

# Deborah Myers

## Persistence through Obstacles to Happiness and Success

Deborah Myers and her siblings were always expected to go to college. Her mother hadn't been able to go and wanted for her children what she hadn't had; her father had a degree in Electrical Engineering from Penn State and knew college was an essential part of getting ahead. However, he was also a child of the Great Depression. He was tight-fisted, constantly pushing back on their mother's investments in childhood activities like swimming and tennis. It was always assumed that Deborah and her siblings would go to college, but her father made it clear he wouldn't be helping the kids pay for their college. They were going to have to pay their own way.

At the age of 16, Deborah started working. Her first job was scooping ice cream at Baskin Robbins. While other kids might've used the pocket money for clothes or concerts, Deborah stashed away as much as she could.

When it came time to pick a college, money was a factor. Deborah was accepted to Scripps College, an expensive private school, but ultimately decided on UCLA, knowing she'd be able to pay for the first two years. After that, she'd be able to be declared independent and apply for financial aid. Her father encouraged her to consider San Diego State, as her family lived there and she'd be closer to home, but with her own money in her pocket, Deborah wanted to get a little space.

UCLA was exactly the college experience Deborah had hoped for. She was in a sorority, ended up in a leadership role there, and loved spending time with friends and going to basketball games. She majored in economics and psychology, with an eye to the business world or possibly becoming a psychologist. During her junior and senior years, she worked in the campus clinical psychology office, answering the phones and

typing up reports alongside the PhDs. It was a wonderful experience, but valuable in another way as well; she realized she didn't want to spend her career in the field.

As it so happened, during her senior year one of Deborah's sorority sisters was working on the Reagan for President campaign and mentioned that they needed volunteers. Deborah became a volunteer but quickly became a paid staffer thanks to her work ethic and hustle. The fateful decision to volunteer for Reagan would end up setting her entire career on a new, exciting trajectory.

After college, Deborah interviewed for jobs and ended up with two offers for full-time positions. One was to be a buyer at Macy's in San Francisco. The other was a job with an insurance company. But as Deborah considered the two offers, she couldn't stop thinking about her time in the world of politics. She was offered an unpaid internship in the office of the then-Senate Minority Leader in Sacramento. Much to the chagrin of her practical father, she took the unpaid internship.

"My dad was furious with me," Deborah recalls. "Because I turned down two paying jobs to work for nothing for the summer! Over Memorial Day weekend he told me that if I expected him to support me, I had another thing coming. I stood up and said, 'I'd rather sleep in the gutter than take a penny from you!' and I left. I had been supporting myself through college, and I had money leftover from my summers working at Baskin Robbins and Safeway. That decision to go to Sacramento led to so many opportunities later in life. That same year I was offered the chance to work in Washington. So that moment really changed the trajectory of my career."

Soon after Deborah arrived in the Senate Minority Leader's office, several of his staff



departed to work on the Reagan-Bush campaign. She was promoted into one of those roles and given a full-time salary. After Reagan's election, a friend from the campaign offered her a spot working on the Inaugural Committee in DC; Deborah leapt at the opportunity. While in town, she was offered a job as the Confidential Assistant of the Administrator of the Small Business Administration. And thus, her career in Washington was launched. A year later she was working for the Commerce Department.

"When I was a kid, I didn't know what I wanted to do," reflects Deborah. "Maybe become a lawyer? When I started undergraduate, I thought I wanted to become a doctor, but I hated my chemistry class. Even when I graduated, I had no idea what I'd end up doing. If somebody had told me I was going to graduate, come to Washington, work two years as a political appointee, go into an international organization, then work for a multinational corporation and travel extensively around the world, and then start my own business, I wouldn't have believed them. Because that was nowhere even in my idea of what I could do."

But that's exactly what she did do, and exactly where Deborah's impressive career has taken her. Today, she is the Founder and CEO of VirtuArte, which sells gorgeous, original crafts and art from artisans all over the world, as well as providing intentional gift-giving services for both personal and professional clients.

