports a certain sense of autonomy and entrepreneurship that's different from other firms," Debbie says.

"When I started in the firm's audit department 28 years ago, John Veihmeyer was an audit partner in charge of recruiting. Diversity, fairness, and happiness were priorities within the company culture he espoused then, and now that he's KPMG's Chairman, those commitments have only grown deeper. It's not only a place where you can have a career while building a family—more so, it is a family. My office is a group of people with genuine friendships that transcend the walls of the building. Through the daily grind, through weekend outings, through births and deaths and wins and losses, we're family."

These familial bonds were forged through the firm's ups and downs over the years. In 2005, the Department of Justice raised some concerns based on the firm's marketing of suspect tax shelters. The firm paid a fee for penalties in exchange for a deferred prosecution agreement,

and agreed to help with the Department of Justice's investigation. "It was a time when everybody sat back and asked themselves if they wanted to stay—if KPMG was the right firm for them," Debbie remembers. "I had a lot invested in the firm. I had job offers from everywhere and could have done left. But I also had a lot of faith in the people and management who were still here."

She sought her father's advice, and he asked if KPMG had always supported her. When Debbie realized that the answer was yes, she decided to stick with the firm. "My dad was confident we were going to come out better on the other side, and he was right," she reflects. "In the end, we were left with a group of people who really wanted to be there—people who could have gone anywhere, but chose to stay. Deciding I was in it for the long haul was a defining moment for me, a moment where I resolved that being a partner meant something to me." In the end, the case was dismissed, and Debbie was able to work directly to rebuild the firm into something for others. "True fulfillment for me is building something and creating a place where everybody can be successful," she says. "I get a lot of satisfaction from identifying problems, fixing them, and watching those changes make a difference."

This idea of fulfillment was cultivated in Debbie through a peaceful, nurturing childhood, characterized by a mix of stability and stimulation that proved ideal for self discovery. Born in South Bend, Indiana, while her father was finishing his undergraduate degree at Notre Dame, she moved with her family to DC while he earned his law degree from Georgetown University and worked at the Pentagon. The unrest in the city during the late 1960s prompted the move to Vermont, where her father hung a shingle and practiced law in a more low-key environment. Debbie's mother got a job as a school teacher of humanities and social studies, and the family would meet at home for lunch during the day. "It was a time when you only needed four digits to dial a phone number because everyone's first three digits were the same," Debbie laughs. "I would hop on my bike and be gone for the day, and nobody would worry. There was a firehouse with a whistle that went off at ten of nine each evening, which was every kid's cue that it was time to head home. It was a very free-flowing and safe place to grow up."

Debbie and her younger sister attended

grammar, junior high, and high school in a quaint brick building adorned in green ivy. She was always very school-oriented, but found time to play tennis, join the Majorettes, practice flute, and hike and play outside. Though she was always a team player, Debbie gravitated toward individual sports, most driven by situations where she was dependent wholly upon her own success or failure. She always envisioned herself becoming a professional later in life, to such an extent that her Christmas gift in third grade was a three-piece wool suit hand-sewn by her mother.

Religion and politics were not typically discussed openly, and when they were, Debbie learned that it was best to listen. "No one ever wanted to offend anybody," she recalls. "It taught me a lot of tolerance, starting with the premise that it's important to listen and think about what you're going to say because some things are personal. We learned to accept rather than judge, which was particularly interesting because Vermont was one of the most homogenous states in the union at that time. You might think such a lack of diversity would have resulted in a lot of fear and apprehension, but for me, it was just the opposite. We weren't confronted with stereotypes on the news, or other things that might skew our first impressions toward negativity. I really grew up with a blank slate, ready to accept anyone for who they were."

