

DARE Q & A with: Anna Maria Chávez



Anna Maria Chávez is the Chief Executive Officer of the Girl Scouts of the USA. She is also a lifetime member of the Girl Scouts and an award-winning community leader. Prior to her current appointment, she served as CEO of Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas and as Deputy Chief of Staff for Urban Relations and Community Development for the former Governor of Arizona. She attended Yale University on a full scholarship and majored in history. After graduation, she served as a law clerk in Arizona and then attended the University of Arizona Law School.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do?

A: I've had to overcome my share of challenges in life. I have to say, however, that I try not to look at challenges as obstacles. Instead, I try to see them as opportunities. I tend to be a very proactive, positive, and rather determined person, and so when I have a goal in mind, I simply focus on building a team and achieving it. It's how I've always lived my life. A case in point is my decision to attend Yale University. I love Yale, and being a Yale student was one of the greatest experiences of my life. But the truth is, I could not have grown up further away from the Ivy League world. I grew up in Eloy, Arizona, which is quite a small town south of Phoenix. It was a wonderful place to grow up, but Yale University was not part of everyday life there, to be sure.

So on the surface, it might seem that starting in Eloy, Arizona, and winding up in New Haven, Connecticut, at one of the greatest universities in the world might be a bit of a challenge. It was certainly required a lot of hard work, focus, and determination, but I never saw it as an insurmountable challenge. I decided that Yale was the place for me—sight unseen—and set about doing the things in and outside the classroom to make my dream a reality. And I did. I was determined to wind up at Yale, and focused on achieving my goal. That drive has served me well my entire life.

I arrived at Yale suitcases in hand, and jumped into everything the university had to offer. The years at Yale were not without their difficulties: I can remember being down to my last dollar. But I persevered and the education I received at Yale set me on a path to achieving the things I have in my life.

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Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to do it?

A: That determination and confidence comes from my family. I am blessed to have remarkable parents and my mother, who was an elected official in Arizona, was a great role model for me. I was also very close to my grandmother, who instilled in me a sense of determination, a belief that all of us have an imaginary train track inside of us, and our job in life is to stay on that track until we arrive at our destiny, no matter what it takes. Throughout life, you'll encounter people and events that will try to knock you off, but you have to fight with every fiber of your being to stay on that track if you want your dreams to come true. It's something I've held onto throughout my life.

“...if you aren't making mistakes, you aren't innovating.”

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: One of my biggest leadership lessons that I like to pass on, is that if you aren't making mistakes, you aren't innovating. Like everyone else, I have made many mistakes. However, they have all been learning experiences.

I'm not sure there is any “big” mistake I can relate. I am such a big believer in learning from each and every experience in one's life — mistakes and successes alike. Mistakes or failures are going to happen in anyone's life, the key is to use them to propel you forward.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: I actually have a few million young women about whom I care deeply. I often tell people I have the best job in the world because every day I get to go to work for girls and their future. I tell girls as often as I can to dream big. You can't get there if you can't envision it. So I tell girls to dream big and be fearless. Don't settle in life. We live in an incredible country with every conceivable opportunity. So set your sights on big things and then don't be afraid to pursue those big dreams.

Q: How did you make the leap from middle to senior management?

A: My career progression has been one of seeking more opportunity and responsibility. Certainly, my education is the foundation. Yale gave me such a wonderful base for understanding how the world works and law school was essential to everything I've done. Without those two components, I don't know that I could have advanced in my career and had some of the wonderful opportunities I have had. (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) I have advanced to more senior levels by maintaining my focus, while remaining open to new opportunities. Throughout my career in public service, I had risen through the ranks by doing the very best I could at every position and challenging myself to do even more. However, risk taking is so important. I had a decision to make after years of working in public service. I chose to leave the public sphere because I knew that I wanted to work directly with and for young people. When I had the opportunity to serve as chief executive officer of a Girl Scout council in San Antonio, I jumped at it, and was honored when I was later appointed to my current position as CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA. I like to believe my elevation was no accident, however. I had prepared by taking on more responsibility throughout my career and then being very focused on what the next phase of my career was to be.

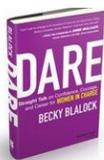
Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: Don't be afraid to fail. I see this so often and perhaps it's part of how we are wired as human beings. In many ways, we learn so much more from failure than success. We need to teach young people to view failure as nothing more than a means to an end. The world is filled with great quotes about the virtues of failure. "Success," Winston Churchill once said, "consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." The operative word is enthusiasm, right? The founder of Girl Scouts, Juliette Gordon Low, searched throughout much of her life for something that would give it meaning and dimension. It wasn't until she was in her 50s that she came across the nascent idea of Girl Scouting and she threw herself at the task with an incredible energy and enthusiasm. And she changed the world. She is such an inspiration to me and millions of Girl Scouts. If you're not afraid of failure and have the passion and enthusiasm for the task at hand, self-confidence will take care of itself.

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Q: What is your greatest fear today?

A: I don't live in fear. Life shouldn't be about fear. It's a negative force that will weigh anybody down. I am actually quite sanguine about the nation because I have gotten to meet so many girls from around the country. This is an amazing generation and they are going to make our world a better place. They are full of energy and hope and I can't wait for those young people to take their place in society.



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