

Lynda Ellis

The Temple Within

Lynda Ellis was defined as a fighter when she was only seven weeks old, suffering from a rare condition the doctors didn't know how to properly diagnose. She held on to life, and by the time a surgery put her back on solid ground, the constitution of her character was certainly changed. She fought through many things in life—abandonment by her mother when she was only seven years old, being unjustly fired once when she was nineteen, and the countless silent battles fought in corporate America on a daily basis. But more than her ability to persevere through fierce determination, her life was changed the day she learned how to persevere through peace.

It was a lovely autumn Saturday in Japan, where Lynda spent nearly a decade of her life. She and a friend, Al, shared a love of temples, and she'd join him on Saturday mornings to go on photography expeditions in search of the sacred structures. One morning, in the middle of a wooded thicket, they happened upon a small temple several centuries old.

There was nothing overtly magnificent about it, but Lynda was taken, and while Al ventured on, she stopped and sat down to take in the feeling it inspired. Then she lay down, sublimely aware of the wetness of the golden leaves beneath the small of her back. "As I lay there realizing how special the temple was, I knew it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life," she remembers. "I knew hundreds, maybe thousands of people had come here over time. This was their temple. And now, in a way, it was mine too."

Time passed, but Lynda's love of that temple did not. Fifteen years later, she happened to participate in a biofeedback monitoring session, where she was instructed to relax as much as possible. The technician tracking her biorhythms was shocked, and had never seen anyone bring

their body to such a tranquil state so quickly in his twenty years of monitoring. "I told him I had just gone to the temple in my mind," she says. "He told me I'd never need anything else to bring me peace. I would never need a sedative, and I'd never lose my cool. In the middle of a high-stakes meeting or a stressful interaction, I can go there and feel the leaves on the small of my back again. It's the most miraculous gift." Now the owner and CEO of Capitol Concierge, Inc., among the most prominent concierge services firms serving the DC metropolitan area and beyond, life is anything but tranquil. But thanks to the inner solitude Lynda carries, nothing deters her as she carries the company forward to new heights.



Capitol Concierge was launched by Mary Naylor in 1987 in the basement of her mother's home with a \$2,000 loan. When Lynda came onboard as Executive VP in 1998, it had grown to a team of 87 people and was earning revenues of around \$3.5 million a year. "Mary was launching another business

focused in virtual services called VIPDesk, so she brought me on to run Capitol Concierge," Lynda recounts. "When I arrived, I realized the company needed to be turned around. So I made myself a promise that I'd get everything righted within three years."

Whenever she enters a new corporate environment, Lynda makes a point to check in with each person reporting to her and ask them to list the top five things that irritate them about the company. "Ninety percent of our employees had the same top three concerns," she recalls. "They felt their pay was screwed up, they were frustrated that faxes got lost in the corporate office, and they felt we were unresponsive. Putting those pieces together, I could see they were telling me that they wanted structure." Of course, Lynda knew full well that imposing structure would make it clear that some individuals were in the wrong jobs,

while others were at the wrong company. After her inventory, in her first collective address to the company's employees, she predicted that half of them wouldn't still be there six months later.

As she eased into her role at Capitol Concierge, Lynda made it clear that she had standards. If employees were one minute late, they were late. "You either are or you aren't," she says. "I believe clear expectations are very important when it comes to leadership. They're what allow people to grow and learn." The new structure extended to the company's clients, some of whom were six months late in their payments. These delayed payments contributed to Capitol's delayed payments to vendors, and Lynda approached each one to set up a payment plan to get the company current. "We were able to turn things around because we have such great customers, employees, and vendors," she says. "I asked them to tell me about the real stuff—the real problems. Only then do you know what you really have to do."

Lynda became President in 2000 and was able to pay out the company's first distribution to its four owners shortly thereafter, missing her goal by only six months. Several years later, Mary decided to sell the company so she could focus exclusively on VIPDesk, but the first several interested buyers didn't pan out. Finally, in July of 2007, it dawned on Lynda that she was the perfect person to step up and buy it. "Mary had given me an opportunity to get into an industry I had never heard of and couldn't even spell at the time," she says. "I had grown to love it, and in many ways, I think I was born an entrepreneur. I was ready."

