Jennifer V. Dalton

Finding Your Voice

Actors will tell you that the challenge of performing William Shakespeare is an allengrossing art that demands the allegiance of both body and mind. Through careful articulation of sound, vowel, and consonant, one reaches and conveys the content and life of the words and story, bringing poetic form and powerful expression to the audience. This, as fourteen-year-old Jennifer Dalton came to realize, is what it feels like to find your voice.

Shakespeare was one of Jen's favorite

authors, so when the Community Play House in Augusta, Georgia, put out a call to audition for its production of Romeo and Juliet, she answered. The lines and feel came naturally to her, and even though she had never acted before, she landed a speaking part as Romeo's mother. "It was just four lines, but it was a big deal for me at the time," she remembers today. Her performance drew the attention of the drama teacher at the nearby fine arts high school, who encouraged her to

transfer over from the public school she was attending. Thus began a passion for theater, and as she became more and more adept at finding the voices of her characters, she grew more and more connected to her own.

Now the founder and CEO of BrandMirror, a branding and reputation strategy firm, Jen helps individuals and businesses find their own voice, amplify their message, and make good on their promise. "Whether I'm working with CEOs, or college graduates, or people going through career transition, it's my job to ask, what is it you want to say?" she affirms. "We all have a voice, and my goal is to help each person learn how to use it with as much clarity, relevance, and impact as possible."

Jen formally incorporated BrandMirror on April 27, 2012, on her son's birthday, so that when she graduated from her executive MBA program a few short weeks later, she was ready to hit the ground running. The company's tagline reads, "your promise delivered," and she has since focused on helping individuals and companies define and convey their unique purpose and value. "I believe everyone has a purpose," she affirms. "We are more than cogs in machines, and we all have a responsibility to figure out what our gifts and talents are to best leverage them. It's about having clarity about who you are and what you want to achieve so that you can live an authentic,

intentional life."

Financially speaking, such clarity pays off in spades because it allows businesses and individuals to stand out amongst competitors and peers, identifying the unique promise they can deliver and the value they bring to clients, employees, and the community. Whether she's working with a golf instructor, a bank CEO who's never had a social media account before, or the leadership team of a company preparing to launch a new product, she helps achieve

relevance by cutting through the noise to truly shape the conversation. "Everybody's out there saying something," she describes. "The challenge is, are you saying something valuable in your own words, and in a way that your audience will care? We achieve thought leadership through knowing what we want to say and then owning it with intentionality and authenticity."

Sixty percent of her time is spent with individual clients, identifying key things they want to be known for and formulating those words into the story they were meant to tell. Drawing on her experiences in theater growing up, she helps them understand their audience and how best to convey value. The rest of her workday is dedicated to companies who might want to rebrand the reputation of their leadership team, allowing others to better make emotional connections with the faces or products of the company. "Branding is

about identification, and trust, and how people describe you when you're not in the room," Jen explains. "What's the personal experience of the customer? Are they getting your promise of value? If you're hired, are you actually delivering on that promise? I help companies clarify that promise, and then ensure they have the processes, policies, communications, and marketing to consistently deliver, thereby building reputation."

After helping clients find their voice so they can talk their talk, Jen then ensures they have the clarity and capacity to walk their walk. "If you want to influence the market and show a certain customer segment that you care about something, you can't just write a check to a certain charity," she insists. "You have to be out there, showing up, leading the way, and actually adding value. Oftentimes it's hard for people to talk about their purpose because it forces them to be declarative, but the more you say 'this is what we stand for,' the more you can connect with your customers emotionally. There's more foundation on which a relationship can be built. There's more room to go big, and live on the cutting edge, and really lead the next discussion or influence the next conversation in a given industry."

Jen was pushing the envelope from the very moment she was born, entering the world a full two-and-a-half months early. "I came out on my own terms," she laughs. Her parents moved from Florida to Georgia when she was a year old, where they pursued their entrepreneurial drive by opening a shoe store in Augusta. Her father, an extroverted salesman, was a perfect match for her mother, who focused more on maintaining the store's books and product stocks. They had worked in a shoe store in Florida and operated a store with Jen's grandparents, earning a positive reputation and later offering to open a location in Augusta mall. They later left the mall to open a 7,000-square-foot location and offer more choice to their customers, which they still run today.

