

LaJuanna Russell

Trust Yourself

To her classmates in high school, LaJuanna Russell seemed to have it all. She was pretty, popular, and academically successful. She was also a dancer and was captain of the drill team. She was always on the move and seemed to know everyone. But on the inside, LaJuanna was suffering from low self-esteem. She didn't know she was pretty or popular. From her perspective, she was just doing what she had to do—throwing herself into school and work, and keeping away from home.

LaJuanna has always been close with her mother, but as a child and teenager, she avoided the family home where her then-stepfather tyrannized the little family. He was physically, emotionally, and verbally abusive, and hardly a day went by that LaJuanna didn't hear insults and ugliness thrown her way. "He would call me dumb, stupid and ugly all the time," she recalls. "I didn't have any self-esteem for a long time because of that abuse. I think that's why it was important for me to succeed."

Tired of living under such circumstances and knowing her stepfather would never help fund her college education, LaJuanna legally emancipated herself at 17. That summer after high school, she began crashing with various relatives as she saved money to pay for her first semester of college. She'd had little guidance and wasn't aware that she wouldn't be able to "pay as you go" once she got to school. Suddenly, she had a huge tuition bill that she was unable to pay, and her education depended on her coming up with the money. She was able to borrow about \$1,500 from an uncle to get through that first semester, and from then on, she completely paid her own way.

Against the odds, LaJuanna thrived and succeeded in college. After graduation, she began working in marketing and later graphic design.

She quickly realized she could make more money as a 1099 contractor helping various groups with their design needs than she could as an employee of a company.

A few years after graduation, LaJuanna was successfully running her own business. She had moved into international business development and was coordinating trips between the U.S. and the Caribbean. Everything was going swimmingly when she heard a familiar voice in her head, and her old insecurities kicked back in.

The voice was telling her she wasn't good enough. She, therefore, decided to leave her successful business because she needed to pursue an MBA. "I decided I needed a degree to do the thing I was already doing!" LaJuanna laughs. "In hindsight, I'm glad I did it, but I now wonder how I was able to convince myself that I needed a degree to do what I'd already been doing. Why did I need a piece of paper to give me confidence? I needed that external

validation of someone telling me I was good enough."

LaJuanna finally hit a major turning point in 2013. She had founded her company, Business Management Associates (BMA), several years prior, but sequestration had led to major financial difficulties. LaJuanna had always been behind the scenes doing operational work and didn't consider herself to be a salesperson. So she brought someone on to handle business development in 2008. By 2012, she'd realized this person wasn't really doing much of anything at all.

"When I let this person go, I thought 'well, at least I have a pipeline of business.' But then I called people 'in the pipeline' and they'd never heard of BMA," remembers LaJuanna. "I was hopeful that I could focus in 2013 and get things back on track, but then came sequestration. Revenue dropped from \$3 million to \$1.5 million.



And I remember sitting at my mom's birthday dinner...crying. The bank was yelling at me, I was the primary breadwinner in my family, I had staff depending on me. Everything just seemed to be crashing down at the same time." Rather than give up, however, LaJuanna stepped up and took control. She knew there was only one person with the skills, passion and tenacity to right the ship and she was staring at her in the mirror. "I thought I needed someone else to do sales. I thought I wouldn't be able to do it," she reflects. "But who knew better what BMA was about, what it was capable of doing? When I was forced to 'sell,' I did it better than anyone else could.

"From 2013 through 2016, we grew from \$1.5 million to \$10 million in revenue, and it was all my change in mindset," LaJuanna says proudly. "I was doing all of the business development and sales, and was writing most of the proposals. It sort of goes back to that same feeling I had getting my MBA. Why did I need someone to tell me that it was okay for me to do that? Since that point, I've remained the primary rainmaker for the company and we've never been stronger."

Thanks to LaJuanna's business development skills, BMA is thriving. Currently they have about 80 employees and will celebrate 16 years in business in 2021. LaJuanna launched BMA while she was still working for a full-time employer. "I went to the president of that company and said, 'I'm going to make you a great offer,'" she smiles. "I'm going to quit, and you're going to hire me as a 1099 contractor for one year. I'll keep working with you, and I'll develop my own business on the side." LaJuanna was so critical to the firm's operation that they quickly accepted that offer. They were eager for her to continue helping them optimize their processes.

