

# Lee Self

## A Transformative Faith

Before 2000, Lee Self was a VP with Bell Atlantic, now Verizon. Her workload was intense, and her schedule was exhausting; she was constantly hopping between New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and her home base in Virginia. Her young children were five and ten years old, and spending time with them was becoming more and more difficult as she rose up the corporate ladder. Then one evening in New York, Lee finally reached the end of her rope. "I was at a meeting that went late," she recalls. "Then when it was over, my boss said we had to have another meeting. It was just brutal."

The second meeting wasn't productive, and didn't accomplish much other than delaying Lee's return trip to DC. "My boss was just a bulldog," she says. "He was a great guy, and I learned a lot from him, but when he got focused on an issue, he wouldn't let go. Sitting there, knowing I needed to get home to my kids, I became livid."

Lee didn't quit her job that day, but in retrospect, she pegs that moment as a defining one that put her career on a different course. She left the meeting upset and remembers calling her sister in tears. "I just said, 'this is NOT a good use of my time!'" Lee recounts. "It was the end of my career with Bell Atlantic. In the weeks and months that followed, God spoke to me. At the time, I was all about me—where I was going, what I was doing. And then I remember very distinctly, sitting at my desk and hearing God say to me, 'It is not about you.' His voice was transformative, and I left to be accessible to my family. I had no idea what I would do next, but I was done. Done with playing the game. Done with moving up the ladder."

Following her faith, Lee took an unlikely path forward. After a stint working remotely for a web hosting business in Atlanta, she happened to hear about franchising from her financial advisor. "I found out that his firm was actually a franchise,

and he described what it takes to get his business up and running," she says. "I didn't feel like I had the patience for that, but he encouraged me to talk to a franchise coach."

Today, Lee is the founder and President of four successful Northern Virginia Renaissance Executive Forums, a national franchise business with around fifty chapters across the country. "For each Executive Forum, we bring together 10 to 12 business owners, CEOs, and Presidents from similarly-sized companies," she says. "They're not competitive because the groups are confidential. We come together monthly for a half-day, and I facilitate a discussion that helps them learn from each other. We also bring in thought leaders on leadership and business issues that are important to our members. It's very interactive and experiential, and the results can be transformative for both the members, as well as their businesses."

Lee personally runs two CEO Executive Forums and presides over two Key Executive Forums facilitated by colleagues to serve COOs, CFOs, and VP-level executives. "My colleagues do their own work in leadership development and management training," she explains. "They're both experts in executive coaching, so I benefit greatly from them. We worked on building those groups together, but a lot of the early members of the Key Executive Forums came from the CEO Forum members."

Lee feels the franchise arrangement is beneficial for all parties involved. She can run her chapter independently, but she's grateful for the community of practice Renaissance provides. She feels certain she never would've made the initial push to create her own forums without the guidance of the national organization. The national organization provided sales training when she was recruiting her first group members, facilitation training when she was holding her first meetings, and still provides materials for the group's annual



two-day retreat—Strategies for Success. “It’s a venue for getting together annually where we really dig into what’s changed, and what needs to change both personally and professionally,” she explains. “Renaissance puts together the retreat curriculum based on current leadership and business works. I learn it and then deliver it in an environment where my members can learn from each other. I would never have done all this if I’d had to make it all up from scratch.”

Despite the guidance, getting her groups up and running was hardly smooth sailing. For one thing, Lee’s only past sales experience was selling Girl Scout Cookies. “At first, I wasn’t as good at recruiting members,” she says. “But it was a lot of fun meeting with business owners and hearing their stories. I made up for the skills I lacked by doing more, working really hard to create two groups that first year.”

Lee expanded to three groups after a few years, but later combined two of the groups when her husband, Mid, lost his battle with cancer. During that time, Lee struggled to balance her personal loss and professional responsibilities. Her faith, combined with the personal fulfillment she found in her work, helped her keep going. Now, Lee is glad she only runs two groups, which allows time for her participation in a number of faith-based service opportunities.

