

Eileen M. Ellsworth

A Persisting Strength

Miles off the Prince Edward Island coastline, fishermen and lobstermen haul up heavy nets and pots, full to the brim of the day's catch. They talk of family life or this year's yield and enjoy a beer. After their last sip, they toss the bottle over the edge of the boat and head back home to port. Behind them, the bottle bobs along the surface of the Atlantic, slowly taking on water and sinking into the sea.

Decades of waves and tides toss the bottle around the ocean floor, smashing it to pieces against the rocks and then gently massaging those broken shards against the sand. Time, weather, water, and earth begin to transform the jagged pieces of bottle into smooth, iridescent gems of sea glass. And eventually, these gems wash up on shore, where they wait in the Prince Edward Island sand for a young Eileen Ellsworth to come along and find them.

Since the moment that she found her first piece of sea glass in her beloved small Prince Edward Island town, Eileen Ellsworth has been finding the beauty and meaning unique to her community and treasuring it above all else. Now, as the President and CEO of The Community Foundation for Northern Virginia, she has dedicated her professional career to championing the unique strengths and addressing the specific needs of her community for the last 13 years. "The mission of The Community Foundation is to grow philanthropy to respond to need and seed innovation in the region," she explains today.

The foundation grows philanthropy through donor-advised funds, as well as through discretionary funds used to meet critical needs in the region by supporting innovative solutions to persistent social ills. These efforts have seen significant progress through her tenure so far, in large part to her team's focus on helping the community by understanding it better than anyone

else. "Our value is that we know our community," Eileen affirms. "If you're interested in making something stronger here, we're your go-to place."

Rigorous, data-driven inquiry is one method The Community Foundation uses to continually deepen its understanding of the nuances of the Northern Virginia region. "We can't serve the community well if we don't take the time to truly understand it, and to educate others on the needs we're able to identify through our analysis," Eileen says. "We run the risk of being very off-base if we act without data to back it up, blindly guessing. For us, it can't be about perceived needs; it has to be about what the data shows."

This sense of persistence, passion for positive change, and dedication to community are the cornerstones of her present success, and have been foundational to her character from the time she was a young girl. And, while her hard work has gotten her where she is today, she attributes the majority of her life's successes to the formative role of her circumstance, family, and upbringing. "As an expert in communities, I understand that every person is fundamentally shaped by their environment," she affirms. "The family into which I was born set the table for the rest of my life."

Eileen was born in Connecticut, but for the first sixteen years of her life, she felt most deeply connected with her parents' homeland, Prince Edward Island. Every summer, she and her massive extended family would convene on the island. "My summers were magical," Eileen remembers. "It gave me this sense of place, and that I was a part of something bigger than myself. It was pure joy." With ninety-four cousins in total, there was never a dull moment on the island, and her family's connection with the place was profound and well-established. "We all looked exactly alike," Eileen says. "People would look at me and say, 'You've got to be a Shea or an



Ellsworth!”

Eileen’s mother was one of nine children, and her father was one of fourteen. In that community, there were no guarantees. An education was not always a given for Eileen’s parents’ generation, and while her mother had the opportunity to get a high school education, her father was not so fortunate. Additionally, economic opportunities on Prince Edward Island were hard to come by; the fishing and lobster yields that had given the community its wealth and reputation were on the decline. So in 1939, her parents left Canada for the United States and settled in Connecticut, determined to give their children the opportunities that they never had themselves.

“As children,” Eileen recalls, “my parents didn’t encourage us to get an education, it was a *given*.” This expectation of study and intellectual engagement extended beyond the schoolroom. Eileen remembers vividly the impassioned discussions and debate that occurred nightly around the dinner table. “My parents read the newspaper from cover to cover and watched the news every single night,” she recounts. “Dinner was always a massive discussion of current events.” Eileen sees these heated discussions as the foundation to her success in the field of law later in life. “My father was a brilliant man,” she says. “I could never win an argument with him. He could marshal the evidence and beat me every time, so it taught me how to be an advocate. It taught me how to think about gathering evidence and persuasively articulating a point of view.”

Early on in her life, Eileen had to learn the value of balancing her education with meeting her financial needs. “We were lower-middle class,” she says. “We had all our basic needs met, but that was it.” At the age of sixteen, she got her first job at the local A&P, which she kept all throughout high school, college, and up until the week before she left for law school. “I had to make money,” she explains. “And that little job at the A&P taught me everything I needed to know about life.”

