

Joe Alvarez

Looking in the Mirror

On January 28, 1986, Christa McAuliffe was supposed to be the first female teacher in space. One of more than 11,000 applicants to the NASA Teacher in Space Project, McAuliffe was selected to travel with a seven-person crew to conduct experiments and teach lessons to students back on Earth from the space shuttle *Challenger*. 73 seconds into its flight, however, the *Challenger* spacecraft broke apart following the catastrophic failure of a seal in the solid rocket motor, resulting in the deaths of everyone on board. Media coverage was extensive, and within an hour of the disaster, some 85 percent of Americans had heard of the tragic event.

One of those Americans was Joe Alvarez. But unlike the vast majority of the millions of people who mourned the loss of life that day, Joe had a personal claim. Years earlier, he had been touched by Mrs. McAuliffe in a way that few others had. McAuliffe had been a teacher and mentor to Joe when he needed one most.

"I met Christa McAuliffe when I was in ninth grade," he recalls today. "That was one of the toughest years I can remember."

Joe was born in Mexico City. His parents divorced when he was six years old, and he and his two younger brothers were raised primarily by his mother. For as long as he could remember, he had dreamed of becoming a professional athlete. "It was my dream to be a professional soccer player," he recalls fondly. "Because my parents were divorced, we never had a lot. I learned to appreciate the little things, and that I had to work very hard if I wanted to achieve my dream."

Joe's mother worked in the hospitality industry in Mexico City. One day, a gentleman from the American company, Remington Rand, traveled with several colleagues through Mexico City on their way to Acapulco for a national meeting of the top sales representatives. Passing

through Joe's mother's hotel, the gentleman was having a very hard time ordering breakfast. An English speaker from the time that her father worked at the United Nations, Joe's mother came and helped him. One thing led to another, and the two went on a date. Three years later, they were married. Joe, his mother, and his two younger brothers came to the United States and settled in Maryland, and Joe was enrolled in junior high at Thomas Johnson in Lanham, Maryland.

"My first year there was the ninth grade, and it was daunting," Joe remembers. "That's when I met Christa McAuliffe. I was in a situation where I knew I was smart enough to do well and pass the tests, but because of my lack of knowledge of the English language, I needed help." Indeed, Joe was learning quickly and excelling in his ESL classes, but it was still difficult to apply his language skills to subjects like algebra or geometry, where word problems were particularly challenging.

"Christa McAuliffe was my Social Studies teacher and would sit with me for thirty to forty-five minutes after school. She would ask me, 'How did you do today? What did you have a hard time with? Let's go over it.' She spent a tremendous amount of time with me. I think she saw in me someone who really wanted to do well. She felt that, with a little help, she could get me to that place where I could succeed. I feel that in those days, in the attention she gave me, the good Lord was looking after me."

Now the Principal of National Office Systems, which has been serving the storage solutions and document management system needs of the DC metropolitan area with expert skill since 1976, Joe recognizes that McAuliffe helped to catalyze his success by going above and beyond, being the best teacher she could possibly be. Because she took the extra time to work harder



and help even though it was outside of her job description, she could look in the mirror and know that there was a young boy who was flourishing instead of sinking. And today, Joe continues to gauge his own success, ethics, and character through a constant act of self-reflection to ensure he's being the best he can be, day in and day out.

Christa McAuliffe helped Joe Alvarez, and Joe Alvarez helped himself. He worked hard to succeed in school, and he brought that same work ethic and talent to the soccer field, too. "I achieved at a high level as an athlete because I hustled and worked very hard to improve my soccer skills," he affirms.

In Mexico, Joe was aiming to be a professional soccer player. Coming to Maryland in the late 1970s as a young teenager, he brought an entirely different world onto the field—one in which the players don't just play the sport, but instead have the pulse of the game moving through their veins. "It was like a hockey player trained in Canada who comes to Maryland," Joe remembers. "Hockey is to Canada, what soccer is to Mexico, which is the same as baseball, basketball, and football are to America. My level of soccer was simply more intense than that of the kids I was now playing with.

Joe was very successful in high school, both on the field in select club soccer teams and in academics. As graduation approached and he considered his options, he was attracted to several schools but eventually decided to attend George Mason University. "I ended up going there because the coach was a passionate guy and the school was close to my family in Maryland," he explains. "There are times in life when you meet someone and you think, I could play for that guy. This was one of those times, and things worked out very well."

Joe started every game that he played at George Mason. Each year, the team improved. By his senior year, the George Mason soccer team went to the final eight of the Division I national championships and faced off against the University of Virginia, coached by Bruce Arena, then the UVA head coach and now the former head coach of the United States men's national soccer team. At UVA, Bruce Arena won five national championships. But in Joe Alvarez's senior year, UVA would be humbled.

"We beat Virginia," Joe says. "I was fortunate enough to score the winning goal to win,

1 to 0. Bruce had worked with me at a youth summer soccer camp. He was always joking with me, telling me I never would've made it at Virginia. After that game, Bruce was busting my chops, telling me he couldn't believe my team had beaten him because UVA dominated the game after we scored. He was so upset we had beaten him at his home stadium, and I just told him that all that mattered was the score and who got the "W". A Fairfax newspaper reporter got a nice picture of us laughing together with me pointing at the scoreboard. My friends still chuckle about that, that I was lording it over Bruce Arena, himself, on his own field, and there's photo evidence! What a great memory."

