

Wanda Alexis Alexander

Lady of the Year

The auditorium filled with applause so thunderous that Wanda Alexander couldn't even hear her name as it was called. Her friend nudged her, and when she looked up, she saw that the high school tenth and eleventh graders were waving at her, the teachers in the bleachers were clapping, and her senior classmates were giving her a standing ovation. By the time she made her way to the podium, the swell of love had brought tears to her eyes.

That year, Wanda had quit the basketball and volleyball teams so she'd have time to work a job at the mall. She had gotten the job so she could afford new clothes, with the ultimate goal of winning Best Dressed when she graduated in June. Everyone voted, including the teachers. Much to Wanda's dismay, the Best Dressed award was given to someone else that night, but much to her surprise, she was given a different honor: Lady of the Year. "At the time, the meaning of the award didn't register for me," she remembers today. "Everyone saw me, except me. But I've grown up into her. I was always that lady; I just didn't know it. Now I get it."

Today, Wanda is the President and CEO of Horizon Consulting, Inc., a mortgage and real estate consulting firm with an expertise in single-family FHA loans, and through that leadership position, she works to empower others to see the good in themselves that might otherwise go overlooked. All those years ago, she never would have identified herself as Lady of the Year, but thanks to the insight imparted to her through classmates and teachers, she has become that lady. "Years ago, I had the great honor of meeting my lifelong hero, Maya Angelou," Wanda says. "She once said, 'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.' My life's goal is to empower others to identify those internal stories so they can be told. To me, that's a crucial aspect of

leadership."

Horizon was built from the ground up with this vision in mind. Wanda was running a multi-family division for a real estate company in the early 1990's, wielding her powers of negotiation through workouts on defaulted and foreclosed HUD-insured properties. Then, one day in 1993, a coworker, Stephen Coakley, took her out to lunch to ask if she'd go into business with him. "I asked if he was mistaking me for someone who didn't appreciate a check that clears every two weeks," she laughs. "The answer was no, but I was willing to help him."

Suddenly, at the end of 1993, tragedy struck a week before Christmas when three of Wanda's close friends were in a car accident. Two lost their lives, while the third lost 85 percent of the use of her legs. "It woke me up," Wanda avows. "I asked myself, what am I doing with my life? The stress of my job had begun to manifest itself physically, culminating in surgery that same

December, and I was beginning to see why people say stress can kill you. Everything culminated in the realization that that wasn't how I wanted to live."

From the time she was a little girl, Wanda knew she'd work hard in life and earn a good living, but she never aspired to own her own company. When she began to explore her options, however, a headhunter told her she had what it took. "She had me sit down and figure out how much money I had earned for my previous company," Wanda recalls. "I had never thought about it that way. She saw things in me I didn't see at the time, and she saw me get excited when my perspective shifted and I realized what was possible."

Wanda ultimately agreed to join forces with Stephen on the condition that she purchase a majority interest in the firm, and that the company



move from his basement to real office space. With that, Horizon sublet its first office in Reston, Virginia, and Wanda came on board in September of 1995. Over the next several years, they coined the phrase “high volume workflow management.” In an industry where the backroom functions of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) remain opaque, Wanda brought a nuanced understanding of the FHA single-family and multifamily products.

For years, Horizon’s team on-site at HUD’s home ownership centers reviewed every FHA loan application in the country to determine whether it got insured or rejected. “I know everyone says not to put all your eggs in one basket, but my plan from the beginning was to touch every single-family loan through our firm, and it’s worked beautifully,” Wanda affirms. “The diversifying comes with the other services we provide for single-family loans, like auditing and valuation appraisals.”

Horizon began as a contractor, but as it brought more and more to the table, Wanda and her team raised themselves to consultants, and have advised on a number of HUD initiatives. Now, they’ve graduated to trusted advisor status, an honor that speaks directly to the highly conscientious attitude Wanda brings to her work. “I teach my team that every single loan they touch has a history and represents a family,” she says. “One loan might represent an elderly couple who wants to live their lives out comfortably while still being able to afford their prescriptions. From the applicants, to the loan processor, to the underwriter, to the broker, so much energy goes into every single file. Every person who has processed a particular loan has impacted it, and my employees are some of the last people to touch it. That’s sacred. At Horizon, we understand that we’re all connected, and that we’re here to serve one another.”

Her professional philosophy draws directly from her faith, which took center stage the day her mother passed away from a heart attack when Wanda was 23. “Losing my mother moved the earth from under my feet,” she remembers. “I don’t believe that anything else has defined me more than that moment.”

