

Jan Adams

Always Reaching Back

As an elementary school student growing up in Youngstown, Ohio, Jan Adams loved learning about geography because it inspired her to dream big. “I loved studying about other countries,” she reflects today. “I always had this vision that I wanted to travel and see as much of the world as I could. That was my dream.”

By age twenty, however, that dream seemed far from reach. Her marriage, which occurred immediately after high school, didn’t work out. Though she had no way to support herself and her two young children, she made the choice to get divorced and move into the projects as a single mother. Welfare kept them from starving, but she had only her own ambition to lift her into a better life.

Looking around, however, she began to understand that her ambition was more than nothing. “It was a defining moment in my life because I was determined to show my children a better life,” she says. “My whole intent for living this life was to dive back into work as soon as my youngest went to school full time. I had a completely different mindset from what we saw around us at the time, and was fully dedicated to the goal of being successful in life. I didn’t know what I would do, but I knew I wasn’t going to be stuck there forever. I wasn’t going to stay in that town for the rest of my life, and I still wanted to see the world one day.”

Now the founder, President, and CEO of JMA Solutions, a 170-person federal contracting firm specializing in program management support in Washington, DC, Jan has made it far beyond her wildest dreams, both geographically and in business. Soft-spoken but unyielding in her determination, she has served both community and country through her career in the Air Force and now as a high-impact, game-changing entrepreneur leading one of DC’s most successful

small businesses. “I’ve chosen this path because I enjoy providing opportunities for people,” she says firmly. “I believe people should always reach back with a helping hand, no matter how much or how little they have to give. Through creating jobs and growing a company that allows us to give back to the community, that’s what JMA is designed to do.”

Jan launched JMA in 2005, when she was an independent consultant working as a budget analyst for a government contractor. As the contract wrapped up, one of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) employees she was supporting urged her to start her own company. “They didn’t have to tell me twice,” she laughs.

The President of the contracting firm she worked for, Bailey Walsh, agreed to spend a full day working with Jan to help show her how to run a business. “It was a wealth of knowledge and insight,” she remembers. She also appreciated the help with cost calculations and overhead management from Ron Coleman, who had started his own business since his days serving with Jan in the Air Force. Beyond that, Jan learned through reading. When her initial 8(a) certification paperwork was sent back for revisions, she saw how expensive CPAs were and instead figured it out on her own, amending her balance sheet and financial statements with the help of a book she got from the library.

In 2007, Jan landed her first contract, a \$6.5 million opportunity to support air traffic control within the FAA. Her daughter was working as a federal employee for the FAA in California at the time, performing preventive maintenance at radar sites and towers. She helped handle Jan’s time sheets after hours, while her son handled invoicing with Excel spreadsheets. Jan hired her first employee in 2008, ultimately bringing on several retired air traffic controllers to provide program



management support, and her daughter soon moved to Washington, D.C. from California to help out. Avis Dillard-Bullock, retired Air Force, was also instrumental early on.

Jan's greatest professional challenge came in 2008, when the financial crisis hit. She was in between lines of credit at the time, and with around five employees, she feared she wouldn't make payroll. "As a single parent, I knew what it was to live paycheck to paycheck," she recounts. "I called bank after bank, but no one would help. Fortunately, if I have a problem and there's nothing I can do, I don't stay up all night worrying about things I can't control. I'm like my mother in that way. Finally, on the last possible day, the FAA deposited the necessary funds into my account, so I wired payroll out right away, on time."

There were certainly lots of lessons learned over the years, but Jan demonstrated an innate knack for entrepreneurship, and found the company growing far larger than she ever imagined. She took strides to control that growth, turning down some very large contracts that might have compromised the firm's culture and values. "I never wanted to lose touch with the people I sent out to support the customer," she says. "I didn't want to be in a position where I was just bringing people in to fill billets, with no time to check personalities and assess whether they're a good fit. That's just not us."

Using her military-honed insight and vision in hiring team members, Jan doesn't look for "yes" people, but instead values high-caliber individuals who pay attention and care deeply about their work. As a leader, she believes in leading by example and giving her team members the space and tools to do their jobs, and goes the extra mile to garner honest feedback from clients on the firm's performance. "When I visit a client site, I ask them how my team members are doing, person by person," she says. "I look for nonverbal cues in their responses to see if there's something they aren't saying. My customers really like that we pay attention to detail, and that we proactively look for satisfaction. We don't push back when they highlight an issue—we work to fix it."

