

Lillian I. Harris

Creating the Future

For Lilly Harris, picking up a pen has always been like picking up a key – the kind of key that unlocks ideas, potential, and the future. Sitting across from her father at local diners as a young girl, she would join him in mapping out problems, goals, and dreams on the paper placemats before them. “Every big life decision I’ve made has been brainstormed at a diner,” she laughs today. “The pen has been my greatest tool; I can literally design my future.”

Lilly and her father embraced creativity beyond the boundaries of diner placemats as well. She was ten years old when her father mapped out the idea for a company on a bar napkin. Several months later, as the idea was forming up, he invited her into his home office to brainstorm names for the business on his whiteboard. “Growing up, we whiteboarded everything,” she says. “He listed out various names for me to choose from, and together, we settled on Man-Machine Systems Assessment (MSA).”

Now, 28 years later, Lilly is President and CEO of the human factors engineering firm she and her father dreamed up all those years ago. Today, the very same creativity that infused her life with motivation and meaning as a ten-year-old is the force that drives her success as a business owner and entrepreneur. “This job really allows me to be my most authentic self,” she says. “I’m a very creative person. I love solving problems, and I love people. I love building teams and communities. When I’m not true to that and I’m misaligned at work, it becomes stressful. But when I play to my strengths and look at things from a creative way, I relax and am more clear-minded.”

Committed to strengthening America through assured materiel performance, preparedness, continuity, and innovation, MSA developed its first core capabilities in the testing and evaluation of missile defense and chemical

biological defense systems. It then developed a business unit in Homeland Security & Emergency Management, taking on contracts at the federal, state, and local levels. From evaluation exercises for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, to supporting the 2015 Papal Visit, the company has been involved in over a hundred full-scale, functional, and tabletop exercises.

MSA was founded by Lilly’s father, who retired from the Navy in 1980. “That was the same year I was born, and they say I was his retirement present,” she laughs. Entering civilian life, he worked for several large contracting companies but hated the feeling of being just a number. They didn’t seem to care about him personally, and he wanted to create a company that did. From that dream, in 1990, he created MSA.

Lilly, who was ten years old at the time, was no stranger to entrepreneurial sparks, having grown up in a multigenerational entrepreneurial family filled with creativity. Her great-grandmother, the rock of the family, encouraged everyone to follow their dreams. Her mother’s father was a photographer who encouraged his children to be their own boss, while her father’s father was the hardworking owner of a large roofing company. Her father started selling newspapers as soon as he was old enough to ride a bike so he could afford a better bike, and his stories inspired Lilly. As a kid, she was innately driven and would sell baseball cards, candy, snow cones, and giftwrap paper. She set up contracts with her parents stipulating care responsibilities for the family pets and raises in her modest allowance. “When I was eight, my father began depositing that allowance into a bank account for me,” she remembers. “I became the first kid around with an ATM card and would go withdraw the money myself when I wanted.”

When MSA launched, Lilly’s parents refinanced their home, dug deep into their savings,



and leaned on credit cards to make payroll. But she was largely oblivious to the sacrifices, living a happy childhood of tae kwon do, track, and volleyball until she fell in love with soccer. "I really appreciated the community I found in my soccer team," she says. "They upheld a legacy of excellence in competition, and the sense of sisterhood was very impactful. It really helped prepare me for building teams in the business world."

Growing up, Lilly's outlook on life was shaped by her father's attitude that everything is an adventure. His work required constant travel, but he framed each trip as he framed each day, as an exciting journey. "My dad is simple and creative," Lilly says. "He likes to create companies, not run them. My mother, on the other hand, has a competitive spirit and is very business savvy. Both come from big families, so family has always been very important to us, with large gatherings for every holiday and event."

The Harris family values translated into the foundational character of MSA in its earliest days. Leaning into his specialty of testing and evaluation of weapon systems, Lilly's father picked up a few contracts and operated the business out of his home office. But business dried up a year later when the Gulf War hit, and he worried he had made a mistake. Digging in, he began bartering with a lawyer who lived nearby, offering help on legal cases. The lawyer took up his help as a trial consultant, which grew into a business line that sustained the company through the next two years.

As MSA worked through 100 civil law cases, Lilly helped out on the weekends Xeroxing, punching holes, assembling binders, and building models to illustrate the engineering conditions of various cases. "Once, we reconstructed a balcony on which a child had fallen over and died," she recounts. "Another time we recreated a case where a can of WD-40 exploded when it was dropped on a nail. If we weren't doing those types of activities, we were going to local mountain bike races to sell the ergonomic bike grips he helped invent. These fun, hands-on things were my introduction to business and to working with Dad."

