

# Suzie Mills

---

## Finding Her Joy

The young women in the pictures welcome veterans and others into the yoga studio entrance. One woman, in a black and white photograph stands smiling, even though it is obvious that the world around her is at war. Another picture in color shows a young woman standing in her Air Force uniform with snow and ice covering the ground. A third photograph captures the warm embrace between a young and much older woman who is clutching a beautiful bouquet of tulips. Viewing these photographs, Suzie Mills feels pride as she remembers that special moment when she gave her grandmother tulips before she deployed to Afghanistan. She is filled with gratitude, remembering those moments spent hearing her grandmother's experience of when she served on the flight line for the Air Force during World War II.

After Suzie joined the Air Force Reserves she reconnected with her paternal grandmother. During Suzie's childhood, her parents separated from her extended family, and Suzie was no longer able to see her grandmother. However, after Suzie's parents were divorced, her father decided to rekindle his relationship with his mother. Suzie, dressed in her uniform, went with her father to see her grandmother for the first time in several years. "Her house was very close to Andrews Air Force Base, so I would visit her often," Suzie says. "I am grateful for the time I got to spend with her." Suzie would spend her military training weekends visiting her grandmother between drills. They would talk, laugh over tea and sandwiches, and found comfort in rekindling their relationship.

Her grandmother's house was a place of security and peace for Suzie and she would often take naps while her grandmother watched over her. Before her deployment to Afghanistan, Suzie's grandmother was diagnosed with Leukemia and

passed away while Suzie was deployed. "When she died, I called my father and he told me that I should not come home because my grandmother would want me to stay," Suzie explains. "I think he knew that if I came home I would not get the veteran benefits that would be so critical to me now." Somehow the vase of tulips that she had given her grandmother were kept safe and found their way back to Suzie. Even though the flowers are dried from age, they rest in Suzie's office as a reminder of her grandmother's influence.



Today, Suzie carries out her grandmother's legacy by providing a welcoming, safe environment for people looking to connect through yoga. Suzie is the CEO and Founder of Honest Soul Yoga in Alexandria, Virginia. "When I was a child, my father told me to find something I loved and figure out a way to make money doing it," Suzie explains. Suzie founded Honest Soul Yoga from her basement in February of 2013. She had five yoga mats and quickly realized that to be a successful business she needed more space. "I wrote a business plan, but my husband and I determined that we did not have the \$25,000 needed to open the retail space. One day, my husband called and said that our bank had just called him out of nowhere, offering a \$25,000 interest rate credit card for the year. So we put the studio on a credit card and eventually paid it back," Suzie says laughing at the memory. "My husband has always supported me in this business and without his support I would not have been able to get to where I am today." After months of laying flooring, painting, and making the studio a warm environment along with the support of her family and friends, Suzie opened the doors to Honest Soul Yoga in August of 2013.

By 2014, Honest Soul Yoga tripled in size, and Suzie moved to purchase a second space in the same building making the studio 3,600 square feet.

Honest Soul Yoga offers classes that increase self-awareness and encourage community. For Suzie, it is significant that the studio be a place that honors all experience levels. "I trained my staff to recognize new students and welcome them with a tour that gives the student a chance to share their experience. The idea is to make them feel seen and heard, like a big welcoming hug." The studio also has a boutique selling unique handcrafted items, spa products, crystals, and yoga gear. "We opened the boutique as a way to offer the whole yoga experience to our students," Suzie says. "I also enjoy selling products that share a story or that were made by veterans."

Creating this friendly environment is important to Suzie because of her own first experience in a yoga studio following her retirement from the military in 2010. "I got back from Afghanistan in 2007 and shortly after injured my knee while running a triathlon and was not able to work out the way I wanted to. I was at the gym and started taking a yoga class," Suzie says. "After one of the classes I overheard the instructor talking about a yoga studio and after extensive research I decided to go to a class. However, I got lost getting to the studio and this nice woman asked if I needed help. This was a time when I was feeling so alone and her kindness made me feel heard and cared for." It was during this power yoga class that Suzie felt a joy that she had not felt in many years and decided in that moment that her business would be a yoga studio.

Suzie describes that many of the students at Honest Soul Yoga are active duty military, their dependents, or veterans looking for a community since frequent military moves makes building a community more difficult. In addition to the classes offered by the studio, instructors provide four free classes a week at the United Services Organizations (USO) for military members and their dependents as well as for wounded and recovering soldiers through the Warrior Transition Unit. Now, Honest Soul Yoga is scheduled to open two new locations in Falls Church and Springfield, Virginia. "We are building a franchise model, so these two new locations will serve as floor plans for a future franchise opportunity," Suzie says.

Suzie's passion for business began at a very young age. She was born in Washington D.C. and grew up in the quiet suburb of Waldorf, Maryland. She remembers being about twelve years old, sitting with her parents as they tried to

establish the name of their family electrical business. "I remember very clearly my dad exclaiming that the name should be JJSA, which stands for Jerry, Julie, Suzie, Amy," Suzie says. "It really was a family business and looking back it is funny because I was celebrating becoming an S-Corp at such a young age." Suzie would often go to work with her father helping install cables, crawl under houses, and mount the finishes for electrical switches and sockets. "My sister and I would get paid \$1.25 an hour for working and it taught me to have a strong work ethic." During these summer jobs, Suzie remembers driving with her father as he taught her how to remember people and make a good first impression. "He told me that when meeting new people I should remember one thing about them," Suzie explains. "He taught me about relationships and making people feel valued, which is so relevant to what I do today at the studio."