As an only child, Jen grew up in a very adult world, and called her parents by their first name until she was five. The small family unit of three developed a strong bond, so that today, Jen's parents are among her best friends. As a child, she would accompany them everywhere, from shoe shows to fancy restaurants, and when she was eight, she began helping out her mother in the store's stockroom. "I learned an incredible work ethic from her, which has been absolutely essential

to success," she says. "At dinner, we would all talk about employee issues and other things going on with the business. I watched them gauge the market, choose stock, and set prices. Mom and I would really get in the zone, working full days non-stop. At the end of the day, I'd write down how much we made in cash and charge cards to let my parents know if it had been a good day or a bad day. I saw them open a store in Charleston and then have to close it because of damage from a hurricane. A lot of what I've learned about management and values comes directly from them."

Other aspects of her character developed along with the muscle and might she built through rowing, a sport she picked up in eighth grade. Beginning in a single, she became an avid racer, eventually moving on to a double with her friend, Maura Bailey. The girls hired a coach, trained mercilessly, beat all the local challengers, and picked up a habit of traveling in search of competition. Once they won the high school nationals competition in Delaware, they set their sights on making the junior national team. Up to that point, Jen's success was founded in economy of movement, but she eventually hit a wall because she wasn't as tall as other rowers. Undeterred, she decided to switch to coxing, placing her in the stern of the boat to coordinate the power and rhythm of the rowers. With that position came new responsibility, and a new perspective on life and work. "My job was to help make each person in that boat be the best they could be, "she explains. "I was a good coxswain because I had been a rower, so I knew what the rowers were going through. I had been in their shoes and knew what was going through their mind, so I wasn't just barking orders. I learned you're a much more effective leader when you've been in the trenches vourself."

The junior nationals race was held in Munich, and though Jen found one door closed for her due to her height, she found another open as she realized there was a whole world out there. She had college on her mind, and she began to consider schools that had academic programs and rowing programs of equal caliber—schools like Harvard, Princeton, and Georgetown. At different points in time, she envisioned her future taking different forks. She wanted to be an astronaut and went to space camp twice, and also held ambitions to be president. As well, musical theater inspired

in her a love of theater so strong that she told her father she was going to become an actor. By that time, however, she had gained admittance to Georgetown, and she compromised by agreeing to get her business degree first.

Jen never did pursue acting professionally, though she auditioned for American Idol in 2005. "It wasn't about winning," she reflects. "It was about being gutsy, which is my life mantra. I always want to go big or go home. If there's an opportunity, I'm going to go for it. You've got to take those risks and chances in life. Long odds have never scared me—actually, they empower me and make me want to prove them wrong." It's a philosophy that drives her to excel with her clients today, focusing on their "superpower"—that one word that reflects who they are and gives them clarity for how they make decisions.

Though Jen didn't come to identify her own superpower word-gutsy-until later in life, its influences shows through around the edges of her choice to attend Georgetown. Globallyminded, the school's elite ranking was matched with an atmosphere that immediately felt like home to Jen. She had loved growing up in prejudiced Augusta, but the undertones permeating her community were disheartening. "I remember a time in middle school, when I was touring with our church choir," she reflects. "We stopped at church in Annapolis with a predominantly black congregation, and several of the families had arranged to host us for the night. Most of the choir members wouldn't do it, refusing to accept the hospitality simply because these nice families were black. I was shocked and heartbroken that people could be so trapped in the past." It was then that Jen decided she wanted to get out of the south. Once she left Georgia, she never looked back.

Her horizon expanded even further during her junior year of college, when she studied abroad in Vienna. It quickly earned a place in her heart as her favorite city in the world, allowing her to see her home country with new eyes as she incorporated the perspectives of the many people she came to call friends. "Talking to people from Austria, Turkey, Georgia, Germany, Slovakia, and all over, I saw new and great things about America, but also things we can work to fix," she remarks. "It was the first global perspective I had gotten, and an opportunity to learn about world history that wasn't U.S.-centric. I visited the

Republic of Georgia as well, where I met the former head of the Georgian KGB and witnessed firsthand a former Soviet Union country. It was a totally different world."

When Jen graduated from Georgetown, she thought she might go into international business, but instead landed a job as a frontline manager at Capital One Bank in Richmond, Virginia. Managing a team of 24 people at the age of 22 had its challenges, especially when her counterpart was a 60-year-old gentleman who wasn't readily able to see a young college graduate as an equal. Still, as Jen learned the subtle nuance of integrating into a workforce, the two developed a mutual respect.

