

Maris P. Angolia

Lighting Up the Room

Years ago, a young man walked into Karin's Florist, a flower shop in Northern Virginia, to buy a bouquet for a first date. Not long after that, he returned to buy flowers for their wedding, and not long after that, the happy couple called up the very same florist as they prepared to celebrate their newborn child. Another customer started purchasing flowers from Karin's Florist as a young girl, and has turned to them through the years for pivotal life and family events. "Flowers bring such happiness and beauty to people," says Maris Angolia, the shop's President and CEO. "Our work lights up the room and allows us to be part of some of the most important moments of people's lives, all through their lives. You have these stories that carry on."

Maris understands the enduring importance of her shop's role in these stories because her story, in fact, began there. Her maternal grandfather, George Raptis, sold flowers on a street corner in New York City after immigrating to the United States from Greece as a child.

By the age of nineteen, he had his own shop. Years later, his only child, Helen, married Bill Dukas, a traveling salesman, and the newlyweds settled in Northern Virginia. There, Bill decided he wanted to open a store at Seven Corners Shopping Center and called his father-in-law. "He told my grandfather that if he moved down to the area, he'd make it a flower shop, but if not, it would be a men's wear store," Maris says. "My grandparents decided to make the move, and the store was formally opened on October 26, 1956. My sister, Karin, was my parents' firstborn child and my grandparents' first grandchild, so they named the shop after her for good luck."

At that time, Maris's father didn't know a carnation from a rose from a daisy. But with one other relative and a driver, Bill and his father-in-law, George, made it work. Eight years later, Maris was born. The shop was a staple of her childhood,

and she still remembers her first job putting addresses on calendars for a quarter an hour. "I was very proud to be doing that," she reminisces. "I'm sure my handwriting wasn't the best at age eleven, but my father still let me do it."

Growing up in Falls Church, Maris remembers her parents as a great team with a storybook marriage. While her father worked long and unpredictable hours, her mother had the kids to raise and the home to care for. From her mother, she learned how to work for the best interest of

everyone around her, always trying to make things better for others. And from her father, she learned to treat every customer with respect and dignity, regardless of their background or appearance. "I remember when I was twelve years old and a lady walked into the store, disheveled and with big pink rollers in her hair," Maris says. "My dad said, 'Madam, how may I help you?' and she asked how much roses were. She started peeling hundred-dollar bills off a wad of cash, and my dad

was just perfectly professional and kind. That stuck with me—to never judge a book by its cover, and to value everybody the same. And he was an incredible salesman, able to connect with people honestly and immediately."

As the youngest of three children, Maris was very shy as a child, and was often so quiet in her car seat that her mother would forget she was in the car. As a young girl, she played with dolls and was best friends with other girls living in the neighborhood. The church her father helped build was two streets away, and she remembers walking to Sunday School. She spent time with her grandparents who lived nearby, and remembers annual family vacations to the beach. "It was a very happy childhood," she remarks. "And as I got a little older, I took on other jobs at the store—calling out the orders to the other florists, writing out reports, selling. We got to know everybody. I



was still shy, but I found that sales actually came naturally to me. Helping out at the store was something we all enjoyed doing.”

Maris was an excellent student, and her academic performance was perhaps enhanced by her parents’ strict rules that only allowed minimal dating after the age of sixteen. “Growing up in a Greek household, they were very careful, and my dad insisted on driving me to football games with friends,” she laughs. “Others knew me as a nice girl and a good student.” She always knew she’d go to college, and though she was most interested in fashion merchandising, she decided to major in business because her advisors said it would open more doors. She was happy to land a spot at American University, which was close to home.

When she graduated from college in 1985 with a marketing and computer systems degree, Maris had no intention of going into IT. She landed at American Management Systems (AMS, later to become CGI) as an entry-level consultant, where mentors took her under their wing and taught her how to succeed. She worked on a project showing the Army National Guard how to automate their records and clocked long, tough hours alongside people who are still some of her best friends today. “In a way, I feel like I grew up there,” she reflects.

One fortuitous day, about a year into her tenure at AMS, Maris found herself in the elevator with Fred Forman, one of the company’s top executives. He asked how she was, and when she asked in return, he mentioned that he wasn’t good because the person responsible for implementing the new software system had just resigned. Maris had used the software package herself, and had dreamed of being in that position someday. She asked how he planned to replace the employee, and he asked, “Are you interested?”

With that, Maris moved into an executive office to handle project marketing and management, where she reported to two of the greatest mentors she ever had. They taught her how to run a department, and at age 26, she became one of the youngest principals at the firm. “There were very few women in IT at that time, and everyone really seemed to have my back as I figured things out,” she recalls. “Fred and my boss, Jerry Grochow, taught me to be the kind of leader who doesn’t jump to conclusions, but instead takes the time to learn all parts of the story and help people grow.”

When AMS reorganized, Maris called up

the CEO of Intersolv, the company that made one of the software packages she liked so much. She landed a job with them doing competitive analysis and analyst relations, which she enjoyed very much. In 1993, after two years in that role, she took a job with Legent working in analyst relations and operating their research libraries. “I got to know the industry and had a great time with them,” she recounts. “It’s always exciting when you can pitch a story and then see it published in a brief. But all my jobs in IT required extensive travel, and I wanted to reconnect with local life.”

With that, after ten years in IT, Maris decided to do something new. Around the same time, Karin’s Florist relocated to Vienna and needed someone to take over outside sales, marketing, and setting up the computer system. It was a perfect fit for Maris’s skill set, so she decided to give it a try. “That was a big leap, to leave IT and join the family floral business,” she says. “But it was wonderful to get away from such an intense atmosphere and return to a community that felt like home.”

