

# THE LONGER I LIVE, THE MORE I LEARN

*a Memoir by*  
**Katherine  
Harper**



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## *Meet* a remarkable woman.

One of Charlotte, North Carolina's most successful businesswomen, Katherine Harper, co-founded Harper Corporation of America with her husband Ron in 1971. Her additional achievements have been numerous, including a run for the United States Senate in 1986. Yet this warm-hearted woman is willing to acknowledge that the toughest task she ever had was raising five children.

In sharing her memoir, Katherine tells us as much about her inner life as she does about the people and events that have shaped her life. In a series of well-crafted vignettes, she offers the reader snapshots into her lifelong search for self-understanding and the wisdom she has gleaned along the way. From the work ethic she first learned as a young girl working in her father's restaurant in downtown Charlotte to the spirituality she was taught by her Hungarian-Gypsy grandmother, from the self-confidence she gained taking a Dale Carnegie course as a young woman to the near-death experiences she has faced in hospitals, Katherine plumbs the breadth and depth of life's drama in these tales from the heart.

Katherine met her match when she was introduced to a young marine by the name of Ron Harper. Hardworking and determined to succeed, Ron proved to be the kind of person who thinks workaholics are the ones who make America great. Katherine shares how trying to be supportive of his efforts, while raising their children, stretched her to the breaking point.

Launching Harper Corporation of America was another whirlwind learning experience. With a dream backed by plenty of ambition, plus a mortgage on their house and a MasterCard, Ron

*(continued from front flap)*

and Katherine founded their own company. They were soon producing cylinders for printing presses, particularly the "anilox rolls" used in flexographic presses. Then, taking advantage of an unusual conjunction of technological developments in unrelated fields, they revolutionized the flexographic printing industry. What's more, they laid claim to a growing market share both in the United States and internationally for anilox rolls and related products. Katherine reveals their astonishment at how far they managed to surpass their initial dream and what the road to success has taught her.

Her multi-faceted life story is full of humor, deep musing and sharp observations. By the end of the book we feel we've known Katherine Harper for years.



*A native born Charlottean, Katherine Harper co-founded Harper Corporation of America along with her husband Ron. The Harper Campus of Central Piedmont Community College and Katherine Harper Hall at Appalachian State University are only a couple of the more visible testaments of the extent of her success.*

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CHARLOTTE, NC

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## *Chapter Seven*

# **LEARNING TO LOVE WORK**



*W*hile growing up, I never thought about work as a nine-to-five activity. My father was up before six in the morning, six days a week, and off to work. He came home to rest a bit in the afternoon, and then he worked until nine or ten at night. I took such work habits for granted, thinking everyone should work that way. Work was what people did when they were awake.

What's more, from an early age work seemed like so much fun to me. Starting when I was about five years old, Daddy started putting me to work in the restaurant. He'd sit me up on the counter by the cash register. When someone paid his bill with a quarter or a fifty-cent piece, Daddy would tell me to count out the required change. I learned all about money and making change.

To Daddy, I was always "Katina" or "Kat" or "Baby Girl." The latter always made me feel like the apple of his eye.

A year or two later I was given the job of seating customers when things got busy. I would show them to their tables and give them menus and say, "Someone will be with you in a minute."

Soon I was bringing customers their water and laying out the silverware for them. Of course I heard a lot of comments about "How cute she is," which just made it all the more wonderful for me. Once a couple of Army officers came in with their wives. I seated them. The place was busy, so someone told me to take their order. That was my first order, a real novelty for them and me. I wrote down their order and took

it back to Daddy, then delivered their drinks and set out napkins and knives and forks for them. Someone else brought the order out, but when they left, there was a fifty-cent tip on the table for me. I was elated, until Daddy took the tip.

By the time I was ten and eleven years old, I was working regularly in Daddy's restaurant after school and on weekends. I became good at it and would always make more money on tips than the other waitresses, which led to complaints. They thought I was being favored with better stations. So Daddy moved me to the worst stations. But still I came out ahead, and Daddy moved me again. He started getting impatient with the issue.

Then one day on my twelfth birthday, five or six guys from the Belk's maintenance department came in. I knew these customers, and they always wanted to sit in my section. I had been letting customers know all day long that it was my birthday and I was getting some extra big tips. They sat in my section, and I was taking their orders when, all of a sudden, Daddy screamed at me from the kitchen. I had forgotten someone's bread order or something.

I started to head back to the kitchen, saying to the guys, "I'll be right back."

But one of the fellows caught me and asked, "Does he yell at you like that all the time?"

I sort of nodded sheepishly and said, "Yeah."

So this guy stands up and says to the others, "Come on guys, let's go."

I thought they were leaving, but they followed me to the kitchen. I was scared to death of what was going to happen next.

When they came face to face with Daddy in the kitchen, one of them said, "Jimmy Hodges, you ever yell at this young lady again, we will never come back to your restaurant." Then they all turned around and walked out of the kitchen and sat back down at their table.

And Daddy turned to me and politely asked, "Would you mind taking this bread out to the table? Please."

He never yelled at me again in the restaurant after that.

But it didn't solve the issue of other waitresses complaining about me

getting more tips. Daddy moved me again, and finally he told me, “I’m taking your tips and splitting them with the other waitresses. I’m losing them.”

To which I replied, “In that case, I’ll just go find a job somewhere else.”

“You’ll never find a job elsewhere,” he snarled.

I guess he underestimated me. I was thirteen by then, still too young to be in the employment market. Mother was working at Belk’s at the time and she talked to her boss. The question of my age came up and Mother told her I looked sixteen. Her boss said, “Okay, but you’ll have to get by the Department of Labor.”

Mother took me downtown to the Department of Labor and signed a consent form saying I could work. And I went to work at Belk’s department store in the “tube room” upstairs, where orders and payments were sent from different areas on the floor by being sucked through tubes in little capsules. Since Belk’s back then only stayed open late one night a week,



Around the time of my graduation from high school in 1950.

Friday, and didn't open on Sunday, and I had to go to school during the day, it was really just a part-time job for me Friday afternoons and nights, and Saturdays.

After a year in the tube room, I was transferred down onto the floor and given the responsibilities of a cashier. I worked in that position for two years. Meanwhile, I also started to learn about wage discrepancies, hearing how Sears department store paid more. I was only getting about forty cents an hour at Belk's, but I wasn't sure anyone else would hire me while I was still under sixteen.

When my sixteenth birthday rolled around, I thought, "Now I can get a real job."

I got all dressed up on my birthday to go to work at Belk's. It was a Saturday, which couldn't have been more perfect. I did my makeup and hair, and I wore my heels. The manager couldn't help but notice me. He came over and inquired, "Katherine, what is the special occasion? You are all dressed up today."

"Sixteen," I said.

"What?" he blurted out.

No one under sixteen was supposed to be working there, and I'd been there nearly three years.

Then I added, "And I put my notice in today and am leaving in two weeks."

Of course he wanted to know where I was going, and I said, "Sears."

He gave me an affirmative reply: "I don't blame you." He knew the difference.

I started out making seventy-five cents an hour at Sears.

A year later I transferred over to the old Bank of Charlotte. They were pretty impressed with my resume: four years working in department stores, three as a cashier, and as a waitress before that, plus an academic diploma from high school. And I was only seventeen, the younger of only two female tellers working at the bank. I was still working at the bank when I first met a young marine named Ron Harper.