Ann Harkins

The Accountability Factor

A seventeen-year-old Ann Harkins pulled into the driveway of her home just outside Philadelphia to find a chair blocking her entrance into the family’s tiny wooden garage. Rather than get out of the car and move the chair, she tested her new driving skills by maneuvering around the obstacle, successfully leaving the chair untouched but wedging the car in the fragile garage at such a precarious angle that it quickly became clear there was no way she could get the car out again without causing damage. “I knew I had to go in and tell my father what had happened,” she recalls. “I expected him to be mad, but instead, he just shrugged and said, ‘You have to bend a few fenders before you learn how to drive.’ That’s when I realized that mistakes could always be fixed as long as you own up to them.”

Her father did, in fact, help her move the car, and she carried that value with her throughout her teen and young adult years. Yet it wasn’t until October 15, 2001, that the full weight of his words would come back to guide her, and the accountability factor would truly lead her to success at a character-defining moment.

It was her first day on the job as Deputy Sergeant at Arms for the U.S. Senate. Mere hours after Ann arrived at work, an anthrax-laced letter was opened in Senator Tom Daschle’s office—the largest bioterrorist attack in American history.

“There was a lot of fear, but I didn’t have time to think about being afraid,” she remembers. “It was so difficult at first. We initially thought the entire building might have to be torn down, and the antibiotic available and in use for other diseases had never been tested on people for anthrax, only animals. And it was hard in terms of community relations as well because we were dealing with a lot of scared people.”

Fortunately, the cleanup team demonstrated incredible resilience and took each new challenge in stride. Toward the end of the ordeal, one of Ann’s major roles was calling each uprooted office to brief them on the return. Three months after the contaminated envelope was first opened, she was making her phone calls when it was suddenly brought to her attention that hazmat gear had dropped out of the ceiling with some of the other material used in the cleanup. “We thought for sure this was going to be the end,” Ann recalls. “We were convinced we were going to lose our jobs. Regardless, we poured over the blueprints of the buildings into the middle of the night to determine how any contaminants may have traveled. The next morning, we had to tell staff who had been in temporary offices for three months, that they couldn’t use even their temporary spaces. We were expecting the worst, but they turned out to be grateful for our honesty. In the end, they just wanted to know that we really did care about their safety.”

When Ann looks back on the anthrax attack, she shudders over the lives lost and affected. With this remorse, however, she feels pride for the efforts of the inter-agency team, who stepped into action so quickly and never cut corners. “We knew the world was watching and demanding swift action, but we never sacrificed the integrity of our work,” she says. “If something goes wrong, it’s so much easier to say so and move on to fixing the problem. That’s proved true throughout my career.”

Today, Ann is the President and CEO of the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), a non-profit dedicated to educating the public on how to protect themselves and their communities through public education, training programs, and civic engagement. NCPC is most well known for its unique icon, McGruff the Crime Dog®, who leads NCPC’s “Take A Bite Out Of Crime®” campaign.

The McGruff Campaign, which is now one
of the Ad Council’s top five campaigns, launched in 1980 in response to the soaring crime rates of the late 1970s—a time when preventive action was not a developed concept amongst the general population. “If you asked people in focus groups how to prevent crime, they would say, ‘I can’t do anything, that’s the job of law enforcement,’” Ann explains. “Crime was going up exponentially, and there was a lot of pressure on the federal government to help, so the Justice Department decided to get together with the Ad Council to create a campaign to address the problem and to make the public more proactive about their safety.”

The Ad Council worked with the advertising firm Dancer Fitzgerald Sample, now Saatchi & Saatchi, to develop the image of McGruff, which was first created on a napkin at a Kansas City airport. Shortly after the first commercial featuring McGruff was aired in 1980, the campaign took off, teaching the importance of lights, locks, alarms, and telling a neighbor before going out of town. In 1982, the NCPC was formed specifically to manage the McGruff campaign, which has since spread out from the standard public education techniques of television and radio to workbooks, programs, and crime prevention training. “You can embed crime prevention principles in any facility, such as a school or even a parking lot,” Ann remarks. “There are many different environments. Where there’s a significant crime problem, it probably will not be alleviated unless everyone comes together to communicate. Once we get people together, we can make a crime prevention plan and help them implement it.”

