

# Kim Hayes

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## Hard Work and Resilience

Kim Hayes was the oldest of 30-odd grandchildren—so many she doesn't remember the exact number. Growing up on the border of South and North Carolina, she and her large extended family did not have much money, but what they lacked in privilege, they more than made up for in hard work, loyalty and resilience. Every Sunday, the many aunts, uncles and cousins gathered at the family tobacco farm around Kim's grandparents table and gave thanks for each other and for the meal. And although no one worked harder than Kim's family—farmers who rose before dawn and worked until well after dark—there were times they had to take help from government programs.

"I remember how many times we had macaroni and cheese," recalls Kim, "and that's because we had government cheese. My grandparents, who had never accepted help, had to take subsidies. Without those subsidies, the dark times would have been worse. When the government's doing what it's supposed to do, it's helping those people who are earning that right, who pay back. I've never forgotten watching these very grounded, humble people take the help they needed, and then turn and help the rest of the community."

Watching those government programs work properly to provide support to tirelessly-working farmers in need was a defining lesson for Kim. She realized that ensuring the proper functioning of government and the efficient distribution of resources, could change and save lives. "I firmly believe that government done well changes the way people across this country live," Kim asserts. And so, it's no surprise that Kim has devoted herself and her career to ensuring that the government delivers on that promise.

Kim is the CEO and Founder of The Ambit Group (Ambit), a government contractor dedicated to building and improving government programs

that serve communities most in need. Founded in 2004, Ambit has evolved significantly over its 15 years in existence, continually growing and adding capabilities to its repertoire. Today, it employs over 250 people, excluding subcontractors, and has attained \$60 million in annual revenue. Over the years, Ambit has run programs for the USDA, the FCC, FEMA, and many other crucial departments in the federal government. They've supported over 800 natural disasters, as well as national crises like the Deepwater Horizon explosion, and worked to

provide food and nutrition to women and children across the country. By streamlining programs and eliminating inefficiencies, Ambit recovered over \$125 million in operating costs. "We've become known for doing enterprise-wide transformations of IT organizations as they try to modernize their systems," explains Kim. "The money that has been recovered is reinvested, enabling the government to deliver better services. Our contracts don't require

the identification of cost recovery opportunities, we do. It's our commitment to lean government."

Kim built Ambit the hard way. Not content to become a subcontractor or pass through business, Kim worked to build a company that could serve as a prime contractor on a wide variety of contracts. When the government required a capability outside of Ambit's scope, Kim hired on more talent, and developed that capability in house. Today, Ambit is still the prime contractor on more than 95% of its contracts. "We've always primed 90% or more of our contracts," says Kim proudly. "We focused on developing capacity and refused to pass work through. We designed and solutioned every plan that was deployed, we wrote our own proposals, we ran our own staffing, we invested in our HR systems and staff development plans. We did our own marketing."

The first five to seven years were a grind,



Kim admits. But having built a strong business from the ground up, her passion and commitment paid off in spades. Kim was recognized as a Federal 100 awardee. Ambit has twice been named one of the *Washington Post's* Top Places to Work, and has been honored repeatedly for its corporate philanthropy. Throughout Ambit's growth and evolution, Kim has emphasized adherence to the business's mission- to Improve the lives of Fellow Citizens. The centerpiece of Ambit's headquarters in Tyson's Corner is a "Core Values Wall". Act with Integrity. Embrace and Drive Change. Take Ownership of Your Success. Pursue Continuous Learning. Demand Personal and Professional Excellence. The Core Values wall sums up the values that have brought not only Ambit, but Kim herself, so far from where she started.

Kim was born in Dillon, South Carolina, and lived in rural parts of the Carolinas throughout her childhood. It was, as she puts it, "very much the buckle of the Bible belt". She was raised in the religiously conservative Pentacostal Holiness church. "My kids and my husband laugh at me all the time," smiles Kim, "because I have zero cultural references." Kim's parents separated when she was young, and her father moved to Ohio, but she remained close with him. She lost both grandfathers at a young age but remained close to her grandmothers. At her paternal grandmother's house, she learned to read at a young age, gobbling up old Reader's Digests and even her aunt's romance novels. "If I could get it, I would read it," Kim laughs. "Grandma Ruby took care of me while my Mom worked until I was five. She was a huge influence. She taught me to cook. She taught me love deeply. She shaped me from a very young age."