Her home life, as well, taught her that life could be hard and unexpected, and that you needed to be prepared for the worst. Ever since her earliest memories, her mother was in poor health. “Mom’s condition impacted me greatly,” Eileen says. “I was the caretaker. I took care of her morning, noon, and night. That was my life.” Juggling her school work, her after-school job, and

caring for her mother was never easy, but it came very innately to Eileen. “I had tremendous compassion for my mother’s suffering,” she remembers. These responsibilities thrust her into maturity and forged her identity as an advocate for others. “I became an adult at an early age,” Eileen says. “I was capable and compassionate, and that made me a very good caretaker, and a good advocate—I was a young girl going toe-to-toe with doctors, nurses, and hospitals to advocate for my mom’s needs. It shaped me in profound ways and made me who I am today.”

In high school, despite the obligations and pressure carried on her shoulders, Eileen excelled in math and science and decided to go to college to pursue a career in biology. In the Ellsworth house, an education was a given, but the money to pay for it wasn’t. This, however did not deter her three siblings, her parents, or Eileen. “It was just a given that we would figure that out,” she remembers. “And we did. I remember turning to my mother and asking, ‘How am I going to do this? How am I going to pay for college?’ And her answer was, ‘The other three did it, and you will too.’” Despite the economic challenges, all four of the Ellsworth children, including Eileen, found a way to go to college, and all of them even went on to get advanced degrees.

After graduating high school, Eileen enrolled at Fairfield University, a quick car ride away from her childhood home. The school’s Jesuit curriculum was a bit of a shock to Eileen, and an eye-opener that turned into a highly positive experience. “The Jesuits are remarkable,” she says. “They question everything and value intellectual inquiry. They want you to inquire and ask.” This atmosphere of rigorous intellectual curiosity was well-suited for Eileen, who was inculcated in debate around the dinner table as a young child. It did, however, begin to make her question even her own career goals. “I loved science and was really good at it, but by the time I was a junior, I realized I didn’t want a career in it,” she says. “At that time, in the mid-70’s, women in science could teach, or they could go into research. Teaching didn’t appeal to me, and research sounded lonely.” For someone who draws as much strength and meaning from community as Eileen does, the thought of spending hours alone on a research boat held little interest. So, armed with a BS in Biology, the Jesuit’s spirit of intellectual curiosity, and a desire to follow a new career path, Eileen

applied and was accepted to law school at Catholic University in Washington, DC.

Eileen's time in law school and in DC was a whirlwind of new experiences and meaningful relationships. She had the unique opportunity to clerk for a DC superior court judge, and her time as clerk solidified her passion for law. "I fell in love with litigation," she says, "It just seemed so exciting." Law school was also where she met fellow lawyer, and her future husband, Bob Weil. But, while it was always stimulating, her time in law school wasn't always easy—most notably the staggering financial burden. "I still remember the exact amount of loans I took out," Eileen says. "I remember what my rent, car payment, and loan payments were the day I graduated law school, because they were such big numbers!" Beyond that stress, Eileen's mother's health continued to decline, and Eileen remembers taking frequent trips back to Connecticut to care for her. After graduating, and after her four years in DC, Eileen returned to Connecticut to practice law, care for her mother, be close to her family, and embark on the next chapters in her life.

Over the next thirteen years, Eileen worked as a litigator in New York and Connecticut, handling commercial litigation and family law. It was a busy time in her life personally, as well; three years after graduating law school, she married Bob and later had two children. Then, when a unique opportunity arose for the family to move back to the DC area, they took it, and Eileen took her expertise as a litigator and became in-house counsel to a software company in Reston, called Best Software.

While Eileen was happy to continue practicing law for an interesting and growing company, she felt that she had lost her passion for the work, and in 2001, on the 20-year anniversary of her career as a lawyer, she resigned. "I called up the CEO," she recalls, "and I told him I had lost my passion for the practice of law. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I couldn't do that anymore."

Eileen was at crossroads, similar to the one she had seen in her junior year of college. She was ready for something different, but needed a new way to decide how to move forward. "I gave a lot of thought to what was missing," Eileen says. "Why I was feeling the way I was feeling about the practice of law?" It was then that she formulated a mental image of her goals and a way to prioritize what was important in her life. "I came up with a

Venn diagram of three circles," she recounts. "I called one circle 'my purpose': this was something that the world wanted, and would pay me for. Another circle I called 'my gift': this was something I was good at. And the third circle I called 'my passion': this was something that excited me; I had felt this way about the practice of law for a long time." Eileen then looked to see what calling fell in the shared space between the three circles of 'purpose', 'gift', and 'passion,' and she found it. "I reinvented myself," she says. "I became a non-profit manager."

