Sophia Jyeh-Shin Parker

The More You Give

It was the most torrential typhoon Sophia had seen in her six short years of life, and the water mark had risen above the window of their cramped and modest home in Taiwan. Her aging father opened the hatch in the ceiling that led to the roof and passed her up through the opening, then handed up her younger brother and sister.

Up above, she saw all her neighbors on their own adjoining rooftops, huddled together around candles. Her father had brought up with him a serving of white rice for the family, and he

reached into his pocket to pull out a jar of pickles.

As they huddled around to eat, a young boy walked over from a neighboring rooftop. His father had sent him over to see if Sophia's father had anything to share. Without a moment's hesitation, her father opened the pickle jar and poured the pickle juice over the rice. He closed the jar and handed it to the boy without a word.

Today, Sophia is the founder and CEO of DSFederal Inc.,

federal contracting firm specializing healthcare Washington, in impoverished childhood belongs to another time, and the typhoons of Taiwan are now a world away, but the power and meaning of that moment are as alive and impactful now as they were all those years ago. "My father couldn't have known how that simple action would change my life, and it took many years for me to realize what a defining moment it was for me," she explains now. "But in that moment, I learned to be a giver. When you give, suddenly you create. A jar of pickles is no longer just a jar of pickles-it's a symbol. It's a gift that stirs in your memory forever. The more you give, the more you have."

This is perhaps most evident in the accomplishments of the DSF-IDEA Foundation, the philanthropic arm of DSFederal named for its core value acronym of IDEA: Integrity, Delivering

results, Everyone matters, and Always honor your words. Twenty-five percent of the firm's profits goes to this arm to be distributed to charities close to the hearts of Sophia and her staff—most notably programs offering early education access to underserved children. The Foundation recently paid for fourteen children and sixteen adults to travel to DC from Lesotho to perform at a charity event at a local high school, and also supports organizations like Doctors Without Borders. It has funded work to provide educational opportunities

to Syrian refugees, and bathrooms for female teachers in Afghanistan who are otherwise forced to wait until they get home at the end of the day.

This 25-percent giving policy has been in place since DSFederal's inception in November of 2007. With the economic downturn of 2008 looming on the horizon, it wasn't an ideal climate to start a federal contracting firm, but Sophia saw the company through that and subsequent hardships,

including sequestration and the government shutdown. "It's never been an easy climate for us to do business, and in a way, that's been a blessing for me," she says. "We've always kept ourselves agile and lean."

Sophia has persevered through good times and bad by focusing on taking care of her customers and employees, and on why she started the business in the first place. "DSFederal is about making the world a better place," she affirms. "Everything we do has to be done, at its core, with integrity. It's how we treat our partners and clients. It's how we carry ourselves. We believe in the power of purpose. We believe that doing things because you believe in them, and supporting customers whose mission you believe in, attracts the best talent and keeps you going through tough times."

Today, most of DSFederal's clients are in

the healthcare space-a sector Sophia has been passionate about since she first started working in federal contracting in 1999. Notably, the company has 21 projects within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with three of those supporting the Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) in its work to improve health in rural and underserved communities. DSFederal designs programs, builds databases, and runs data analytics for life-changing efforts like Healthy Start, which supports low-income young mothers in rural areas as they care for their babies. "I enjoy helping our clients solve complex issues," Sophia says. "And our commitment to support clients in the healthcare space really gives us a sense of mission because our work directly or indirectly improves health and cures people. That's something worth getting up for every morning."

Specializing in advanced IT solutions, DSFederal now has around a hundred employees and annual revenue around \$17 million. This success is born from the tone and culture set by Sophia, who has always believed in maintaining a business that takes care of its people. "Our employees know that I care a lot about them and their families," she says. "They know I'm going to do all I can to take care of them. They know that when I say I'm going to do something, I mean it. And they know that integrity is number one. In everything we do, we honor our word, and we hold each other accountable. All our energy is used to take care of business, serve our customers well, and give back."

