

Rebecca R. Rubin

The Woods Within

In Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, you'll find a hundred-acre undeveloped, untouched woods owned by the Village of Hastings. Rebecca Rubin was nine months old when her family moved from the Bronx to a house on Edgewood Avenue just across the street from this sanctuary of wildness, which seemed to the young girl to stretch for thousands of acres. Under the shelter of those trees, she found a sense of freedom and empowerment that came to define her inner self as much as it defined the world around her. She walked to school through the woods, played there with friends, and explored independently, setting off in the morning with her knapsack for a day of adventure. And in these pursuits, the young girl was also undertaking a cartographic exercise of far greater magnitude, mapping the terrain of her own character and values.

Now the founder, President, and CEO of Marstel-Day, an environmental consulting firm and conservation think tank, Rebecca has dedicated her career to combating elements of loss, destruction, and degradation in the natural world. And in this work, she brings the same affinity and wonder she felt as a child. "We were given the most perfect of all possible worlds," she says. "Everything about it was in perfect symmetry, function, and beauty. Then we came along, and our grand legacy has been to eliminate more than half the earth's forests, wreck its aquatic ecosystems, and vanquish its habitat and species. We're now experiencing the effects of hundreds of years of habitat fragmentation, destruction, and relinquishment of our love of nature to distance ourselves from our ecosystems. Now we have a sadly dissipated version of what was once a beautiful and highly-functional planet, and I believe the most important task before us as human beings is the monumental work of restoration."



Founded in 2002 as a solo consulting venture, Marstel-Day was named for the oceans (mar), stars (stel), and daylight (day) that inspired it. At that time, Rebecca observed a sweeping trend in the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy to divest significant portions of land as the federal government sought to downsize its defense and energy complexes. "I was working for a defense think tank at the time, a job that allowed me to visit many closing sites during the Base Realignment and Closure process, surveying the land and witnessing the decision processes," she says. "The U.S. military owns 25 million acres of some of the highest quality habitat in the country, and is one of the six largest land managers in the nation. Over time, military bases have become islands of biodiversity amidst a sea of development. Congress was ramping up pressure to get rid of property, and as a consequence, we were seeing some lands with important habitat value being transferred for development purposes. That approach seemed fundamentally wrong to me, and there was never going to be a bigger opportunity to seize the moment and develop alternatives, like strategies for long-term conservation of those lands."

To provide a better solution, Rebecca and her team developed the concept of conservation conveyance, allowing DOD to transfer lands to private sector, land-acquiring conservation nonprofits. This kind of thinking became the hallmark of Marstel-Day, framing consulting questions in a way that ties them back to land, water, and ecosystem services. The firm is also based on the premise that the for-profit world should be just as concerned with saving nature as the nonprofit world, playing its part as a leader in conservation. "Often, it seems people will do anything to build the next development so they

can create a bigger tax base, not realizing they're really shooting themselves in the foot," she says. "Our entire economy depends upon nature. Without nature, there is no economy."

While it seems impossible to imagine that the natural world could ever be fully appreciated by society at large, Marstel-Day takes its work piece by piece, a day at a time. Its team is made up of people with extremely diverse backgrounds, attracting engineers, philosophers, and poets alike. And while many employees decide to stay at the firm long-term, it's also a perfect short-term environment for young people who are finding their footing in the world. "They'll stay a couple years, develop a nature-based way of viewing the world, and then go on to the next thing," she says. "They become ambassadors in a sense, taking this value set somewhere else. And every new wave of employees brings something new, helping the company grow and evolve. In this way, our culture is based on an extremely positive symbiotic learning relationship."

Today, the firm has grown to roughly 150 people in nine offices across the US and one location in the UK. It does a lot of work with landowners large and small to address encroachment, managing the urbanization and development that threatens wild spaces. Its portfolio also includes water resources management to maintain the health of underground aquifers, which grow increasingly depleted as communities deal with drought and increased demand. The firm specializes in large-scale community outreach and engagement, as well as more traditional environmental work like environmental assessments and impact statements. Perhaps its most defining undertaking, however, has been a decade-long commitment to host various forums with environmental thinkers and strategists. Recently Rebecca initiated a monthly speaker series called the "Stand With Wildlife" Awareness Campaign. "Our Stand With Wildlife Campaign covers the gamut, from connecting kids with nature, to environmental journalism, to how nature is helping veterans with PTSD," she explains. "Every individual action counts when it comes to preserving nature, and through this campaign we help people find their role as environmental citizens."

Rebecca was born in 1965 to theater-loving parents, both of whom earned PhDs in their chosen fields and encouraged her to explore her

own role on the vast stage of life. Driven by an inner flame akin to Rebecca's own unrelenting spirit, her mother has taught voice and movement for actors and actresses at Circle in the Square Theater in New York City, where she still works today. She also launched a business called Professionally Speaking, teaching executives how to deliver remarks and carry themselves proudly. "She's one of the most out-there people I've ever met," says Rebecca. "She defies every effort anyone has ever made to turn her into something she's not." Rebecca's father, known for his insightful and thoughtful nature, is a stage lighting professional, and one of a handful of individuals who defined the future of stage lighting and theater technology.

