

Gertrude Lamfrom Boyle (1924–2019)

By Mary Oberst

In her autobiography, Gert Boyle proffers “Ma Boyle’s Recipe for Success in Business.” The first ingredient is “Don’t give up.” That advice also tops the list in her “Recipe for Success in Life.” She should know. By not giving up, Boyle led Columbia Sportswear to international success and made significant contributions to children’s organizations and cancer research in Oregon.

Gertrude Lamfrom, known as Gert, was born on March 6, 1924, in Augsburg, Bavaria, Germany. Her father, Paul Lamfrom, owned a successful shirt factory and was a prominent citizen in the city. As the Nazis rose to power in the 1930s, however, Jewish citizens suffered. They were barred from shopping in certain stores and swimming in the local pool, and the children were prohibited from attending certain schools. “Jews live here” was scrawled on Jewish homes, including the Lamfrom family’s. Paul Lamfrom decided that the family had to leave the country.

In 1937, when Gert was thirteen years old, her parents and their three daughters left their home and the family business—they were essentially required to give away the factory—and immigrated to the United States. They settled in Portland, where one of Gert’s uncles lived. Enrolling in the city’s public schools with limited English-language skills, Gert was assigned to the first grade. Within two weeks, however, she spoke her new language well enough to advance to the seventh grade. A few months later, her father was able to borrow enough money to purchase the Rosenfeld Hat Company. He changed the name to Columbia Hat Company, Gert Boyle remembered, to avoid “a foreign sounding name like ‘Rosenfeld.’”

Gert Lamfrom met Joseph Cornelius Boyle, known as Neal, when they were students at the University of Arizona in Tucson; they married in 1948. When they graduated from the university in 1949, Neal went to work at Columbia Hat Company. Paul Lamfrom and Neal Boyle eventually expanded the small family business to include ski wear, and later began manufacturing clothing for skiers. Columbia Sportswear was born in 1960 from those endeavors.

For twenty years, Gert Boyle raised the couple’s son and two daughters while her father and husband managed the company. Then Paul Lamfrom died in 1964, leaving Neal Boyle in charge. Six years later, Neal died of a heart attack, and forty-six-year-old Gert Boyle and her twenty-one-year-old son Tim took control. “We had absolutely no clue what was going on,” she later wrote. Once again, Boyle was thrust into an unfamiliar world—this time the business world and an industry dominated by men. “The more that people doubted me,” she wrote in her memoir, *One Tough Mother* (2005), “the more I wanted to prove them wrong.” Thanks to the wisdom of an informal board of advisors and the wit to take their advice, Gert and Tim Boyle kept Columbia Sportswear alive, eventually making it “the largest outerwear brand and leading seller of ski wear in the United States.”

Columbia Sportswear’s greatest success came in the 1980s, when Gert Boyle became an advertising icon at the age of sixty. In 1984, the advertising agency Borders Perrin Norrander, seeking to differentiate Columbia Sportswear from its competitors, depicted “Ma Boyle” as a woman “who demanded and expected nothing less than the best out of...my company.” Boyle soon realized, based on an “almost instantaneous” increase in sales, that “our customers thought of us as the company where the cranky and crotchety old broad made sure that they were getting a good product at a fair price.” The campaign included an advertisement showing Gert pushing around her son to further prove the point. In one television commercial in 1990, she pushed Tim through a car wash to demonstrate a waterproof parka.

In 1989, at age sixty-five, Gert Boyle gave the reins of Columbia Sportswear to Tim while she served as chairman. She believed that her son deserved the titles of president and CEO. She opined that “I never did like the word ‘Chairwoman,’ and I couldn’t convince Tim that we should be the first company to have an official ‘Chair Ma.’”

In 1998, Columbia Sportswear became a public company, and with financial success Gert Boyle began to distribute her financial rewards to charity. Closest to her heart were Special Olympics and CASA, a nonprofit that advocates for children who are under the protection of the juvenile courts.

Those two organizations, "who do so much to help young people overcome challenges," share the proceeds from her autobiography. Boyle also donated \$100 million to the Knight Cancer Institute, a Portland-based research institute that is part of Oregon Health & Science University. In honor of her sister Hildegard, a molecular biologist, Boyle, together with her son and his wife, endowed the Hildegard Lamfrom Chair in Basic Sciences at the Knight Cancer Institute and provided financial support for the Hildegard Lamfrom Biomedical Research Building.

During a 2006 interview, Boyle told a reporter with *Inc.* magazine that "they asked my son, what are you gonna do when your mother dies? He said, we'll have her stuffed. In Columbia gear." Boyle died in Portland on November 3, 2019, at age ninety-five. Thousands attended her memorial service at Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Portland to honor her business success and her generosity.

Sources

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