

Gunilla Girardo

The Drive to Discover

Growing up on a modest farm in a small town in western Sweden, Gunilla Girardo remembers vividly the hand-embroidered wall decoration that hung in her mother's kitchen. "If you want to know nature's true way to happiness," it read, "follow its first law: work." A strong work ethic was innate to the town, to the farm, and to Gunilla herself, and she remembers watching her parents labor from sunrise to sunset.

Her own inherent energy and drive, however, differed from the rest of the family in one key way. "Growing up in Sweden, failure was not an option, so risk taking was actively discouraged," she remembers. "We were told not to try things when we weren't certain to succeed, and if we failed, the response was, 'I told you so.' It's completely opposite of how it is in America."

Despite this culture of playing it safe, Gunilla was driven to discover the world around her and the ability within her. Upon graduating from high school, she arranged to travel abroad for the first time and came to the United States, where she experienced true independence for the first time. After becoming the first in her family to go to college, she worked with entrepreneurial companies that entrusted her with big responsibilities that led to bigger opportunities. "Unlike the climate of my upbringing, my employers expected me to overcome obstacles, seize opportunities, and stretch myself beyond my comfort zone," she says. "I loved being challenged in that way and working in a culture where I felt empowered to succeed."

Now the President and CEO of Mentor Foundation USA, Gunilla knows that not everyone gets to experience that kind of empowerment. Over the last fifteen years, over half a million people have died in the U.S. from drug abuse, and 91 Americans die each day from opioid overdoses alone. In the name of these lost lives, she works today to turn that tide, connecting with young

people to help them realize within themselves the drive to discover a better future. "My core purpose is to empower everyone to succeed, whether at the organizational or individual level," she says. "It's what I've always done, and it's what I'll continue to do."

Mentor Foundation was founded in 1994 by Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden as an evidence-based drug prevention program geared at preventing drug abuse in youth by helping them realize their potential. The largest organization of its kind in the world, the Swiss-registered entity now has affiliate members in nine countries and projects in eighty. It began its work in the U.S. in 2010, and Gunilla was recruited in 2014 to join as Mentor Foundation USA's first CEO.

Under her leadership, the Foundation's activities are now organized into one prevention platform with two pillars. The first pillar covers its career mentoring programs, which are geared toward underserved high school youth. "When you add a caring adult into a young person's life, the risk factors for drug use are cut in half because they're less likely to drop out of school," she explains. "There are 8.5 million young people in the U.S. that are without a caring adult in the lives. 3 million drop out of high school every year. Mentoring is universally seen as one of the best prevention tools."

The Foundation's mentoring program started in the DC area as an effort to recruit people from the business community to visit schools twice a month, but later pivoted to instead transport groups of local high school students to companies that have "adopted" them. "We bring the career-based mentoring curriculum, which instructs the students in goal-setting, communications, interview skills, and resume writing," Gunilla says. "All we ask of the mentors is that they show up and care." The Foundation's career mentorship program has now spread to Baltimore, New York



City, and parts of Pennsylvania.

The Foundation's second pillar is made up of three peer-to-peer prevention programs, all designed to provide platforms so young people can speak up and speak out. "The idea is to help them become their own advocates for drug prevention and healthy choices, giving them the tools to make the right decision in the moment if they're offered drugs or alcohol," Gunilla says. The first program, *Shattering the Myths*, is a collaboration with the National Institute on Drug Abuse that empowers youth through discussions with scientists, parents who have lost children to drug abuse, and young people in recovery. These discussions are augmented by slam poetry performances where youth use spoken word poems to describe issues of importance to them.

The Youth Ambassador Network, another peer-to-peer program of the Foundation, trains around twenty students per school in leadership and social media. These students then design peer-driven change projects and are given small stipends to implement them school-wide. The Foundation partners with George Washington University on the curriculum and measures peer engagement and social media activity. The final peer-to-peer program, *Living the Example*, is a collaboration with H&M to create a video contest spurring submissions from digital youth ambassadors all across the U.S. "We know there's a horrible drug epidemic, and that kids are dying every day," Gunilla says. "But the fact is, most kids are not doing drugs, and we need to promote them as great examples. It's an innovative counter-marketing approach that is for youth, by youth."

Reflecting back on her own youth, Gunilla was never subject to much of the peer and societal pressure experienced by today's young people. Her challenges instead came from a lack of exposure to all the good and bad the world had to offer, and from the pervasive attitude that little girls could do little more than dream of a future as a farmer's wife. "Today, if someone says I can't do something, I try to prove them wrong," she says. "But as a child, I had to build that confidence and understanding that more was possible."

