

Kathleen M. Poorbaugh

Taking Charge while Taking Care

Even as a little girl growing up in Philadelphia, Kathy Poorbaugh was never afraid to jump in and take charge. In Girl Scouts, she was always organizing things and earning badges. In swim club, what she lacked in raw athletic talent was made up for in competitive drive that earned her ribbon after ribbon. When the nuns at school launched fundraising efforts for orphans, Kathy would volunteer to manage the collections, and she was the one who stayed after school to help the teachers clean the chalkboards.

"The nuns would have described me as driven," she says today. "I grew up in a blue collar area, and I saw most high school graduates go immediately into the workforce or military service. My parents didn't go to college, and I definitely wasn't raised thinking about my transcript and college marketability. I was just a go-getter who liked to lead."

While taking charge, Kathy also took care of others—especially her brother, six years younger. She still remembers when he started first grade at her school and came to find her in class one day just to ask her a question. When she'd go out shopping with friends, she'd always bring him back a present. "He still refers to me as his second mom," she laughs. "I looked after him a lot and always made sure he was okay."

Now the Principal and President of Homes, Lowry, Horn & Johnson, Ltd. (HLHJ), a CPA firm providing a wide range of accounting, tax, and consulting solutions in the DC metropolitan area, Kathy has come a long way from those days growing up in Philly. But her leadership style still revolves around the core tenets of taking charge while taking care, both at home with her family and at work with her fellow partners, employees, and clients. "I'm driven and inspired by the fact that our work helps people all throughout their lives," she says. "It's not about

the number crunching. It's about being with our clients through life's great inflection points, easing the ensuing adjustment in any way we can."

HLHJ was launched by Gene Homes in 1956 and has grown organically ever since. Serving both businesses and individuals, multigenerational family clients are a big key to their success, including estate and trust work. They also have a strategic three-year succession model for their retiring partners, where clients are co-managed by the retiring and new partner to ensure continuity.

And after that three-year window, the retiring partner is free to continue assisting with the firm. "Mr. Lowry stayed on semi-retired for nineteen years," Kathy says. "It's so helpful to our staff because they get to see the firm's history and benefit from the mentorship of those who have lifelong experience to share."

As a leader, Kathy ensures the firm is always cognizant of its up-and-coming talent, and is firmly committed to a silos-free organization. The firm's five full-time partners share clients freely and help wherever needed, a model that shores up any blind spots or weaknesses for the benefit of the clients. "Rivalry doesn't have a place here," she says. "We're not a sweatshop where people log 80-hour weeks. It's not the up-and-out mentality of a lot of the bigger firms, where people burn out and move on. Our employees tend to stay with us a long time, and we like to help them grow if they want to move to the partner level."

Today, HLHJ is a team of 35. It serves the four business niches of government contracting, real estate, car dealers, and retirement plan audits, but also has expertise in a range of other professional services and organizations. "I especially love when startups come to us with an idea and ask, 'now what?'" she remarks. "It's very rewarding to help cultivate those ideas into



successful businesses. But my proudest accomplishments are those clients who have followed me over the years and through my various career transitions. It says a lot about the relationships we've built."

HLHJ's culture is remarkably inclusive and places a high premium on work/life balance. Each month, the company does a "jeans day for charity" day, where employees can decide how they want to give back. They do an annual afternoon of service working on a project together, and they support Toys for Tots. On both the professional and the support staff, they have more women team members than men, a true anomaly in the industry. Thanks to these factors and the firm's remarkably family-friendly vibe, it was named one of the best firms to work for by *Virginia Business Magazine*.

From her earliest days growing up in Philadelphia, it's always been about family for Kathy. Her father worked as a service representative and then a sales representative for an equipment company, while her mother was a homemaker. Both sides of her family lived in the area, and Sundays were always spent with cousins and grandparents. "One grandparent died when I was little, but the other three were around and always there to listen," she remembers. "That was very special."