Lee loves working with her groups because the benefits are tangible, making a marked imprint in the world that is up close and personal. She remembers one group member agonizing for months over letting go of a leader who had been with his firm for over twenty years, but was not able to take the organization to the next level. After months of discussion, he finally took action. While the decision was painful, it was ultimately good for both parties. “Then about six months later, I met with another Forum member, who announced he had let his VP go. I said, ‘wow, that was quick!’ And he said, ‘Oh yeah, I wasn’t about to let that happen to me!’, referring to the other member’s experience. I realized the members pick up on things that aren’t currently their issue. While it wasn’t a problem he brought to the group, he had been able to learn from someone else’s experience in a way that served him well when his own time came.”

Lee’s Executive Forums provide a space for leaders to learn from each other, listen to new ideas, bounce problems off one another, and

receive some much-needed support. She remembers another member who used the group to work through his retirement and succession process, striving to ensure his departure was properly managed. “He decided he was leaving in three years,” Lee says. “He had a long way to go to make it happen, but he went ahead and announced it. Every month we would work through it with him. What’s the next step? You need a board of advisors. You need a leadership team. Wouldn’t you know it, three years later, he met his goal and promoted one of his leaders to fill his shoes. His successor is now a Forum member and continues to learn from the group. It’s a great example of how using the Executive Forum to hold yourself accountable can help you make changes you’re committed to.”

Lee has certainly seen her share of change. She grew up in the tiny town of McCormick, South Carolina, on the Savannah River, with her parents and four older siblings. “We had one traffic light at the time,” she laughs. “Now we have two!” Her father worked over at the textile mill, but would have preferred farming. “He realized he wasn’t going to feed five children doing that,” she says. “So farming was relegated to a hobby, and we had cows, chickens, pigs, and horses.”

Lee’s parents met teaching high school, but neither one of them stayed in the field long. When Lee’s oldest sister was born, her mother left teaching to stay home and raise the kids. Three more daughters and one son later, her mother decided to go back to work when Lee entered first grade—an unusual move for women in that area at that time. She took a job as the County Extension Agent and advanced to become the first woman in the state of South Carolina to serve as the County Extension Leader. “She was very unique in our town because she worked in a professional role,” Lee remembers.

Although both worked hard, Lee’s parents were different in some ways. While her mother was high-energy and emotional, her father was steady and quiet. She was close with both, but considered her father to be her hero. “He wasn’t trying to impress anybody,” she says. “He always tried to do the right thing, and he was dedicated to his family. He loved us and was always joking around with us. He didn’t talk a lot, but when he said something, it mattered.”

Lee’s mother always stressed the importance of faith—something Lee values highly

today. She remembers, at the age of seven, when she first heard the Bible verse John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life." She was too young to fully comprehend the meaning, but she knew it was important. "I remember very clearly talking to my sister about it," she says. "I sat right there and prayed to God, and told Him I believed in Jesus. That experience was an important beginning in my relationship with God. I didn't know at the time the impact that would have, but in hindsight, it was like putting an anchor down in my life." Today, she still treasures the Bible her parents received at their wedding.

The whole family attended church on Sunday mornings, and as Lee got older, she was active in the church youth group. She also sang in the choir, participated in Girl Scouts, went to camp, and joined the 4-H Club led by her mother. She was editor of her high school yearbook, a cheerleader, and a member of the basketball and softball teams. "My siblings and I were all pretty involved in whatever was happening," she says. "It was just a part of life growing up in a small school and a small town." She also spent plenty of time at Clemson football games, cheering on her father's alma mater.

Chores were also a big part of life in Lee's family. As a young child, she often felt grateful she hadn't been born a boy, since her brother got the worst of the farm duties. Her older sisters ran the household for years, but by the time Lee was 14, all her older siblings had moved out, so much of the housework fell to her. "By the time I was in high school, I was buying all the groceries, washing clothes, ironing my father's shirts, and cooking meals," she says. "That is, if you could call them meals. I didn't really enjoy any of it, but it wasn't optional. Both my parents were working hard, and they'd gotten accustomed to their other children helping out, so it all fell to me."

