

Carla James

The Long View

From the day Carla James drove to the Air Force recruiter's office at the age of 22, her life would never be the same. She cannot really explain what compelled her to march into the office and sign on the dotted line, but she knew she was ready for discipline, direction, and a fresh start.

When she told her family and friends, they were shocked. None believed she would make it through basic training. But she was very independent, self-sufficient, and well equipped to take on the tests of endurance that lay before her. She graduated with honors from basic training from Lackland Air Force Base, going on to join a mobility unit that allowed her to travel the world and experience places in the Middle East and Africa that she never knew existed.

Now the cofounder, President, and COO of The Mayvin Consulting Group, Inc., a government contractor providing program, life cycle, and operations management expertise, Carla uses the strength and determination she cultivated in her years of military service to provide game-changing government service in a new context. "The mission of what we do continues to drive me," she says. "It's amazing to be able to support multiple government agencies like the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security in the ways we do. We're supporting big-picture defense efforts and warfighter missions, and that's incredibly rewarding."

Carla met the other Mayvin cofounders, Lisa and Victor, in 2004 while working on a client site for the Wexford Group before it was acquired by CACI. Four years later, Carla and Lisa met for drinks, where they laid out a plan for starting Mayvin. "I knew Lisa's work ethic—she was tough as nails at work," Carla remembers. "And I had been working in the Pentagon for the last 13 months, ready for a change. It was the right time

and the right place."

Victor joined shortly after they signed their first contract, completing the triumvirate that would lead the new venture to success. All three had very different personalities and skill sets—Lisa's jubilant, big picture, over-the-top personality balanced by Carla's detailed oriented focus on the day-to-day operations through Victor's middle-of-the-road approach and expertise in all things numbers. Carla then leveraged her MBA and education into practice in the real world. Every day was a learning opportunity where they learned by doing, accessing Small Business Administration resources and turning to partners for advice and mentoring. "I never had second thoughts about starting the business," Carla reflects. "We hit the ground running, and after a lot of hard work we had a contract within a few months."

In the beginning, Mayvin focused on supporting Army programs, later branching out to the Navy, Air Force, Department of Homeland Security, and Customs and Border Protection. Its offerings have diversified as well, expanding from project management support services to mission support services and operational services. It now focuses on two lines of services, with project management support services covering the typical life cycle of a project, and mission-focused operations support services including training, technology assessments and insertions, and overseas work.

When Mayvin opened its doors, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were in full operation, but the company knew it couldn't rely on the federal money being thrown left and right. "I saw those opportunities as highly unpredictable, because government clients often don't know what their budgets will actually be," Carla says. "We knew we had to use these times to lay a foundation and



plan ahead to keep the pipeline robust so we could operate in lean times. This really helped put us on solid footing when the government shutdown happened. In the very competitive, cost-driven environment, bigger companies with more overhead and middle management really took a hit and had to lay people off, but Mayvin's lithe and flexible structure actually allowed us to grow quite a bit during that timeframe. The government needed things done immediately and for less money, and we're designed to accommodate those needs."

With this approach, Mayvin has been successful each year of its existence, doubling in employees and revenue last year. Today, the company has a team of almost 70 employees and is slated to do \$12 million in revenue for 2015. This is thanks in part to its culture, which is focused around innovation and employee wellbeing. "We try to set ourselves apart by valuing our employees and making work fun for them," Carla says. "At their one year anniversary with the company, each employee gets a necklace or cufflinks or tie pins with our logo. We do team building through baseball games and holiday parties, and we give out an award each year to the employee that best demonstrates the company's values. Even though we're very geographically dispersed, with employees at different client sites, we always try to make sure they know they're supported by the company and connected to its culture."

The stability and support sown throughout Mayvin's culture are a reflection of the solid upbringing Carla enjoyed growing up. She was raised in Gilford, a small, two-stoplight town in New Hampshire. With a lake down the street and the White Mountains nearby, the town lived off tourism and didn't have much in the way of industry. Her mother, the breadwinner of the family, was a telephone operator who showed Carla that women could do anything. Her father, an auto mechanic, always had a soft spot for his daughter, and she grew up a daddy's girl and a tomboy. "I had a nice, normal childhood," she reflects. "I grew up going to the same school with all the same kids. We'd ride our bikes to the lake to play all day, and we skied in the winters. My parents worked very hard, but we always had dinners together."

Carla was very close with her uncle, a talented painter who lived nearby. He had an art

studio in their basement and a separate structure next to the house that served as a gallery where he sold his work. "They had a horse and a pool, so I spent many of my childhood days there," Carla reflects. "He was an entrepreneur, always with an idea brewing for a new thing to make and sell." His daughter was five years older than Carla, and the two girls grew up like sisters. Carla got her first job when she joined her cousin in working on a horse farm, cleaning stalls and picking up rocks. She went on to hold a string of jobs that included busing tables, lifeguarding at a waterslide park, working at a clothing store, and waitressing. "One thing I learned very early in life was the value of a dollar," she remarks. "My parents worked incredibly hard every day, and I really noticed that. They never just gave us money; we had to earn our allowance through chores."

