

Meena Krishnan

Life is Short, Create Your Legacy

When Meena Krishnan tells her story, two words stand out: homage and legacy. Her company, Inoventures, which made the *Inc.500* list of Top Ten Women-Led Businesses two years in a row, began as an homage of sorts, and she runs it with legacy in mind.

"At Wharton Business School, we all did an unique exercise where they said you have to summarize your life story in six words—that's all we'll give you! I came up with, 'Life is Short; Create Your Legacy.' I believe it certainly communicates the purpose behind my life. What legacy am I going to leave after my time?"

The complementary spirits of homage and legacy meet in the statue of the Hindu God Ganesha, which Meena chooses as her totem object.

"My mother used to travel to different countries and she came back with memorabilia for me and my daughters. One year, she brought a beautiful statue of Lord Ganesha from India, and she said, 'Meena this is very beautiful, why don't you just keep it on your desk?'"

To this day, Meena has the small statue on her desk at work. According to Hindu theology, He is the Lord of beginnings and the remover of obstacles; His blessing is entreated at the start of journeys, projects, and business ventures. Ganesha is known to protect followers from arrogance, ignorance, and the illusory nature of the world, all of which have the potential to entangle a person and derail her endeavors.

Meena says, "After my mother passed away this became very special to me."

This unique statue on Meena's desk is designed to reflect the shape of the Sanskrit word 'Ohm,' which is reckoned as the sound created by the big bang that initiated existence. "It's a micro and a macro concept all in one, so it is absolutely powerful," Meena acknowledges. "Every time I look at it, I think of what my mother stood for."

Tradition holds that Ganesha should be

the first deity worshippers acknowledge when they enter a temple to pay homage, and what Meena calls her crucible story involves just such a visit by her mother and her brother in the summer of 2006.

Meena's brother and his family lived in nearby Burke, Virginia, and since he was her only sibling, the two families enjoyed a close relationship. "We had lost our father," Meena explains, "That was a huge loss for our family as he was the rock that held us all together." Dealing with that loss together as a family made their bond even closer.

In the summer of 2006, Meena's brother got a promotion, and his daughter was awarded a scholarship to study at Washington University in St. Louis; having reached that highpoint after a difficult period, he felt moved to return to his homeland and pay homage to the forces that govern such recoveries by visiting a Hindu temple.

Being a devoted son and father, he decided to take his mother and his daughters with him. On the eve of that journey, he visited Meena at her home in McLean, and she bid the travellers bon voyage with the light-hearted gift of little fans to dispel the heat of the summer in India. Two days after the travellers landed safely in New Delhi, on her birthday early in the morning, Meena received a phone call from India. She thought it was her mother calling her to wish birthday greetings.

"Instead, someone on the other end told me my whole family except for my sister-in-law had died in a car accident while on their way to the temple. Their van driver fell asleep and hit a truck head-on. In that second, I lost everyone. That second challenged all the strength, love, and values I had accumulated in my life. That second shook my core faith. That second again and again told me that I had become an orphan. It was a very difficult time in my life", says Meena.



"After many months of self-reflection, I understood that my entire family may have gone, but I was still around. I had to leave a legacy for them. Change is the only constant and facing it head on was the only option. I had to pick myself up and move on. I had learned that life is short, and to leave a mark I couldn't indulge in negativity nor could I wait another day. I decided that as long as I live on this earth, my purpose would be to leave a legacy for my people, for the ones who left, and what they stood for."

That legacy is Inoventures.

She further explains, "I decided to use my experience in the commercial and public sectors and start my own business. The grief that pushed me into deep self-reflection was also what made me start Inoventures and build it into the successful firm it is today. Prior to that time I had always entertained the idea of starting a business, but for one reason or another I kept postponing it." Meena explains, "When the incident happened, I thought, okay, I already have 2 Masters' degrees in the STEM field with PhD research experience; I decided to sharpen my business skills, so that's when I went to Wharton's Advanced Management Program. I met many global leaders there who were pretty senior. Working with them, the feedback I got was 'Meena, you are so focused—we'll bet on you!' . They were willing to invest in my company if I were to start one! At first I laughed it off, but it definitely gave me the confidence to get started."

Inoventures is a business analytics company which processes huge quantities of information in ways that make it meaningful to customers. To quote Meena, "Our goal is not only to create the processing software, but also to teach customers how to use it. That is a niche skill for us: we not only develop, we also explain how to derive the maximum return for expenditure."

In addition to developing software, Inoventures provides Big Data analytics, predictive modeling, geographic information systems, data base management, and systems integration on various Cloud platforms for mission critical projects for different agencies in the federal government. "We're present at the US Census Bureau, FDIC, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the EPA Office of Pesticides, Hughes and FINRA, where we create Big Data algorithms on a daily basis to analyze all the data from different hedge funds and find any

fraudulent activity in the Stock Market."

Meena describes Inoventures as an employee-centric company comprised of 60 employees, located across the country. "I named the company Inoventures because at Wharton they pounded innovation into our heads. When you say innovation, immediately you think of a product, but we can be innovative ourselves as individuals every day. If you're adding value to a particular process or saving time even in making coffee in the morning, then you're innovative."

Valuing people and change is a personality trait that Meena can trace back to her parents. Both of them came from humble beginnings, she says. "We didn't have too much money, but we had a lot of love in the house." As a high-ranking law enforcement official, Meena's father was stationed in different towns throughout Southern India, so the family moved frequently during Meena's youth. That itinerant lifestyle taught Meena to accept new circumstances and embrace new people.