Everything changed, however, when Kathy was thirteen, and her parents decided to move to Northern Virginia, where her father had to travel often for work. They settled in Chantilly, at that time a rural area, when she was in eighth grade. Kathy was devastated to leave the only life she had ever known, and especially worried about leaving her grandmother. Her parents promised that if she still hated it by the end of the first school year, she could move back to Philly to live with her grandmother, but her grandmother passed away shortly thereafter.

Kathy's Catholic School experience in Philly had been very stable, where families rarely moved and many students graduated with the same kids they started first grade with. But as a military area, Chantilly was transitory, where many students had lived around the world and would only be there for a few years. It was also a brand new school that embraced an open-classroom model, so there weren't walls, desks, or chairs when Kathy first started. "It was a big shock to go from a very structured environment to

something so fluid and different," she remembers.

Fortunately, Kathy made friends in the first couple months, and she had much success in launching a babysitting network in her new neighborhood. She also responded to the new environment by focusing even more on academics. She saw that the open classroom experience could be whatever she made of it, so while other students slacked or goofed off, she seized the opportunity to learn more and get involved. When she got into high school, people began asking where she wanted to go to college. "I was a good student, so I thought to myself, maybe I should start thinking about that," she says. "My parents encouraged me to do well and think about what I wanted to do. College was never a given, but it became a consideration."

Contemplating her future career path, Kathy had an affinity for math but didn't know what to do with it. She was advised to sign up for a high school accounting class, which she loved. "I took bookkeeping and saw that maybe I had a future in it," she remembers. "I saw many of my classmates struggle to understand, but it came very naturally to me, and I liked the order of the numbers and the fact that everything worked out."

Kathy accelerated through the school's math classes, balancing her school work with Honor Society, Government Club, and other extracurricular engagements while volunteering as the manager of the cross country team and working a part-time job at McDonalds. She earned straight A's except for two B+'s during her senior year, which she still regrets today. She thought she might pursue a career in teaching, but a few key conversations curbed her path toward accounting. "I enjoyed doing spreadsheets, and a friend's father took the time to tell me all the things I could do with an accounting degree," she recalls. "Even then, I thought about how it would be a really good job to have as a mother because I could go part-time and still be very successful."

Upon graduating, Kathy enrolled at the College of William & Mary with the goal of majoring in accounting. Her best friend enrolled as well, and the two were roommates for three of the four years there. Kathy helped cover costs by doing work-study during the school year and working full-time in the summers. In fact, it was the summer after her freshman year, while working for AAA, that she met Sam, the man she has now been married to for over three decades.

For the most part, Kathy's college days were happy, filled with studying, synchronized swimming, accounting club, and dates with Sam. But her worldview underwent a profound shift during her junior year, when she found out her parents were getting divorced. The news broke the weekend before Thanksgiving, and though Kathy had her coursework to think about, she immediately took charge to take care of her family. "I was always very financially literate, keeping close track of my money and always making sure my checkbook was balanced," Kathy says. "My mother had never done any of that. When my father left, she had no money and no credit card. I could tell she was kind of falling apart, so I rushed home to help."

At that time, it was difficult for a 40-year-old woman with no credit history to open a credit card, but easy for a college student. Kathy didn't know much about credit at the time, but she opened a card and added her mother's name. She helped her mother open her own checking account and made sure she was okay with each step forward. Her mother increased her part-time hours working for the Fairfax County School System, and with time, things stabilized. But Kathy's perspective and priorities were forever changed. "I didn't want to ever find myself in that position," she says. "I wanted to know I could stand on my own no matter what happened, and that I could provide for my family. It really drove me to make something of myself."

As she neared graduation, Kathy interviewed at all the big accounting firms and chose KPMG because it seemed the most grounded and family-friendly. She spent the next two years working in audit and ultimately decided she wanted to look for a role that allowed for more personal connections with clients, so she took a position with MCI. It was just as the company decided to divide from one corporate office into a handful of regional offices, and she managed key training programs while mastering the world of revenue accounting. By that time, she and Sam were married, when she had their first child, she left to spend time with her newborn daughter.

