

Joanna G. Alexis

The Lucky Charm

As a little girl walking around the modest home where her father grew up in a small village in Greece, Joanna Alexis was stunned as she heard the stories of her parent's upbringing. They had no running water, no electricity, no access to healthcare, and no promise of an education. It was a far cry from her own upbringing in America, where her parents had applied their remarkable work ethic to building a better life for their children. "As a kid, I saw the farms my parents lived off of and understood how different life was for me growing up in the U.S., where I had everything at my fingertips," she says today. "Seeing the two scenarios side by side, I began to understand just how lucky I was that my parents took the risk and made the sacrifices to immigrate to America. And I saw that with hard work, you can really accomplish anything you want."

While her parents labored from dawn till dusk, her grandfather looked after her, and even at a young age, a drive for professional success seemed woven through her DNA. At age four, she explained a business idea to her grandfather and asked him to invest in the proposal. "I was the little girl in the neighborhood selling lemonade or sea shells with my best friend, Penny," she recounts. "I always had it in me, and I hoped that at some point in my career journey, I'd start my own business." Now the founder, President, and CEO of Navstar, Inc., Joanna's road to realizing that dream defied even her own expectations for herself. And while her father used to call her his lucky charm, her own luck was made through entrepreneurial curiosity, hard work, good timing, and her ability to turn missteps into miracles.

Launched in 1999, Navstar is now a government contractor with a proven track record that excels at helping their clients solve various technology challenges in Big Data (mining and

analytics), cloud computing (from architecture to production), cyber security (including offensive and defensive strategies, C&A/A&A, and the development of IA policies and procedures), learning solutions, e-learning training, and software development (both new and O&M). "The work we do is important to me because, at the end of the day, the service and information we provide our customers helps fulfill important missions," she says. "We do interesting, meaningful work, and that's very fulfilling and motivating for us."



Now, as she focuses her energy on the company's strategy, infrastructure, staff, and culture, Joanna often reflects back on the classic immigrant story of her parents. They had known each other as children growing up in the small village in Greece, where her father only went to school through third grade. Her father adored her mother and knew from the time he met her as kids that he would marry her one day. Her mother wasn't so sure and, it took two turned down

proposals for her father to convince her that he was the one! When she finally accepted his proposal and, they began their journey as a happily married couple and started a family, they set their sights on going to America, the land of opportunity. Her father landed a sponsor for his immigration, but due to visa restrictions, he couldn't bring his family with him right away. So he set off to get the lay of the land, working three separate jobs in New York City in the hopes of bringing his family over soon. "To call him a hard worker is an understatement," Joanna reflects. "He literally had no time to sleep because he was working around the clock. He gave up a lot of his life to be able to provide more opportunity for his family than he ever had."

When his visa expired, he returned to Greece to find a new sponsor and then resumed his efforts in the U.S. He slowly learned the

language and repeated the process over and over again until, after eight years, he was able to bring his wife and three sons through Ellis Island. They planned to live in New York City near family, but her mother didn't like the big city life, so the family moved to Arlington, Virginia, where Joanna was born. "My dad used to tell me that I was his lucky charm because when I was born, his luck changed. He found a business to take over—a diner in Clarendon—and became a homeowner that same year," she says. "That's when they finally were able to see the results of all those years of hard work and, have a restaurant business of their own."

As the fourth child born substantially later than her brothers, Joanna had the opportunity to spend a lot of time one-on-one with her parents, where she witnessed their incredibly hard work firsthand. She also had a strong connection to her grandfather, who came to the U.S. from his home village in Greece to help his daughter care for the newborn baby. "He was my world, and I love visiting his home in our village in Sparta, Greece, where my family has been living for several generations," Joanna says. "He passed away when I was six, but I get to hear wonderful stories about him and when I'm there, I connect with my core values, my roots, and the essence of my background. It gives me a sense of strength and empowerment I don't feel anywhere else."

Her grandfather fought in both the Greek Civil War and World War II. "I attribute so much of my morals, integrity, and values to the way he raised me, and also to where I'm from," she says. "And if I were to lose everything, things are just 'things.' At the end of the day, I know who I am, what I'm made of, and where I'm from, and that really is invaluable because no one can ever take away the essence of who we are at our core."

Joanna was also profoundly shaped by time spent in her parents' diner, where brothers—all teenagers by that time—worked. "I remember sitting at the high-top bar as a little girl eating my pancakes and chatting with the patrons, who were excited to talk to me," she remembers. "I think I learned my customer service skills growing up in that environment, and also chatting with people in Greek while taking walks through the neighborhood with my grandfather."