In high school, her best friend's father was President of the local bank, and he hired the two girls as tellers during the summer. When she wasn't busy with work, chores, school, and her many extracurricular activities, Lee spent time with her high school sweetheart, William Middleton Self III, or "Mid" for short, who went on to become her husband. Mid was a year older and went off to college at Washington & Lee in Lexington, Virginia. Lee's brother had gone to

Clemson, and her three sisters had all attended the University of Georgia, but Lee was determined to go to school near Mid. "My parents were always adamant that all five of us were going to college," Lee remembers. "And we didn't have to pay a penny ourselves. They didn't make a lot of money, but they put it all aside for our college since it was a huge priority for them. That's no small feat."

Lee settled on UVa as her college choice, and although her out-of-state tuition was far higher than her siblings' had been, her parents agreed. She and Mid spent every weekend together, alternating between Lexington and Charlottesville. Her friends partied hard, and they both joined in, but Lee always prioritized her schoolwork. "I was very driven, both in high school and in college," she says. "I had to get that A."

Mid graduated in 1983, and when Lee graduated in 1984, the two married and decided to move to the D.C. area for the career opportunities. Mid was an engineer and quickly found work with the government. Lee's first job was with the McDonald's Corporation's accounting center in Fairfax, Virginia, but after three months, she landed a more dynamic job with Bell Atlantic.

Years went by, and Lee rapidly rose through the ranks at work, but cracks began to appear in her marriage at home. While faith had always been central to Lee's life, Mid did not share that commitment. Her relationship to God took a backseat for a while, and even when she began attending church regularly again when their daughter was born, her day-to-day concerns took priority. Finally, in 2005, she had an experience which transformed her life, her faith, and ultimately her marriage. "I was invited to the High Tech Prayer Breakfast," she recalls. "My life, and my marriage in particular, was a wreck."

Adolph Coors IV, the heir to the Coors fortune, was speaking that day, and the story he told resonated deeply with Lee. "He talked about how, even though he had been groomed to take over the Coors Empire, his life was empty," she recounts. "His marriage was in deep trouble. And he said that God used that to reorder his priorities, teaching him to put God first and his wife second. And it really hit me—I knew that was what I had to do. I left that day and put God first."

Lee started reading the Bible, which she had not done with any intensity before. She also joined a Working Women's Bible study, where she

found the support of a group of inspiring and committed women. "I learned that I had to pray for my husband—not for me, but for him," she says. "That was a big shift."

Then finally, after years of denial, she was able to come to terms with a hard truth. "I finally admitted that Mid was an alcoholic," she says. "He was so much more than that too, and I loved him deeply, so I couldn't believe it could possibly be true. For 25 years I denied that it was a problem. He and I both loved each other, and there was always loyalty and commitment, but when I went to that breakfast, I was holding on to my marriage for dear life."

Lee joined Al-Anon, a twelve-step program for families and loved ones of alcoholics, which provided the support she needed to make some necessary changes. "That's where God really humbled me," she says. "I had never been honest with myself or anybody else about what was really going on. But there, you have to be honest. I don't know what would have happened if I had never turned back to the Lord and started going to Al-Anon, but it wouldn't have been good. Ultimately, Mid found the end of his rope too, and got sober. I'm not saying that what I did directly caused him to stop drinking, because he found his own path. But I got out of God's way, and Mid also turned his life over to God. So there you go. I had been sure all hope was lost, but God transformed."

Mid lived only a few more years before dying of cancer, but Lee is so thankful for the healing process they were able to go through together, and for the years of peace and happiness their shared faith afforded them at the end. "When he died, it was hard, hard, hard," she admits. "But how grateful I was, that I didn't lose him – I know where he is! Now, I'm able to help others by sharing that story. It's hard to tell, but it's redemptive and powerful. It's a story of humility because we don't have all the answers, but a story

of hope because we're willing to learn and change."

To young people entering the working world today, Lee advises that same humility, hope, and openness. "When you're young, you try to map out the next ten to fifteen years, as I did," she says. "But things don't go as planned anyway, so recognize that all you have in front of you is that next decision you need to make. Try to make the best decision you can at the time. You'll have a chance to make other decisions, so just learn from it and do your best."

At its essence, it's the same kind of thoughtful, patient transformation that Renaissance Executive Forums is all about. "I love doing what I do for my members," she says. "When we're all together, members get epiphanies from each other, or from themselves, and I see how they put them to work changing their businesses and their lives. I love connecting people and seeing something meaningful happen as a result. I love seeing somebody transform right before my eyes."

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