Certainly, this open-mindedness was the result of how others treated Debbie—with a kindness and support that empowered her to define herself proactively, rather than reactively. This climate was reinforced by the close group of friends she spent her formative years with, who still remain among her best friends today. In high school, Debbie was voted "Most Likely to Succeed" and finished second in her class academically, missing the top ranking by the narrowest margin. When she was given an aptitude test to help with future career decisions, her results revealed that the left and right sides of her brain were equally matched. "The woman looked at my charts and said she didn't know what to tell me, because my aptitude was even," Debbie recalls. "She said I could be anything I wanted when I grew up."

When it came time for Debbie to think about college, it was custom for students to apply to only a few schools, given the cumbersome nature of the application process. Ready to explore

the world beyond Rutland, she applied to the University of Vermont (UVM), Mount Holyoke College, and Georgetown University's School of Business. She was admitted to all three, and her parents pushed for UVM, which awarded her a full-ride scholarship. Still, Debbie felt drawn south. "I knew that if I ended up in Georgetown, I'd have many paths forward," she says. "I could pursue law school, medical school, government work, accounting, or anything else. Though it was more expensive, and my parents made it clear that I'd have to help cover the cost, it felt like the more practical decision, yielding a degree that would allow me to support myself, make a good living, and have fun in the process. I knew it would be a good foundation for anything."

Debbie still remembers her father's parting words when they dropped her off at school. "If you get your debits and credits right, you'll be all set," he had said jokingly. Interested in numbers and the mental gymnastics of organizing them into context for reconciling and reporting, she chose to major in accounting. That trajectory felt like a narrow runway, with her classes keenly focused on skill building, so to balance out her studies, she decided to double-major in Sociology. "I loved classes on how people interact and how societies jell," she recalls. "The two majors combined to give me a world view wherein there are certain number things that have an answer, and certain human things that don't have an answer, so you need to observe and figure out how to respond in a way that's constructive and not destructive. Both skills have proved pivotal at KPMG, allowing me to instinctively assess situations and how people are engaging and where I fit in. Sociology allows you to look at why and how, piecing together a situation to give you a bigger perspective than the numbers on paper."

Debbie helped pay her way through college with work study jobs, the first of which was an application review position at the prestigious Appellate Litigation Clinic at Georgetown Law School. Tasked with weeding out the most promising applicants from the pool of highly qualified candidates from around the world, it was an eye-opening look behind the scenes at how the world really functions. Then, when a transvestite prostitute came in for pro bono assistance, she knew she wasn't in Kansas anymore. She did some accounting work for a modeling agency, and also had a stint with a

government agency intent upon spending its annual budget so it could receive its full appropriation the following year.

"A lot of the jobs I had through school were reality checks," she remembers. "They were great learning experiences and important windows into how things operate." Another notable reality check came when her parents decided to get divorced. It wasn't the expected next installment in Debbie's idyllic coming of age, but true to form, the family adapted with grace. Her mother, who had been promoted to school principal, went on to a successful career as Superintendent of a New York school system. Her father remarried and later moved to Georgia on a whim, keeping a small lake house in Upstate New York where Debbie and her family spend a few weeks every summer.

Through working hard, being responsible, and remaining tolerant of others, Debbie finished Georgetown with job offers from each of the Big 8 accounting firms at the time. She felt one firm was too traditional for her, while another didn't have enough diversity in its client base. She had a reason for everything, but her choice ultimately came down to the feel. "At some point, you just connect," she remarks. "I really clicked with the people I met at KPMG."

Debbie started in audit as a staff accountant in 1988, where she worked in real estate and came to realize that her clients cared more about taxes than they did about audited financial statements. This prompted her to transition to the tax group in an operating office, where she worked until 1996 on compliance and reporting. At that point she moved into the national tax group on a temporary assignment. "It's kind of like the crown jewel of the firm," she explains. "It's a group of people—KPMG associates, as well as attorneys and folks from government—who operate like a think tank to solve complex tax problems. It's the best kind of job you could ask for, with terrific clients, challenging assignments, and incredible colleagues that foster a tremendous sense of camaraderie in an exciting environment."

