

# Kathleen Benson

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## The Gifts That Aren't Givens

Growing up in the blue-collar town of Altoona in central Pennsylvania, Kathy Benson's family didn't have a lot of money, so she learned early on how to make a little go a long way. But it was only in retrospect, after working hard for what she achieved in life and reflecting back on the subtle sacrifices her parents made, that she came to understand things as gifts instead of givens.

One hundred fifty dollars was the cost of renting a small apartment five blocks from the beach in Wildwood for a week in the summer. For her father, who worked in a plant, and her mother, who worked in the Sears credit office at night so she could be home with Kathy and her two brothers during the day, the sum wasn't cheap. But they made other sacrifices in life so that the family could spend that time together each summer. And today, remembering her mother preparing sandwiches for a day at the beach and her father carrying the heavy cooler on his shoulder as the sand burned their feet, Kathy knows those memories are some of the most precious gifts they could have given her. "They were very positive, always choosing to look at the glass as half-full," she remembers. "At the time, I didn't realize how hard they worked to give us all they could."

Now the cofounder, President, and CEO of ORI, a market research firm that excels in providing innovative insights to drive results, Kathy's life's work is about giving people the opportunity to turn hard work into good lives for themselves and their families. "One of the things that motivates me most is the fact that we're able to offer a great working environment to so many people," she remarks. "It gives me a lot of satisfaction to know that I'm keeping people gainfully employed and offering them opportunities that other companies wouldn't, like the ability to have a good work/life balance."

The pursuit of that balance was exactly

what compelled Kathy to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams in the first place, though she hardly could have imagined it would lead her to launch her own company. When she had her first child, Travis, at age 26, she took time off from her job working as the executive assistant to a business owner. It quickly became apparent that the office couldn't function without her, so at the urging of her boss, she packed up her baby and brought him in to work with her so she could keep the company running. "I loved my work, but after a month, I knew there had to be a better way," she remembers. "I needed a profession that gave me personal satisfaction while still allowing for the work/life balance I needed as a new mom, so I decided to start a word processing company."

Those were the days before the internet, so Kathy hit the library to do her research and contacted the newspapers to run her advertisements. When she spoke with her employer about her plans, however, he begged her to stay. She agreed to continue working for him, but under new conditions. She would work four days per week for her same salary, have the leeway to leave the office for other meetings as needed, and have her own phone line in her office, which she could answer with her own company name.

With these new arrangements established, Kathy decided that word processing might not be the best direction to take her fledgling business, so she phoned a friend, Susan Lynd. The two had worked together at an engineering consulting firm, and their aligned ethics and moral values made for an exceptionally compatible working relationship. They met at a McDonalds in Bethesda in January of 1988 to discuss a possible path forward, conceptualizing a data entry business on the back of a napkin. After more research and brainstorming, they decided to launch Office Remedies together, and their own mothers landed



them their first two projects.

Several months later, the work began to trickle in. The Bensons had just bought their first home, and as a new mother who had to figure out how to balance the competing interests of family and finances, Kathy imagined there had to be other women in the community who felt just like she did. Carla, her sister-in-law, had just had a baby as well, so Kathy invited her to join the team. As more people sought the services of Office Remedies, she brought on neighbors and friends from church. "Suddenly we had a cottage industry of stay-at-home moms willing to work from home, which was an extremely novel concept back then," she explains. "I continued to cold-call, conduct meetings, and sell our data entry capabilities. Then, when I knew we had enough business that I could pay myself an adequate salary, I left my office job fully and worked from home for eight years, until we moved into our Herndon offices."

Kathy has always been driven by the thrill of strategy and the challenge of getting from point A to point B, and her team began bringing this insight to their work by pointing out questions in their clients' surveys that were generating mixed and ineffective data. The clients would ask for recommendations to improve the questions, and Office Remedies was happy to help. After about 8 years, a light bulb went off for Kathy, and she realized the business was already so much more than a data entry company. With that, they brought on someone with survey expertise to help formalize the service, marking their transition into a research firm.

Before long, Kathy noticed that clients were asking for help with making sense of the data that Office Remedies was processing. She saw that companies were collecting massive amounts of data over time, but they didn't know what to do with it. Highlighting her needs-oriented approach to growth, she hired someone who could run the analysis and tabulations and teach the team how to really drill down to extract valuable information about customers, members, and the organization itself. In this fashion, the company continued to augment its services over the years, steadily evolving into the full-service research firm it is today.

Now known as ORI to reflect the firm's reinvented identity, the company has over 320 employees, with offices in Herndon, Atlanta, Dallas, Kansas City, Chicago, and Florida. With a

team of seasoned statisticians and researchers, it utilizes traditional market research augmented with social media tools and technologies to help organizations make better business decisions based on qualitative and quantitative analyses of market penetration. "If a client wants to expand to new geographies, we show them how they would be perceived in those areas and advise on the best ways to communicate with those potential customers," Kathy explains. "We also do satisfaction studies to see how a company's customers or members perceive them. When it comes to data, we do deep dives to provide our clients everything they need to make good decisions."

ORI takes its work a step further by giving specific recommendations for implementing solutions, and then ties everything back to the reason the customer wanted to conduct the research in the first place, ensuring that their process is entirely outcomes-based. What's more, the company serves associations, commercial firms, and the federal government, drawing on the best practices from each segment to maximize its research principles and offer innovative solutions across spheres. "One reason Sue and I started this company was because we wanted to create a culture of responsiveness and empowerment," Kathy affirms. "If an employee comes to us with a great idea, we want to be able to act quickly and bring those benefits to our clients quickly. It's that flexibility and urgency that have kept us evolving to meet the needs of the entities we serve."