Gunilla had a happy childhood growing up in rural West Sweden with two brothers, one older and one younger. Her father had taken over the family dairy farm when he was only fifteen, and the whole family was expected to pitch in to manage the endless list of chores and projects of

farm labor. "Every Saturday, we had to rake the gravel yard and the alley, which was lined with forty maple trees," she says. "It was nice growing up around nature, and I never missed the chance to see a cow giving birth."

As a child, Gunilla enjoyed school, singing in the choir, and attending church group. She had several close friends in town and spent her time doing chores, studying, and practicing drawing and design. She was always the first one up and enjoyed having breakfast with her parents, where she started drinking coffee at age four. Despite having only four years of formal education, Gunilla's father was an industrious farmer and community builder. Her mother, who still lives on the farm today, is a patient and selfless woman.

Gunilla's parents hoped their daughter would grow up to marry a farmer and perhaps become a teacher, but beyond that, there wasn't much discussion about dreams and aspirations. Her aunt Astrid, who chose not to marry, lived in the city and had an office job. "She was good with numbers and investing, and enjoyed collecting art," Gunilla remembers. "She exposed me to a different way of life that I found fascinating. Aside from that, I didn't have any mentors and really didn't know what path I should pursue in life. I identified most with stories of my grandfather, an entrepreneurial businessman who died the year I was born. I had an energy and drive, and I knew I wanted them to take me places. I felt I had a bigger purpose somehow, and I knew that if I stayed in that small town forever, I would suffocate."

Gunilla got her first job at age fifteen as a cook in a nursing home. When she started high school, she had to travel to a larger city nearby, where she met kids who had experienced life beyond West Sweden and even beyond the European continent. She learned about opportunities to work as au pairs in other countries, and knew a friend of a friend who had worked as an au pair in Florida. Through an interview process, she lined up a family in Florida of her own and planned to leave Sweden the October after she graduated. "I told my parents two weeks before I was scheduled to go, only after I had set everything up and bought my plane ticket," she says. "I arrived at night and woke up the next morning to palms and orange trees. I had never been in a tropical environment before."

When her year as an au pair came to an end, Gunilla returned home to Sweden and

learned to sew fine men's clothing. She worked in the factory for nine months, sewing tuxedos and honing her patience. She later worked in a home for disabled individuals and then decided to enroll at the University of Gothenburg. It opened up a new world of connections and possibilities, and Gunilla became very engaged and social. She studied English, communications, media, and law, joined the choir, and worked as a florist—a creative job she came to love.

Upon earning her degree in communications and media, Gunilla's first professional experience came when she took a summer job as a language school teacher in England. She then decided she needed practical training in an office environment, and with her aunt's sponsorship, she accepted an unpaid internship at a boutique PR firm in Washington, DC. There, she discovered the dynamic world of networking—something that wasn't done in Sweden. She was then recruited for a telemarketing job selling expensive educational programs—a position she undertook with so much success that she was quickly promoted to Program Director. In that capacity, she managed large programs in France, Germany, England, and Spain. "The company was very entrepreneurial, and they gave me a ton of responsibility for a young graduate," she says.

After four years in that capacity, Gunilla and her husband—an American—decided they wanted to move to the U.S. "We had three boxes of things and \$5,000 to our name at the time," she remembers. "He got a job as a chef, and I didn't know a lot of people, so I relied on my networking skills to start over." She landed a communications manager position with the Industrial Designer Society of America, working as their editor, membership manager, and liaison working with the leaders of their 84 chapters. "It was a great environment where I learned how to build organizations through event management and marketing," she recounts. "I didn't understand the hierarchy protocol that's typical in American workplaces, so anytime I had an idea, I walked into my boss's office and told him. Although I was stepping on toes, he loved it, and I still keep in touch with many of those members today."

When Gunilla had her first child, she took a job as the Program Director for a grassroots organization in DC. She was also a member of the Swedish American Chamber of Commerce and the

Swedish Women's Organization to stay connected with her roots. When she came across an advertisement that the Chamber was looking for a President and CEO, she decided to put in an application to see what would happen, though she didn't imagine they'd ever consider her because she hadn't studied economics. Much to her surprise, Gunilla received a call the next day and had a phone interview for which she was completely unprepared. She was then brought in for a face-to-face interview, landing the job. She was flown to Sweden to meet the board—impressive executives she had read about in business magazines.

While it was a tremendous opportunity for someone so young, Gunilla soon came to realize just how challenging the role would be. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into," she admits. "I thought it was a healthy, wealthy, no-internal-politics organization. When I took office the week after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I quickly realized that we were a scattered, decentralized network with bad politics and bad debt."