Like any successful business, NCPC has changed McGruff’s image to keep up with the times, and strategies for crime prevention have evolved as well. On the icon’s 30th birthday, the Circle of Respect program was introduced. It focuses on the basic principle that for a crime to occur, there must be ability, opportunity, and desire. “If you take any one of those legs away, the crime will not occur,” Ann explains. “The Circle of Respect started because we do a lot of work to prevent bullying and cyberbullying. That has allowed us to identify numerous inter-relational crimes, such as bullying, school violence, dating violence, gang violence, and workplace violence. In all these circumstances, an element of respect would change the dynamic between the people involved and reduce the desire to commit the crime.”

Ann was born and raised in the Philadelphia area, where she lived with her father, a postal inspector, and her mother, a stay-at-home mom who worked as a part-time executive assistant. Her parents taught Ann and her two younger brothers the importance of education, and they made every family outing oriented around exposing the children to new and interesting things. Her father was a man of integrity. Her mother was a very intelligent woman who was ahead of her time in terms of women’s rights, passing down to Ann a sense of empowerment and capability. Political dialogue was a constant in their household.

In junior high, Ann dreamed of one day becoming a doctor, inspired by the family’s pediatrician. At the beginning of high school, however, she became involved in student government, and has ever since been focused on public policy. Driven by this passion, she attended Catholic University in D.C., where she majored in Latin American history, having been inspired by a foreign exchange experience she had in Paraguay. “I was living with another family, and it was eye opening,” she comments. “I tapped into a willingness to try new things and experience new cultures.”

After graduating, she attained her Master’s in Latin American history, thinking she might pursue a Ph.D. in the subject down the road. Her mind was changed, however, when she went to New York City to work in international education. “I was with a group of really smart career women,” she notes. “They were all starting to apply to law schools and business programs, and I knew I wanted to get back to D.C. and the government, so I decided to pursue law instead.” After three years in New York, she moved back to D.C. where she attended the night program at Georgetown University Law Center while working part-time.

Working on Capitol Hill had always been enticing to Ann, but she had found no means to get there in her time right out of college. So when a law professor announced he knew of a job opening on the Hill as a law clerk, she jumped on the opportunity. “The whole class booed because the job included typing,” she laughs. “But I went and checked it out. I ended up landing the job and working for Senator Leahy, who was at the time a junior member of the Judiciary Committee.” Now
he is the Chairman of the Committee and President Pro Tempore of the Senate. “From him and his then Chief Counsel John Podesta, I learned that good substance is good politics,” Ann remarks.

Ann worked for Senator Leahy until she graduated from law school in 1982, at which point she went to work as a litigation associate at Davis Polk & Wardwell. “Dan Kolb, the partner for whom I worked, approached the work with the mindset that, rather than being defensive as defense counsel, we were telling our story,” she says. “I found that so positive—that you might be in a jam, but it doesn’t mean you did something wrong. You just need to explain what you did and why. I’ve used that lesson in my career every day for almost 30 years now.”

In 1986, Ann was invited back to work on Senator Leahy’s staff, so she returned to the Hill to serve as General Counsel to the Patents, Copyrights, and Trademarks Subcommittee. A year later, Leahy became the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, leading to Ann’s promotion as his Chief Counsel on the Judiciary Committee, where she stayed for eight years. Then, after a brief stint in the private sector, in 1995, she transferred to the Justice Department’s Office of Legislative Affairs, where she became what she terms an all-purpose troubleshooter.

“Before a policy position becomes public, the Department has to ensure all of the interested stakeholders are part of the decision making process,” she explains. “Often, the Office of Legislative Affairs is the last stop before a policy statement goes to the Hill, and it has to be solid. I did a lot of oversight in that regard.” Her work there led to her becoming Attorney General Janet Reno’s Deputy Chief of Staff, and eventually Chief of Staff, where she served until 2001.