Wanda had been in graduate school in the months leading up to the unexpected death, but had left her apartment and resigned from her job in March at her mother’s urging. Mrs. Alexander

had asked Wanda to move home so she could concentrate on her classes full time. Wanda’s two older sisters had married and moved away from the family’s home in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Her younger brother was a senior in college, and her younger sister was fifteen. “I’ll never forget the way my sister’s voice sounded on the phone when she called to tell me something was wrong with Mom, and that I needed to come to the hospital,” Wanda recalls. “It was cloudy that day, but on the way there, I saw the sun come out. I had the sense of a voice saying, ‘Your mother is with me.’ I knew she was gone, and in that moment, I learned that God was real, and that we’re all connected in this way we don’t understand.”

When her mother disappeared, Wanda stepped into her role without missing a beat, displaying the fearlessness that has been a hallmark of her character from the time she was a little girl. Born in Washington, D.C., Wanda’s steadfast commitment to going after what she wanted in life was first demonstrated when she was three years old, playing with her older sisters out front of their apartment on I Street Northeast. Most children got excited when the ice cream man came to the neighborhood, but Wanda’s true love was the balloon man. “Whenever I’d see those beautiful colors come into view down the street, I’d go crazy,” she laughs. “Then one day, I disappeared. My mom had the entire neighborhood and the police department out looking for me.”

Three neighborhoods away, a lady noticed a small girl trailing along behind the balloon man and called the police. Before long, a police car pulled up in front of the Alexanders’ house with Wanda in the backseat, balloon in hand. “I was fearless—I went after what I wanted, and I got it,” she remembers.

It was that same fearlessness that compelled her to start skipping school when she was six years old—not because she was a bad child, but because the classes didn’t stimulate her. Her older sisters were in a different wing of the school, and she’d wave at them through the window of their classroom. In first grade, she would convince her friend Gwen to accompany her down the road to a hot dog restaurant with spinning stools. “I never had any money, but I always got a hot dog,” she muses. “There were always people looking out for me; I just didn’t

realize it at the time.”

It was that same year that she got caught by her father, whom she idolized. Not wanting to disappoint him, she abandoned her roaming ways and committed to spending her school days at school. Then the family moved to Prince George’s County, Maryland, and Wanda watched her all-black classroom transform into an all-white environment. “I had a lot of great experiences there, and I always had the feeling that I needed to prove myself, which was ultimately a good thing,” she remarks today. “No one ever had to tell me to do my homework or study, because I wanted to be the best. I would notice the smartest people around me, and I’d focus my attention on them.”

Through it all, Wanda dreamed of being in charge. She dreamed of excelling in a professional environment and earning promotions for hard work, someday living in a nice house and traveling the world. But she never framed this dream in terms of leadership, and easily overlooked the instances in her life where her leadership qualities shone through. When she was fourteen, she worked at a daycare, where she and the other interns were responsible for making sure children took naps and had their milk and cookies. Wanda naturally went into leadership mode, dividing the tasks among the interns and directing them as needed to conquer the challenge. Within a week, she was formally put in charge of managing her peers.

Even outside of work environments, she was the organizer at church and Sunday School, and was always trying to be in charge when playing with her siblings and friends. In class, she wasn’t afraid to fight for justice, even if it meant standing up to a teacher who was picking on a student unfairly. “My parents always taught us that people see excellence, so we needed to operate in excellence,” she remembers. “I never thought about leadership as a gift, and I never saw myself as a natural leader, but looking back, I realize that other people saw those things in me.”

As Wanda made her way through high school, the administration had to design a whole new mathematics course curriculum because she was too smart for the classes they offered. She participated in Latin Club and the Yearbook Club, and she graduated a member of the National Honor Society. Neither of her parents had graduated from college, but they raised their children with the understanding that higher

education would be an essential part of their future. “I never felt pressure; I just knew it would happen,” she says. With that, she enrolled at the University of Maryland, planning to use her brilliance in numbers to earn an accounting degree.

But college, in all its glory, wasn’t enough for Wanda. Even as she dove into the experience and relished it for all it had to offer, she was eager to get a leg up in the world through genuine work experience, landing a job first at the Department of Labor and then with the National Corporation for Housing Partnerships (NCHP). “I was living la vida loca—a social butterfly who was traveling to DC three days a week for work,” she remembers. “I was President of the Sweetheart Club for the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity, earning the nickname ‘The Godmother’ because I was always there for people to talk to. At the time, I hated that name because it wasn’t sexy, but looking back, it was another instance of my true self shining through.”