Though she was exposed to English through these limited interactions, only Greek was spoken at home, and Joanna started her first day of

kindergarten unable to understand any of her classmates or teachers. It was a traumatizing day of a tough year marked by the passing of her grandfather, one of her very best friends. But thankfully, she picked up English quickly, and was soon able to make friends at school. "Looking back, the language barrier was definitely a challenge, but it helped me be successful in life because it taught me that you can figure things out," she explains. "It was more proof that you can overcome any challenge, and one of the reasons I didn't shut the doors of my company when I was experiencing rough times later on."

Around that time, Joanna's father opened a sit-down restaurant, Pizza Castle, in Falls Church. "We'd have lines going out the front door because the food was so awesome," she says. She remembers being very interested in the business and often asked her dad questions about it. Because they worked so hard, her parents didn't have time to help her with her homework, but when she was nine years old, Joanna remembers her father bringing her to the restaurant when she was struggling with homework and her confidence. He asked for her help giving change to the customers, showing her how to count it out and how to do the addition and subtraction in her head. "It slowly gave me the confidence to not have this fear of math," she says. "I still remember it to this day, and especially every time I pay in cash at a register." Over time, her parents opened a total of eight restaurants. Watching and learning from their success and failures reinforced her dream of starting her own business someday. I gained so much confidence in doing that at such a young age."

Through her childhood, Joanna would help out at the restaurant on weekends, working closely with her father to understand how the business was run. "I was intrigued by how a business makes money, and I remember my dad always telling me that it didn't matter how much money you brought in," she recalls. "What mattered most was that your profits exceeded your costs." She was also a natural leader as she grew up, from launching and leading the Hello Kitty Club as a young girl, to various leadership roles and engagement in groups and organizations through high school. "I was born this precocious, entrepreneurial girl into a very traditional Greek family, where my parents never expected me to go to college or have a career. It was always implied

and expected that I was to get married and my husband would take care of me," she says. "My mother had no clue how to mentor me or guide me, and we butted heads quite a bit. She didn't understand my entrepreneurial drive and interest in school activities including when I was elected President of the Civitans in my senior year of high school."

Because she was expected to get married and have kids, Joanna was never told that she was smart or that she could be whatever she wanted to be when she grew up. As a result, she didn't apply herself in school and was an average student. Upon graduating, she enrolled at Marymount University with a plan to major in fashion merchandising, working in retail and as a waitress on the side. At her waitressing job, she noticed how one of her coworkers took a course at the Computer Learning Center nearby, and when he suddenly landed a tech job making good money, she wondered if she should sign up for the six-month program herself.

Also during that time, Joanna started dating a young man from Canada who was Greek. When he proposed, Joanna dropped out of college and decided to enroll in that Computer Learning Center program. She was also motivated by her brother Tony, who reminded her that she would most likely only qualify for a job as a waitress in Canada since she hadn't completed her degree. The computer industry, rife with job opportunities at the time, seemed like a great idea. She signed up for the six-month program, earning her certificate by the time she got married. "It was grueling, and I studied all the time," she recalls. "We started with 40 students, and of the 20 that made it to graduation, I was number two in the class."

Joanna was twenty one when they married and moved to Canada where a friend helped her land a job at SHL System House, a technology company in Downtown Ottawa. "At that time, there weren't yet many developers focused on one specific technology, since the tech world was constantly changing and evolving," she explains. "That environment provided a window for me to land that job even though I didn't have an undergraduate degree. It was the perfect time to make my foray into the tech world, and I saw it as a stepping stone, so I worked long hours and learned how to develop in an assembler code called Interactive Reader Language, or IRL, for a project with The Canadian Post Office."

Joanna loved her new work in the tech field, empowered by the world of possibilities that seemed to be opening to her for the first time. But as she grew more successful, her marriage grew more strained. "He wanted me to stay at home and be more traditional," she recalls. "It was also a classic emotionally-abusive marriage, but I had had a very strict, sheltered upbringing, so I didn't recognize the warning signs and that experience broke my spirit in many ways. I knew my parents disagreed with my decision to get a divorce and I didn't have emotional or financial support from them. It was one of the hardest experiences of my life but in a way, knowing I was on my own, allowed me to become a lot stronger. I realized that if I worked really hard, I could have the kind of financial and emotional freedom where I could dictate my own path in terms of what I wanted to do with my life. It liberated me from previously-held ideas."

With newfound independence, Joanna returned to Virginia, where she took several months to regroup and then landed a job at SCI Consulting. The company needed developers to train in technology called IEF, a framework methodology product, and Joanna spent the next two years working twelve-hour days. "It was a great experience, but I didn't see much room for advancement," she recalls. "I did very well there but got little recognition for my achievements, and when they switched me to a project in Maryland with a longer commute, I decided to leave."

