

Dondi Strong

Things Happen For Us, Not To Us

In early 2018, Dondi Strong was at work when news of the Matt Lauer sexual harassment scandal broke. In that moment, an idea struck her: “What if there was a recruiting firm dedicated to placing women in executive positions and on corporate boards?”

The following Monday, she attended a book launch event for Gretchen Carlson, where the conversation turned to Carlson’s experiences being harassed by Roger Ailes at Fox News. After Gretchen spoke, she invited questions and comments. It was there Dondi first vocalized what would become a personal mission: “This isn’t just relegated to corporate environments; this harassment is in the same vein as domestic violence,” Dondi told the crowd. “I also talked about my experience of being a professional woman getting out of an abusive situation, and how, just like what Gretchen went through at Fox, there’s often no support network. So many women of all backgrounds live through abuse and harassment, but oftentimes it gets brushed under the rug. It’s important to break the silence.”

In what surely felt like fate, that same day, #MeToo began trending on social media worldwide, and Dondi felt the signs could not be clearer; the service she had imagined providing was sorely needed in the corporate world. She knew about a variety of organizations offering networking and mentoring; but nothing like what she knew was needed. She wanted to make sure there was a company whose focus on placing women and other diverse candidates on Boards and in C-Suites across the nation was solid. On April 1, 2018, she founded Levia Partners.

The name “Levia” is particularly meaningful; an anglicization of לביאה or “lioness” in Hebrew. It is also a reference to a book called *Lioness Arising* by Lisa Bevere, a close friend and mentor of Dondi’s, and the name of the first female

team of Marines special forces sent into Iraq in 2006.

Today, Levia Partners is an executive and board search firm that partners with companies and private equity firms. It focuses on providing authentic diversity; that is, diversity that does more than simply check a box or provide a token candidate. Women are a special focus of Levia, but its services are not strictly limited to women; all forms of diversity are honored, and all those who celebrate inclusion and diversity.



“Many traditional recruiting firms that are highly commission-based put pressure on how many placements should be made each week or month,” notes Dondi, “which makes it hard to spend time on quality searches and prime candidates.” Because of the flexible nature of owning her own company, she appreciates having the time to do those things with diligence and integrity. Levia Partners has made many successful placements since it started but most notably are the two women, they were able to place on publicly traded boards.

Dondi’s specialty is her gift for meaningful relationships, noting that her skill for networking and connecting people is what made recruiting a natural choice for her.

As a young child, Dondi didn’t know what type of business she would run, but she did have a specific vision in mind; when asked what she’d like to be when she grew up, she’d reply, “a powerful businesswoman.” She had her mother to look up to, who ran a men’s wig company along with her father; both of her parents were entrepreneurs with little time for anything but business. Dondi was expected to help whenever it was needed.

Dondi’s father taught her many facets of entrepreneurship with the businesses he started and required her to work in all of them. Dondi

reflects, “He was all about work, teaching me how to work hard and make money and be responsible. He hoped I would take over the family business at some point.”

Her parents also owned one of the only private nightclubs in Salt Lake City, Utah. She remembers, “Every Friday night my parents would get dressed up and go out. My mom was so glamorous, and looked like a model. They smoked, drank, and had a party lifestyle; diamonds and cars and the club, *The Gatsby*.”

The Mormon community she grew up in was strict, and because of her parents’ lifestyle, Dondi faced exclusion and harassment, almost to the point of ostracism.

When Dondi was eight years old, her parents took her to a different type of church than the Mormon services she had previously attended. “It was a non-denominational Christian church and after the service, I asked my parents if we could come back,” she said. “These people are nice to me.”

Thus began Dondi’s close relationship with Jesus Christ. Her newfound faith did little to reduce the mistreatment she suffered in her neighborhood and at school. In fact, it worsened the isolation as the family was no longer Mormon. But Dondi focused on prayer, hard work, and Bible study to help get her through her childhood.

When she turned 14, Dondi was required to get her first job. Her father told her he would no longer cover her clothing expenses and that she needed to pull her own weight. Dondi objected that she had to be 16 to get a job, but her father told her to “figure it out,” and Dondi did. A friend helped her get a job at a local fast food chain, and from there she tried her hand at a couple of other food service jobs. She joined the family business during her senior year of high school, where she worked long hours answering phones, filing, stacking boxes, stuffing envelopes, and helping fill orders.

When Dondi was in college she met an artist and at the young age of 20, she decided to get married. “My dad was worried we wouldn’t have enough money,” remembers Dondi. “So, while he was on a trip to Hawaii, he bought the licensing rights to start coffee shops in Utah called *Badass Coffee*. He enjoyed the implicit irony in doing so, especially since Mormons don’t drink coffee.”

Dondi and her husband began scoping out sites for the new coffee shops. As they worked to

get their stores up and running, Dondi had their daughter, Olivia, and then their son, Michael, in less than 2 years. They moved to Park City to open the second shop, and, despite the two small children, Dondi found herself in a leadership role. “I had been raised in this entrepreneurial environment, so I was able to handle many things with a baby on each hip,” smiled Dondi.