Rebecca's parents traveled often while she was young, and her brother and sister were older and often off doing their own things, so music kept her company—especially Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life*. "I memorized every song he wrote and really connected with the lyrics philosophically, intellectually, and morally," she reflects. "One song in particular, 'As,' has a line that I still think about almost every day: *Kindness knows no shame*. All through my life, and especially as a business leader, the first thing I look for in people is kindness. There's no lack of smart people and brilliant strategists, but kindness is in very short supply. I've found that the business world can cause people to become cold and mechanical, so it's really important to work to transact with kindness."

Free spirited and unconventional, Rebecca was always roaming in the woods growing up. She credits her mother for getting her into athletics, and by ninth grade had joined the soccer, basketball, and lacrosse teams. Still, she returned to the shelter of the trees on weekends, and she remembers the haven of those trees as the formative piece of her youth.

Later, home for the summer before her senior year at Harvard University, Rebecca was out exploring the woods she loved so well, when she came across a group of people who asked for directions to a certain landmark. She was happy to help—until she learned they were developers doing a site survey. "When I realized that land might be sold for development," she recalls, "I felt a palpable sense of injustice and unfairness. It became clear that preserving natural lands mattered to me, and helped identify my True

North.”

Despite this defining moment of clarity, Rebecca didn't discern her path to a profession in conservation until much later. “Kids today are so focused on the future, starting their professional pursuits early on and becoming completely focused on a profession by the time they're 22,” she observes. “When I was graduating from college, I could hardly think to the next day.” She applied for a temp position at ABC News and to an unpaid internship at the Brookings Institute, landing the former. Then, when she was packing up her Harvard dorm room to take the first steps toward what might have become a career in the news, she got a notice from Brookings that she had landed the unpaid internship. She chose that route instead, moving to DC and taking a job as a waitress at Suzanne's Restaurant in Dupont Circle to cover costs.

From her home base at 18th and S in DC, Rebecca explored her new city, finding that it had a freedom and beauty all its own. From the walking trails behind the Naval Observatory, to a sweeping old staircase in Rock Creek Park, her years spent exploring the woods had prepared her well for finding Washington's secret details. When her internship ended a year later, she moved to New York to run a State Senate campaign in Westchester County, but promptly returned to DC when it was over. After sending her resume far and wide, she landed a job at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA).

Over the next twelve years, Rebecca made the most of her time with her standout employer, eventually coming to manage many of its environmentally-related projects. Rebecca credits IDA and its think tank culture and framework with teaching her how to think more analytically. “IDA taught me a lot about critical thinking and about objectivity, both of which are key to what I do now. Passions matter because they drive you, but you have to be sure you're considering all the angles. I'm grateful for everything I learned there.”

At IDA, Rebecca took an 18-month assignment to serve as the Director of the Army Environmental Policy Institute at Georgia Tech, and as that tenure wrapped up, she found herself at a crossroads. “I felt drawn to the idea of breaking off to try my own thing,” she says. “Had I continued on the current pathway, the result would have been a productive career, but one that was fundamentally governed by someone else's

principles and administration. I thought the time was right to go my own way.”

Driven by her love of freedom and self-reliance, her initial vision was to start a small consulting practice that might perhaps grow to include several other people. She never imagined Marstel-Day would become what it is today, nor did she envision how onerous the road would be to get there. The business's first lifeline was a significant contract with the Army to assess options for divesting surplus property for permanent conservation uses, such as wildlife refuges, parks, and open spaces. With skill, Rebecca had identified the contract vehicle and client, made the pitch, and studied the funding cycle, so she was confident about the win. “What I hadn't planned for was what we'd do beyond that first contract,” she recalls. “Things got hard a year or two in. But I learned over time that the company would be made or broken based on its ability to bid and win contract vehicles, which can take months or years. In a sense, I think my naiveté about business development helped through those hard times, because I didn't have a good understanding of what obstacles lay ahead. It certainly ended up being a lot harder than anticipated, but we made it.” Now, Marstel-Day has been on the Inc. 5000 list for seven years running, and Rebecca was named a White House Champion of Change for Community Resilience in 2014. She also serves on numerous green business and conservation-related boards and is Chairman of the Board for the National Wildlife Refuge Association, a non-profit conservation organization that protects and advocates for half a billion acres of land and water that lie within the National Wildlife Refuge System.

A self-described loner, Rebecca has always found strength in solitude, more in her element alone than she ever was with others. That began to change, however, when she met Lee Halterman, a former policy director for the House Armed Services Committee who retired into consulting for clients like the San Francisco Airport Authority. Rebecca and Lee met striking a deal to transfer 3,000 acres of wetlands from the Navy to the airport as a mitigation credit for an expansion project, creating a new national wildlife refuge and a lifetime bond. She hired him as a consultant for a time before bringing him on as a partner on the West Coast. Then, in 2005, they started dating. In 2007, they were married. “Lee is certainly the

smartest and also one of the most loving and balanced people I've ever met," she says. "Anytime I find myself in a tough spot, he comes at it from a place of love." Lee has two grown kids who mirror the same approach to life, and Rebecca and Lee have a young daughter together.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Rebecca shines a light on the powerful legitimating forces of society, which tempt people into conformity and often lead people down the most socially-accepted path, rather than the right path. "Find that thing you can't *not* do," she says. "In hindsight, it's easier to see that it doesn't matter in the end what you study in college or graduate school. Your path is determined by how you self-define. My life's purpose has thus been intrinsically about self-definition and where my moral compass points. For me, it points to those woods I grew up in. There's a part of everyone that has a place like that—a place, idea, concept, or cause that makes them feel truly free."

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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](#).



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