

# Michaela Pratt

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## Never Work a Day in Your Life

The work of drug and alcohol prevention has special meaning to Michaela Pratt; she grew up almost entirely with her mother, as her father was an alcoholic throughout her childhood and through the end of his life. Back then, the reality of her fathers' struggles with his addiction brought shame to Michaela and her older sister. They saw the fathers of their friends being involved with their kids and wondered why their own dad couldn't do the same. They didn't know what alcoholism was. "Today we talk about addiction as an illness," she points out. "It's not a character flaw and it's not a choice. But back in the 1980's, it wasn't like that. And as a child, you viewed alcoholism as your parent picking something over you. It was easy for us to question why we were not enough for him."

Michaela's mother was a working single parent who did everything she could to fill the void where her father was missing. The two had separated before Michaela was even born, and they divorced soon after. In Stockholm, Michaela's mother and her two girls lived in a communal type of housing, where residents had their own apartments but shared a communal space, kitchen and occasional cooking duties. Every Saturday, one floor would cook breakfast for the rest of the building. There were 22 apartments in each building and six buildings overall. The environment gave young Michaela a real home and community, and she became close with her many neighbors. "For my mom it was the perfect set-up," she explains. "We had instant friends in the building among all these other families. I remember being able to go anywhere and knock on neighbors' doors. Everybody knew each other, and neighbors might even offer you apple pie or something. We'd have big carnivals together. It was a great place for a child to grow up since there were so many people and everyone watched out for each other."



In the summers, Michaela and her sister would spend time with their father in the northernmost part of Sweden near the border with Finland. In fact, the border was just a short ride down the road. They had extended family—paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—there, and they enjoyed their time with their dad. "My dad was very smart and was like an encyclopedia of knowledge," Michaela smiles. However, such trips were also fraught with disappointment and broken promises. "I remember we'd do things like make him sign a contract that he'd take us fishing in the morning," she recalls. "The next day we'd show him the contract to try to get him to stick to it, but he'd be too hungover to go."

Despite his struggles with getting sober, Michaela knows that his inability to be there for his daughters was something that affected him deeply. After he passed away, she found a letter he had written to her, her mother, and her sister. Today, that letter is one of her most prized possessions because it says a lot of things that he was never able to say to them in life. "He wrote about his struggle with alcoholism and his disappointment with himself. He wrote about seeing himself at a turning point and that he was going to be better from now on," she says. "It was from when he was in treatment. When I got older, I had it laminated once I realized the power of that letter. To me, it gives me motivation in the sense that it gives what I do professionally a meaning. He wanted more for himself, and he wanted to be better. He realized the pain that he caused to his family without ever telling us."

Today, Michaela works to spare other families that pain by investing in the prevention, treatment, education and research around substance use disorders as the Director of Development for Second Genesis Foundation, a non-profit that provides financial support to

organizations and institutions in this space.

Second Genesis' roots in the Washington, DC area run all the way back to 1969, when world-renowned psychiatrist Dr. Sidney Shankman founded the nonprofit to serve individuals and families in the throes of addiction. The organization utilized the therapeutic community model, a more holistic approach that focuses on the patient's overall lifestyle rather than simply encouraging abstinence from addictive substances. Second Genesis expanded to serve families throughout the mid-Atlantic region — serving nearly 300 adults and 100 adolescents in residential treatment and another 250 in outpatient programs daily in 11 treatment centers throughout Maryland and Washington, DC — before shuttering in 2014 due to financial difficulties and continued cuts in government funding to its facilities. Before its closing, Second Genesis boasted an estimated 30,000 graduates from its various substance abuse recovery programs at a graduation rate of 68 percent, a notably high mark compared with similar programs. The organization also received worldwide praise for its work at the Second Genesis Melwood House facility in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, a facility dedicated to female patients that included children's services, career counseling, parenting classes and anger management workshops.

After its closing, Second Genesis' board sought to continue the vision of Dr. Shankman and thus began a foundation to steer funding from the sale of the organization's assets and new fundraising efforts to other worthy DC-area institutions with the similar mission of reducing substance abuse through prevention, treatment, education and research. Enter Michaela, whose role as Director of Development of the Second Genesis Foundation allows her to take advantage of her skills and past professional experiences to help achieve their mission — all the while driven by the passion derived from her own lived experience dealing with the issue she now works to combat.

Prior to joining the Second Genesis Foundation, Michaela served as President and CEO of Mentor Foundation USA, the US member of Mentor International, the leading NGO devoted to helping youth worldwide make healthy choices for their future. It was founded in 1994 by Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden in partnership with the World Health Organization.

"2020 was a difficult year, in so many ways. The isolation and shutdown of communities has directly impacted everyone, but some vulnerable groups of society more than others," says Michaela. Since the COVID-19-related social distancing began, the frequency of alcohol and substance use has only increased. In fact, a recent study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period in 2020, numbers that suggest an acceleration of overdose deaths during the pandemic.

"Every year it's got worse and worse," she nods soberly. "In 2020, more than 80,000 people died of a drug overdose." Although many more Americans have died from COVID-19 than overdose, those who died from overdose were significantly younger.

While the nation and the world address the future spread of COVID-19 with effective vaccines, there is no vaccine for substance use disorders. The overdose epidemic existed before the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue after. Tragedies continue to mount as families and communities lose young people to overdose death.

Although Michaela considered her childhood wonderful and fulfilling, she knew from a young age that she wanted something more. And that 'something more' was a dream a 10-year-old girl had to move to the United States thanks to an unusual inspiration: the American TV show *Alf*, about a family who adopts an alien. She couldn't yet speak English, but she read the Swedish subtitles, and fell in love with the American lifestyle. "I loved that family," she laughs. "American families looked really, really nice. I loved the idea of everyone coming down in the morning for a pancake breakfast."

