

Francisca Villarroel Alonso

Building Something Better

Francisca Villarroel Alonso was born in Chile to a Bolivian father and German mother. Her father studied architecture and her mother industrial design, and at the time of her birth, her father was a successful designer working with a department store in Santiago. Due to the political and economic turmoil in the country, however, demand for expensive construction projects had diminished substantially, and so he found work where he could utilize his design skills: in high fashion.

Despite his success, Francisca's father decided to move the family to Spain when she was six years old. Although she was young, she remembers how the relocation took her mother by surprise. "We had a brand new house that my father had designed," Francisca recounts today. "Everything was perfect from my mother's point of view. My father had a job and a great partner. But he wasn't doing what he was passionate about, so we left everything behind to build something better."

At the time, Francisca herself didn't understand her father's choice, but looking back, she not only understands his desire to pursue his passion—now, she cites it as a formative lesson that has shaped her own philosophy over the years. In Spain, he began again at the very bottom, but over time, he attained a level of success he hadn't dreamt of in Chile: instead of designing clothes, he was designing resorts.

"He had nothing, then he had plenty, then he had nothing again," Francisca muses. "He became successful again because he made the choice to follow his passion, and not to settle. Looking back, that set the tone for me. He did it four or five times throughout his life, and I picked up the pattern—if it's not working, take it apart, reconfigure it, and redirect yourself. Don't stay doing something if it's not making a difference."

Now the co-founder and co-owner of AV Architects & Builders, which renovates homes to fit the tastes, personality, and lifestyle of its clients, Francisca's business is the crowning achievement of a lifetime of vigilantly reassessing and redirecting her own path in accordance with her passion.

The first such redirection came during college. She and her three siblings all came to the United States to study at George Mason University, which was the school closest to her paternal aunt's house in Northern Virginia. As she left Spain, she warned her father that she had no interest in architecture—she planned, instead, to study law and become a lawyer.

After two years at George Mason exploring various disciplines, Francisca and her sister both signed up for an elective course called "Thinking on the Right Side of the Brain." The girls were shocked when the professor, noting their clear passion for the subject, advised them to consider architecture as a career. After that semester, Francisca and her sister, Antonia, both transferred to Catholic University and enrolled in the architecture program there. Although the program required five more years of study, she didn't let this deter her. She completed the additional years, and along the way met her husband, Tony, who had transferred into the program from James Madison University.

After graduating in 1992, Francisca found herself concerned about the job market and, thinking she wouldn't find employment for quite some time, enrolled in an additional class for the fall semester. It was the early 1990's, and architectural software programs weren't part of schools' core curriculum yet, so she sought out this separate class on the use of an AutoCAD program. Just after the semester began, however, she landed



a good job with a respected architectural firm in Fairfax, Virginia, called Dewberry & Davis. When the firm learned she was enrolled in AutoCAD classes, they were quick to move her away from the drawing tables and onto the computer; they were short of employees well versed in the technology, and although she had only just been introduced to it, she learned quickly. She stayed with Dewberry & Davis for three years until, in 1995, she again decided to redirect herself.

Francisca had enjoyed her time with the large firm and learned a lot, but felt that the size of the business kept her skills from being fully utilized. The position was comfortable, but no longer the challenge she craved. "I wanted to be a little more hands on, and I was just a peon there," she explains. "It's a really large firm—a great organization, but I was just one of many there. I wanted to have more of an impact."

With that vision, Francisca went looking for something different and found a small firm in need of her skill set. They were three men in their 40s and 50s running their own operation, and none of them were versed in AutoCAD. "I basically applied by telling them, I could be your AutoCAD department," she remembers. "They were all more old school, but highly experienced, and great people."

In that capacity, Francisca, one of only four architects, flourished and learned over the next few years. When her son Lucas was born, she never missed a beat, and her bosses, happy with her work and eager to keep her on, told her to bring her infant son into the office. For almost a year, she brought Lucas into work, until he began toddling around. Then she and Tony faced a decision: should they have more children, or put Lucas in daycare? They decided to have another baby, and Francisca left the job to stay home for a few years. Over the next five years, Francisca had three more children and then decided it was time for her to get back to work. Thus, with four young kids at home, she launched a private business with her husband, and AV Architects & Builders was born.