Maris had not come onboard with the intention of running the business one day, but she became VP, Operations in 1999. She continued to grow with the company, and in 2009 officially became President and CEO. “I’m so grateful to my father, who was always there to lend a helping hand,” she says. “He was a role model who believed there was enough business to go around, so he would help other florists in the area succeed. He was both a numbers guy and a people person, and the customers just loved him. I learned from the best.”

One of her first courses of action was a focus on greater community involvement, starting with joining the Vienna Chamber of Commerce. At a chamber event, while discussing the new phenomenon that was the internet, she met the man that would become her husband, Mark. Later, in 2010, she joined the Associates Board of Wolf Trap Foundation, a large performing arts venue in the community. She became chairman of that board in 2014—a year-long tenure that stands out as one of the highlights of her career to date. “I grew up going to shows there,” she reflects. “I had my first date there. And to be elected into that leadership position to work on its behalf was one of the biggest honors.”

At the newly-opened Vienna store, Maris found herself incredibly busy and grateful for the

hardworking staff who helped share the burden. They had between ten and twelve employees at that time, and the company has now grown into a team of around thirty people that scales up to around a hundred employees during the holiday season. "I believe we have some of the most talented designers in the country, if not the world," Maris remarks. "We've got a divide-and-conquer strategy where we've got a sales team, a design team, a delivery team, and office support. We focus on our strengths, and say no to services that are outside our expertise. It's been a lot of fun to define who we are and how we want to move forward in the future."

Globalization has transformed virtually every industry and sector as the world has become more interconnected, and the floral industry is no exception. Flowers can now be transported swiftly all over the world, with customers snapping photos of the delivered products to say thank-you to the sender. It adds a new level of quality control in an industry that revolves around a perishable product, which has changed the calculus used when substitutions must be made.

But Maris sees change as a good thing, and a common refrain in the industry she's observed since childhood. "Growing up in the floral business, I knew that new things happen every day," she says. "There are always new flowers, new varieties, new styles, and you have to keep up with everything. So even though I knew the business well, there was always something new to learn every day, and lots of surprises along the way. Some are good, and some are not quite so good, but I thrive in this environment where there's always something new to work at."

Recognizing this changed environment, Maris makes it a priority to protect the company's brand in the online marketplace, where she must be cautious of online advertisers that mislead or misinform customers. But overall, she views the online marketplace as a tremendous positive that allows her to have real-time conversations with customers all over the country about their visions and preferences. The point-of-sale system she researched and brought into the store has also created important efficiencies, and the company recently introduced a new program called "See What You Send" that issues photos of the delivered products to every sender in the local area. "The program is already very popular, and it gives customers the chance to make changes before

the delivery goes out the door," she reports. "The more we can incorporate technology into the business, the more we can stay on the cutting edge and ensure our customers love what they get."

At the age of twelve, Maris would have told you that she would be married by the age of 22, and by age 30 would have 2.5 children, a white picket fence, and a dog. But life veered in a different direction, and though it hasn't gone exactly as planned, she couldn't be happier. Her husband, Mark, has been an incredible partner, lending his technical skills to the success of the business behind-the-scenes and giving Maris the support she needs to be the best leader possible. "He never questions my obligations to the shop and is always there to help," she says. "He's my world, and he brought two incredible step-children into my life who are now grown and starting their own families."

Maris's step-kids are the light of her life, and for Christmas last year, they gave her a Pandora charm bracelet. One of the charms, an elephant, is meant to symbolize her new baby granddaughter since the theme in her room is elephants, but it also reminds Maris of something Mark tells her every time she feels stressed or burned out. "He says, 'How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time, and never alone.' So whenever I feel overwhelmed, I look down and am reminded of my granddaughter, my two wonderful step-kids, my husband, and my ability to persevere," she affirms.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Maris underscores the power of showing up every day and doing your best. "Working your way up takes patience, but it pays off," she says. "Good things will come with time. If you want a role, let your boss know and then put yourself on a path to get there. Work hard to show you deserve it. When I look to hire people, I ask for three things—that they show up to work on time and ready to do their job, that they have a great attitude, and that they be trustworthy. If you're ready to do those things, you'll get far in life, no matter what industry or workplace you enter."

Now, in addition to the various committees and leadership roles Maris holds alongside her work at Karin's Florist, Maris works to contribute more to the community through the Karin's Gives Back program. This year, for the company's 60th anniversary, the effort donates the

proceeds from certain large events to one of four selected charities. "It was always very important to my father to be involved in the community, because so much of our business is about relationships," she says. "When people think of flowers or gift baskets or weddings or events, I want them to think of us, and of a time when they met me." Thanks in part to these community involvement efforts, Karin's Florist was named Best Florist in America in 2013 by Steve Harvey.

Despite her marked impact out in the community and in the world around her, however, some of Maris's most important work takes place on the most common of days and in the confines of the store. There, she strives to lead by example, striking a tone of uncompromising honesty, integrity, and positivity. "Our industry is fantastic, with some of the greatest people you could hope to meet," she says. "You meet growers from all over the world, familiarizing yourself with these international currents even as you remain deeply connected to folks in your local community. You get to know peoples' emotions and have the ability to add to their joy, which is a true gift. And to be

able to carry on my father's legacy is also incredible. He always lit up the room—not only with flowers, but with his kindness and a smile. Today, that's still what Karin's Florist is all about."

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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](#).



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