Today, the company has grown to 170 employees from various career fields specializing in program management support. They provide acquisition support, training, engineering expertise, program analysis, website development, and more, expanding their focus beyond air traffic

management as they now enter the software engineering space. Most of their managers are retired military, and both of Jan's children work within the company. "Since the beginning, they've been exceptional sounding boards, each lending an opposite perspective," she affirms.

With the help of her son and daughter, business leadership has been a path Jan has walked mostly on her own—a skill she's been practicing since she was four years old. "I can still vividly remember the first day of kindergarten," she laughs. "I had watched other kids walk to school accompanied by their mother, down the street to the crossing guard at the traffic light. I told my mother I didn't want to be walked to school, and instead went by myself."

Growing up the second of five children, Jan was always especially close to her youngest brother, who has Down Syndrome. "He's always had such a love of life and joy in his heart," she says. "I felt very connected with him and would spend extra time with him. I felt as though he needed me."

Jan's father, an incredibly friendly man who said hello to every person he passed on the street, worked in a steel mill for 44 years and hardly ever missed a day of work in his life. Her mother, a beautician for 40 years, built the front porch of their home into a beauty shop that allowed her to stay home with the children while having a career. "They were incredible role models with outstanding work ethic," Jan affirms. "I always knew I was going to have a career of my own because I saw that in my parents."

As a kid, Jan loved firetrucks so much that she lit their kitchen trashcan on fire one day, just to summon them to her house. The family lived next door to a church, and attendance was required every single Sunday. "That was non-negotiable, even in my teenage years when I'd stay out late at a party the night before," she says. She loved playing outside, climbing trees, going to Church, having picnics, and riding her bike around the neighborhood. "We were your normal, average family with an apple tree in the backyard," she recounts. "We always sat down for meals together, though I don't remember a lot of conversation. Children were expected to be seen and not heard in our house, except when it came to the piano lessons my mother signed my sister and I up for."

Jan's sister took very well to the piano, but Jan wasn't interested, and was far more passionate

about singing. She joined a singing group at the community center in her neighborhood, and with her sister's accompaniment, she went on to sing for weddings, baseball games, and parties. At age sixteen, she won first prize in a community singing contest attended by 500 people. After the show Jan received a note from a scouting agent for Johnny Nash. "I never followed up, but I probably should have!" she admits. "When I retire, I want to sing in a supper club, so I have plans to finally get serious about learning how to play the piano to accompany myself."

Jan also had a remarkable talent in spelling, and was spelling champion all through her elementary school years. In high school, her friends thought she might become a recording artist later in life. She made her first dollar at age sixteen working at a convenience store nearby, and planned to go to work for General Motors once she graduated from high school. "That was the big company in the city, and it was where you could make good money—or what I thought was good money at that time," she reflects. "My parents had children later in life, and came from a different generation in which college didn't have much of an emphasis."

After her life was dramatically changed by graduation, marriage, childbirth, and divorce, Jan began biding her time, eager for the day she could dive into the workforce as she had planned. When her youngest child started first grade, she landed a job as a laborer on an assembly line at General Electric, and then at General Motors. "They paid maybe fifty cents more an hour than I had been making at GE, but even that small amount made a difference," she remembers. "I was going to college in the mornings and work in the afternoon, while my mother watched the kids. We moved out of the projects and into an apartment. Little by little, things got better."

After several years on the assembly line, however, Jan knew she needed to make a leap if she was going to truly change her life and realize her goals. She saw that chance in the military—her ticket out of town, a source of benefits for her children, and an opportunity to see the world she had always dreamed about. "I didn't want to be at sea for long months at a time with the Navy, and I didn't want to be on the frontlines with the Army or the Marines, so I gravitated toward the Air Force," she says. "It was a much better match."

At that time, single parents enlisting in the

Air Force needed to make adoption arrangements for their children prior to entering the service, in the event they had to deploy immediately. Jan found a four-month window of time, however, when only guardianship paperwork was needed—something her mother readily agreed to. With that, in 1976, Jan enlisted at the age of 27, embarking on a 24-year career of service in uniform that cultivated a strong patriotic spirit and love of country.