Deborah launched the business in 2010. At first, she focused solely on finding beautifully crafted items to sell to her clientele. "I travelled internationally so much in my career, particularly in developing countries," she explains. "Everywhere I went, I shopped. When I had the opportunity to travel, I always wanted to see what was being made in those countries, how it fit into the culture, and what the traditional skills were. So when we launched, I was working with artisans in developing countries, importing their handcrafted jewelry and fashion accessories, and home and office décor items. I didn't want the sort of things you can buy at the airport; these were real artisans. I loved travelling and finding the artists and finding new pieces."

After about two years of this work, Deborah was speaking with a marketing expert, and he asked her an interesting question. What differentiated VirtuArte from other companies performing similar functions? What about

branding the business around gift-giving, and helping customers become more intentional gift-givers?

"In 2012 I began talking about helping people become more intentional gift-givers," Deborah describes. "I started having people ask me for help selecting a gift. It was a lot of men who would tell me they'd never been able to find the right gift for their wife or their girlfriend. What I found was, whether it was for a family member, partner, or friend, people really don't know the person they were buying the gift for! When I started asking questions like, does your wife wear silver or gold? Does she like necklaces or bracelets? They'd tell me they didn't know."

"At that point, I give them a list of questions, I give them homework," Deborah laughs. "I tell them go find out. Do not ask her. Pay attention to what she does, what she wears, and when you have the answers, come back and I will help you find the gift. If it's for something personal like a piece of jewelry, I'd ask them for some pictures so I can see the style. Then I give them two or three options, let them pick, and wrap it beautifully. If it was from one of the artisans from around the world, I handwrite a card about where it came from and how it was made and the artist. My clients come back and tell me, 'my mother almost started to cry when she saw this.' 'Or my wife put it on immediately.' It didn't go in a drawer never to be seen again!"

From there, Deborah's business continued to expand, and a new area of demand caught her eye. She was no longer attracting clients who were seeking only personal gifts; she also began attracting customers who wanted to give gifts to business partners, clients, and people with whom they had otherwise professional relationships.

VirtuArte had just successfully helped a client give a very personal gift to a professional mentor — an African mask in a style the mentor collected — when Deborah began to ask: 'What would happen if businesses did this on a consistent and continuous basis?' "It took me until 2019 to figure out what kind of service I could offer to these clients," Deborah describes. "Now what we offer is a customized client appreciation strategy for a company. That can include handwritten cards, gifts, helping with content to create more personalized emails, etc. We plot it on a 12-month calendar, because I insist we do this for a year. This is not just something you do once. We

plan ahead of time what we're going to do at certain times of the year and which clients we're sending these cards and gifts to. Each strategy is custom to what the company wants; some only want to send cards on birthdays or holidays. I have another client who has a whole client experience—from a welcome card to a personalized gift. And the feedback my clients are providing is that their clients are surprised, they're wowed, they're amazed, and they feel special. From my perspective, it's that personal touch and connection that puts a company ahead of their competition. People often feel companies don't care; that they're a transaction or a number. My mission is to bring the personal connection back into business."

VirtuArte ultimately grew out of Deborah's passion for travel and for experiencing new cultures. "My mother used to say to me, 'I don't know where you came from, because nobody else in the family really liked to travel,'" laughs Deborah.

Deborah grew up in Southern California, the eldest of three children, with one younger sister and a younger brother. Her parents were a classic case of opposites attracting; her mother had grown up in Mexico and was vivacious and outgoing. Her father was of German descent, very strict and very frugal. The two were constantly in conflict over spending money on the kids. "My mom wanted to make sure we had all the opportunities we could," Deborah says. "She made sure we had swimming and tennis lessons. My dad didn't see these things as necessary. Even birthday parties were considered unnecessary. So things that were no big deal in other kids' childhoods were very contentious things in our home."

Still, Deborah's father was driven and brilliant, and she attributes some of her stubbornness and ambition to his example. He spent his career in the aerospace industry, working as an electrical engineer for large corporations like General Dynamics and McDonnell Douglas. He worked on the Gemini program and Apollo program during the space race.

From her mother, Deborah says she inherited a joyful spirit and outgoing personality. "She loved to entertain," Deborah smiles. "She loved being around people. I get that from her. She was so caring. She would do whatever she needed to do to get what she thought we deserved. When I was at UCLA she would drop \$20 in the mail for

me whenever she could. So from her I'd say I get my compassion for people." Deborah was always close with her mother. In fact, she says that her most prized possession would be a baby picture of her mom.