Despite her marked success as a businesswoman, Sophia never imagined she'd start her own company. Her father had served in the military in China under the Chinese Nationalist Party, or KMT, until its defeat in the late 1940s. Like many in the party, he retreated to Taiwan, where he became involved with a young woman. Shortly after Sophia's birth, her mother developed schizophrenia and was either hospitalized or jailed. Her father couldn't raise the girl alone, so she was given away as a child bride to a family with a son seven years her senior.

Soon after the exchange, however, Sophia fell gravely ill. The family did not want her to die under their care, so they returned her to her father. When her health improved, he placed her in an orphanage, where she was surprised to meet her younger sister. Despite her mental illness, their

mother was strong and clever, and routinely found ways to escape her captivity. After her second daughter, she gave birth to a son, and then another son, who were given away as well. The four siblings all ended up at the orphanage together for several years, developing close bonds that continue to this day. "Conditions were very bad there, but we had each other," she recalls. "Other children had family come visit them on weekends, but we knew our father would likely not show up. We had to take care of ourselves, but it made me strong and independent."

The course of Sophia's life from that point on was set by political upheaval occurring hundreds of miles away, in nearby Burma (now Myanmar). A military coup in 1962 spurred a strong anti-Chinese movement, and Chinese residents of the failing state were given 48 hours to evacuate. Among them were eleven of her relatives-her father's cousin's widow and the woman's five children, son-in-law, and four grandchildren. "My father, endlessly kind and generous, telegrammed them from Taiwan to say that he'd take them in," Sophia recounts. "He said that as long as he had a bite to eat, they would too. And once there were more people in the house to share the responsibility of raising children, I was allowed to come home from the orphanage. I was six at the time." In this way, the tumultuous geopolitical fault lines and conflicts of whole nations shifted in such a way, and at the perfect moment, that one young Taiwanese girl was able to return home and start school on time.

Quickly, Sophia learned to cook and clean. The relatives from Burma soon found other accommodations, and she assumed the responsibility of caregiver for her father and for her siblings when they came home from the orphanage on visits. "I became very motherly," she recalls. "It's one reason it gives me so much joy to take care of my employees and their families today."

While taking care of the housework, Sophia studied prolifically and excelled in school. She took after her father, a well-educated scholar of Classical Chinese who wrote poems and mastered calligraphy. While math and science were not her strong suits, she loved writing, English, and history, earning awards for her skills in public speaking and composition. She hoped her success in school would hide the strife of her home life. "My childhood was very different from my

friends' childhoods," she reflects. "The other kids at school had both a mother and a father. When they got home from school, dinner was on the table. We never let friends come over—we didn't want them to know our mother was sick and our lives were so different. But in retrospect, I'm grateful for what those years taught me. I learned how to be a CEO at a very young age. I had to multitask, make ends meet, and be ready for whatever came our way."

This became especially true in high school, when Sophia enrolled in Taipei First Girls High School's night school so she could work during the day to help cover her family's rent and food expenses. Schoolwork and housework were babysitting balanced with jobs, selling newspapers, and working in a factory, where she was hired as a laborer and then put in charge of cooking. She attended the parent teacher conferences for her younger siblings and was very strict with them, taking on the role their real mother couldn't. She also started developing real friendships for the first time with the other girls at school—relationships she still treasures.

Sophia dreamed of being a journalist, but the college entrance exam sent her to Soochow University, a private school founded in Taiwan by Americans. She worked toward her degree in English literature and tutored to cover tuition costs. "At that school, I was introduced to a different world for the first time," she recalls. "Taiwan was still operating under martial law, so there was no freedom of speech and no rights. We started learning for the first time about corruption in our government, about censorship, and about what the world was like beyond our borders. I decided I wanted to go somewhere that was free."

Sophia didn't know anything about America at the time, but she knew she wanted to go there, and she knew education was her ticket out. When she completed her undergraduate degree, she enrolled at Illinois State University to pursue a masters in journalism and mass communication, making the life-changing move to the United States.

