

# Leah Nichaman

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## Everyone is Suffering, Ease the Pain

Leah Nichaman was always a go-getter. In high school, she was at the top of her class earning straight As. She became the first in her small parochial school in Atlanta to earn admission to Brown University. As an Ivy Leaguer, she impulsively signed up for Japanese classes, loved the language, and ended up studying in Japan during her junior year. After college, she was quickly snapped up by Arthur Andersen's Boston office.

For the next six years, Leah worked her butt off for the firm. She learned the ins and outs of the corporate world and began building her career. "It was one of the most formative experiences I've had," she remembers. "They taught me how to work, how to think, how to solve problems, and how to visualize things graphically."

For many young college graduates, the job at Arthur Andersen might have been the beginning of a long, stable career in the field. However, Leah wanted more. After six years, she began to realize that, although she had learned a lot, her job was not fulfilling. "I quit partly because I figured out it wasn't what I wanted to be doing," she reflects. "I felt like I was working so many hours so that some partner could get a boat. We had to cancel our social plans all the time. We were workaholics. In particular, I worked on a graveyard shift with a small team of programmers, meaning I was in the office from 8:00 at night until 6:00 in the morning. There was so much overtime, and I had no life. I realized I didn't want to do this job anymore; I wanted to help people."

Leah had met her future husband, Loren, at Brown. When he made the decision to accept a position in Tokyo, Leah realized it was the perfect opportunity to return to a place she loved and reassess her path forward. In Tokyo, she began teaching English. After a year of that, she was

hired at an investment firm called Okasan Securities, where she edited stock reports. "I didn't know anything about stocks, but the young people at the firm would write stock reports or projections, and I would edit them from bad English into good English," Leah explains. "I also had an English language conversation class that I ran at the firm. It was a great experience, but I didn't love it. I was the only woman in the office who wasn't serving tea so it was strange."

At that point, Arthur Andersen reached back out to Leah to offer her work on a project in Tokyo. "I was thinking to myself, 'Really? I already quit this job,'" she laughs. "But I met the manager of the project, who was another Western woman, and she was just a hoot. I decided to take it, and I actually had a good time doing it. I spent the next couple of years in Japan working for Arthur Andersen again."

Leah and Loren married during their time in Japan, and after several years abroad, the young couple decided it was time to return home to the states. Specifically, they were moving to Florida, where Loren had been offered a job in Boca Raton. South Florida was a culture shock, but her next job finally put her on a new path.

"When we came back, I knew I wanted to do something for the world," she nods. "I became more aware of the different ways people suffer in the world and that's when my altruistic side started to blossom. I ran a Planned Parenthood office in Pembroke Pines, Florida. And it was the best job I ever had."

After so many years in the corporate rat race, Planned Parenthood was a massive change of pace. She wasn't making the kind of money she made at Arthur Andersen, but for the first time, she felt like her work was making a difference in the lives of others. Finally, she began to feel the professional fulfillment she'd been lacking. "That



was the best job I ever had because it was all about problem solving,” Leah elaborates. “Women would call and say they had a problem, whatever it was. We were serving mostly low-income, Latina, White and Black women in Southern Florida. I learned to listen to people and to hear their story. While I couldn’t solve every problem, I tried to ease their pain simply by listening well. I learned a lot about people in that job. I loved that when the phone would ring, I wouldn’t know what the problem was going to be, but I felt really confident that whatever it was, I was going to do whatever was needed to help the woman on the other end of that line.”

Leah left Planned Parenthood when her husband enrolled in graduate school at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. The couple decided to make a move to the DC area, but Leah wasn’t able to find a comparable position in Washington. However, she knew she wanted to continue helping people, and got a job with Westat, a statistical research firm in Rockville. Westat was performing health studies with the National Cancer Institute (NCI), and Leah got involved on the training and development side. “I wrote manuals on how to collect data for a clinical trial,” she says. “I stayed there eight years, but eventually realized, my heart wasn’t in it. I was helping people; NCI helps people, but it wasn’t direct enough for me. I needed to touch people, to work one-on-one with them, so that’s when I went to work for NAMI.”

Working at NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, was a career- and life-defining experience for Leah. It was not only a job where she could have a direct impact on people who were struggling; it also planted the seed of her future business. She was working the helpline at NAMI, and like her job at Planned Parenthood, she was on the front line connecting people in need with resources in their communities. It was in the course of researching those resources and options for struggling families that she discovered a field she’d never heard of before: Daily Money Management.