"A change of place—that's fine," she says. "As long as my loved ones are there, it's going to be my home." She credits that way of life with teaching her to relish new challenges. Her parents insisted that Meena and her brother strive to be the best at whatever they did. "It may be a small little task, but I've got to do a really good job, and I am like that even today: I have that sense of duty, that sense of ethics in me."

Meena describes her mother as "a math genius" who did not have the benefit of a college education herself but insisted that Meena always go for the best education. "My mom kept me very busy. I had to bring home stellar academic records, or else I was in trouble. She also encouraged me to try speech and debate competitions that enriched my knowledge and gave me the courage to face an audience at a young age. During my childhood years, when I came home every day, I would have my instrument teacher waiting there, my dance teacher coming in after, and my vocal music teacher following them. So, I would get home around 5:00 PM and all these teachers would be waiting for me, and by the time they left it would be 8:30 PM or so, and then I had to do my homework—and sleep!"

Meena was also involved in Student Government, from the early stages of elementary school all the way through college, and she participated in organized debate programs as well.

"I seriously feel that what I did during high school and college years gave me a lot of confidence to not worry about asking questions in a group setting and just be bold to throw in some ideas. Initially my mom encouraged me. Later on I discovered that I liked those activities and actually enjoyed them. Life is an evolution."

Confidence-building is one of the factors Meena traces to her mother. "She would challenge me to do things I used to be afraid of, and even though at that time I was hesitant, every time I emerged from an activity that gave me fear, I realized that I actually liked it. That was the turning point for me to start taking risks, push the boundaries a little bit to try activities that gave me fear, which I ended up mastering".

Encouraged by her parents and her teachers, Meena was determined to develop her potential to its fullest through higher education. She studied Mathematics at Madurai Kamaraj University in Madurai, India. After completing her bachelor's degree in that field, she shifted to the related discipline of Econometrics, which she describes as "Mathematics applied to Economic Theory and Principles to solve business problems".

She earned the Dean's Gold medal for the excellence of her Masters-level work; it earned Meena a position in the university's doctoral program, and she was beginning to envision her future as an academic when she met "a tall guy with a mustache," who was home on vacation from his professional life in Virginia. "One thing led to another and we decided to marry," she explains, "and things happened quickly!" Meena joined her new husband, Shiv, in the United States, and continued her education at George Mason University, where she earned a Masters degree summa cum laude in Systems Engineering. Before she even completed her degree, Verizon offered her a lead position to supervise business analytics algorithms.

"At Verizon I led a team to develop segmentation models, multi-variant models, and business analytics for various products such as Call Waiting and Caller ID," she says. Her team would look at sales data and devise strategies for reaching new markets or maximizing return on the dollar. "We would use demographic and psychographic data, such as income, family size, propensity to buy, and related factors that would be meaningful, and we'd put them all together and develop our own specific algorithm that would

predict zip-code-specific customer segments for products such as Caller ID—and we'd do it all in three weeks," she says.

"I quickly discovered that I really enjoyed working with Big Data. We worked with Big Data even before it became a buzz word! I really enjoy solving a customer's problem by using a specialized algorithm, and not only that, I enjoy explaining it in plain English to folks who don't care about the technology of it—they care about how they can make their goals."

After Verizon, Meena spent 15 years in the government contracting industry, where she was exposed to a different way of doing business. "They're so opposite," she says. "In the private sector, everything is quick turn-around, and in the government industry, projects are longer-term. I take a lot of pride in assisting various government agencies and solving their mission-critical problems with cutting-edge technologies."

Meena traces key components of her leadership style to Ray Smith, who came on board as CEO after the Verizon divestiture. "He instilled a lot of concepts I still carry on," Meena says, "such as 'best cost,' meaning spend company's money as if it were your own. And 'No whining': if something goes south in business activities, think of solutions and propose them to the supervisor instead of only stating the problems".

But the most important thing she learned from Smith is that a leader must be aware of her shadow. "We all cast a shadow on our team," she explains. "They look at us and they emulate us, and that creates a culture. What we are as leaders—our team follows that."

As a reminder to act in ways that will bring out the best in people, the shadow-casting principle extends beyond Meena's professional life. Meena is the Chairman of a non-profit Foundation called Save a Child Now. She and her husband have cast their shadows on their daughters, Preeti and Priya, who serve as Executive Directors of the foundation. They were moved to create it after witnessing the effects of poverty and oppression in India.

"Walking out of Higginbothams Bookstore," Preeti and Priya write in their Director's Message, "One of us felt a nudge. We turned around to find two young girls, with unkempt hair, dirty clothes, and no shoes, begging for food and money. Their sad eyes, tired from hunger, yearned for an opportunity. Before we

could plead with our parents for some money, a security guard had chased them away. It was then that we both decided that we had to do something. We had to at least try to improve the lives of those who could make the most of it--the lives of poor and underprivileged children."

The foundation that Meena leads has garnered a Congressional Award, a Prudential Spirit of the Community Award, and commendations from Senator Mark Warner and President Barack Obama.

Meena believes that aspiring young people should cultivate a few simple qualities. "There is an universal template of values that yield success anywhere: hard work, ethics, integrity, and respect for other people. With these time-tested values and a positive attitude, you can pick up and do anything," Meena believes.

Embracing this value system is the first essential step in creating your own legacy.

"My goal is to run Inoventures well, and create a social impact that helps the larger community. I have already started impactful charity work under my departed family's names."

Meena says. "That way, even after my time, their names are going to be here -forever."

Her legacy, in other words, will be a form of homage.

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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 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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