

# Candace Duncan

## Making Your Point

Raised on a farm just outside Wichita, Kansas, Candace Duncan learned at a very young age that there wasn't anything she couldn't do. Raising livestock, wheat, maize, alfalfa, and corn, she and her younger brother and sister were expected to help with anything and everything. Her mother taught school, while her father worked for a Mobil oil refinery in nearby Augusta, so Candy was responsible for making dinner for the family. There were always animals to be tended to and homework to finish, and her father had her driving a tractor before she knew how to drive a car.

Beyond teaching her the tremendous, incrementally escalating value of a hard day's work, this upbringing instilled in Candy a strong sense of self and an unwavering belief in her own ability, which would prove invaluable down the road when she found herself the only woman in the male-dominated field of accounting. "When I got into the business world, there were very few females, but I always had the confidence that I could do anything I wanted or needed to do," she affirms today. "The way I was raised, I just knew I had it in me."

This didn't mean Candy didn't notice the lack of equality in the workplace around her — only that she never took it personally, and never allowed it to hold her back. In 1978, she was hired in the Norfolk office of KPMG LLP, one of the largest accounting firms. She was one of two women on the professional staff, and while the other quit a month later, Candy rose through the leadership ranks to senior associate and then to manager.

"Sometimes it was hard to be different," she concedes, remembering being invited by clients to lunch at clubs that didn't allow women. "But a friend and mentor of mine, Dr. William Harvey, was one of the only black gentlemen at Harvard in the early 1970s, and he told me that if

you're different, people will remember you. So if you're different, make your point, and people will remember it. That has been true my whole life." Candy has spent her professional career not discouraged about being different, but empowered by it, using it to amplify the points she believes are worth making.

Today, KPMG International is among the largest professional services companies in the world, employing 155,000 people and specializing in audit, tax, and advisory services. "It's a firm that really lives its core values of integrity and ethics, firmly committed to doing the right thing in the right way, and that attracts phenomenal people," Candy affirms. "Many public accountants end up moving on to other things, and there were several times in my career that I considered doing that, but it always came back to the people. This job has given me the opportunity to advise a wide array of companies and industries, and I've been able to facilitate a lot of good things with a lot of good colleagues for these people and organizations. I've really enjoyed that."

The other key consideration that has made her tenure at KPMG so lengthy and prosperous has been the opportunity for continuous learning and growth. "As soon as I would get settled into a position and feel like I had gotten good at it, they'd give me another job," she reflects. When Candy was admitted to the firm's partnership in 1987, she was the first female partner in Virginia. Later, she was asked to lead KPMG's Virginia audit practice, and then the Mid-Atlantic area, which included Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

Through that time, several partners asked that she run for the board, but Candy wanted to focus on mastering her responsibilities and ensuring everything was running seamlessly, so she declined. After five years of leading the Mid-



Atlantic area, Candy felt that the numbers were good enough and that running for the board was the right thing to do—and her instincts were solid. “Looking back with what I know today, I’m still a little shocked that I got elected to the board,” she remarks. “Of the firm’s nearly 2,000 U.S. partners, there are only 15 board members. But I agree with the leadership of KPMG that diversity in gender, background, upbringing, function, and geography makes for the best boards, and I am thrilled to be a part of that.”

Candy was elected to the board in 2009, and to her surprise, within 30 days, she was asked to move to Washington, D.C. to become the first female managing partner of the firm’s Washington Metro Area practice. “My husband and I had been in Williamsburg for 25 years, so it was hard to give that up, but this has been a great and welcoming community,” she says. “And in terms of helping people grow and furthering the strength of the firm, I feel like I’ve made a difference, which has always been my number one goal.”

As she prepares to retire from KPMG following 35 years of service to the firm, Candy recalls how much the accounting profession has changed. She can still remember several jobs she had hoped to lead, only to be told that women were not put on such jobs. Several decades later, she finds herself a top-tier executive, serving as the lead on those same accounts. The time in between these two extremes was spent evolving both personally and professionally in a firm that has been as committed to change as she is—one of the reasons Candy felt KPMG was the right place for her. “I’ve been doing this for over 35 years, and I learn something new every single day,” she avows. “Whether it’s about people, leadership, growing a business, or taking something from concept to a tangible product, the constant learning has made for an incredibly rewarding career.”

Candy’s love of learning and finding better ways to do things extends back to the earliest days of her childhood, when her family’s farm in Andover, Kansas grew popcorn that she had to shell by hand. The stalks would grow five feet high, and the shelling was hard work for a little girl, but she and her siblings were allowed to sell the produce at the family’s vegetable stand in the summers for pocket money. The daily grind of shelling changed, however, when her parents gave her a popcorn sheller for Christmas. It was a symbol of the kind of solutions-oriented approach

that would fascinate and compel her throughout her life.

Candy’s siblings and grandparents also played a big influence in her life. Her brother was often sick as a child, so she and her sister would sometimes stay up the road at their grandparents’ house. For the first four years of school, they attended a one-room schoolhouse, and the grade-levels in her high school had less than 80 students. Team sports were a favorite pastime, and Candy loved softball, basketball, and volleyball. As their property was on the main road between Augusta and Wichita, there was a small country club near their house, where Candy would lifeguard and teach swimming lessons to earn money. She also cleaned houses to supplement her modest income.