Once her decision was made, Lynda hired her own attorney and approached Eagle Bank to arrange her own financing, bringing her own presentational materials to her meeting with the bank's President and Senior Loan Officer. "They remarked how I was far more organized than most other entrepreneurs they knew," she recounts. "It wasn't my first rodeo, but it was my first time working with a business that sold something this intangible. You can hold products, but you can't hold services or people. Still, I came to learn that I value the intangible more than the tangible. Capitol Concierge is a team of wonderful people, and that's what's real."

When she finished with her presentation, the bank representatives remarked on her past success as an entrepreneur and on her captivating passion, but pointed out that she didn't actually

have a product. "That got my Irish up," Lynda laughs. "I closed my binder, leaned forward, and said, 'The people who work at Capitol Concierge go home, feed their families, and live their lives by what they make. If you don't recognize that, I'm at the wrong bank.' I was completely determined to get the funding I needed, and before I walked out the door that day, they were in. It was a defining moment for me, and certainly a good business decision for them." With that, Lynda officially purchased the company on November 30, 2007.

Today, Capitol Concierge is the nation's largest provider of concierge services for commercial office properties, upscale apartments and condominiums, shopping malls, private corporations, and individuals. "As long as it's legal and ethical, we're the people who do anything you need us to do," Lynda says. "We're the people that make your life convenient. Beyond the mint on the pillow, we're about anticipating what you're going to need before you need it. It's that service and experience you remember."

With its team of around 400 people, Capitol Concierge serves clients all over the DC metropolitan area and works with big names like Google, ExxonMobil, and Facebook. As the company begins to expand its virtual service offerings, it recently signed a contract to provide concierge services for europa assistance. A strong believer in clear, collaborative leadership that sets expectations and holds people accountable, Lynda constantly seeks innovative ways to meet her labor pool where they are to ensure the company continues to deliver the most effective, efficient, professional service possible. "Through a deeply-rooted passion to serve, we are dedicated to making peoples' lives better, even though many of them have no idea who we are," she avows. "And it's fun. Even on the worst day, it's still fun."

Lynda would not be at the helm of such a dynamic, vibrant company today if not for countless lessons learned along the way, and a habit of taking each day as a defining moment full of possibility. They have not been lessons learned lightly—particularly the lessons learned from her mother. Lynda's mother already had a twelve-year-old son and a baby boy by the time she met Lynda's father, and he adopted them as his own. He started a meat market business with her brother, who ended up gambling away much of their success. The business went under, and Lynda's mother left with the two boys around the

same time. By the time Lynda was seven, her mother was largely out of her life. "At the time, I was convinced she had left me because I wasn't pretty enough," Lynda recalls.

One wouldn't imagine that Lynda's father, a fifty-year-old bachelor with no experience raising kids on his own, would be an ideal candidate for the job. But the strict Irishman adored his daughter and did everything possible to fill her world with love. "I believe things happen for a reason," she says. "My mother was thinking of herself and not my brothers or me. I remember crying a lot when she left, but my father showered me with so much love and kept me so busy that the void somehow didn't feel so empty. I didn't even realize it was a bad thing not to have a mother in my life, as I was my father's life."

After his own meat market went under, her father took a job as the butcher for Mike's Market, but he never let go of the entrepreneurial drive and sense of ownership he felt when he was running his own shop. Though it was an 8-to-5 job, he'd arrive at 7 each morning and stay till 7 in the evenings. He was incredibly customer driven, and Lynda can recall times he would humor even the most unreasonable of requests to ensure that people always felt taken care of, respected, and served. "He took great pride in serving others and doing everything he could to make sure they had a great experience," she says. "Though he didn't own that company, he owned his job. Some of my best memories are of hanging out there—times he'd set me up on the counter and give me a cut of bologna as I absorbed incredible life lessons about customer service and personal integrity."