With visions of American suburbia dancing in her head, Michaela was intrigued when flyers advertising au pair jobs in the U.S. began popping up around her apartment complex. She was around 11 years old at the time, but she began to think seriously about how she could make her dream a reality. The biggest hurdle she saw was getting a driver's license. In Sweden, public transit is more readily available, and her mother didn't have a license and didn't have a need for a car. Michaela would have to save money to take classes before she could pass a driving exam, and such exams are more difficult in Sweden than in the

U.S.

Still, once Michaela set her mind to something, she wasn't likely to back down. She began babysitting, started a popcorn selling business with a friend in the building, and ultimately landed her first real job at a grocery store at the age of 16. She began saving money for that time when she could take the driver's exam when she turned 18. "I wanted that American dream of a family like Alf," she remembers. "So it was either save money for the classes, or it's not going to happen. I wanted it to happen right after high school."

Sure enough, after graduation, Michaela came to Reston, Virginia for a year to work as an au pair for a family there. It was 2003, and that same year, she happened to meet her future husband. Still, at the end of the year, she felt she needed to go home. Her father had become quite sick, and she wanted to return to help take care of him. While spending time with her father, she spent the next year working with the agency that had sent her overseas doing the English evaluation and presenting the program to interested applicants.

Her father passed away after one year, and Michaela longed to return to the U.S. She had such a wonderful relationship with the family she'd served on her first trip that they invited her back to stay with them for free while she attended school. While there she befriended the new Swedish au pair who had taken her place and the two remain close to this day. Fatefully, Michaela also ran into her ex-boyfriend, Chris. The two got back together and married a year later.

Michaela started studying at Northern Virginia Community College before transferring to George Mason University. After graduation, she got a job at a marketing firm in Bethesda doing business management. Meanwhile, Chris was working on launching his own consulting firm and needed to relocate to Afghanistan to do so. When Chris set out for Kabul, Michaela returned to Sweden for another year, where she worked for Red Bull.

Her time at Red Bull was hugely successful. Her district, Stockholm, won best sales district with the most improved performance, and she was given a free trip to Italy and Germany as a reward. However, she chose to skip the trip to go join her husband in Afghanistan. "I felt it was important for me to go there to show my support,"

she explains. "He was making a big sacrifice for our family. If I really wanted to understand what he was doing and viewed this as an opportunity for me to do that." Michaela then began working for her husband's business and spent time in Kandahar, where she lived on the base, and Kabul, where they lived in an apartment building.

Chris has been a constant source of support since their fateful reunion. "We kind of grew up together," Michaela reflects. "I was 19 when I met him and 22 when we got married. We're very fortunate that we grew together instead of apart, because it can easily go the other way when you're married so young. He's the most driven and ambitious person I know. He's a fantastic father. Plus, his name is Chris Pratt. You would be surprised to know how much that helps in making dinner reservations!" The couple have two children now, a son and a daughter.

While working for Chris's company, Michaela did payroll and back office work and saw the business steadily grow to four partners and over 30 employees. But after a couple of years, she knew she needed to find her own way. "I wanted to miss him when I came home at night," she laughs. "Plus, your husband telling you what to do is cute for a hot minute, but then it gets old." She told Chris she'd begun looking for other work and stumbled into the Mentor Foundation. "I found them through the Swedish mafia," she laughs again. "I ran into two Swedish women at the ambassador's residence and started talking. I sent them my resume, and two weeks later, it landed on the Chairman's desk. She brought me in for an interview, and I spent a decade with that wonderful organization."

She was initially hired to do marketing and business management, but as the second employee of the U.S. operation, she did just about everything. "I had to figure things out and find solutions to anything in the office including technology matters," she remembers. "I had my fingers in Payroll, QuickBooks, project management, marketing, newsletters, design work, benefits, and many other things. I had the freedom to help find solutions that helped create a stronger future for the new organization. I thrive in that environment."

Fortunately, the leadership took note, and they worked with her to develop her skill set. "Sometimes it's easy for an organization to get comfortable when employees are running things

well," Michaela notes. "I was fortunate that I was encouraged and continuously developed so I never felt bored. The leadership in the organization recognized what I was doing and helped me continue to grow professionally." Their faith in Michaela continued when they promoted her to President and CEO in 2017. Michaela spent a decade with the organization and helped them build key partnerships and programs.

In April of 2021 she joined the Second Genesis Foundation as Director of Development, with a focus on fundraising and development to help grow the Foundation's resources, partnerships and ultimate impact.

As a leader, Michaela works to embody that attitude and pass on opportunities to others. "I always encourage and give my team members the opportunity to prove themselves," she affirms. "I do not like to micromanage people or dictate to other people how to work. I'd rather provide positive reinforcement; I like to spot talent and develop it. I trust my team 100% as a professional and as an adult to do their job."

To young people entering the working world today, Michaela advises maintaining an attitude of humility and willingness to learn. "There's a lot of professional decorum that doesn't seem to be as well known by the younger generation," she reflects. "It's important to do things like send hand-written thank you notes. And to understand you can actually learn from

somebody who's worked a lot of years!"

Michaela is excited about the new chapter in her career, where she can keep making a difference in the community. I never envisioned myself working in the non-profit sector, especially not in the area of substance use prevention," says Michaela with a smile. "I think I subconsciously gravitated towards community service, as a way of dealing with our family history and grief. To me, what I do does not feel like a job. The saying is true, if you love what you do, you will never work a day in your life."

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

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