Debbie did exceptionally well in the group and was offered a permanent position there. She only had a CPA degree, while most of her colleagues were lawyers, but she was recognized as a diamond in the rough. Thanks to her ability to make vital contributions, balance personalities, and help others succeed, she became a partner, and

today, she's the Partner-in-Charge of the Pass-through Group for KPMG's Washington National Tax Practice. With only 25 people in her group, she doesn't have to manage by the numbers, but instead remains deeply engaged with her colleagues face-to-face. "I get to work with numbers, but there's a lot of reading and writing as well," she details. "There's a lot of policy and theory. I get to analyze and draw conclusions and put that work into a context that others can benefit from. It's a little bit of everything, which keeps me energized and utilizing all of my talents. I think I ended up right where I'm supposed to be."

The same is true of her family life. Debbie was hired at KPMG by Brian Fields, who was known for identifying and hiring strong, intelligent, successful women that went on to partner in the firm. He left KPMG in 1990 to become the CFO of CarrAmerica, and amidst the transition, he and Debbie began dating. They married in 1997, and when Debbie gave birth to twins in 2002, he was ready for a career change. "As the CFO of a publicly traded real estate company, he felt like he had done everything he wanted to do, career-wise," Debbie says. "We decided to try life with him as a stay-at-home dad, and it worked perfectly for us. Our kids are our pride and joy, and the fact that he's able to be there for them through their childhoods has been incredible."

As Debbie ascended at KPMG, Brian coached hockey for his kids' teams, allowing them to pursue their interests with a freedom and support similar to Debbie's own upbringing. Now Rachel and Michael are almost 14, while their youngest, Abby, is eight. "Whether at KPMG or at home, I've always known Brian to create great team environments," Debbie affirms. "He's remarkably supportive, and once he made the decision to stay home, he hasn't looked back. Neither of us sees our current role as a sacrifice. Rather, it's a collaboration, and there's support and gratitude on both sides of the equation."

In advising young people entering the workforce today, Debbie refers to lessons learned in a KPMG leadership development program she was tapped to join called the Chairman's 25. It's a two-year personal and professional development opportunity extended to 25 employees expected to hold future leadership roles within the firm, wherein participants are brought together for retreats every couple months. "It's a time to reflect

on our own management style, strengths, and weaknesses," she explains. "We also study the world outside the walls of KPMG, reflecting on who we are, who we've become, and how that fits in to the future of the firm. It's fosters the kind of thinking that brings down walls and bridges rifts. Now, when I think of what advice to give the younger generation, I'd say, find out what it is that makes you tick. What kind of goal are you willing to work hard for? What makes you feel fulfilled? Having that self-knowledge will be key in finding a work mission and environment that fits you well."

Debbie's own definition of fulfillment can be summed up by the contents of an old shoebox she keeps at home. Inside is a stack of personal notes from friends, coworkers, Brian, and the kids, validating her efforts and detailing the evolution of relationships and circumstances over time. The messy crayon scrawling on Mother's Day cards from when her children were little have given way to cards with more sophisticated doodles. She recalls warmly a note from a Boston partner who took a moment to remark on the fantastic group she had built. "When I think about the little times when someone took two minutes to say, 'you did it, and you did it right,' I'm truly touched," she says. "It's something I try to do for others, like writing a letter to congratulate a new partner, or slipping a note in my daughter's lunchbox in the morning just to let her know I'm thinking about her. Like me, she saves those notes."

The notes act as signposts, letting Debbie know that the course she's charted through life has benefitted the others who've been along for the ride at various points in time. They are small ethnographical studies of the choices she's made, reflecting back her identity in countless kind words memorialized in the handwriting of the people that love her. "Life is like a river," she says. "Within the parameters of the banks, you make choices. Sometimes the current is strong, and you have to go with the flow. You have faith, make choices, take a few leaps, and in the end, things work out."

© November 2016 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– 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](#).