Gunilla's second child was only four months old at the time, and she had a single assistant to help deliver on the ambitious goals set by the Chamber's driven chairman. She set to cleaning up the organization, unifying the network and creating programs that brought real value back to the chambers and succeeded in stimulating trade and commerce between the U.S. and Sweden. She organized trade missions, orchestrated business matchmaking, and established a State Department-approved program to bring recent graduates from Sweden to the U.S. for internships and trainings. In her ten-year tenure, with limited resources, she grew the organization into the second largest European Chamber of Commerce.

Gunilla's time at the Chamber was career-transforming and life-changing, but also taxing. Working sixty hours a week and traveling to Sweden almost monthly was especially challenging with her two young children, Elsa and Sven, to care for. She had divorced and was now a single mother, and decided one day that it was time to change. "Once I made that decision, I resigned," she says. "Within one month, I was offered a job at a consulting company for executive coaching and continued serving on boards. I then worked at a smaller consultancy for a government contractor. It was a good period to experience

other lines of work and to figure out my core purpose. I wanted to be able to articulate why I do what I do. That's when I connected with my life's work of empowering everyone to succeed."

In 2013, Gunilla caught the eye of Mentor Foundation USA with her track record of transformative success at the Chamber, and with her good reputation and entrepreneurial brand. She was known as someone who could build a valuable organization with limited resources, and someone with the business network key to achieving the Foundation's goals. "I saw it as an opportunity to accomplish my dream of building an organization and implementing programs that have a meaningful impact," she says. "When I accepted the position, I was charged with making the organization more accessible and portable. Now that we've achieved that, our challenge is to scale and find the staff needed to implement our programs. It's the best assignment I've ever had, and I'm excited to see what we can accomplish in the next several years to make our programs more accessible to kids across the U.S."

In the summer of 2016, Gunilla faced the Foundation's biggest opportunity yet when they were invited to pitch for the Structured Finance Industry Group (SFIG), an organization of 350 members including the largest financial institutions in the US. The group had decided they wanted to invest in young people, and Mentor Foundation USA was selected for that investment amidst heavy competition from much bigger organizations.

Thanks to a scholarship program the Group set up for the Foundation's youth ambassadors and mentees, Gunilla and her team will be able to give out \$250,000 in scholarships in 2017, with plans to expand in the future. The assistance will be life-changing for the young people in their programs, and marks a new stage of achievement for the Foundation itself. "Our success stems from four drivers," she explains. "One, the need is there, and it's acute. Two, our programs are innovative and evidence-based. Three, we're recognized by the White House Office for Drug Control Policy and by the National Institute on Drug Abuse as a key partner in prevention, despite being a relatively small organization. And four, we have good corporate and foundation partners. Now, with these new scholarships from the SFIG Foundation and a significant research grant from the Conrad and

Hilton Foundation, we're poised to take off."

In advising young people entering the working world today, including the seventy interns she's had over the years, Gunilla underscores the importance of taking the time to travel and engage in cross-cultural experiences. But she has more advice for the older generations who can learn so much when they take the time to invest in young people. "It's important for every professional to stay connected with how the younger generation is thinking and operating," she affirms. "It keeps the organization fresh and innovative, and gives young people the opportunity to engage and contribute. If we give them a platform to speak and are willing to listen, they have a lot of great things to say."

As a leader, Gunilla excels at day-to-day, on-the-ground deliverables, but is at her best when she can take a step back to connect the dots of the bigger picture. She leads by doing, showing up every day with positive energy to help guide her team to success. And in its demanding rigor, their work is not unlike the art of embroidery she learned from her mother and aunts when she was young. "To me, embroidery symbolizes the extreme patience, care, and commitment it takes to create any complex entity of meaning and elegance," she says. "Whether you're building a business, growing a foundation, or pursuing some other goal in life, you have to undertake the tedious, detail-oriented work of building success step-by-step. Every stitch matters."

Each student touched by Mentor Foundation USA is a stitch in the work of art that Gunilla has dedicated her life to completing. Each student that chooses a future in software engineering instead of a future of opioid addiction, and each student who wants to launch a foundation for the homeless instead of taking a hit of cocaine, is a stitch in that tapestry. "The best of Mentor Foundation USA is yet to come," Gunilla says. "When young people are driven to discover a better future for themselves, the future is brighter for all of us."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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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

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The logo for Bernhardt Wealth Management is centered on the page. It features the word "BERNHARDT" in a large, elegant, black serif font. A thin horizontal line is positioned directly beneath "BERNHARDT". Below this line, the words "WEALTH MANAGEMENT" are written in a smaller, black, all-caps sans-serif font. The entire text is set against a light gray, textured rectangular background that has a subtle, repeating pattern.

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