In basic training, she was older than her instructor, and her poise and natural leadership qualities garnered her significant respect. "For me, it was like a game," she remembers. "Follow the rules of the game, and you'll be fine. When the instructor would leave, she'd put me in charge, and I was called the Dorm Chief. Everyone fell in place and did what they needed to do."

After basic training, Jan completed technical school and reported to her first duty station at Fairchild Air Force Base in Spokane, Washington. There, she found a support system that enabled her to better balance her responsibilities as a working mother. "There were people who could watch my kids in the morning when I went to work before they went to school," she recounts. "After school, they went to the youth center on base until I could pick them up. The community support was wonderful."

Jan was then assigned to a base in Germany, where she and the kids lived for seven exhilarating years. Her son and daughter attended Department of Defense schools with the classmates of other service members, and traveled to other high schools in the area to compete in sports. They took class trips to Spain and Italy, while Jan spent time working on an Inspector General team that traveled to bases around Europe to assess communications assets. She also won her base's talent competition with her incredible voice, advancing on to compete at a higher level "My kids and I really loved being over there," she affirms. "Finally, at long last, I was getting to experience parts of the world I had only seen in maps and books."

Once her children graduated from high school, Jan took an assignment on Crete, Greece and then at the Pentagon, where she worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff under the leadership of General Colin Powell. She also served two years in Korea and a year in Honduras, all while finding time to complete her Associate's degree and rise to

the top of the enlisted ranks. Then, toward the end of 2001, she was serving at Scott Air Force Base in 2011 when she received a job offer as a secretary at Titan Corporation from Colonel Eddy Chelkowsky, whom she had worked with in Germany. "If I had to name one person I especially looked up to while in the military, it was him," she says. "I will always admire and respect him for his leadership."

Most viewed the job as a step down for Jan, given her experience and rank, but she saw opportunity. "I knew that if I got my foot in the door, I could maneuver my way from there," she affirms. Her predictions were quickly proven accurate when someone in another office heard about Jan and offered her a position as a budget analyst, paying a full \$25,000 above her current salary. Rather than let her go, her current supervisor arranged to match the salary and increase her responsibility, so she stayed. "Really, it was the simple things that made me so indispensable," she remarks. "They saw me arrive on time, stay late, think outside the box, and get things done."

Those same qualities elevated her to a top-notch budget analyst, ultimately catching the eye of the FAA manager who encouraged her to start her own business one evening over beer. "I knew I was basically guaranteed to pick up work as an independent consultant, so I thought, why not?" she recalls. "So I went out and established an LLC, and the rest is history."

A natural born leader, Jan has always cut her own path through life, marching to the beat of her own drum and driven by an ambition that has elevated her through every challenge. She stays calm under pressure, leads by example, and expects her team members to be accountable without being micromanaged. Her laissez faire style has landed JMA recognition on the *Washington Post's* list of DC's top places to work, based in part on employee input. Jan was designated as one of the Washington Business Journal's Top 10 Minority Business Leaders of 2017 as well as on the Black Enterprise list of 100 top African American-owned businesses in America.

The cornerstone of her leadership, however, lies in her dedication to giving back. The JMA team has adopted the two schools in their neighborhood in Southwest DC, and they stand ready to assist with any need that might arise. When the middle school needed help purchasing

uniforms or paying for a school field trip, Jan arranged for the necessary funding. Through her work on the foundation board of Washington Redskins cornerback Josh Norman, she arranged for him to come in to speak with the kids—a real treat. And every month, JMA also supports causes important to Jan and her team members, ultimately donating up to five percent of the company's net income to charity. As a result, the company has received the Community Impact Award from the DC Chamber of Commerce.

Looking back, Jan only wishes she had started her business earlier, and in advising young people entering the working world today, she underscores the importance of following your dreams. "Think about what it is you really want to do in life, and once you figure it out, go for it," she says. "Don't let anything stand in your way. You may get discouraged or knocked down, but get up and keep aiming toward that goal."

Beyond that, her example demonstrates the power of what's possible when we pursue our professions with the goal of doing good. "I never, ever thought I'd own my own business, and I didn't do it for the money," she says. "I did it because it sounded exciting, and I realized I didn't see a lot of women business owners, especially not in the aviation industry. I thought maybe I could make a difference by inspiring other women, especially minority women. I thought it might allow my hand to be even more helpful as it reaches back. And I hoped it would inspire and empower others to always reach back too."

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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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).