During the summer of 2001, Ann began looking into the job as Deputy Sergeant at Arms in the Senate, a role she knew would combine her experience as a Senate staffer with the management experience she gained at the Justice Department. On September 4th, 2001, her soon-to-be boss, Al Lenhardt, who now serves as the U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania, was hired as Sergeant at Arms, specifically in response to Senator Daschle’s request to hire more security professionals. General Lenhardt served in Europe in the early 1980s, and later became head of the Army’s military police.

Her experience played in Ann’s favor during the hiring process. “By then, I had spent five and a half years in the Justice Department, so I was a Senate professional with a civil liberties background,” Ann says. “I could talk with law enforcement easily, which I think helped my application.” Staying focused despite the turmoil in the country, Ann followed through with her application in mid-September 2001 and started in her new position on October 15th, the same day the anthrax letter was opened.

Ann was on route to being sworn into her new position, first as Deputy Sergeant at Arms and then at the Capitol Police. She went to her first swearing-in, waiting to hear if the spores in the envelope tested positive for anthrax. They did, prompting Ann to fly into duty and putting off her second swearing-in for months.

Cleanup began immediately and lasted until January 2002—a notably fast effort, considering the number of offices that had been affected. Ann recalls how supportive the Senate was throughout their efforts. “No one tried to rush us,” she says. “Senator Daschle kept reminding us to follow the science and do it right.” The Senate leadership supported Daschle’s commitment to health and safety as the top priority. That kind of support in a crisis is invaluable.

The bioterrorist attacks left a heavy cloud of fear and unease over the Hill, but Ann and the inter-agency team was hugely successful in the cleanup effort. Lenhardt, especially, had become an influential figure in her life, having been a strong leader in the face of a national crisis.

Ann later moved home to West Virginia in 2003, working for Senator Rockefeller. She went on to serve as executive director of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program for the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia, and she also coordinated two West Virginia Summits on Homeland Security. In 2004, Lenhardt became President of the NCPC, and in 2006, he invited Ann to join him at NCPC to serve as Vice President for Programs. After a year and a half in that capacity, she was promoted to Chief Operating Officer before being promoted to CEO in 2009.

Today, Ann monitors the threats of yesterday while also shifting her attention to the threats of tomorrow. Chief among the latter is the internet—a terrific tool that can also provide new techniques for villains at the forefront of crime. “Crime rates are currently the lowest they’ve been
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in 30 years, but that’s in comparison to the types of crimes seen in the 1950s,” she says. “It used to be relatively easy to identity thieves. If you want to find out how many cars or bikes are stolen, you can access that statistic, but with cybercrimes, it’s harder. It’s much easier for criminals to hide, and they can do immeasurable damage, including identity theft and financial fraud.”

As the current president of the NCPC, Ann recognizes the importance of listening in leadership. “I always make sure to make every voice heard, especially the young ones,” she says. “There’s nothing I’m prouder of than the young people I’ve worked with who have gone on to be forces in their own right. I love helping these young people get started because I know so many people helped me along the way.”

As Ann enjoys helping others get their footing in the work world, she feels strongly about volunteering at various non-profit organizations, such as her local arts council, as well as the Contemporary American Theater Festival, both in West Virginia. She also always makes time for her dedicated group of friends. “I’m blessed to have friends that I’ve been close to for over 40 years,” she smiles. “I don’t think that’s very common in Washington, but people are very important to me, and I don’t want to lose them. It’s amazing what can be accomplished when people come together and communicate.”

Throughout her many roles, Ann has balanced her career at the intersection of law, policy, and politics. She attributes the success she has had in each of her various roles to her father’s lesson so many years ago, which she has held with her each day. “In my line of business, I’ve found it’s all about putting your best foot forward, making decisions on the merits, and thinking through a problem, rather than defending yourself,” she says. She hopes to send the same message to the next generation entering the workforce, allowing them to live life more in a state of wonder than a state of worry. “You have to be open to things in life,” she says. “Make mistakes and take responsibility for them—it’s the best, surest way to end up where you need to be.”

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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 and Gordon’s Blog.