After five years of running the coffee shops, Dondi and her husband decided they wanted out of the family business, preferring to make their own way, and decided to move to Seattle, Washington. Her husband had several interviews scheduled with graphic design firms and the couple was immediately greeted with several signs that they’d done the right thing. Among the most poignant was upon walking into the first interview where on the wall was framed a photo of the logo of none other than *Badass Coffee*. That graphic design firm had done the logo and marketing for the original store in Hawaii. During their brief visit they also checked out a local church, and, feeling at home right away, made the decision to accept a job offer and move in late 1999.

For a while, everything went smoothly, but after 9/11, the economy suffered and her husband’s paychecks began bouncing. The couple then decided to strike out on their own and, launched a graphic design business—*Serious Design*. Her husband was the creative director, handling the artistic side of the work, while Dondi took over the rest, handling everything from operations, to finances, to taxes, to business development. It was the school of hard knocks, but Dondi learned quickly. “I remember calling my dad and telling him that I had been interviewing with attorneys about how to incorporate, and what they wanted to charge me,” says Dondi. “He told me, ‘What the hell are you thinking? You don’t need to pay that! Go figure it out yourself!’ and hung up. I almost cried, but when I went and looked it up, I figured it out. That was eye-opening for me, realizing how much I could accomplish if I just tried. I was handling the books, the payroll, the banking -- all of it. My dad’s tough love moved me to find a way.” During this time, Dondi also decided that her children’s education was of equal, if not more, importance. Along with a few friends, she started homeschooling their kids in what is known as the *Classical Tradition*, a methodology she still regards to this day.

In 2006, after seven years in Seattle, Dondi

and her husband felt called to help their church start a new location in the Washington, DC area. Their pastor was looking for folks to step up and help, and after six months of prayer, the couple decided they were ready for the move. During their first year in DC, through aggressive business development and with the children now in well-funded public schools, Dondi was able to grow the firm by 100%.

Things went well for a while, but in 2008 a major life-changing event took place: the financial crash, and later bankruptcy. Their firm had done a significant amount of its business with residential and property development companies, and the housing crisis dried up most of their client list. This, among other things, had taken a toll on their marriage as well, causing the couple to divorce shortly after.

But Dondi found a way to thrive. She accepted a job in business development at a local law firm, where she stayed for several years, before being asked to do business development at a national accounting firm. From there she continued climbing the ladder, later securing the position of Regional Director of Client Development at a national law firm. She also remarried and had another son.

Throughout her life and her experiences, she recognizes that many adversities have taught her resilience. “Things happen for us, not to us,” encourages Dondi. “My childhood and living through a surprisingly abusive relationship after my first divorce, were like bootcamp for what I do now. I am not afraid. God put this calling on my life, to promote and change the personal and professional landscape for women. Not just to talk about it, but to have the courage to stand up and do something significant to create change.”

Beyond her business, Dondi has a history of investing her personal time in women. Along with her work with Levia Partners, she was the chair of Heroines of Washington for many years, a group that highlights the professional and philanthropic successes of women across the D.C. area. She strives to lead by example and follow through even when it gets difficult. “I would say I’m intentional and aggressive,” reflects Dondi. “If I say I am going to do something, I go at it 150%. One mistake people in my life have made has been underestimating me. Those who know me understand what I can accomplish. I tell my kids; the definition of leadership is doing what other

people are unwilling to do. It is not about success or having people under you; it’s about doing what needs to be done, period. Leadership is an inverted pyramid, it’s not you on the top.” Her kids are now leading themselves. Olivia has graduated college and off on her own with over 10 published poems and looking to pursue a master’s degree soon. Her son, Michael, is serving as a United States Marine. A future she had not yet considered when naming her company after one of their missions. And her 11 year old son is a young leader in sports, and especially golf, which he has been competing in events since he was 5 years old.

So what’s next for Dondi and her undertaking? She’s hoping to launch a woman-owned private equity firm in the coming years. “There is still a huge gap with women leaders, not just in Corporate America but also in private equity and start-ups. Women are significantly underrepresented among the investment decision-makers at private equity and venture capital firms, as well as in the leadership of companies that receive this investment capital. Women hold only 10 percent of all senior positions in private equity and venture capital firms globally, and women-led enterprises collected less than three percent of global venture capital in 2017 (Prequin 2017; Zarya, 2018). Without a vision, people will perish,” she advises. “Look out at that horizon. Surround yourself with the right people; seek out relationships that make you a better person; and work harder than everyone else.”

Dondi still sits on the board of her family’s business and helped her father negotiate and successfully sell Badass Coffee to a private equity firm in the summer of 2019. She also sits on the board of the Mid-Atlantic PGA Reach Foundation.

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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*

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