Though she never envisioned running a business like ORI, Kathy's entrepreneurial spirit was evident even in her childhood pastimes. She loved to sew and would sell the things she made. Then, in high school, she was charged with raising money for charity and decided to negotiate a deal with an office supplies distributor to purchase packs of pens for 30 cents. She then sold them for a dollar, and when her grandmother took her to bingo night at church, the packs went like hot cakes. In the end, she raised more money than any other classmate.

As the oldest sibling and only daughter, Kathy loved to boss her brothers around, cook for her family, and tend the garden with her uncle after school and on the weekends. Her parents prioritized family dinners together each night, and she remembers fondly the big Italian dinners the family had each Sunday at her grandparents'

house. When she was 14, they started an annual reunion in the mountains of Pennsylvania, and they haven't missed a year in the decades since. "We have a series of pictures from each year, and it's great to see how the family has grown and changed over the generations," she remarks. "When we were younger, we'd sit and listen to the stories. Now I'm where my mom was when we first started going. Today, it's as important to my kids and nieces and nephews as it was to my grandmother 40 years ago. It's a platform for passing values down from one generation to the next through storytelling, and it's extremely important to all of us."

Fourteen was a transformative age for Kathy in other ways, as well. It was the year she began dating Shawn, the man who would become her husband, and the year her parents divorced. Watching them, she learned how important it is to pick up the pieces and do what you need to do to make it through hard situations. "Shawn helped me get through that difficult time," she reflects. "He was a football player, and I was a cheerleader, so we'd go to sporting events together. My family embraced him, and his embraced me. It was a very different way of growing up, with expectations that we'd stay in Altoona and settle down."

Having babysat for a number of business owners in the town, and having watched some of her own aunts and uncles move away and achieve different levels of success, Kathy knew there was more than one way to go through life. First, however, she wanted to master the art of hard work. When she turned 16, she was offered a job at the local drug store, where she was promoted to work in the pharmacy. Then, during her senior year, she participated in a co-op program, attending school in the mornings until eleven and then working in the data processing department of a manufacturing plant until 7 at night. "I worked for a really great family who would let me leave early sometimes for my cheerleading commitments," she remembers. "It was a good experience at balancing various priorities."

Neither of Kathy's parents had gone to college, and although she loved academics, it was assumed that she wouldn't pursue higher education. None of the college counselors approached her to open the conversation, and though she considered it, she was offered a full-time job with the manufacturing company upon graduation. She worked there for a year and then

moved down to the D.C. area with her best friend to be closer to Shawn, who was enrolled at the University of Maryland on a full-ride football scholarship. The couple got engaged at age nineteen and married at twenty.

Kathy got a job with the government as a GS-2 in the secretarial pool making \$8,000 a year, and Shawn's monthly stipend of \$585 for room and board helped to make ends meet. "We thought we had so much money!" she laughs. "Nobody ever asked us if we understood what we were doing, or if we had enough to move to the D.C. area. We just made it work."

Kathy knew education was important, and because she hadn't had the opportunity to be a traditional student, she decided to take business classes at the University of Maryland in the evenings. She started doing sewing work for people in her spare time, and with football games on the weekend and family visiting from Pennsylvania all the time, the young couple was happy as could be.

The Bensons moved to Virginia when Shawn signed with the Redskins as a free agent in 1984, but when he suffered an injury shortly after camp started, he decided to resign. Drawing on the help of several great mentors, he was accepted into the sales program at Xerox and has been in high tech software sales ever since. Kathy spent three years working as an executive assistant for the engineering consulting firm where she met Sue. She then spent four years working in the finance industry before committing herself to ORI full-time.

In the intervening years of transformation, Shawn has become ORI's biggest fan. "He's always encouraged me to branch out and do what I want to do," Kathy affirms. "He knows I get bored if I'm not challenged, so he always supports me in stretching my limits and doing what I need to do to get to the next level, personally and professionally. Our 33 years of marriage have been wonderful, and I couldn't imagine a better partner."

Together, Kathy and Shawn were active in the community through their children's school and sports. Now that Travis and their daughter, McCaul, are older, they focus on giving back in other ways. Shawn works with special needs young adults through a weekly weightlifting program focusing on health and fitness, while Kathy mentors women who own their own

business or are looking to take the next step in their professional lives. As a board member of the DC Chapter of the National Association of Women-Owned Businesses, she's an important voice in the conversation of balancing work and family life, and as a leader, she aims to give alongside her employees as they participate in charity events like Relay for Life.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Kathy highlights the important role that failure plays in the road toward success. "A lot of our employees are afraid to fail, but mistakes are fixable," she explains. "They're important learning experiences for the whole team." She also embraces entrepreneurship as a force not only to start new companies, but to improve existing companies from within. "Some of our staff are very entrepreneurially-minded, and I encourage them to think of new products, services, and ways of doing things," she says. "Our employees come up with great ideas that have led ORI to conduct original research and pursue thought leadership that has been valuable for our clients."

This inclusive, proactive, forward-thinking approach and wonderful employees landed ORI a spot on the *Inc.* 5000 List of America's Fastest Growing Companies for five consecutive years—a badge of honor for a company that has seen many ups and downs in its 26 years of operation. And Kathy's and Sue's creativity and resilience have garnered spots on WPO and American Express OPEN's List of 50 Fastest-Growing Women-

Owned/Led Companies, and on *Working Mother* Magazine's list of 25 Best Woman-Owned Businesses.

"It has been a real honor to be part of this," Kathy says. "I love what we're able to do for our clients and employees. And most of all, I love that I've been able to show my children what it means to be a mom working outside the home, running a company and leading a team. I've encouraged them to chase their dreams and try everything they want to try, because you have to experience lots of different things to really become who you are. That liberty is never a given in life, but it's the best gift one can give or receive."

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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 providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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