The Myers family grew up in Southern California, not far from the beach. Their favorite activity was going to La Jolla beaches. "My mom tanned, my dad didn't; the length of our trip depended on who took us," laughs Deborah. "I grew up going to the beach. My cousins on the East Coast would say their vacation was a week at the beach. I thought that was so strange since in my mind you could go in the afternoon and still have time to come back and go to a movie."

The family had dinner together every night. Her father served the food, which also became a bone of contention as Deborah got older and asserted independence. "Growing up we were always butting heads," Deborah recalls. "I would come to the dinner table and say I wanted to ask him something and his line was always, 'Is this going to ruin my dinner?'"

At school, she made friends easily, did well academically, and became active in the marching band drill team. However, when she found out she'd be paying her own way through college, she had to let go of her extra-curriculars. Free time was spent scooping ice cream before she headed to UCLA.

Throughout her career, Deborah considered returning to the West Coast; but every time she was close to making the move, another fantastic opportunity popped up. After working in the Commerce Department, Deborah moved on to the Reagan White House. "Today I would probably not want to do anything in politics," Deborah reflects. "But I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the wheeling and dealing aspect of it. It was a great ride. I had these opportunities, helping with advance for the President. I had lunch in the White House mess and all these incredible opportunities when I was 23 and 24 years old. I knew, this doesn't happen to everybody."

From there, she was offered a spot in a program at the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) being developed for young professionals. It was to be a two-year program; Deborah ended up working there for ten years. After the professional program ended, she was offered another role by the head of the administrative department. "I went to work within the bank as

part of a consulting team for the Board of Executive Directors," Deborah explains. "That's when I started to travel because we went and did evaluations on programs. I took my first international trip to Brazil to look at an electrification project in rural Brazil. And I loved it. I loved going to a foreign country, trying new foods, meeting new people, and seeing new things. From that point on, anytime we were asked who's interested in travelling, my hand shot up!" To date, Deborah has spent time in 72 countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and Australia/New Zealand. The only continent she hasn't visited is Antarctica.

Deborah was promoted to work in the Executive Directors office of the IADB and stayed there for several more years. However, as the race between Bush and Clinton heated up, she saw the writing on the wall. She was in a political role; it was time to start looking for something new. She ended up landing a position at a French company as a liaison to the development banks. Again, she was sent travelling, this time across the former Soviet Union dealing with World Bank contracts. After five years, the company merged with another business and Deborah took a severance package and left.

Then, she took a brief work hiatus, during which she dealt with various personal issues including her father's stroke and separation from her husband Paul. "It was the universe telling me I needed to step back for a moment," Deborah recalls. She and Paul ultimately got divorced, but, like something out of a romantic comedy, eventually got back together. "We met in 1988, got married in 1991, got divorced in 2000, and got back together in 2010," Deborah relates. "He's been extremely supportive of me and my business. He compliments me well; he likes to entertain, and we like to travel. He's a great companion."

When she was ready to go back to work, she accepted a part-time role with SmithKlein Beecham as a consultant. She then took a full-time role with Fisher Scientific for about a year and a half, before getting the opportunity to interview with GlaxoSmithKlein. The interview process was the most interesting of her life; she met with the President of the vaccine business in a hotel lobby

in Philadelphia, and the two hit it off right away. It ended up being a two-hour long conversation where Deborah impressed and earned the job.

"Working there was a phenomenal experience," Deborah describes. "I didn't know anything about vaccines, but they hired me because the President wanted to figure out how to get the basic vaccines into low-income countries. That was his passion project. And I knew the international organizations, I'd worked with NGOs. We did a lot of great work together."

Ultimately though, when Deborah was passed over for a major promotion, she decided it was time to move on. She knew she was ready to stop working for others, to be her own boss.

As a leader, she considers herself "can-do," elaborating, "When I personally make up my mind I'm going to do something, I do it. When I'm working with others, I do want their input. I don't have people around me who agree with everything I say. I've always had an open-door policy."

To young people entering the working world today, she advises against allowing themselves to be pigeonholed; looking back on her career, it's clear to see why. "Be open to all the opportunities that come your way," she encourages. "That's what I did. Every time someone offered, I thought, 'Yeah, I think I could do that.'"

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**– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, 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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*