Jen advanced from production, payment processing, to embossing, but she had her sights set on breaking into the marketing space. She also dreamed of moving to Northern Virginia, where she often visited her boyfriend, Jerrod. Both goals were realized when he asked her to marry him and she landed a job on a Capital One marketing team in McLean. She spent the next several years taking the lead on developing marketing materials, customer doing segmentation, building direct mail and telemarketing campaigns, and working as a product manager. She was then promoted to Chief of Staff, which challenged her to run a team and steer its communication and culture, and then to Director, where she took on more of a strategic role. "That's when I transitioned from being a doer to being a leader," she reflects. "I had a team of product managers reporting to me, all of whom I'm still friends with to this day. It was a great company that truly shaped and molded me as a leader and thinker."

As she approached her ten-year anniversary with Capital One, however, she decided it was time to step back and get her bearings. She had had a good run, but she knew it was time to move on to something else, and she resolved to make that move with serious reflection and intentionality. "I realized I didn't want to work in the corporate chain anymore," she remembers. "I wanted to go do my own thing. I knew I was here for a reason, and I wanted to get really clear on what that was." Through that transitionary period, and all through her career, Jerrod has remained a true rock and invaluable sounding board, never once holding her back. "He has a quiet intelligence and strength," she says.

"He thinks so differently than I do, and that's one of the things I love most about him."

Jen gave birth to her second son, Logan, and did some marketing for a Children's Media Company while spending time with the baby and her first son, Wyatt. Having majored in International Management and HR in college, Jen knew she wanted to work with people and companies to make a difference, and she had realized later in life a true love of learning that compelled her to return to school. With that, she landed a spot in Georgetown's Executive MBA program, embarking on a journey that became so much more than learning business finances and general management. It marked one of the greatest turning points of her life-the moment she truly took control of her destiny and embraced the "gutsy" superpower.

In many ways, the executive MBA program resembled her experience in Vienna, designed to open her mind and expose her to global thinking beyond the day-to-day. The program entailed international residencies in India and Turkey, where she opted to spend four months working with entrepreneurs and small business owners. "I realized my strong passion for working with people who were trying to break into a new market," she says. "I'd help them assess every single aspect of their business, and I then put this to work in a business planning residency, entailed a venture capitalist pitch competition. My team didn't necessarily have the top students in the class, but we were the bestfunctioning team, and I learned how valuable that can be. We took the time to walk through every piece of the project as if we were really going to launch it. We did hardcore market research, got the numbers, talked to partners, put together our story, and actually won the competition, landing two offers of actual investment."

Though the program's students were brilliant, Jen noticed that many of them didn't know how to present their story and skills as they looked to pivot into a new role post graduation. She knew she wanted to pursue an entrepreneurial career in marketing and strategy, but the work she began doing to help her own classmates sparked her interest in personal branding. "My classmates had invested all this time and money in pivoting, but they didn't know how to show other people what they were capable of," she reflects. "They didn't know how to build credibility or tell their

story. That's when I started researching personal branding, and I just fell in love with it."

BrandMirror has since built up credibility and reputation of its own, with a story to tell that inspires even those who are most disillusioned by their workplaces. The company was nominated for a Small Business of the Year Award in Loudon County, and Jen has plans to grow it into a small tour de force. She complements this work as the Vice Chair of Homestretch, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering homeless families in Virginia to find their own voices and purpose through achieving stability and self-sufficiency. The organization signs two-year contracts with homeless families, wherein they provide housing, credit counseling, job training, employment placement, or scholarship assistance, in exchange for a genuine commitment to succeeding. The accompanying Kidstretch program provides childcare for adults as they work to develop the skills they need to land a job, helping adults address the root causes of homelessness. The program has a proven success rate, with 90 percent of its families escaping the cycle of poverty within the two-year program. "The stories these families have to tell are mind blowing, and I find it extremely rewarding that every dollar that goes in acts as a springboard for these families to become self-sustaining citizens again," Jen remarks.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Jen stresses the importance of thinking bigger. Daring to reach means diverting one's path from the ordinary to the extraordinary and rendering the farfetched achievable. Keeping one's eyes on the horizon in this manner should be matched with a self awareness and diplomacy that allows one to meld gracefully into a workplace dynamic. "Respect the people that are there and remember that everyone has value to add," she says. "Figure out what you love to do, what reputation you want to build, and why."

A respectful nature and diplomatic demeanor are nothing, however, without a voice and a vocation. "The clients I've enjoyed working with the most, and the people in life who really inspire me, are those who are truly impact-driven," Jen affirms. "They might need help articulating it, or honing in on the strategy behind it, but they all have that hunger to go out and do something. They're lit with that internal fire. Hearkening back to my days performing

Shakespeare, it's never a question of, 'To be or not to be?' It's always about, how to be—as clearly, authentically, and intentionally as possible."

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