The summer after her first year of school, she decided to visit the East Coast with a friend and fell in love with Washington, DC. There, she started dating a diplomat and working in a Chinese restaurant, where she loaned money to a coworker who gambled it away and never paid her back. She realized she had neither the money

nor the will to return to Illinois State to finish her masters program, opting instead to stay in DC and marry the diplomat later that year. She ultimately saved enough money to pay for her family in Taiwan to fly to the U.S., and continued to help supporting them here in America.

Sophia recognized in herself a love of travel and adventure, and life as a diplomat's wife had both in spades. They were stationed in China and then Spain, where they lived in Barcelona during the 1980s as the Basque uprisings swept the region in violence. There, Sophia volunteered at a USO lounge for the seamen who came into port, and she remembers vividly the day she had just left work in a taxi with her two young children when a bomb went off inside the club. On another occasion, her husband had left the consulate for a cup of coffee when that building was bombed—an incident that could have claimed his life.

The family then returned to DC for two years, where Sophia took a job in the accounting department at a pharmaceutical nonprofit. "I had hated math in school, but I started to realize that I actually liked it," she says. "I found out they would pay for me to get my accounting degree, and that I needed that degree in order to sit for my CPA, so I decided to go for it." She worked during the day and took classes at night, just as she had done through high school. And in those late nights spent working on balance sheets, finding at the end that she had run the calculations correctly, she found a new kind of joy. "What I loved about accounting was that you didn't have to say anything," she explains. "In the end, the result speaks for itself. Either you balance, or you don't. Life works the same way. You can make excuses, but it's really about results."

After two years spent in DC, the family was assigned to Moscow, where they witnessed a coup. They were then sent to Islamabad. "A truck filled with bombs exploded as it was attempting to enter the Egyptian embassy, just down the street from where I was working," she recounts. "My kids were on the bus going to school when it happened, and they saw the bodies on the ground. We were in some very dangerous situations over the years, but I always had the feeling that we were blessed—that angels were watching over us and keeping us safe."

Sophia also savored the experiences for teaching her children empathy. The hardship they witnessed expanded their worldview and had lifelong impacts. She especially remembers the experience of volunteering at a women's prison in Islamabad, in a country where people accused of crimes were considered guilty until proven innocent. "Women and girls were often thrown in prison by their husbands and in-laws, where they were raped by the guards," she says. "It was very tragic. I brought them cooked food, clothes and books until I realized that the minute I left, the guards took everything away. So I just focused on bringing them food. You saw the worst of humanity in that place, but also the best-women coming together to help take care of the babies, and each other. It was amazing to see that love and compassion amidst the ugliness. I brought my children to the prison with me twice, and they still remember it."

Sophia passed her CPA exam in 1994, and in 1996, she and her family finally returned to the United States. She landed a job at CDSI, a company contacted to build the first government accounting system. "I had no experience working in the states, so my CPA degree really helped me get that position," she says. "I loved interacting with clients and really thrived there, accomplishing things I had no idea I could do."

The software they developed was used at both the federal and state level, so Sophia was sent to state capitals all around the nation. She learned more about federal contracting and then took a job at SAIC in 1999, where she was sent to NIH to sell PeopleSoft. There, she immediately hit it off with the NIH liaison. "She asked on the spot that I be SAIC's on-site manager for NIH, so I was put in charge of IT and the helpdesk there," Sophia says. "I knew nothing about technical support, but the customer trusted me, and I started growing like wildfire on the NIH campus, surrounded by these incredibly inspiring scientists from all over the world coming together to improve public health." She was divorced in 1999, six months after she joined SAIC.

Within two years, Sophia proved key in landing SAIC an additional \$95 million contract with NIH. Because she had earned the customer's trust, she was able to garner insights that proved crucial to SAIC's success, and she was promoted from helpdesk manager to account manager overseeing the NIH, FDA, CDC, and HRSA. She oversaw network managers, excelling not because of hard IT skills, but because she knew people. "Sometimes, the best thing you can do for a

business relationship is show a little kindness," she explains. "If you take care of your customers, your customers will take care of you. If you don't take care of them, someone else will. Taking care of people matters. Little acts of compassion can go a long way."