“People would call and tell me their son had bipolar disorder and he’d maxed out three credit cards,” she relates. “So, I went looking for resources and I found the American Association of Daily Money Managers. I had an informational interview with one of them to get details for our referral list. But the truth is, it stuck in the back of

my mind after that. Daily Money Management (DMM) is the perfect marriage of data and people. What am I good at? Data and people! That’s the essence of DMM. It’s a little bit of a science, but it’s mostly an art. And the creativity and problem-solving that it entails is what I love about it.”

Today Leah is Founder and President of Everyday Money Management (EMM), a DMM firm with a particular focus on helping the elderly and people with disabilities. DMM is a holistic approach to helping people manage their finances with emphasis on assistance with logistics, paperwork, interpersonal challenges, and more. “A really good Daily Money Manager is a combination of a bookkeeper, a social worker and an organizer,” Leah explains. “We’re handling the medical bureaucracy, the banking bureaucracy, and the insurance bureaucracy. Some of it is bill pay, but during the course of an engagement they may ask for assistance in obtaining a copy of a birth certificate or changing the name on a car title or anything else. So a Daily Money Manager is not just a bookkeeper, they are somebody who navigates all the intricacies of your personal finances.”

EMM was founded in 2007. At first, it was a solo operation, but as the business began to expand and focus on seniors, she quickly had to bring in an administrator, with more staff following behind. Today, she has 12 part-time staff at EMM. Combined, they serve a total of 130 clients, 85% of them senior citizens, most with some form of cognitive impairment.

“I still do business development because I like to meet new referral partners and I want more people to learn about DMM,” Leah notes. “But the reality is that our phone rings anyway. I planted enough seeds over the last decade and a half that it just keeps growing. We’re almost at capacity now and we’ll need to hire more employees in order to continue our growth.”

The business and the industry at large are poised for massive growth in the years ahead. Right now, there are about 700 members in the American Association of Daily Money Managers, although Leah estimates there are likely twice as many people doing the work who have not joined the Association. As for EMM, Leah plans to expand into the high-net-worth world as they continue to grow their team. “For seniors, we’re trying to make their finances simpler and keep them safe,” Leah describes. “For high-net-worth

busy professionals, it's the same thing; we want to streamline and simplify things so they won't struggle to stay on top of their financial details. Just like seniors, people with significant resources can feel vulnerable when they don't have a handle on what is going on with their personal finances. Everything is digital now, which is great, but it also creates issues that you don't notice if you're not paying attention. For example, we have found automatic payments that were setup years ago but were never stopped when the service became irrelevant."

Leah's journey to founding her own business was a circuitous one, and she's encouraging to young people who have not yet found their calling. "I think it's important for young people to see that success is not linear," she points out. "A lot of people take a very roundabout route. My journey was somewhat convoluted, but what I learned in every job along the way helped me move to the next job. I think it's important to know you don't have to blossom right at 22 and say this is what I want to be. You can blossom in your 50s or blossom over and over again throughout your life."

In her personal life, she notes that it's only in the last decade that she began to engage deeply with the practice of Buddhism, something that has brought her great peace and serenity in the face of an ever-changing world. "I wish I had found it earlier in my life," Leah glows. "I go to hear the teachings of Tara Brach; she's the lead teacher at the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. I've learned a little bit about Buddhist psychology and now I'm delving much more deeply into learning about it. In many ways it has really changed my life. A lot of us cling so tightly to who we are—our ego, our judgements and opinions, and our anxieties; we have strong attachments and strong aversions. The Buddha talked about walking the middle path, trying not to have those strong attachments and aversions. It doesn't mean you don't care about things or don't work toward things. I'm very passionate about a lot of things. But I no longer get overly attached to succeeding or failing. If I have a big disappointment, my ability to be resilient and bounce back from that is so much better when I think about it through the lens of Buddhism."

Leah and her husband are both walking the Buddhist path, while also embracing their Jewish heritage; a mix that Leah describes as

"taking what resonates" from both religions. She grew up in a very Jewish household. Both of her parents were first-generation Americans and her grandparents fled pogroms and anti-Semitism in what is now Ukraine and ended up in Boston. Her father was an epidemiologist, known for his small stature and large personality. "We called him the little big man and the energizer bunny," Leah laughs, "He was only 5'4", but he was so gregarious and energetic. He was very animated about things, and a renaissance man."