What began as a small idea has grown significantly since its inception. At first, Francisca and Tony only designed the renovations, but today they oversee the building process as well. The company currently boasts 18 employees and contractors, and takes on anywhere from 4 to 12 renovation projects in a year, depending on the

projects' size. "When I told people I was starting this business, they looked at me like I was crazy," Francisca laughs. "It seemed like the worst possible time, with all these babies everywhere! But looking back, I'm so glad I didn't listen to anybody, because in those first five years, the wind just propelled us."

Although she had only worked on commercial projects in the past, Francisca knew she could put her skills to good use remodeling homes, especially given the requests she periodically received from friends and acquaintances. "People were coming to me and saying, 'I really want to renovate, when are you going to start a business or something?'" she recalls. "Two people in particular said, 'I really want to build this addition, but I can't trust anyone else, and I know you're going to do a great job.' So I had two clients before I even started the business!" AV Architects & Builders' reputation spread through word of mouth, and after those two projects, more followed.

Founding a business allowed Francisca to determine her own hours, often working late into the night and always making time for her children. While this enables her to spend more time with her family while also achieving a success she is proud of, she finds her greatest challenge to be prioritizing her many duties and roles. "Everyday you're faced with ten things that need to get done," she says. "Everyday you have to decide which one of those ten you're going to tackle first, and you have to face the fact that you cannot do them all. People talk about work-life balance, but I think that's the wrong term. It's really not a balance, but a whole integration. The hardest thing is to integrate the two worlds successfully." Like her father before her, she was able to tailor her life to her dreams, leaving a secure position in order to raise children and then finding a way to go back to work without compromising her commitment to her family.

When her father passed away in 2010, Francisca found herself shaken, and with a newfound sense of urgency. "We really went through and thought about what we wanted to achieve in life," she avows. "My father's death gave me a real sense of having a deadline, so I wanted to focus and really get things done." Although she can no longer turn to her father for advice, his memory still burns brightly in her leadership and life philosophies, and she still has

more than her fair share of mentors to rely on. Her three siblings are architects as well, and they all work for the business her father built in Spain, designing luxury resorts and houses. She considers them important influences, along with Tony, who also serves as an architect for the General Services Administration. Francisca also belongs to The American Institute of Architects, National Association of Women Business Owners, National Association of Professional Women, Accelerator Program of Entrepreneurs' Organization and several local chamber organizations, and believes that maintaining that outside input is crucial to success.

Having a positive impact on the community is also one of the driving motivations behind Francisca's work, and when she and her team renovate homes, they take great strides to ensure that nothing goes to waste. AV Architects & Builders work with Habitat for Humanity, donating old building materials to the organization. "We take entire kitchens and give them to Habitat for Humanity," she explains. "I love working with them because I know they put everything to good use." Once, a client suggested that their old kitchen be installed in the teachers' lounge in a local public school—an idea Francisca was happy to execute. Francisca has also expanded the positive impact of AV Architects & Builders by speaking at the Northern Virginia Women's Business Conference, hoping to inspire other moms and entrepreneurs to expand their own impacts and strive to build something better themselves.

Francisca followed her father's example as she found her place in the world, and she advises

young people graduating today to do the same. "Find a way to make a difference and pursue a passion," she urges. She also emphasizes hard work and consistency while also reminding young people to focus on the journey, rather than worrying over the destination. "Every day counts," she says, her words rife with inspiration. "Don't look so much at your finish line. Look at what you're doing today. Today matters just as much as tomorrow. For my dad, everyday was *the* day." In a sense, Francisca approaches each day with the creative and proactive eye of an architect, not waiting for a better situation to come, but instead creating it herself. By tearing down the old and building something better, she and the AV team are working toward a stronger tomorrow, one project—and one day—at a time.

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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](#).