From there, Joanna took a job at MCI Local, where she met Beth Schiebler. From her three years there, she particularly remembers her role as manager of the Y2K project, where she was responsible for several critical applications related to billing and inventory. Amidst the panic of what would happen when the date struck 2000, she successfully managed and completed that Y2K project ahead of schedule and under budget. "Our projects got a lot of recognition because we solved the problem quickly and were able to tell every other organization at the company how to solve the Y2K problem," Joanna said.

As Joanna evolved in her career from a software developer, to a team lead, to a program lead, to a project manager, she worked in every aspect of the software and product development life cycle, including analysis, design, development, testing, implementation, and production. "In experiencing all those phases, I found that I really

enjoyed and excelled at interfacing with the end user community, understanding their business, gathering those requirements, and interfacing with the technology side to actually develop what they would use," she explains. "Organizations sometimes spend hundreds of millions on technology that becomes shelf-ware because it isn't user-friendly, or because it isn't what the end user really wanted. I saw that I could really help with that. I was also really good at managing the projects, ensuring that we delivered on-time and on-budget. I was perfect for the management track, working closely with the technical geniuses to bridge the gap with the end-user community to develop the best solution."

She had identified her strengths, but Joanna knew that if she wanted to progress in corporate America, she needed to go back to school and complete her undergraduate degree. But she was making triple what most of her college-educated friends were making and didn't want to regress financially. Instead, at age thirty, she decided to launch the business she had dreamed of owning her whole life.

When Joanna started Navstar, she had no experience in sales and no clue how to go about finding a customer, let alone selling to them. She also had no experience in the staffing industry, recruiting or even business development. What she did know was the technology sector and how to identify the most capable technology resources and, build the right teams to deliver the best solutions. She had worked in the commercial sector at MCI Local, and though a non-compete prevented her from approaching them, she approached other companies in the telecom industry and sold to them. "It was just me and a temp I hired to help me with recruiting, and we'd work together to bring in the staff and put them on various contracts," she explains. "Those companies were all venture-capital-funded, and they were all hiring contractors instead of bringing in employees. If I had done a little due diligence back then, I would have realized that they weren't making any money. It wasn't the greatest timing to start selling to them, but I did do half a million in sales in my first year of business."

That second year of business, when Joanna did \$2.5 million in sales, she began to accept the fact that business development was one of her strong suits. Starting in 2002, however, her customers started having financial difficulties.

Joanna provided the best staff in the field, and they committed to paying her what they owed, but in the end, there was no way they could make good on their promises. "They all slowly started filing Chapter 11, one after the next," she says. "I was short \$850,000 I was owed. I had kept a lean and agile model with only myself, two recruiters, and a bookkeeper, but I was overdue on my bills, and I was getting calls from the bank requesting that I pay my credit line in full. To make matters worse, I was also going through my second divorce, so that was a really tough time both personally and professionally. But I didn't give up, resolving that I need to shift gears – and quick."

Thinking back, she remembers exactly what she did. "I focused on learning how to get into the government sector, specifically as a subcontractor." Through lots of hard work and countless cold calls, Joanna connected with Northrup Grumman. She knew nothing about the government sector, but the company had a huge contract handling all of the telecommunications services for the U.S. Department of Treasury. She was added as a subcontractor to Northrop and she was able to quickly win new business and become their largest sub-contractor. "I paid the bank back and paid all my bills and my employees, though I didn't get paid. I consulted a lawyer about my options for recovering the \$850,000 I was owed, and there were some, but I had asked myself where I wanted to spend my time. I didn't even want to focus on that market anymore, so what was the return on investment? I wrote it off as a huge lesson learned on the importance of market research and strategic planning and I moved on."

Making the tough choice to walk away from that loss freed up her time and energy to focus on this new world of government contracting, and she quickly found that she was good at it. She built teaming relationships and won business with Northrop Grumman, CACI, Raytheon, Deloitte, General Dynamics, and Lockheed – big names doing business across a number of different agencies. As a subcontractor, Joanna considered where she wanted to focus her efforts. Through research, she felt that doing valuable, meaningful work meant a lot to her. "In 2007, I made the decision to focus specifically within the Intelligence community, specifically within the Department of Homeland Security, and specifically in projects that I felt mattered and made a difference in developing products or

services for our country,” she says. By this time Navstar had a great portfolio and reputation of working with most of the well-known government contractors.

Once she set her strategy and mapped out the infrastructure she would need at various points over the next five years, she looked at the staff she would need to bring in to scale up her \$7 million company into something bigger. “I saw I couldn’t do it alone,” she says. “In the last five years, I made a lot of shifts and changes internally to get my infrastructure and staff onboard to help me scale to where I wanted the company to be.”