After being drafted to the Baltimore Blast (MISL) in 1982, injury would bring his pro soccer dream to an abrupt end, but fortunately, resiliency had been built into his character. That resiliency supplied the drive to bounce back and pursue a professional career despite the disappointment. He had studied accounting and public administration, and when he graduated, he found a job at a car dealership in the back finance office that lasted about 90 days. "I just could not do it," Joe says. "I actually got depressed. Someone said to me that I should try sales, but when I went to the GM of the dealership about a sales opportunity, he just laughed and told me I was only good at counting beans and to stick with what I know. As an athlete, you love a challenge, and that guy gave me a good one. My next challenge was to test myself in sales."

With that, Joe found a sales job at a copier company. "We were, what you call in the sales world, cold-calling machines," he recalls. "If you did well, you moved up. If you didn't, then you were fired. It was very simple. To me, cold-calling was like someone had let me out of jail. I loved it! The worst anyone could do was say no, and I never took it personally."

It wasn't long before Joe's work ethic and natural ability advanced him through the ranks to the point that he was running the company's entire Virginia operation at age 29. But the more success he saw as a salaried employee, the more he felt the entrepreneurial drive to chase ownership. "I was a young guy," he affirms. "I had a good knack for sales and for leading people. Once, at an executive meeting, I told my colleagues and superiors alike that I really wanted to own my own business. After the meeting, I went straight to the guy who

owned the company and asked him to sell the Richmond branch to me."

The owner recognized Joe's ability and told him flat out that he was a young superstar in the making, but that he already had big plans for the company that didn't involve selling it off piecemeal. "He was planning to sell the entire company," Joe says. "He told me it was worth about \$41 million. He asked, 'You have \$41 million, Joe?' I said with a smirk that that was a little outside of my reach."

Facing the sale of the entire company, Joe informed the executives that if an opportunity came along, he would consider it. Two weeks later, that opportunity did come, but from a place he least expected it. The President of the northern region of his company, Daniel Harbison, called Joe and proposed that they become business partners. "Dan was a proven overall business executive with expertise in finance and operations, but more importantly, he was, and still is, my mentor," Joe says. "I loved sales and had a proven track record. He knew our skill sets would complement each other well. He told me I was one of the best salesmen he had ever met, and his perspective was that, with his operational and financial experience combined with my rainmaking ability, we would have an optimal formula for success."

Together, Dan and Joe found a company worth buying in National Office Systems (NOS). NOS specializes in helping organizations and firms manage physical assets and make the most efficient use of their available space through comprehensive storage solutions, document management systems, and biometric security. "Today we're expecting to see over \$25 million in revenue compared to \$1 million in year one," Joe says, "and we have about 75 full-time employees plus additional contract staff. The first ten to fifteen years was steady growth, but it wasn't until I made a decision to network more than I ever had before that the real growth began. What was at first a very transaction-based business became a relationship-building business. I've built relationships with builders, brokers, consultants, architects, designers, security people, and most importantly, end user clients. The last six to eight years have seen very fast growth, and it's thanks to that ever-expanding network."

Even though Joe never had sales experience growing up, it always seemed to be an innate skill for him and came very naturally.

"What I have learned is that sales is not about ringing the cash register," he affirms. "It's about understanding my customers' needs and finding solutions that improve their lives and their environment. I'm lucky enough in my line of work that I get to meet and greet all kinds of wonderful people on a daily business. I really enjoy meeting new people and finding out what makes them tick, but more importantly, about how I can help them. Sometimes you meet people and feel within the first minute that you can trust them and that they have your best interest at heart. That is who I strive to be, and I believe I succeed because I really do feel genuine in my interest of what they have to say. It goes hand in hand – networking is getting to know customers and business partners and helping each other solve problems. I firmly believe that my company's success stems from the fact that we genuinely care about making our customers happy."

Whether he's speaking to today's young entrepreneurs or to his own children, Joe's message stems from what made him a success in school, in sports, and in business: his hard work and passion. "Life's too short," he says. "Don't waste a single day of your life. When you're at work, give it everything you've got. What I tell our employees and my kids is that it's not necessarily about the results, it's about whether you did the best you could. If you do your best but don't get the result you wanted, you can still look in the mirror and know you gave it all you had. You only have one boss, and that's yourself. You are the only judge that counts, so look in the mirror. Are you the best spouse, the best friend, the best worker, the best boss you can be? Ask yourself that question. The mirror is not going to lie to you. You know deep in your heart what the deal is. At the root of this is self-accountability. If you say you're going to do it, then make it happen."

"And," he adds, echoing the legacy of his mentor and friend, "don't forget to enjoy the ride as much as possible. Smile a lot. Life is too short."

Christa McAuliffe once said, "I touch the future. I teach." In reaching out to Joe, she reached her hand beyond her own mortality, passing through the present and extending into the future as long as her impact reverberates through the impact of each student she touched. By working hard, pausing to assess our progress and character, and taking the time to help others along the way as well, we can be sure that those

reverberations ring positive, powerful, and persistent for many years to come.

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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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](#).

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