Carla didn't find high school particularly motivating or engaging. She performed well academically, including Advanced Placement courses in early high school. Around tenth grade, however, the boredom and restlessness of small town life started to set in. Her parents had saved up money to send her to college, but she declared she didn't need it because she wasn't going. "It was a different time back then, with parents less involved in their children's lives than they are now," she says. "My parents didn't exercise a lot of discipline over me as I was growing up. I was raised to be very independent, which made me a stronger person in many respects. But it also cultivated a rebellious streak. I was going to figure out my future myself."

When she graduated and left home, her uncle gave her an oil painting of the New Hampshire scenery, which she still treasures today. In her new life, Carla found work as a waitress. Then one night, while celebrating the fortieth birthday of a coworker, she realized she did not want to wake up a decade down the road doing the same thing. With that, Carla promptly gave her thirty-day notice to her roommate and drove home to New Hampshire, where she spent a few weeks thinking about what she wanted to do with her life. It was then that she decided to join the Air Force, catapulting her into a new world with broad horizons and unlimited opportunity. Through her four years on active duty, she completed basic training and then additional education at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi before joining a mobility unit stationed at McGuire

Air Force Base in New Jersey. Each mission meant she was away for four to eight weeks, serving in places like Gabon, where people lived without running water or electricity, and Uzbekistan, where life resembled 1950s America. Through these experiences, the Air Force opened her eyes and completely changed her concept of the world.

When she completed her four-year commitment, an officer nominated her to enter the Blue to Gold program to become an officer herself, but Carla decided her future lay elsewhere. "I was incredibly grateful to the Air Force for giving me direction and life skills," she reflects. "But at the end of the day, I decided I wanted to try something else." Carla knew she would need a college degree to be competitive as she pursued this new future, so she enrolled at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She also happened to come across an advertisement for the Massachusetts Air National Guard, which was looking to fill positions in her career field. She accepted one of the positions at the base thirty minutes from her campus, which meant her tuition would be waived.

At Amherst, Carla lived off-campus and majored in exercise science. She worked weekend duty in the National Guard and took a part-time job, which meant she was always busy. The experience went by in a blur, and in no time she was commemorating her graduation in 2001. "I was the first person in my family to make it through college," she says. "That was a defining moment for me, realizing that I had gotten through the Air Force and earned my four-year Bachelor's degree."

Upon graduating, Carla made the move to Washington, DC to take a job conducting research at the National Science Foundation. She was working in the geosciences division for lower atmospheric research, which had nothing to do with the biology and kinesiology she had studied in school. She decided to transition over to a small NIH-funded biotech startup with six employees, where she had the opportunity to help out in the lab, work on the books, and learn the practical side of business from the owners.

From there, Carla got a job at a clinical research trials company managing data for NIH studies, and was then offered a job at Fort Belvoir. With that, she began working for the government from 2002 to 2004, learning all about government contracting and Department of Defense (DoD)

funding. At the same time, she pursued her MBA at the University of Mary Washington and obtained a certificate in financial management from the USDA Graduate Program. "It was an incredible experience to learn about the inner workings of government in that way," she reflects. After a couple years of working for the government, Carla leveraged her experience and accepted a position at a small government contracting firm, the Wexford Group, where she met Lisa and Victor.

At Wexford, Carla learned the art and science of project management and had the opportunity to work on an Army program. Three years into her tenure at Wexford, the company was acquired by CACI, and the close-knit team of 200 suddenly skyrocketed to 12,000. "I went from being Carla, to being a number on a timecard," she recalls. "A year later, Lisa laid out her vision for starting Mayvin."

Through all her previous experience, Carla developed into strong leader focused on finding people who are a good fit for the company and then providing them the tools and guidance they need to succeed. This year, she was honored at the "Enterprising Women of the Year 2015" awards ceremony, recognizing women with fast-growing businesses that take the time to mentor or actively support other women and girls involved in entrepreneurship, and who stand out as leaders in their communities. Carla also received the 2015 Washington Brava Award, which celebrates female CEOs, nonprofit leaders, and high impact executives driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and a passion for giving back to the community.

For the last two years, the firm has been recognized as an Inc 5000 company, and was a runner up for the Corporate Citizen award given by the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce. This was thanks to Mayvin's focus on encouraging its employees to be active in the community and its matching policy for charity donations, as well as its participation in functions for Wounded Warriors and the Save A Limb Foundation. "Mayvin cares a lot about giving back, especially when it comes to supporting veterans," she says. Carla is also involved in various other organizations and spends time mentoring students at her alma mater. She is also a member of the Mary Washington alumni board.

In advising young people entering the working world, Carla stresses the importance of

not being afraid to fail. “Failing is part of growing, and it’s what you learn from those failures that’s important,” she says. “I failed at many things as we were starting Mayvin, but I had to just keep going and trying again the next day. Don’t dwell on those failures—just learn something and use that knowledge going forward. If you’re not failing, you’re not trying. And trying is crucial.” Indeed, the perseverance required for success was always in Carla, a quiet reserve of strength and commitment that could carry her through anything she put her mind to. Whether it was signing up for the Air Force, choosing to go back to school, or deciding to start her own company, only through those points of decisive action could her true potential be revealed and reached.

© September 2015 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights

reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

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](#).

BERNHARDT
WEALTH MANAGEMENT