When Suzie was not working with her parents, she and her sister had an adventurous childhood. "I had the best time as a child. My parents would let us play outside all day and would call us in with the house alarm in the evenings. I lived outside my entire childhood. I would ride my bike to school and went to the pool during the summers," Suzie says. "My dad was very handy so he built us a playground in the backyard and we had an above ground pool. So our house was the party house for the entire neighborhood. My dad was constantly building something unique and encouraged us to build things too."

Suzie describes her parents as diligent and passionate business owners. She says, "My mom taught me a lot about respect and I think I got my work ethic from her. My parents never took it easy." While operating a business during the day, Suzie's father worked evenings at NASA as an electrician. He is still working with NASA today. Suzie's mother worked in administrative roles for doctor's offices and also managed the family business. Now she works alongside Suzie at Honest Soul Yoga.

"As a child I remember knowing that we did not have a lot of money. When we had the business we had a little more because my parents could afford to send my sister and me to private Catholic school," Suzie says. Before she entered high school, Suzie's parents closed the family business. "I am not sure exactly what happened,

but it meant that my sister and I would return to public school,” Suzie explains. “Which was okay because I was able to reconnect with the friends I had during elementary school.”

In high school, Suzie flourished as an honor student and athlete. “In middle school I started running track and made it far on a Junior Olympic team. In high school I ran track and played field hockey making it to varsity during my freshman year,” Suzie says. Although Suzie excelled in honors level classes she explains that she had to study to earn her grades. She says, “School did not come easily to me and I had to work really hard.” While being engaged in school and sports, Suzie also held several jobs throughout high school to pay for her car. “I worked for Ledo Pizza, Gold’s Gym, Eckerd Drug Store, Sears, a dentist office, and then several paid internships. When I was a sophomore, I was introduced to the Vocational and Technology center of my high school and started in the Cisco Academy,” Suzie says. “By the time I was seventeen, I earned my CCNA and was accepted as an intern with Comcast.” When Suzie was approached about her plans for college by her guidance counselor she recalls knowing that she would not be able to afford college right away and opted for a job after graduation. “I graduated and immediately started working and was making \$30,000. I also started taking college classes at the community college, but I was not sure what I wanted to focus on,” Suzie says.

As a network engineer, Suzie began her professional life working with Prime as a subcontractor. She moved locations within the company over the course of five years before moving to Indian River and then procured a network-engineering job for the Navy Yard in 2004. At the Navy Yard, Suzie met her husband, Jeremy, and started to learn more about the military as an option. “In high school, my dream was to become the CEO of a company, and I knew that I would need a college degree in order to get there,” Suzie says. “My boss was part of the Air National Guard and encouraged me to join the military to pay for college and travel, while I kept my job. So, in a very short time I went to a recruiter and signed up for the Air Force Reserves.” Suzie completed boot camp and tech training and then received orders for annual tours to Hawaii, Germany, South Carolina, and finally Afghanistan in 2007.

During her four-month deployment to Afghanistan, Suzie was responsible for airline transportation shipments on the Air Force flight line. While Suzie was not in direct combat, she still experienced the mental and physical impacts of war while struggling with being away from home. “When I first started the studio I did not feel worthy to be called a veteran, because I saw the struggles and pain that combat veterans went through. Now, I own my veteran status, because I saw and heard terrible things that still impact my mind and body,” Suzie explains. Also, during her deployment, Suzie’s future mother-in-law and a very close friend passed away in addition to her beloved grandmother. Suzie recalls, “I was so lonely even though I was surrounded by people. I did not feel like I had anyone to talk to and had a lot of time to think. I thought about what my dad said and how I needed to find something that made me happy and make it my job. So, it was in Afghanistan that I realized I wanted to have my own business doing something in health and wellness. It was like coming back to my true self knowing that I had to change something.”

Once she returned home from deployment, Suzie continued working her full time job as a network engineer, attended college at the University of Maryland University College online and in the evenings, and ran drills with the Air Force on the weekends. In 2010, Suzie decided to retire from the military and also graduated with a Bachelor’s in Business Administration. She also attended the yoga class that would change her life and by 2011 she earned her yoga instructor certification.

As the CEO of Honest Soul Yoga, Suzie strives to be a compassionate leader that encourages and supports her employees. “I am constantly thinking about how to promote people and how we can enhance their strengths,” Suzie says. “I want to take what they do well and make it better, which I think takes compassion.” Suzie advises young leaders to follow their own paths and stay true to their own dreams, without being influenced by others.

Certainly, Suzie’s compassion and path has brought her and Honest Soul Yoga many accolades. Suzie was featured on ABC 7 for the Working Women Segment and Honest Soul Yoga was highlighted on Fox 5 for National Yoga Month. Additionally, Honest Soul Yoga was awarded Best Yoga Studio in D.C. by the

Washingtonian in 2014, and recently was chosen from 55 businesses in the entire United States by Google to be featured for the Commonwealth of Virginia on their Economic Impact Report. This coming fall, Google will air a commercial featuring Honest Soul Yoga and Suzie telling her story of being a veteran and business owner. Also, in 2018 Honest Soul Yoga hosted a yogathon, that raised over \$10,000 to support the USO programs. Throughout her life, Suzie has truly sustained a balance that many would falter to maintain. Today, her new balance includes being a mother to her son and daughter, ages one and a half and three and working full time. She has achieved her high school dream of being a CEO and proudly proclaims her veteran status. She is truly a remarkable individual who found her joy through establishing a business that is making an impact in the lives of others.

© January 2019 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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

---



**BERNHARDT**  
WEALTH MANAGEMENT