Hoping to make a little money on the side, Kathy answered an ad in the paper and went to work several hours a week doing bookkeeping and payroll for a man who had taken over the small business of his deceased son-in-law. "I'd bring my daughter to work with me and she'd sleep in a crib

in the office," Kathy remembers. "They were like grandparents to her."

Kathy also worked part-time during tax season, and soon switched from accounting and audit to tax, taking a job at the small CPA firm where her brother worked. Her son was born soon thereafter, and she would get work done at night while the kids were asleep. "It was so flexible," she says. "I had as many hours as I wanted, which was great because I still had this drive to provide so my kids could have the best in life."

Several years later, the tax division of her firm was sold to a larger firm, and Kathy was sold along with it. Her son had just started kindergarten, so she picked up more hours, working under the vision and leadership of Will Soza. From 1994 to 2001, she watched as he grew the modest CPA practice into a 1,500-person government contracting firm—without losing the culture that made the company great. "He taught me how to be great to clients," she says. "Even though we had these multi-million dollar contracts, the \$500 individual client was valued just as highly. Later on, when I worked in bigger firms, I remembered the lesson that everyone is important, not just the clients bringing in the most money. He also taught me that, while it's easy to be somebody's friend, business is business at the end of the day. You've got to stay pragmatic and do what's best for the company overall. I'm lucky to have had a lot of great mentors through the years—people who believed in me and helped drive my career forward."

By the time her kids were in high school, she was still working part-time but was racking up so many hours that she was close to being made partner. After consulting together as a family, Sam decided to leave the world of programming to stay at home, freeing up Kathy to fully embrace the career opportunities before her at HLHJ. "Family has always been number one for me," she affirms. "Going full-time and becoming partner was just another way of showing that and ensuring I could provide for them."

When Will was ready to retire, he sold the government contracting group to Perot Systems. The firm's small CPA practice, then around twenty people, went to Kathy and a fellow partner. "He was the stern fatherly type, and the accounting firm was near and dear to his heart," she says. "He made us rent a space in the building he owned and would drop by to make sure we were doing

everything right and taking care of his clients. It was a great experience, but we were twelve people with some really big clients, and it got hard to manage.”

In 2005, they merged with a regional firm, where Kathy worked for the next three years under the excellent mentorship of Clark Childers. Then, in 2008, she got to know HLHJ and saw that it was the perfect fit for her. “I wasn’t actively looking at the time, but I was very impressed by their constructive and supportive workplace culture,” she says. “People were working insane hours at my firm, and there was a lot of strain. They also wanted me to focus on selling and bringing in more clients, rather than serving the clients we did have. That just wasn’t working for me.”

Kathy loved the idea of a medium-sized firm where she would know all her staff, meet with any client she wanted to meet with, and do practice development on her own terms, so she accepted the position. Several years later, she stepped up to assume the role of President—a pragmatic choice that made the most sense for the firm’s succession plan and for Kathy’s own skill set. “It’s a great position where I’m working to implement ideas that will help us move forward,” she says. “As a firm, we’re always thinking about longevity and how we can improve our processes. It’s also important to transition the leadership team just as we transition the clients, so I look forward to passing my role on to a younger partner in the future.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Kathy underscores the importance of lifelong learning, and of nurturing relationships. “Be a sponge,” she urges. “Stay in touch with people you went to school with or knew at other points in your life, because those relationships matter. Remember that life doesn’t

have to be all work, though you do have to put in the time. Keep growing and learning, like I did several years ago when I got my Master of Science in Taxation degree. There are lots of ways to keep learning, whether it’s formal education or simply observing and asking questions of the people around you.”

Beyond that, Kathy drives forward without ever losing sight of what matters most. Her two children are now grown up and married, and Kathy and Sam were thrilled to welcome their first grandchild into the world in 2016. “Family is what keeps me going, and it all stems back to the relationship I have with my husband,” she says. “We’ve been very supportive of each other throughout our careers. Sam is my rock—quiet, even-keeled, and always there to listen. He makes sure everyone is taking care of, from our parents to our kids to our dog. We take charge and take care of things together as a team, and it’s made all the difference.”

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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 and [Gordon’s Blog](#).