Finally, Lilly's father received a phone call from a prior client, asking him to resume the weapons testing subcontract work he had been doing before the war. He shut down his other ventures and pivoted on a dime, and for the next

several years, that work was MSA's primary focus. "My father never had a vision to build a large company," Lilly says. "He wanted something small, lean, and intimate, where employees were treated fairly and the company was manageable."

That began to change around 1998, when Lilly's mother completed her graduate degree in accounting and came in to help with back office support. She formalized the company's payroll, set up QuickBooks, and took the organization to a new level of professionalism as its Executive Vice President until stepping into the role of CEO. When Lilly's parents decided to place a greater emphasis on business development, they brought on a partner to expand beyond El Paso to the Austin area, hoping to one day win their own prime contract.

By the time MSA was looking to open their first office in Virginia, Lilly was graduating from college at Texas Tech University, where she had intended to pursue medicine. She had joined a sorority and made close, lifelong friendships with several other girls, who helped her through adventure, heartbreak, a transformative experience, and sleepless nights of studying. After spending a summer as an EMT, Lilly realized she didn't want to become a doctor after all, and instead majored in Psychology with a minor in Anthropology. "I didn't know what I wanted to do," she says. "It was either the Peace Corps, or I wanted to become a chef. Either way, I wanted to get out of Texas."

When her father said he needed help opening an MSA office in Virginia, Lilly saw it as a viable path to a new experience and decided to give it a try. With that, she spent six months in El Paso learning the business and then joined a partner in Virginia to focus on business development. "It was an exciting time because we were growing and very open to learning best practices from other companies," she recounts. "How could we grow and learn?"

Their efforts paid off, and when MSA landed its first prime contract in 2003, the steps to its future began falling into place. They hired employees as one contract led to another, and when they obtained their 8(a) designation as a disadvantaged small business, they were able to build out a new business line in homeland security and emergency management. The growth, however, brought new challenges. It took time for Lilly to acclimate to the natural ebbs and flows in

revenue that accompany growth, and with the company's work tied to the budget decisions and policies of the federal government, it felt the sting of Congressional discord.

As well, growth meant that MSA had to compete with bigger companies for talent, so Lilly set to work designing professionalized HR policies and benefits packages that could compete with the very best. Identifying weaknesses, Lilly took over the books from her mother, but she soon hit a slump. "I was unhappy, stressed, and disconnected from my creative sense of entrepreneurialism," she remembers. "I didn't want to spend my life crunching numbers in an office as a government contractor, so I decided to leave the company to enroll at New York University's film school."

There, Lilly took a producing class and was tapped to produce several short films for her classmates. "I remember walking into that situation with such confidence, like I was a Hollywood producer," she laughs. "I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I jumped into things intuitively, and I realized that a movie budget is like a company budget. Casting is like HR, and scripts were like a business story."

Just as Lilly was reawakening to her entrepreneurialism and creativity, she got a call from her mother that MSA needed help after a new accountant didn't work out. Lilly left school to help out, and as she stepped back on the MSA set, her work hummed with a new energy. She hired a new accounting firm that could identify their business challenges by reading the story of their numbers, and she committed to learning from everything they did. "As a kid, math had always been hard for me because I didn't have context for why it mattered," she says. "But as an adult, watching that auditor read the financials and tell the story of my business, I was hooked. It made the numbers creative for me, which is the connection I need. The numbers told our story, and the company was our movie. I absolutely fell in love with it."

As the company's momentum continued to grow, Lilly hired a CFO who perfectly complements her skillset, and made the defining move into the role of President as the company celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Embracing the opportunity to put her own stamp on the business, she implemented a rebranding and refocus, including a new website and business line.

The changes were implemented thoughtfully to honor her father's legacy by preserving the core essence, values, and culture he had built, while allowing Lilly to step into her own. "Through that time, we tried, failed, and succeeded at all kinds of things," she says. "It was all the part of the process of expressing my vision for the future."

Several years later, in 2010, Lilly became CEO. At the top, she grew very introspective about assuming ownership of the business with that new role. "Things used to fall on my shoulder, but now, this was my future," she says. "If I played my cards right, it could be really great for me and whatever family I want to build. That was a big change in how I looked at the business... really, how I looked at everything."