Lynda's father enrolled her in Campfire Girls, Brownies, Girl Scouts, and Rainbow Girls, a group for the daughters of Freemasons. She was always volunteering or selling cookies or candy, so there was no time to get into trouble. She started her own babysitting service when she was eleven, and anytime she wanted something, her father made it clear she was going to have to earn it herself. "If I expressed an interest in a purse or something, he'd remind me that somebody somewhere needed their windows cleaned or their yard mowed," she laughs. "He taught me to go look for opportunities. It cultivated my understanding that you make a living by identifying what people need and then figuring out how to deliver it."

Lynda kept herself too busy to participate

in sports or extracurricular activities in school, and she didn't really fit in at her high school. When she graduated, she was eager to leave it all behind her and decided to go to beauty college with a few close friends. She developed a great relationship with Annette, the school's manager, and when she graduated, she set to work looking for a job. Through a friend, she found her first salon job and provided stellar service for two weeks, at which point she was fired—allegedly for being rude to customers.

Lynda was devastated. "If they had told me I was being let go for giving a bad hair cut, I would have been okay with that," she recalls. "But providing great customer service was always one of those core things about me. I didn't understand how I could have messed up so badly." Fortunately, Annette found out that Lynda had only been brought on to cover for somebody while they were out for two weeks of vacation. The termination had absolutely nothing to do with Lynda's service or performance, and was an important lesson in not allowing others to define who she was. Lynda held on to the message but quickly forgot the lost job that earned \$2 and \$3 tips when Annette helped her land a position at a much better salon on the strip making \$50 and \$100 tips.

Despite some measure of success, Lynda decided she was not a beautician at heart and instead took a job as the private secretary for an advertising manager at the *Las Vegas Review Journal*, Nevada's largest newspaper. She was in a relationship at the time, but her life changed one day when she noticed a tall blond man walk past her. He was one of the newly-hired advertising salesmen, and Lynda promptly turned to her friend and declared that she wanted to have a date with him in two weeks.

Two weeks later to the day, Lynda and Bill went out on their first date. She broke things off with the man she was seeing, and they dated for eight months until Bill decided to move to Japan, where he had lived for a year after completing his service there during the Vietnam War. When he left in July, he told Lynda he'd be back in five years, and that they'd be together again if neither of them were attached.

It was too long to go without seeing him, so Lynda set her sights on becoming a stewardess. She went to San Francisco to interview with all the carriers she could find, staying with her mother

and spending time with her older brother, Rich, and younger brother, John. Through a serendipitous meeting with one of Rich's friends who knew a company looking for stewardesses, Lynda landed one more interview with a charter airline. She was ultimately offered jobs with Delta, Western, and Standard, and she went with the latter because it flew military contracts to Vietnam via Yakota Air Base in Japan, in the area Bill was living.

It seemed too good to be true, and it was. On the day Lynda finished her six-week flight school training in Seattle, Standard lost its military contract. Still, Lynda loved her time flying, and in less than a year, she found her way to Japan to see Bill. He invited her to come live there, so at the age of 22, she picked up her life and moved to a new country on the other side of the world.

Over the next nine years, Lynda and Bill grew up, got married, and had their daughter, Misty Dawn. Bill became the country manager for Mutual United of Omaha, and Lynda took a job as the Sales Administrator for Chrysler International, responsible for bringing all the vehicles into the Far East Theater from the U.S. At the time, the company was paying a \$2,000-per-vehicle brokerage fee just to bring the cars into the country, and Lynda figured out how to lower the fee to around \$10. "I spoke enough Japanese that I could figure out the system," she says. "I became a hero to them."

Lynda stayed at Chrysler until Mutual United decided to open their first military division office in the U.S.—an office in San Antonio that Bill was chosen to launch. With that, the Ellis family moved home to the U.S., leaving behind a chapter of their lives the gifts of which Lynda is still absorbing today. But Lynda was ready for Misty to learn what it meant to be an American, and she herself had set her sights on getting an advanced degree. Once the family was resettled and Bill's office was up and running, she enrolled at San Antonio College part-time to work toward her Associates degree.

All was well until Bill parted ways with Mutual United, leaving the financial responsibilities up to Lynda for a while. There she was, a 32-year-old college student with a husband and a daughter to raise, balancing schoolwork with three part-time jobs and her obligations as a brownie scout leader and room mother. She distinctly remembers pausing in front of the mirror

at 3:30 AM one day, with a textbook balanced in one hand as she curled her hair with the other. "As soon as you get your college degree, you will never, ever, ever again do anything that's not fun," she told herself adamantly.

