

Brenda C. Harrington

In Your Own Voice

I don't know if I should be here. The feeling of doubt plagued Brenda Harrington as she sat nervously in Dr. Olsen's class waiting to receive her exam score. It was a course taken to test the waters before fully enrolling in Virginia Tech's Master's in Business program, which Brenda would be footing on her own dime. Against the warnings of the Dean's office, she had enrolled in one of the hardest core classes, wanting to make the most of her time and resources.

The professor was renowned both as a leading consultant in the hospitality industry, and for his intensely rigorous teaching style. "I appreciated that it was challenging, but I had no idea what I was getting myself into," Brenda recounts today. "I remember preparing for the midterm, studying nonstop, but still feeling uncertain."

That day, as Dr. Olsen returned the midterms, he explained his grading methodology and told the students that he always included one curveball question on his exams. Then he announced the name of the person who had given the best answer to that question, and it was Brenda. "I was shocked," she says. "I didn't hear anything else the rest of the class. For me, that was a pretty significant breakthrough. It was the moment I realized that yes, I could do it. And yes, I belonged in that classroom."

By that time, Brenda had been out of college and working for about twenty years, and had made a name for herself as an independent broker of employee relocation, destination, and real estate services. Several years earlier, she had made the decision to discontinue her corporate career and chart her own course. "I worked for two Fortune 10 corporations," she says. "In both cases, it was clear that the people who were most successful were the ones who primarily defined themselves by whatever title was printed on their

business card." She had enrolled in Virginia Tech to learn, but soon saw the same trends among her classmates. She had begun to question whether it was the right place for her, but her success with the midterm, and in Dr. Olsen's class overall, significantly influenced her decision to proceed and ultimately graduate from the program.

Brenda's first priority is, and has always been, to be her own person. Through her early professional experiences as a college student maintaining an ongoing seasonal coop with IBM in

White Plains and Armonk, New York, while home during summer and winter breaks, and later during her first post-graduate professional experiences at Mobil Oil Corporation and AT&T, she realized it would be necessary for her to develop and master a different persona if she was to be successful, or even survive in corporate life. "For me, it would have been like putting on a costume and never taking it off," she explains. "I was never interested in

being anyone other than who I was. People would often comment on my 'presence,' and although it took me years to understand what that really meant, I knew it was something I did not want to compromise. My preference has always been toward individuality, and perhaps freedom of expression and thought."

Freedom of thought and independence have been at the foundation of Brenda's life philosophy since she was a young girl, and she still remembers one of the first times her independence was reflected in an important decision about her future. "My family moved from Mt. Vernon to White Plains, NY, when I was twelve years old to be closer to my father's job, and for a better quality of life," she recounts. "Although I made new friends, I missed the camaraderie that existed with the friends I grew up with in my old neighborhood." For Brenda, high school was now



something less to experience and more to get through. At the end of her sophomore year, she realized that she would be able to complete senior year requirements as a junior and graduate one year early. In June of 1975, she graduated from Woodlands High School at the age of sixteen and entered Adelphi University that fall as a freshman and a member of the Class of 1979.

This would be one of many decisions Brenda would make based first on what she felt was best for her. She developed confidence in her own judgement, accompanied by a willingness to weather the storm in the event that things may not always go according to plan. Years later, after being relocated to Northern Virginia by AT&T, Brenda had the good fortune of being eligible for a lucrative separation package from the company. Having determined that corporate life was not the life she envisioned for herself, she decided to accept the package to make space in her life for what would be next. Her decision to leave the company coincided with her acceptance of a marriage proposal from Jim Harrington, now her husband of over thirty years, and illustrates how her approach to making decisions has always represented the inverse relationship between what she wants and what she doesn't want. "I don't always know where I'm headed, but I am usually pretty clear about what I don't want and where I don't want to be," she says. "Distancing myself from what I don't want enables me to make space for, and direct my resources toward attracting, opportunities that align with my values and interests." As she turned the page to begin her next chapter, she held those interests and values close to inform her next steps.