But the road was not easy, and in time, Joanna realized it didn’t make good business sense to walk it alone. In 2008, she recognized that she was struggling. Her infrastructure was busting at the seams, and every decision encountered by her forty-person team—HR, contracts, the bank, taxes, existing business, new business—was still all running through her. A good friend recommended Vistage, a peer-to-peer CEO coaching organization dealing with many of the problems that were threatening to drown her, she signed up immediately. “When you’re so focused on working *in* your business, it’s hard to work *on* your business,” she acknowledges. “If you’re working twelve hours a day, it’s hard to think straight. I was desperate for a better way and joining Vistage really saved my sanity. Mike Harden was my Vistage Chair, I will forever owe him a debt of gratitude. In 2007, I remember Mike telling me, “The people you have in your corporate office now helped get you here, but they don’t have the skills and are not the people that can help you grow,” and I wanted to grow.”

After three years in the program, Joanna decided she learned what she needed and, it was time to build her own advisory board. “I’m very proud, flattered and, humbled to work with the greatest group of advisors such as; Mike Harden, Rich Wilhelm, Joanne Isham, Reginald Hyde, Wayne Wilkinson, Scott Goss and Phil Merritt—folks who are very accomplished in their careers and take the time to brainstorm with me,” she says. “When you’re a small business owner, every decision that requires a financial investment matters because you’re investing your own hard-earned money. And when it doesn’t work out, it’s painful. But whenever I would fall on my face, Mike Harden would say, ‘You can look at this as either punishment or tuition. Which way do you

want to go with it?’ I still think of that today and am so grateful for his mentorship and guidance.”

In building out her corporate management team, Joanna first invested over a million dollars in putting together a model and group that, unfortunately, didn’t work. So she pulled out her white board to start rebuilding her corporate infrastructure staff. With perseverance and determination, she now has a great infrastructure and the right staff. She refers to her staff as the Navstar Allstars and each one of them is a valued and contributing member of the team. “Navstar’s core values: customer satisfaction, integrity, excellence, creativity and collaboration are practiced every day. Those core values are what makes us who we are,” she explains.

The Navstar culture is very important to Joanna who leads her team with vision, passion, compassion, dedication and perseverance. As a leader, Joanna believes in defining the future, being clear about expectations, and holding people accountable for results. She employs techniques from the company’s core values such as collaboration, empowerment, and professional development for staff. She welcomes innovation—if an idea fits with the company’s strategic plan and involves meaningful work for the customer, she welcomes it for examination. She conveys clear goals and expectations and then allows her team the freedom to reach those goals however they see fit. “Our employees matter, they are not just a number on a spreadsheet here, they are part of a company that cares about them and wants to inspire each and every one of them to thrive and succeed,” she says. “When sequestration hit, I advanced each of our employees 80 hours of paid time off so they could continue to be paid by Navstar while the government was shut down, even though it was a big financial hit to the business. We hire some of the most sought-after folks in their fields of expertise, and it was important to me at that time that my actions supported my words. I put my money where my mouth is - telling them they mattered with paying them during a very uncertain financially stressful time. They are the reason we succeed, I value and appreciate their dedication and contributions.”

Thanks to this culture and the team it has created, Navstar did \$14 million in revenue in 2015, and after winning a large \$40 million, 5-year contract in May, the company is on track to do \$18 million in 2017. They now have two prime

contracts, and Joanna is focused on expanding on Navstar's core competencies as a prime in other agency's as well over the next five years.

As the company grows, its very important to Joanna to give back to the community and, organizations that help others in need. Personally, Joanna supports charities that help children, the homeless, and animals in need around the globe. She donates to local efforts to assemble and distribute gift bags to the homeless on Christmas day, and she supports other organizations that provide gifts and food during the holidays to families that can't afford them. "I feel so blessed in my life, and I consider it my duty to give back to the community and help others how I can," she says.

Through it all, Joanna remains deeply grateful for the sacrifices her parents made to immigrate to America, allowing her to learn skills and achieve success that never would have been possible in Greece. And though she never feels connected to her core and to her heritage quite so clearly as when she actually returns to the village of her ancestors, coming to America and succeeding in business has allowed her to connect to family in a way all her own. "I still remember those moments I'd tell my parents what was going on at the company, and I'd see a glimmer in my dad's eye," she says. "We were so alike and had a

special bond from the time I was a kid, to the point that we could often just look at each other and know what the other one was thinking. From the time he was a boy tending to the family farm and selling grapes in Greece to help support his family, he was a true entrepreneur. I know how excited he was for me, seeing a lot of himself in what I was doing, and that in itself for me is like winning the biggest entrepreneurial award on the planet."

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– 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](#).



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