While hard work and help with the chores was expected, Candy’s parents only asked that their children do the best they could do, and Candy internalized this as her dream for the future. “I never had any one thing in mind that I wanted to do with my life, but I knew I wanted to be the best I could be,” she remembers. “My parents taught me to do a good job every day, and this lesson was as powerful as it was simple.” By taking life one day at a time and always doing her best, Candy excelled in sports and was valedictorian of her class, in addition to earning academic honors and serving as student body president. “I always liked leadership, which began with the vegetable stand I ran as a young girl,” she remarks. “My sister would sack up the produce and my brother would carry it for the customers, while I kept a ledger of everything we sold each day. I really enjoyed that sense of responsibility and ownership of the business’ performance.”

This love of leadership stayed with her at Kansas State University, where she served as a resident assistant in exchange for free room and board. During her sophomore year, she was responsible for one dormitory wing with 60 girls. The next two years, she was responsible for a co-ed floor of 200 people—an exercise in dealing with people and interpersonal issues that honed her leadership skills even further.

In her junior year, Candy chose to major in accounting not only because she found the classes enjoyable and a good match for her skill set, but also for its high marketability. “I noticed that everyone coming out of the major got a job fairly quickly, and a job was what I needed,” she says pragmatically. “I did an accounting internship and

liked that as well, so I decided to get my CPA.”

After graduating *magna cum laude*, Candy took an accounting job in Kansas City, where her boyfriend, Mike, a fellow Kansas State University graduate, was in medical school. The two had met in high school in Andover and married just before he earned his medical degree. Mike was then summoned to the East Coast to practice at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. Around that time, Candy passed her CPA exam and, with two years of experience under her belt, was hired on at KPMG in Norfolk, Virginia.

Prior to her retirement, Candy served as the face of KPMG in the Washington Metro Area. As managing partner, she focused on community outreach and attended important meetings and events, but she still enjoyed the more client-centered activities. “I love pursuing new work, interacting with existing clients, and working with audit committees and boards,” she remarks. “That’s my upbringing and my roots. There’s a lot of pressure to grow the business, which is all about cracking the code of our clients’ problems to find solutions.” To do that, Candy focuses on bringing the best and brightest people on board through recruitment, competitive hiring practices, and spending time with the firm’s interns. “Making sure we have the right people in the right seats on the bus is crucial, and I know that if we help our people find their way and be successful, our clients will be happy, too,” she affirms.

This attitude speaks to the leadership style Candy has cultivated since those early days on the farm, which has nothing to do with titles and everything to do with enabling others to find a path to success. “I try to show, teach, encourage, follow up, check in, and make sure our team members can see where they’re going,” she says. “I begin with the end in mind and set a clear vision of the future, knowing that it just takes time and lots of small steps to get there.”

This brand of leadership takes equal parts conservative implementer and risk-taking dreamer. By nature, Candy is the former, which is why her husband’s influence was so important. Ever the dreamer himself, Mike left his successful medical practice to work at NASA, where he was responsible for international space physicians from Germany, Russia, Japan, Canada and the U.S., and was required to spend considerable amounts of time at the cosmonaut training facility in Russia. “Likewise, I spent time in Russia as well, and often

in less than optimal conditions, but it made my world broader,” Candy says. Mike was one of the four NASA personnel who played a key leadership role in the rescue of 33 Chilean miners from an underground chamber in 2010—a testament to his remarkable ability to broaden the world not only for his wife, but for others. Mike passed away in 2012, but his legacy of leadership through unrelenting vision continues to touch the world in profound ways.

Influenced in part by her late husband but bringing to the table a flare that is all her own, Candy has been on *Washingtonian Magazine’s* list of the 100 most powerful women since 2009, and is distinguished as one of the Kansas State Business School’s outstanding alumni. She sits on the executive committees of the Board of Trade, the World Affairs Council, and the Cultural Alliance.

As co-chair of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s annual ball, Candy is leading efforts to raise more than \$3 million dollars in support of the non-profit’s mission. She also raised nearly \$1.5 million as chair of the 2012 Heart Ball for the American Heart Association of the Greater Washington Region. “I’m very proud of helping to raise that money because I know it will make a big difference in the lives of people,” she says. “I’m also very proud of the operating results of KPMG’s Washington office, which is a leader in the firm from a growth perspective, and of my KPMG family tree—those people I’ve touched and had the opportunity to work with, mentor, and grow. Dollar Tree Stores is one of those clients who had 20 stores when I first began working with them. I was with them every step of the way as we took the company public and helped them buy companies, and they’re now an almost \$8 billion business.”

Focusing on excellence every step of the way is the technique Candy employs each day to bring success to clients like Dollar Tree Stores, and serves as the advice she would give to any young person entering the working world today. “It might be tempting to come in a little late some days, or leave early, or cut a corner here or there, but if you can do a great job every single day, it really adds up,” she affirms. “When you look back at the end of a year, or five, or 35, you’ll realize you’ve really built something incredible.” And in being our best each day, we not only build incrementally a lifetime masterpiece, but also make sure that we are prepared in any given

moment to put our best foot forward, make our point, and show the world what makes us different and worth remembering.

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*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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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