And that's exactly what BMA, a government contracting company, was born to do: process optimization. Who does what? How do they do it? Who oversees what workflows? How can projects be efficiently managed?

As the company grew, however, more and more clients asked for help on human resource (HR) related issues, and BMA transformed into an HR-heavy company. Today, about 70% of its work is in the HR space through federal contracts.

"We do all traditional HR work including things like creating policies, hiring, firing, classifications, helping people understand their positions, position management, etc.," LaJuanna

explains. "We also help clients understand federal hiring—because it's very different—and help them hire to meet their organizational chart. We do retirement, retirement training, and we'll help manage payroll. From the strategic and operational side, we're doing workforce analytics with some clients now. One of the things I really love doing is workforce development, helping clients establish an effective career ladder. For example, what would a career ladder look like for a GS-5 to go to a GS-13? This helps employees understand where they can go and how they can get there. We do the whole lifecycle of the employee engagement and development."

Since the sequestration scare, BMA has focused on winning more prime contracts as these vehicles tend to be more secure in times of economic contraction. Today, BMA is a prime contractor on 90% of its contracts. Another result of the sequestration scare is LaJuanna's involvement with the Small Business Majority (SBM), a nonprofit organization that works with small businesses across the country and advocates for their issues.

SBM approached LaJuanna and asked if she would speak with an Associated Press writer for an article about the crisis. "From there I was asked to speak at events. I did a speech on C-SPAN that still runs to this day," she notes. "It was all about the impact of these shenanigans on small businesses. SBM helped me so much at that time and gave me something else to focus on. Today, I'm the Chair of their Board."

Between BMA and SBM—and a host of other targeted professional and industry involvements—LaJuanna keeps very busy. "Everyone thinks having your own business equals all this freedom. And there is a level of that, but between client work and staff needs and the demands of being a business owner, 'freedom' is defined a bit differently for each person."

That ability to adjust her perspective has been a critical success factor for LaJuanna and BMA. She is well known for her positivity and fun-loving spirit. In fact, having fun is a crucial part of the culture at BMA. LaJuanna strives to bring joy and humor to every situation. "If you're not going to have fun in a meeting, why go?" she jokes. "That's who I am, that's my personality, and that's what I want to infuse into this business. Things we have to deal with may not always be fun, but we're going to make it fun. We're not walking around

with our heads hanging down. We laugh every chance we get.”

LaJuanna attributes this fun-loving nature to her paternal grandfather—a man whom she admired and looked up to when her father was out of the picture and her stepfather was treating the family poorly. Her grandfather was a jazz drummer, a larger-than-life figure with a house full of friends and a big personality. “He was my best buddy in the world,” she glows. “He was the kind of guy that if my grandmother went to the grocery store for a loaf of bread, she’d come back to a house of 30 people having a party. The thing he instilled in me was to make life fun.”

LaJuanna was born in Alexandria, Virginia, and has lived in the area her entire life. Both of her parents were federal employees. Her mother worked as a secretary at the Department of Defense and her father worked for the IRS. The two divorced when she was only two years old, which meant LaJuanna’s mother and grandmother played an even bigger role in her life.

As a young child, LaJuanna and her mother lived close to extended family. In fact, LaJuanna estimated the extended family in the area to be in the hundreds—and that was just the cousins. She could hardly walk down the street without being stopped by an aunt or uncle. Today, she never has fewer than 80 people over during the Thanksgiving holiday. As a young child, she was closest with her twin male cousins. They were slightly older and never lost the opportunity to torture her with games like ‘shove LaJuanna in a hole’ or ‘tell LaJuanna to get in the sewer.’

“I remember so many times my aunt running out yelling, ‘Leave her alone. Get her out of that hole!’” laughs LaJuanna. “They were always in trouble, but I loved it and loved them. Those were fun days.”

LaJuanna was about six years old when her mother remarried. A few years later, the family moved farther out where it was more affordable so they could own a house rather than continue to rent. Unfortunately, the move meant that LaJuanna was no longer within walking distance of her beloved aunts, uncles, and cousins. Now, she was in the suburbs, and found the environment much more isolating. So, she threw herself into school and work and got a job at the local Friendly’s when she was only 13. She loved working behind the counter and making conversation with customers. It was from her interactions there with

other students and adults that she began to think about college.