With so much going on in her life, and with the inflated academic ego she had built up in high school, Wanda began picking and choosing which of her classes she would attend based on whether she liked the professor or the subject matter. She shouldn’t have been surprised when, as a junior, she received a notice that she’d been kicked out due to academic probation from dropping classes at will, but she was. At the advice of her mother, she set up a meeting with the Dean of the Business School, who she’d taken several classes with.

When Wanda walked into the room for the meeting, the Dean said he’d been waiting for her. He was happy to strike a bargain to readmit her to the university, and he posed a question to her that nobody else ever had. “For the first time in my life, someone looked me in the eye and asked me what I loved to do,” she remembers. “I realized that I love to connect with people and help them find that ‘Aha!’ moment for themselves. I believe everybody is born good, without exception, but sometimes, life interferes and prevents them from seeing or feeling or believing that. I had a gift for listening to people to hear what they weren’t saying, and to provide leadership to those in need. I had wanted to become an accountant because I was good at numbers, and because I would make a good living that way, but I realized that, at my core, that wasn’t my life.”

With renewed strength of spirit, Wanda

earned her bachelor's of General Studies and began working on her masters, when her mother passed. Amidst the trauma of the loss, she continued her work at NCHP. She had planned to go to law school, but when NCHP created an Asset Management Division, she knew it was the place she needed to be. Though she was just an admin at the time, she approached the Executive VP of the new division, explaining her passion and interest in his work and how she saw it as the wave of the future. Her fearlessness again led her to actively move toward her objectives, and he agreed to take her on.

Despite her success at work, Wanda still had an important lesson to learn in her personal life before she could truly begin to heal from her mother's death. Always in salvation mode, she worked so hard making sure others were taken care of that she lost herself. "Whenever anyone needed anything, I'd jump to the rescue," she recalls. "I'd make sure all the bills were paid, and all the needs were met, but I was abandoning myself. Finally, I realized it was not my responsibility to save people, but to serve them."

From that moment on, Wanda used that breakthrough to fully embrace a life of servant leadership, empowering herself to empower others. Focusing on Horizon's core principles of honesty, integrity, hard work, and professionalism, it's the legacy she shapes everyday through her firm, and it's the foundation of Wanda Alexis Alexander, LLC, a new platform through which she did twelve speaking engagements in 2013. "I get absolute and total joy out of creating things and helping others," she avows. "At the end of the day, being a CEO and building a company has allowed me to pursue my true passion, which is serving, training, coaching, and creating with others. We've built Horizon into a company of excellence, and I'm truly proud of the impact my employees and I are able to have on others, and each other."

Horizon was recognized by the Inc. 500, which Wanda certainly counts as an accomplishment, but she was far more humbled when she was named the Loudon County Business Woman of the Year in 2005. "That was amazing because I typically fly under the radar, but a lot of people in my life wrote in to the Loudon County Board of Supervisors and a woman's group to let them know that I was doing good work," she says. "It had a tremendous impact on me, both for the

support of my friends and colleagues, and for recognizing my role in how far women have come over the last generation. When I was young, my mother's credit card had my father's name on it. We're so empowered now, and I'm honored to continue fighting for women's empowerment in the workplace." Wanda has also been honored through a Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Maryland—a powerful testament to her parents' unyielding belief in their children's education.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Wanda reminds us all that, no matter our circumstances or our trials, our lives are on purpose, and our lives matter. It's the belief that compels her employees to see the tremendous meaning and honor in each day of their work, and it's the outlook that has shepherded her through good times and bad.

Above all else, however, Wanda's story is about the power of seeing in others what they can't see in themselves, and in turn trusting that others can see in you what you, yourself, haven't seen yet. If she has been able to dedicate her life to seeing the promise and potential in those around her, it's because her high school class was able to see the depth underneath her carefully-selected outfit. It's because her college classmates were able to see her character based in faith and family, rather than her more mischievous exterior. It's because her parents, teachers, coworkers, and friends didn't always see disobedience and bad behavior, but instead a spirited and fearless young lady who faced the world head on. And it's because Maya Angelou, in their brief meeting, took both her hands, looked her in the eyes, and said, "My God, girl, you're beautiful. I'm not talking about out here—I'm talking about in there."

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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