The world of non-profits represented a big change for Eileen, but it wasn't altogether unknown. During her time practicing law in Greenwich, CT she served on the board of the United Way of Greenwich. "It was an incredibly formative experience for me," she recounts. "At 25 years old, I was a very young attorney, and I had talked myself onto this big board with all of these influential community members." Despite her newcomer status, during her nine-year tenure on the board, she headed committees that were vital to the organization. "Even so many years later, that experience was sort of rattling around in my brain, and I thought maybe nonprofit work would satisfy my three requirements," she says. "But I had no idea how I was going to make that transition."

Like bottles to sea glass, Eileen knew the transformation would just take a little work, and true to her self-starting nature, she decided that the only way to get into the nonprofit world was to dive right in. "I decided to start my own nonprofit," Eileen says. "I figured it would be my graduate school in nonprofit management." Eileen's new venture was called Empower Girls, a tech enrichment program for 4th, 5th, and 6th grade girls in the Title I schools of Fairfax County. "I wondered what would happen if we just gave girls a little more encouragement and a little bit more opportunity?" she recounts.

In the two-and-a-half-year lifespan of Empower Girls, Eileen and her small but dedicated team of staff and volunteers taught over 600 young women, and raised over \$120,000. In that time, Eileen not only learned about the nonprofit world, but she began understanding her community in new and profound ways. "It taught me so much about the county," she says. "I learned so much about the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity of the area."

Though her time running Empower Girls was relatively short-lived, it was a crash course in community-centered nonprofit work that laid a strong foundation for future success. “It was my school,” Eileen affirms. “It was my window into the work I was meant to do, equipping me with the skills, experience, and confidence to lead The Community Foundation.”

The Community Foundation of 2018 looks very different from the Foundation of 2005. “I applied because I understood its potential,” Eileen says. “I love an underdog challenge, and in 2005, the Foundation was an underdog. We had a lot of issues to overcome. For instance, I inherited a budget of \$220,000, and within three weeks of starting, I was \$40,000 in the hole!” It took dedication, determination, and help from friends along the way, but thanks to her perseverance and creativity, Eileen was able to grow it into the organization it is today. “There couldn’t be a Foundation without Booz Allen Hamilton,” Eileen says. “The company is the reason the Community Foundation exists to this day. They were so generous in giving us our space and IT services. They hung with us through the good and the bad and never faltered in their commitment.”

Today, The Community Foundation is an exemplar of community-focused philanthropic work, and is routinely recognized in the area and beyond for its excellence, including with a Nova Forward Award by the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce. “The Foundation is asked to speak all over the country about our innovative approach,” Eileen says. “We’re small, but we’re mighty.”

Ultimately, Eileen’s successes at The Community Foundation boils down to communication. A collaborative leader, she focuses on constant and constructive communication within her team, cultivating a common understanding of the organization’s values and direction. “Through communication, we work to make sure everyone on the team is on the same page, synchronized, and working toward the same goal,” she says. “It’s one of the big reasons we’ve been so successful in making an impact.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Eileen underscores the importance of persistence in making or breaking

an experience. “You must persist,” she affirms. “Find your purpose, your gift, your passion, and then give it all you’ve got without giving up.” Indeed, the power of persistence has shaped her story always, and in all ways. She was raised to persist by loving, determined parents. She was taught to persist by dedicated instructors and professional mentors. She cultivated every aspect of her varied career through careful persistence. And her husband and soulmate, Bob Weil, is the personification of persistence. “He never gives up,” Eileen says. “I mean *never*.”

Like the decades of slow tide and fine sand that transmute broken bottles into beautiful sea glass, Eileen’s life and legacy through The Community Foundation has shown that persistent and thoughtful hard work can bring about meaningful change. Her connection to the places and people that shape her defines her sense of responsibility and her commitment to stewardship. And her dedication to the wellbeing of others, her profound sense of compassion, and her optimism in the face of adversity, all combine to make her an empowering and transformative community leader. “I’m grateful I took the time to reconsider my professional direction, analyze my true calling, and make a change,” she reflects. “Life at the intersection of passion, talent, and need is exactly where I want to be.”

© July 2018 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

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](#).