Kim's mother's family was Native American, and as such, never had access to many of the resources afforded to the white families in the area. Until the day they died, neither of her mother's parents could read. Kim's mother had attended segregated schools for the Native American children. She was determined to give her daughter the advantages she'd never had.

Kim's aunts and uncles remained on the family farm. Her mom took a risk and moved to assisted housing in Laurinburg, North Carolina. She was determined to see Kim in a better school system. "She could have stayed on the farm for free," notes Kim. "But she made the decision she'd rather live in assisted housing and work in a

factory so I'd be in a better school." Right away, Kim tested into the gifted and talented program and began to excel in her new environment. But her mother was working non-stop to make ends meet; she had two jobs, and Kim was a latch-key kid learning how to make her own dinner and do her own homework. All the other kids in the gifted program had parents who were lawyers, doctors, attorneys," recalls Kim. "They all belonged to the country club and had housekeepers. It was a completely different world. I'm walking into class with kids who have adults to help them with their homework at night. So I became very good at learning things, very fast. It was my only way to survive in that environment. My mom gave me the gift of resilience and persistence. I never doubted we would have food on the table or a roof over our heads. It might not look like everyone else's but it was ours."

Kim put her head down and managed to get ahead. In high school, she headed the journalism association and edited the school paper. Outside of school, she was hustling just as hard at her part-time jobs, working at a credit counseling office and waiting tables. Upon graduating, she received a full-ride scholarship to a local college, but finances were such that she couldn't take it. "I helped my mom pay bills on our house, I helped bring money in," explains Kim. "I knew I couldn't go to school full time, work, help her, and sustain myself." Instead, Kim took a full-time job waitressing at a trendy new restaurant by Ft. Bragg.

The restaurant was an hour and a half commute, but the money was great. "I figured out quickly that I could make in one night what I'd make in a week working in the factory," says Kim. And for a year, she worked as many as five double shifts a week, bringing in as much as she could.

Fatefully, she began to develop a friendship with a group of regulars. They were E7s and E8s at Ft. Bragg, and encouraged her to think about the army as a route to her education. One night, about a year into her time waitressing at the restaurant, Kim's house was broken into and a week's worth of tips stolen. She decided it was time to think seriously about her next steps. She went to the recruiting station, and left for basic training four days later. She entered the Army, committed to qualify for Green-to-Gold and become an officer. And at first, she thrived. "I was the number one performer at Intel school," she

remembers. "I'm a good enough athlete, a great shot. I don't get freaked out in stressful situations. I was sort of this golden child. Getting hurt changed everything."

While on a nighttime training exercise for Desert One, Kim was severely injured when a rain-soaked ledge gave way causing her to tumble down an embankment. Battered by her weapons and gear, she dislocated her shoulder, cracked her jawbone, broke both ankles, and damaged multiple vertebrae. Facing nearly a year of treatment, mobilization and potential surgeries, her bright future as an officer was uncertain. "When you're injured, your value drops," says Kim. "Those were different times in the military. I had to learn to keep my head high, stay focused, continue to do the things you need to do, and not let failure of your body, or failure of anything else to cause you to mentally quit. You have to mentally stay in the game, so for me it was a matter of finding other meaningful work."

Kim went back to her mother's trailer, unable even to reclaim her waitressing job. But she didn't stay down for long. She met a veterinarian on Ft. Bragg who needed someone to run his front desk, and she took the job happily. Around the same time, she got married. It took Kim eighteen months to get into the VA system for medical assistance, and nine more months for her paperwork to go through, but finally the government agreed to pay for her education. She headed down to Winston-Salem to meet with her counselor. "I've never forgotten it as long as I live," Kim recalls wryly. "I walked in and he asked if I want to go to school. I said, 'Yes sir.' He said, 'All my girls are teachers. You're going to teach.' I had wanted to major in business, but, they paid 100% living allowance, I had my first child and they helped pay my child care costs. So that's how I became a teacher! I was able to go to school. You do what you have to do."

Kim began teaching in rural North Carolina, which she loved. She had another son and was just becoming accustomed to life there, when the young couple were stationed in DC. Kim was assigned to an at-risk classroom, and while she loved working to make a difference in their lives, the administration was abysmal. Finally, pregnant with her daughter and nervous to walk out of the school one night, Kim decided to make a change.