Fortunately, Lynda was able to function exceptionally well on little sleep, and her innate abilities caught the attention of the Head of the Management Department, Professor Charles Tuck. He had read an article about a Fortune 50 company, Control Data Corporation, which adhered to the same business philosophy he saw in his hardworking student. The company's cofounder and CEO, William Norris, was a visionary leader who seemed to see the future before it happened and always took care to build an engaging and entrepreneurial company culture.

Recognizing that Lynda, like Norris, had the stuff of CEO greatness, Tuck knew she needed a four-year degree, so he kicked her out of the Associates program and instructed her to review the curriculums of the universities in the region. She found a degree in Management Science at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, but the tuition was high. Her instructor walked her through the process of identifying which credit hours the school would accept from other schools, ensuring she got their commitment in writing. "Across three institutions, I pieced together a curriculum I could afford, and it's good I got it in writing, because St. Mary's changed their curriculum a year after I enrolled there," she reflects. "Thanks to the advice of Professor Tuck, I didn't lose a single credit hour. All the professors in the Management Department were so incredibly wonderful to me, and it's thanks to their personalized, genuine caring that I succeeded."

When Lynda finished her degree, her Marketing professor asked if she'd be interested in working part-time for Control Data Corporation, the same company Professor Tuck had identified for her several years earlier. She came onboard and was promoted to manager the day she got her diploma, and soon thereafter was sent to Houston to oversee a learning center. She helped save the center's accreditation and was promoted again, given additional responsibility for the centers in San Antonio and Austin. Within a year, she was leading all the learning centers nationwide. "I absolutely loved that company," she recalls. "The people genuinely enjoyed each other, and it was a lot of fun. And though there were 65,000

employees when I worked there, I never felt like an employee. I was always empowered to be entrepreneurial and to really own my job. I've always felt that if you're going to work for a company, then you own it, and that's who you are."

Lynda developed a strong affinity for Plato, the computer-based education and training software pedaled by the company. Recognizing the strong positive impact it had on the self esteem and motivation of kids in school, she leapt at the opportunity to serve as an Account Manager when Control Data Corporation launched a joint venture with a company called WICAT to sell the software. In her interview, the company President pointed out that salesmen from neither Plato nor WICAT had succeeded in closing a deal in the Rio Grande Valley in at least eight years. "He asked why it would be any different to send a Caucasian woman down to work the area," she recounts. "I told him the salesmen had proven that he needed a woman to get the job done."

Lynda landed the position and resolved she would cut the normal sales cycle window for the product in half, making her first sale within one year. Some nights she would finish a proposal at 3:00 AM, and then Bill would drive her through the morning hours to the Valley, where she'd change in a gas station and deliver the presentation at 9:00 AM. In only five months, she closed a deal for \$2 million. She swept the Valley like wildfire, but the two companies decided to part ways several years later. Lynda decided to stick with WICAT, the company whose products she had sold the most, so as not to desert her customers. There, she ultimately moved up the ranks to VP of Marketing.

Lynda was then poached to become the VP of Marketing at Jostens Learning—a move that proved incredibly difficult given the company's leadership at the time. "Had I known what it was going to be like, I wouldn't have had the courage to go, but it was a very important learning experience for me," she reflects. "In the three years I was there, I learned so much of how not to manage, how not to treat people, and how not to lead." She then made the move to Iowa to take a position with Breakthrough, a young entrepreneurial company developing advanced software cochlear implants for children. But when she was contacted by a headhunter with an opportunity to move to DC, she was hooked.

Shortly thereafter, she accepted the position as VP of Sales and Marketing for Loral Learning Systems.

There, Lynda was charged with selling \$425,000 worth of software in a year—something she knew she could do in her sleep. Within six months, she had hired a small team and sold \$1 million. She had written into her contract that the firm would set up a commission plan, but after receiving pushback from its leadership, she convened a meeting with two colleagues, Pierce and Gary. Over a Christmas drink in 1994, they decided to purchase Loral Learning Systems from Loral Aerospace, making all thirteen of their employees shareholders and changing the name to PLG.