As she got older, she landed a job as a receptionist where she was able to do her homework after school. From 3:00 to 9:00 PM she would work and study before going home to sleep. Sundays were reserved for church with her mother. Religion was often a comfort during the difficult years living with her stepfather, and LaJuanna strongly values her faith to this day.

Eager to get out of the house and prove herself, LaJuanna applied to Penn State and planned to study genetics. She had chronic asthma and wanted to devote herself to curing the disease. She was accepted through Early Admission and excitedly informed her mother, who wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic about the news. She asked LaJuanna if she’d applied to any other schools. But LaJuanna had not considered the need to apply to multiple schools until her mother pointed out the cost of attending Penn State; clearly, it was not an affordable option.

LaJuanna’s mother did some research and quickly came up with a solution. She went into her room and called the admissions office at Virginia Tech. Twenty minutes later, she told LaJuanna she was in as long as she completed the application and essay. “That’s literally how I went to Virginia Tech!” marvels LaJuanna. She moved in with her godmother the summer before school and then into the on-campus dorms to begin school. Meanwhile, her mother finally left her stepfather a few months after LaJuanna left for college.

LaJuanna studied at Virginia Tech in between taking time off to work and make tuition money. She ultimately graduated with a primary degree in Communications Studies and minors in Marketing, Political Science, and English. From there, she got a job at the Optical Society where she did marketing communications and then moved on to the American Nurses’ Association where she managed their exhibit program before moving into graphic design. It was then that she began to think about independent contracting and began her entrepreneurship journey.

While completing her MBA in International Finance several years later, LaJuanna landed a great job at Windstar Telecommunications. There, she worked about 30 hours per week in the finance department and was provided with stock options, which she used to purchase her first home. After leaving Windstar,

she worked for two government contractors before ultimately deciding she could start her own business and do the work on her own. One particular mentor was Myles, her boss at the second contractor, whom she says gave her the confidence to start her own operation. His wife was also an accidental motivator. "I remember one night she came to the office around 8:00 PM. I knew I would have to be up until 2:00 or 3:00 AM to finish a proposal," LaJuanna remembers. "She walked in with her fur coat and told Myles they had to go to dinner. So they leave, and I'm there pounding out this proposal for six or seven more hours so we have a chance to win it. I finally realized that something was wrong with this picture and knew I could do this on my own."

Today, LaJuanna leads by example, and never leaves her own teammates working late into the night on their own. "Like last night," she describes, "we were working on a response. I was there with them in the conference room as we worked together. We had a bottle of wine and some food, and we all figured it out together. I'm not the type of person who is going to ask someone to do something I am unwilling to do."

As a leader, LaJuanna describes herself as 'free.' She doesn't micromanage; instead, she believes in allowing people the space to learn, develop, and grow into their roles. "Sometimes it works great, sometimes it doesn't," she admits. "Not every person can take that responsibility. I will tell you when the deadline is, but I'm not going to tell you how to do it. But I do expect you to get it done and figure it out. If I tell you how to do everything, you're never going to learn. If I find I have to micromanage someone, then we probably won't work well together because I need people to be as entrepreneurial in this setting as they need to be. But, with that being said, I will always be available to help teach and guide."

To young people entering the working

world today, LaJuanna advises careful reflection before leaping, but also not to let fear keep someone from leaping. Two of her favorite quotes are "Never, ever, ever give up" and "What would you do today if you were not afraid," both of which she has displayed in her office. "Do not be afraid," she encourages. "Really think about what you want, then go for it. If you want to be an entrepreneur, just think carefully about why. Are you doing it because you think you're going to have a lot of freedom? Be ready to redefine what that means...again and again and again. Are you doing it because you think you're going to make a whole lot of money? Be ready for a lot of work before that happens. And even when it happens, be ready in case it evaporates overnight—think sequestration or a global pandemic—and be ready to work just as hard or harder to get back to where you were. Talk to people who have 'been there, done that' and really think about (your business) up front. And if that's really what you want, be fearless."

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