Another momentous event that coincided with Brenda's departure from AT&T was the announcement by Mobil Oil Corporation of the relocation of their New York headquarters to Fairfax, Virginia. A number of Brenda's former Mobil colleagues considering the move contacted her to inquire about life in Fairfax. A native New Yorker who had made the move herself during her tenure at AT&T, she knew all too well the differences in lifestyle these individuals would confront.

Along the way, Brenda had obtained a real estate license with an intention of using it personally to purchase and sell investment property. Although she had not considered real estate as a profession, Brenda recognized the Mobil

group move as a unique opportunity to use the license as a gateway for leveraging her experiences. "I knew firsthand that having a new address was the easy part of relocating," she explains. "The hard part was being able to recreate life in an environment that is 180-degrees different in every way from the place you called home." For Brenda, the Mobil move marked the beginning of her professional journey in the employee relocation industry, and represented everything that was meaningful to her. She knew that if she did it right, she would be able to define success on her own terms.

As word began spreading about the boutique, high-touch services offered by Brenda and her team, she began to receive countless referrals from employees impacted by the Mobil move, culminating in a continuous flow of clients who sought her holistic approach to helping families settle into their new location. "For the clients I worked with, the experience went way beyond finding a house; it was about how to make the new location feel like home," she says. As part of her commitment to the work, to increase her profile in the industry and to have greater control, Brenda earned her real estate broker's license and the Certified Relocation Professional (CRP) designation from the Worldwide Employee Relocation Council. She continues to maintain both of these credentials today. For more than ten years, she worked with executives from a variety of companies impacted by domestic and international relocation to and from the VA/MD/DC region, helping them and their families recreate life in their new location.

As the Internet took hold, and email and the establishment of websites became critical success factors in business, Brenda began exploring partnerships with larger entities in order to keep pace and gain access to opportunities emerging from the impact of technology. She began working more closely with third party relocation and asset management companies to increase her exposure and broaden her experience. At about the same time, a recently established relocation management company was in need of a Principal Broker to facilitate their registration as a real estate firm, and to allow them to participate in real estate-related aspects of employee relocation policy. Brenda became the first Principal Broker for Capital Relocation Services (today known as CapRelo), a subsidiary of JK Moving & Storage. It

was there that she got involved with relocation policy development and implementation, working with many of the firm's key clients, including Sallie Mae, Friedman Billings & Ramsey, XM Satellite Radio, and Fila USA.

As the saying goes, life happens when you are making other plans. The events of September 11, 2001 had an immediate and profound impact on activity in the relocation industry. In the midst of great uncertainty, it was clear that things would never be the same, but there was less clarity around when and how the industry might find its way to a new normal. In 2002, Brenda was offered an opportunity to work on a project for a boutique property management and consulting firm to help them refine their business development practices. Beyond the real estate connection, this was somewhat outside of her wheelhouse, but it seemed like it could be an opportunity to gain worthwhile experience. Brenda joined Legum & Norman in 2002, for what she expected to be an 18 to 24 month engagement. The company was extensively involved with the development of new communities and mixed use developments throughout the Mid-Atlantic area. As real estate development increased, Brenda's responsibilities began to evolve. She was promoted to Senior Vice President of the Consulting Division, overseeing the company's work on projects such as National Harbor, City Center, and Midtown at Reston Town Center. "We partnered with developers like The Peterson Company, Kettler, and Hines to help them prepare for public offering," Brenda explains. "There were many months when I spent as much time in a hard hat as I did in heels—it was lots of fun! But as great a job as it was, I knew it was not what I wanted for myself long-term."

Brenda began a period of deep reflection to develop her "what's next" strategy, turning once again to focus on the things most meaningful to her. It came down to when she was able to connect with people, to help influence a shift that enabled others to think independently, with greater confidence and improved ability to manage and control their own outcomes. This punctuated much of the work she had done in relocation and was becoming more of a necessity in her current role. As development activity began to wane, the impact of residual stress was taking a personal toll on her staff. Benefiting from coaching herself, Brenda was able to successfully coach and develop two of her team members through many of the

professional challenges they were facing. This competency would become even more critical to her success than she could have imagined.