Never one to stay trapped in a bad

situation, Kim reached out to a friend who specialized in recruitment for veterans, but he told her she needed sales experience before he could market her to employers. Undeterred, Kim then called her realtor, Patty, to ask how she might become a buyer's agent. "Patty told me I needed to get a license," remembers Kim. "She told me I'd have to take a test. And I said, 'Well, I've got that.'" Studying at home, Kim passed the test with flying colors and got her license. That year, she was recognized as a top producing agent.

Kim displayed such a natural talent for the business that Patty was shocked when Kim announced she'd be leaving. But real estate had just been a means to an end for Kim; she had demonstrated her ability to sell, and now the recruiter could take her on. She quickly found a position at a production design group in Alexandria. It paid well, the work was interesting, but Kim saw opportunity for change. "My boss gave me a list of people and I would just cold call them all day," laughs Kim. "I decided that was just absolute insanity." Right away, she looked for more efficient ways to build the business, and began attending networking events all across the city. Quickly, she became a popular fixture at women's events. "I met other women who helped me and introduced me to others," recalls Kim. "One of the ladies said listen, 'It's a little like a game. You want to leave with more cards than anybody else. And you want to call every person you meet, and get them to like you.' I thought, I can do that, and that became my goal."

Kim's compensation was based on commission. Her base salary was a draw of \$40,000. She made the draw and reached a total compensation of a previously unimaginable \$100,000.

Having demonstrated a distinctive gift for building business efficiently, Kim was recruited by a federal consulting firm to direct their business development. She began to learn the ropes of the GSA. Just two years after that, she was recruited by Touchstone Consulting Group and hired as the VP of Federal Sales. It was here she met Ambit Co-founder John Condon, and the idea for the business was born.

For a year and a half, Kim did very well at Touchstone, but realized that she craved more of a hand in customer solution delivery. "I would meet with a customer, bond with them, understand their problems, and design a solution," remembers Kim.

“But I was working in someone else’s organization, and the expectation was that I would then hand it off. Within 60-90 days, that customer would call back expecting that I be a part of delivering the solution. I enjoyed being a part of that delivery and advancing the vision we’d crafted together. Before long, I knew I needed more.”

Kim was confident that she could provide such services end-to-end with more consistency and efficiency. “Ambit means a sphere of influence,” reflects Kim. “It’s about connected organizations or connected environment. That name was purposely chosen.” John gave her a check for Ambit’s seed fund, and soon after, he left Touchstone to join her in growing the new business.

Ambit’s success and evolution owes a lot to Kim and John’s joint leadership and ability to maintain a peaceful partnership. Over Ambit’s 15 years, her leadership style has evolved. She says she considers herself a servant-leader, with a high degree of accountability. “I’m here to help my employees be successful and am driven by doing what is ethically and morally right. Ultimately, I am responsible for captaining the ship through these waters. I’m evolving as my workforce and our market evolve. I choose to lead with integrity. I must be clear in my mission and vision. Everyone on our team must be accountable for their success and the success of the team. We’re building an organization that leaves an imprint, that truly leaves something behind.”

To young people entering the working world today, Kim prescribes the very things that enabled her her own success. “Work harder than everybody else around you,” she instructs. “Finish anything you start. I don’t care if you like it or not—sometimes you have to suck it up. Be smarter. If you lead a meeting and you don’t know the answer to something, by the next day, have a

dissertation. Be the most curious, aggressive, hungry, fastest source of reliable information. You will be surprised at how quickly you move up.”

Throughout her career, it has been Kim’s willingness to work hard, and her resilience in the face of many challenges, that has continued to buoy her. But she has never forgotten where she came from, nor the importance of helping those with less. “Poverty is something that is virtually impossible to climb out of,” says Kim. “What you realize coming from fewer means is that it takes more than a village, it takes a system. When our government works its best we deliver the right services, at the right level, at the right time, to the right citizens, where they need them and when they need them. I think back to that government cheese. I think back to the funded library buses that brought books to where there was no library. Books were my sanity. Government is here to deliver a mission. And I really do feel like there is a burden on those of us who have been entrusted to do that. That’s why I’m not ready to quit yet.”

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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](#).*