The same year she became CEO, Lilly brought her daughter, Elle, into the world. Legacy transformed from a vague, remote idea to living, breathing reality. "I knew I had to make it work," she remembers. "I started thinking about big concepts like multigenerational wealth and family business, but I also found myself craving a network of others facing the same challenges and opportunities. Thankfully, several months later, I found Harvard's Owners President Management (OPM) program, a forum that allowed me to connect with 160 other CEOs from around the world. Living in dorms, studying in pajamas, we really connected and found that we were all in the same boat, and I was able to get insight into all kinds of businesses. For me, it was like Disneyland for business, and as someone without a business background, I found that I was instinctively doing many of the things we learned about."

With all these factors taken together, 2011 was a major turning point for Lilly, both personally and professionally. It was transformative to peel back the façade to find that her struggles were the same faced by many others, and learning alongside her peers was like heaven. "I'm most happy when I'm learning new things," she affirms. Her personal evolution translated to growth and prosperity for the company as well, and 2015 culminated in their highest annual revenue yet.

Then, in 2016, MSA's biggest client decided to go lowest price technically acceptable (LPTA), and as a result, the firm lost three of its core contracts. "We had been supporting that client for almost three decades, so that was a blow," Lilly concedes. "But that moment spurred

me to really come into my own as CEO. In that moment, we basically had to reinvent ourselves, and I knew our future was going to be bigger than our past. We just had to stay in it long enough to bounce back. When I'm an underdog facing adverse odds, I really embrace the challenge. I had an important conversation with a mentor who reminded me what an exceptional company we had built. Everyone was looking to me for the plan. There was nothing to hide behind. So I decided, we're doing this. I took out some cash, paid off my parents' house, and threw the rest into saving the family business."

It was a big decision, and in that act of deciding, the company truly became hers. None of her core team members left, and within eight months, she won their key contract back. Within eighteen months, she recaptured nearly every contract and rehired every employee they lost. "It was certainly dark there for a while, but it makes the success now ten times as sweet," she says.

Today, the Harris family values are still enshrined at the heart of MSA. In the 2016 layoffs, Lilly went to great lengths to ensure every team member knew they were still valued, and that kindness ultimately brought everyone back. "We believe in being good, honest, polite, and respectful, and strive to leave things better than we found them," she says. "We put people before profits and see our team as a family. My job as a leader is to provide our people with the tools they need to shine and do the best job possible for the client, so that's always my focus."

Lilly's other main focus in life is coaching, teaching, and having fun with Elle, her wonderful daughter. Life as a single mother has made her more organized and efficient with her time, and keeps her eyes on the goal of providing Elle with the best opportunities in life. That may include following in her footsteps at MSA one day, but if that day ever comes, it will be after Elle has explored other potential career options first. "I'll encourage her to do internships elsewhere so she knows what's out there," Lilly says. "If she decides to come on board one day, I'll then encourage her to work in every department, and at every level, getting a 360-degree view of the business in full. Understanding each job allows you to roll up your sleeves and jump in the trenches with your team at a moment's notice, which is important to me as a leader. It'll also give you a better grasp of your own strengths, which will make you more

successful in any area of your life."

Looking ahead to the future, Lilly eagerly anticipates the MSA's thirtieth anniversary in 2020. The company is poised to reach her goal of \$20 million in revenue by that milestone, and she's already thinking about what comes next. "It's important to never be comfortable," she says. "Never take anything for granted, always be hungry for more, and dare to ask a lot of your team members, while also giving a lot. It's important to celebrate our wins and successes together." This leadership style earned her a Women Who Mean Business award by *Washington Business Journal* several years ago, and she remains active in that community encouraging other women in their pursuit of business excellence.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Lilly underscores the importance of internships to sample different environments to see where your interests lie. "I think there's so much pressure on us to know early what we want to do in life, but if you don't test those waters, you don't know if that's what you really want," she says. "Seek out mentors and learn from them to shorten the learning curve. I've sought out mentorship from people who are where I want to be, and it's allowed me to cover more ground in a shorter period of time. They've become my tribe, and together we go after the next dream."

Beyond that, Lilly encourages vision in how you want to be and live. "Try to pinpoint the kind of person you want to be so you have some direction," she says. "Choose your job based on the kind of life you want to create. Life will certainly throw you curveballs, and things will change with time, but never lose your capacity to dream big. Those dreams are your blueprints for creating the future into whatever you want it to be, so start brainstorming and grab a pen."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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