Though much at SAIC was going well, Sophia felt herself hit a ceiling when she brought in more than enough revenue to deserve a promotion to VP. Her manager explained to her that he was doing her a favor by not promoting her because she wasn't ready, instead handing the honor to a friend of his. As she was coping with her frustration over the old boy's club mentality of her workplace, Taiwan was developing a national healthcare system, and they extended an offer to bring Sophia over to help. She accepted, taking a leave of absence from SAIC to spend 18 months in the country of her birth.

Soon after she arrived, Sophia met Jane Liu with whom she clicked instantly, and the two became close friends. "I had never hiked before, but she loved it, so I started hiking with her," Sophia recounts. "I got to see Taiwan like I never had before. When I was young, I was focused on studying and trying to find a way out. But once I returned, I developed a whole new love for it." Sophia also spent time visiting and caring for her mother.

Finally, in April of 2006, Sophia decided it was time to return to America, lest the life she had built there fade beyond recognition and recovery. A colleague from SAIC had taken a job at Northrop Grumman and offered to bring her onboard there, so she accepted, but soon found that the company's mission didn't resonate with her at all. "I had joined the health division there, but the company was all about tanks, submarines, and airplanes," she says. "That wasn't my purpose. I didn't want to be supporting a company that was oriented around weapons, so I decided to venture off on my own and start DSFederal. I had no grand plan or strategy. I just wanted to be able to support myself and my children."

DSFederal had no business for its first three years, and Sophia worked full-time during the day as a subcontractor to another company. In the evenings, she wrote proposals, enlisting the help of her son to ensure her written English was correct. She finally certified the company as an 8(a) business, which helped land a small contract for \$300,000 in 2009 to build a health statistics portal.

Sophia marketed that success to other branches of HHS, and by October of 2010, she had six contracts.

"The first few contracts came after an oral presentation I gave, where I left with the feeling that I hadn't made any real connections with the people in the room," she remembers. "I was shocked that we got all those contracts. It was a lesson that, in this business, reputation is everything. You have to do right by your partners, your customers, and your employees. We know how to take care of people, and I think that's why we've been successful."

Like all federal contractors, DSFederal has experienced its share of ups and downs since it was launched nine years ago. The inclines of this unavoidable roller coaster were perhaps steepened by the fact that Sophia launched the company without a strategic plan and without experience, learning along the way through the school of hard knocks. "I wish I had invested in the company's infrastructure much earlier," she acknowledges. "I should have bitten the bullet and bought the software to get the certification we needed to land contracts we wanted. Having infrastructure in place definitely puts you in the best position to seize the business opportunities that come your way."

While hindsight is 20/20, DSFederal has delineated itself as a model federal contractor. In 2014, it was ranked the fourth fastest-growing Federal contracting company nationwide by Inc. Magazine. In 2015, Sophia was named Small Business Person of the Year for Maryland by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), and in 2016, SBA named DSFederal a top Woman-Owned Small Business nationwide. "Seven or eight years ago, nobody had heard of us," she says. "But thanks to our growth, our reputation, and the caliber of work we do, people have heard about us. Our work now speaks for itself." This month, Parker was honored at the 2016 SmartCEO Cornerstone Awards, which recognizes community and philanthropic impact.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Sophia underscores the importance of having a plan. She also highlights the importance of mentors—something she wishes she had sought out and utilized through her own journey. She identifies trust as the most important ingredient in business relationships, and she reminds us that each experience through life is like a puzzle piece. "You never know when you'll use it, but it will fit somewhere in your life down the road," she says.

Beyond that, her example illustrates that giving back is more than a nice thing to do. Rather, it's a powerful business and life philosophy that should stand as a cornerstone of any venture. "In 1982 I first heard the adage that goes, the more you give, the more you have," she says. "If there's any lesson for anybody in my story, it's the truth of this idea. I never imagined I'd achieve what I've achieved today. I never planned to become an entrepreneur. But one thing I'm not afraid of is giving. The more you give, the more you have. The universe comes around."

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