

## Military veteran secures career as entrepreneur and PR professional (Video)



Carla Gentles, 29-year military veteran turned PR professional, shares her journey and the Billie Jean King quote that inspired her. Jim Poulin | Phoenix Business Journal



By [Mignon A. Gould](#) – Associate Editor, Phoenix Business Journal

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“If you can see it, you can be it.” Those words spoken by Billie Jean King about witnessing Grand Slam and Wimbledon tennis champ Althea Gibson for the first time as a 13-year old, served as inspiration for Carla Gentles.

“I could see that I was going to be philanthropic, that I was going to be planning events, or part of events, or something like that. My life was going to include fashion and some things that are important to me, like helping the community,” she said. “But I didn’t know how it’s going to move from here to there. I knew my life was going to be different from what I was experiencing in the moment.”

A Greenville, South Carolina native, Gentles said that growing up in a small town, she wanted to see what else the world had to offer, but didn’t know how to get out of her situation to explore it. She recalled being eight years old and her mother bringing a Town and Country magazine home.

“I look in there and I see these people all dressed up, and they’re going to these events and galas, and they’re raising money, and they’re doing important stuff,” she said. “They’re impacting people’s lives ... and I’m like, ‘Wow, nobody in my hometown looks like this.’”

At that point Gentles wanted to study fashion. envisioning being a buyer and influencing the industry from the retail space.

Her path to get there was by joining the military straight out of high school.

"The only people that I knew that had ever left our town joined the military," she said. "That's how they got to see the world. That's how they went to college, or whatever the case was. So I joined the Army."

Gentles served the country for more than 29 years before retiring as an E8 master sergeant, one level from the highest rank of E9. Gentles was a reservist, but was activated twice.

She received money for college, and figured that she could use that money to go to fashion school.

"It's just like, OK, this is my bridge. This is what will connect me from here to there, and this is what will make my small universe a bigger space," she said.

However, Gentles deviated from fashion and instead opted to study economics at [University of South Carolina](#), where she received her bachelors' degree. She continued her education, getting an MBA from Webster University in her hometown of Greenville. She recently finished her doctorate at Grand Canyon University, studying organizational leadership with an emphasis on philanthropy.

After the military, Gentles worked for Fortune 500 companies including as an international sales analyst with Lockheed Martin and assistant vice president in retail banking for Bank of America.

In 2007, right before the economic downturn, she made the decision to launch her own event-planning business. She later met her husband Karl who was in public relations. He became her partner in business and life.

As business partners with The Gentles Agency, Carla oversees the event planning and Karl manages communications, crisis management and government relations.

The duo has worked with a diverse range of clients in the nonprofit and for profit sectors. Clients they've worked with include Germany-based Hello Fresh, a meal kit company. For the client they focus on government relations when the company ventures into new markets and establishes new facilities or distribution centers. Another client was Night Lite Pediatrics, an urgent care operator for children. They helped the company expand its footprint, going from one office in Houston to nine. The company was sold two years ago.

**Have there been any challenges based on being a woman or a business run by people of color?** I would say it's a factor. But I also teach part time at Grand Canyon University. What I tell my students is, when you get this hand that you're dealt, you have to figure out how to win. You have to figure out how to win with the hand that you have. It's not going to be fair, it's not going to be perfect, you're not going to like it, whatever the case is, you have to figure out how to win with that ... how to win as a woman, as a person of color, as a veteran, like, here's my hand. I have to figure out how to win.

**So how do you believe being in the military prepared you to run your own business?** Discipline and basically just transferable traits like a lot of organizational details and just the discipline to be routine. We have dinner every day at seven o'clock. I have a lot of structure and routine around a lot of things that I do.

**Philanthropic work is important to you. What is a significant project you are currently involved with?** Philanthropy is a significant part of our personal and professional lives. We are members of the Black Philanthropy Initiative at the Arizona Community Foundation, an initiative dedicated to increasing Philanthropy in the African American community. Currently, we are working on our annual "Let's Make History Together" fundraiser and building a vibrant network of philanthropists.

**When you are not working, what is your favorite pastime?** I enjoy entertaining and spending time with friends and family who share an enthusiasm for travel, fine dining, wine and our newly established book club. I also like to spend quiet time working on one of my fashion-themed coloring books.

**What is on your must-read list?** “Becoming” by Michelle Obama; “In Many Lives, Many Masters” by Brian L. Weiss; “The Sum of Us” by Heather McGhee.

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## **The Gentles File**

**Title:** Co-founder

**Company:** The Gentles Agency

**Education:** Bachelor's degree, University of South Carolina; MBA, Webster University; doctorate, Grand Canyon University

**Where is your favorite go-to spot in the Valley?** One of my favorite places in the Valley is Bella Fine Art, Inc., in Scottsdale, which offers art, culture, and conversations with internationally renowned featured artists. We recently had the pleasure of experiencing the work of Gedion Nyanhongo, an amazing sculptor from Nyanga, Zimbabwe.

**What is your favorite local eatery?** Sugar Jam in Scottsdale. They have an incredible menu and a great atmosphere for brunch if you can get a reservation. My favorite dish is shrimp and grits, but there is so much to love that it's hard to narrow down just one favorite.

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## **A Day in the Life**

*We asked Carla to break down a typical workday:*

**6:30 a.m.** - Coffee

**7 a.m.** - News updates

**7:30 a.m.** - Workout usually including walking the Bridal Path

**9 a.m.** - Client meetings, project updates

**11 a.m. - 3 p.m.** - Teach at Grand Canyon University (Wednesday & Friday)

**7 p.m.** - Dinner with Karl

**7:30 p.m.** - Watch "Jeopardy" and favorite shows

**10 p.m.** - Reading, bedtime

Saturday

**9 a.m.** - Farmer's market shopping

Sunday

**11 a.m.** - Brunch with family and friends