In 2008, the Company announced its acquisition by a larger firm. Brenda was asked to assume the role of Executive Vice President and to be part of the leadership team that would handle post-acquisition integration. She stepped into the role in January of 2009, but maintained firm resolve to continue development of her exit/transition plan. "Although it was a big step sideways, I gained invaluable experience in that role," she affirms.

Brenda's competency with coaching and development became increasingly relevant as she worked daily to help executives committed to two distinctly different corporate cultures to collaborate toward common objectives. And through it all, she never lost sight of her plan. She recalled with fond memories the work she had done in the past when in relocation. While it was something she had actively been away from for some time, she maintained her connection to the industry and a number of her former colleagues. It was rare for more than a few months to pass without her being contacted about a project, and in some cases a job. But her heart was not in starting over with another organization. "It is really important for me to be able to speak for myself and maintain the integrity of my values. This is not always possible as an employee, especially at higher organizational levels," she says. "I was clear about the fact that it was time to reestablish myself as an independent consultant, focusing once again on the areas where I excelled and the things I liked doing most."

In her role as EVP, ambassador, peacemaker, and sometimes magician, Brenda was becoming increasingly conversant in many aspects of coaching and human capital management. The impact of the company's acquisition on her staff and on her had resulted in a reliance on a variety of resources needed to succeed in the new environment. These experiences increased Brenda's awareness of training and certification programs for leadership coaching and other human capital management tools. She developed clarity around the type of work she wanted to focus on, but it meant she would need to invest in the proper training and preparation.

Brenda applied to, and was accepted to the Georgetown University Leadership Coaching

program, the first step toward her new beginning. Concurrently, she began putting the wheels in motion to create a consultancy that would focus on leadership and professional development. She wanted to help people have more rewarding professional experiences that would in turn produce greater operational results toward the strategic focus of their work. What would come to light next was not something she could have imagined or planned.

When Brenda stepped away from the mobility industry, relocation assignments and transfers were predominantly focused on the business purpose. Beyond a person's professional qualifications, few companies considered the impact of relocation on an employee and his or her family. With the sharp increase in globalization during the early 2000's, having an international presence had become a critical success factor for companies in many business sectors to be competitive. The requirement for employees to accept international assignments had become commonplace, but many individuals considered to be professionally qualified were not adequately prepared to perform successfully outside of their home environment. This lack of preparation and readiness had begun to result in relocation assignment failures that led to losses in the millions of dollars for corporations, and the end of distinguished careers for otherwise revered executives and business professionals.

It was apparent that conversations about mobility and relocation were maturing. There was no longer a sole focus on the business objective. Companies were now beginning to evaluate an employee's readiness for an assignment based on a broader range of criteria, in many cases relying on coaching, assessments, and similar human capital management tools used for other forms of professional development. Brenda saw this evolved landscape as a way to reconnect with the industry she treasured in a different capacity, providing services similar to those she once offered, but with greater complexity and at a higher level.

In 2011, Brenda launched Adaptive Leadership Strategies, LLC, a leadership and professional development practice that focuses on occupational transitions. An area of specialization for the firm is Global Talent Mobility, working with organizations and their employees being impacted by mobility assignments to help them

achieve success at the organizational and individual level. Brenda and other members of her team are certified by the Thunderbird School of Global Management as Global Mindset Inventory facilitators. Research reflects that having a global mindset is a determinant in a person's success when exercising influence across cultures and with people different from themselves. It is especially critical to a person's capacity to navigate an international assignment. Interviews with Brenda on the topic of relocation have been featured in *The New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, and *CNN Money Magazine*.

Brenda has the distinction of having experience with relocation and mobility, as well as formal training and experience as an executive coach delivering leadership and professional development programs. Clients she has worked with include teams and individuals classified as leaders, key employees, and high potential employees within multinational firms, nonprofit organizations, and government.

Outside of her practice, Brenda is a Moderator in the Corporate Learning division of Harvard Business School Publishing (HBP), where she delivers virtual leadership development programs for companies that engage HBP to provide leadership training. "This was not something that was on my radar," she says. "There is no way that it could have been. But it is one example of what can happen when you allow yourself to be who you are, to speak in your own voice."

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