Within the next nine months, their independent marketing group was doing \$2.5 million in sales. Eager to grow, they sought angel investors, and through Lynda's iron will, she and her two partners were able to maintain majority ownership and only sold 40 percent of the company. With the money, they initiated a merger with a competing software company in Jackson, Mississippi, and six months later, they sold the merged company to a Viacom company. "I remember hearing so many times that we weren't going to get it done—that we couldn't do it," she recalls. "Our defining moment was every moment we decided not to give up. It's thanks to those experiences of determination and perseverance that I truly believe with my soul that if you want to do something, you can. My father always told me that, and after experiencing the world head-on, I know he was right."

While the fight ended in victory, Lynda was tired and ready for a change of industry by the time it was over. She knew the business inside and out, and it wasn't fun anymore. But then she got a call from one of her mentors, the CEO of Academic Systems. Their numbers were way behind, and he wanted her to come onboard as VP of Service. She agreed to help, and while she was only asked to do \$500,000 in sales that first year, Lynda's team sold \$3 million. The next year, she traveled so much that she spent only 52 nights in her own bed. At that point she really did call it quits. She was ready for something completely new—something fun.

For Lynda, the most fun thing is growing something out of nothing. Capitol Concierge was itself the fruits of such labor, as Mary virtually invented the concept of concierges in commercial office properties. Lynda decided to go in for an

hour-long interview with Mary, and the two women clicked—so much so that the meeting extended for an extra eight hours. “I saw in Mary the opportunity to build something in her company,” Lynda affirms. “I saw in her the strengths that complimented my weaknesses, and she saw in me the strengths that complimented her weaknesses. She was ready to bring in some corporate experience to take the company to the next level, but she wanted someone who would preserve its entrepreneurial spirit. That’s what I set out to do.”

Along the way, Bill has remained a perfect partner, thriving in various jobs while remaining flexible to move as Lynda’s career required as she had moved for him early on. She still remembers the days he would drive her to the airport and fill her in on the breaking news of the sports world, giving her the talking points that would allow her to connect with colleagues and clients alike. “His influence in my life has been invaluable,” she remarks. “He’s always been my rock, my support, and my conscience. We’ve always been a team, thinking of how we work together as a unit to support one another. It’s been wonderful.” Bill now works as a full-time contract manager for Capitol.

At the meat market counter, Lynda’s father always taught her to do the right thing not because you might get recognition for it, but because it was right. It’s a principle she’s embraced throughout her career and sown into the fabric of Capitol Concierge’s culture, earning the company the National Capital Business Ethics Award in 2014. “I’m most proud of the fact that one of our clients nominated us for that,” she says. “It demonstrates that Capitol Concierge is a company that does the right thing because it’s the right thing to do.” Lynda was also instrumental in launching Capitol Cares, the philanthropic arm of the company that has now logged over 4,000 hours of pro bono work in addition to countless forms of community service through organizations like the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, and Wounded Warriors. “My father came through Ellis Island when he was sixteen,” she recounts. “He would always tell me how special this country is, and how it’s important to give back to the community.

It’s just what we did.”

Outside of work, Lynda is a member of the Red Cross Tiffany Circle and serves as an Ambassador with the Yellow Ribbon Fund, an organization that strives to meet the unmet needs of injured veterans, caregivers, and families through the recovery process. She’s a senior warden of the vestry at her Episcopal Church, and she helps the DC Police Association in showing at-risk kids that there are alternatives to gangs and drugs. She also speaks frequently to schools, focusing her message on young women specifically. In advising young people figuring out their lives or entering the working world today, Lynda says simply, “Dream. When somebody tells you that you can’t do something, don’t believe them. You can do anything you want to do, as long as you take responsibility for finding a way to get there.”

In doing so, one must recognize the defining moments of everyday. Some are light-filled and sweet; others carry adversity from which we must rise. In many respects, life is a defining moment, and we are the ones who set the tone of that definition. “The temple reminds me that we can aspire to anything we want to aspire to,” Lynda says. “We are our own gating mechanisms. I don’t care what your situation is—you determine your future, and no one else.”

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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