Her mother, meanwhile, was a part-time teacher in Judaic Studies to first graders, and a stay-at-home mom the rest of the time. "I get most of my organizational and practical skills from my mom. She has always been able to take care of what needs to be done," Leah says. "She taught me that everything usually works out, and if it doesn't, then learn to accept that."

Leah was one of three, the middle of three sisters, and all three were and remain close. The family loved being outdoors, and Leah's love for camping, hiking and all things in nature has continued throughout her life. In fact, when asked about what her most prized possession would be, she simply describes a tent. "It's a 2-person REI quarter-dome," she smiles. "And it represents all the tents I have had over the years and will have. In many ways it connects me to my family. My sisters still camp. I have two adult daughters and they camp. One thing about a tent and the whole camping experience is that it takes you away from all the stuff we have, our possessions, and things we think are important. When you are camping you realize you don't need much. It takes you back to the basics. I need shelter, warmth, food and water, but other than that? Not much. Camping is so simple."

Some of Leah's earliest memories are of camping and hiking in California and the Rockies. Though she was born in Pittsburgh, the family lived out west when Leah was a small child. "When I was around the age of eight we went on a backpacking trip in the Rockies," she reminisces. "I don't know exactly where, but we walked over this ridge and suddenly we came upon the most beautiful, pristine, alpine lake you have ever seen. It was so quiet and peaceful. I honestly think I've been looking for that lake ever since."

Soon after, the family relocated to Atlanta, where her father had gotten a job as Director of the Nutrition Program with the CDC. The family

settled there for the rest of Leah's childhood. From that time, she established a group of friends that is still close to this day. "We used to do a yearly trip, but since the pandemic started, we've been talking every weekend," Leah says. "It's really wonderful."

Leah had a happy childhood. She enjoyed her time in nature, and cherished family events and her Jewish community. Although she notes that she wasn't very good, she played basketball and joined the swim team. She thrived in her tiny school; so much so that the transition to Brown was a difficult one. "I had this experience that a lot of people had. I went from this little pond where I was a big deal, to Brown University where I was a small fish in a big pond," Leah remembers. "It was a hard transition initially, but I learned a lot from that. It sent me into a bit of a tailspin because my identity was that of a good student, an achiever, and a leader, and it was hard to find my place at Brown. In that way I was humbled. It was hard, but I made it through. I think in some ways the identity crisis I was having made the opportunity to spend my junior year abroad appealing. And that experience was tremendously influential on my professional life."

It was also at Brown that Leah met Loren; they've now been together for 33 years. "He is my number one mentor, I've learned so much from him," Leah notes. "He's one of the kindest, wisest, most compassionate people you'll ever meet. He's collaborative and a great listener. He will make you feel like you're the only person in the room. He taught me a lot about listening. He's my partner and my best friend."

Leah says she has also learned a lot from being a mother to her two daughters, and teaching other parents positive parenting skills through PEP, the Parent Encouragement Program, a Maryland based non-profit. "Parents are suffering, too! Parenting is hard and so many parents feel the vulnerability of their families in today's world. I loved being able to teach skills to make parenting easier," she says. "PEP was the greatest gift to our family. My girls are self-reliant, resilient,

collaborative, and most importantly, kind. PEP helped us to create a harmonious, peaceful household when they were growing up."

To young people entering the working world today, Leah advises to be a learner, not a knower. "I'm an intelligent person who's well educated so I think I know I lot," she smiles. "And when I was a kid, I thought I knew everything. But in the last decade once I started on the Buddhist path, is when I came to something the Buddhist's call 'beginner's mind'. Come to everything with beginner's mind. What does that mean in practice? Ask questions. Lots of questions. Then stop, and don't think while somebody's giving you the answer. Listen. Practice listening like it's a muscle and work it the way you would your biceps. Practice good listening. Practice compassionate listening. Learn to be a good listener."

"I've come to realize that everyone is suffering," she reflects. "Some people may be very successful, beautiful or wealthy, and some may be struggling just to get by. We may seem very different from one another, but one thing we share is that we all have places where we feel vulnerable. What I want to do is to help ease that pain."

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