

◆ PERSONAL BACKGROUND

The subject of my Entrepreneur Profile is Elaine Wright Harris (Elaine). Elaine was born and raised in the Tidewater area in Newport News, Virginia. She graduated from Newport News High School, traveled to Washington, D.C. that same night, and began working for the federal government the very next day. She attended George Washington University in Washington, D.C. where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration. She was selected for and completed a three-year computer specialist program and earned a certificate in web design and development from the Department of Agriculture Graduate School in Washington, D.C. Elaine resides in Prince George's County, Maryland with her husband, Frederick Harris (Fred), where she has been a resident for approximately 50 years. She is a mother and a grandmother.

◆ CAREER PATH

Elaine worked as a computer programmer for approximately 10 years. She was a Mary Kay Cosmetics Sales Director for approximately 12 years and was rewarded multiple times with Mary Kay's trademark pink Cadillac and trips to worldwide destinations for being a top seller. While working for the Maryland National Park and Planning Commission (MNPPC) as an Information Specialist, Elaine sought the services of a Notary Signing Agent to come to her home to finalize the paperwork for a home loan closing in 2002. She instantly fell in love with the process and asked the agent what she needed to do to learn the skill. He referred her to Prince George's Community College (PGCC)—conveniently located minutes from her home—where a five-hour notary course was taught, and she and Fred enrolled in the class. After completing the class and a course evaluation, Elaine was contacted by the school's program coordinator and told that the evaluation she submitted was chosen to spotlight. She also learned that the instructor for the course had passed away from complications of brain surgery. Within four weeks of these events, Elaine and Fred became the instructors for the notary course at PGCC and still serve in that capacity 21 years later.

Elaine began operating as a sole proprietor in 2003. She is President of Trusted Agent Services Group, a full-service notary provider and educator for notary professionals. Elaine has been a member of the National Notary Association (NNA) since 2002 and has been an instructor for them since 2005. She is nicknamed the "Global Notary" by the NNA because she and Fred set up appointments and visit notary offices while vacationing in places like Australia, London, Alaska, and the Bahamas.

◆ CHALLENGES & VICTORIES ALONG THE WAY

Elaine shared that she has had minimal challenges along the way because she perseveres to do whatever she has to do to make things happen. She said, "Sometimes the timing is not right, and perseverance is key." That is evident in the way she and Fred seized an opportunity

under difficult circumstances and turned a one-class workshop into a self-designed Notary curriculum comprised of a variety of topics relevant to traditional and modernized notary practices and procedures. When I asked Elaine how she and Fred could take over as instructors for the notary class so soon after taking the course for the first time, she said, “I felt like we could fill the void.”

Elaine has been celebrated and honored in many ways throughout her career. She was awarded Notary of the Year by the NNA in 2009. Also in 2009, she was recognized in a local newspaper, *The Gazette*, for bringing her stellar brand of professionalism to the notary community through education. In 2011, she was named Adjunct Professor of the Year at PGCC and in April 2023, she was awarded the esteemed PGCC Faculty Organization Excellence Award for outstanding performance and service.

◆ KEY(S) TO SUCCESS

Elaine mentioned more than once during our interview that she is not a one-woman show. She attributes her success to the collaborative efforts of herself, her husband Fred, and best friend and colleague Wanda Moore. She said she would not be able to do what she does without them. She adoringly admits she thinks Fred knows more than her, but he lets her have the spotlight. Both Fred and Wanda are educators and influencers in the notary community and the collective expertise of the three of them continues to be invaluable as they carry out a shared mission of building up and empowering the notary profession through education. The tagline given to her by the NNA when she was awarded the 2009 Notary of the Year award was “Commitment to Elevating the Notary Office Through Professionalism and Education.”

Elaine named perseverance, passion, integrity, and loving what you do as her cornerstones for success. She said success is about having a vision, developing a plan, and seeing your outcome before you begin. Along the way, her work changed from pursuing money-making opportunities to teaching others how to create income through notary work and giving back to the community. She said her years with Mary Kay Cosmetics taught her people skills - how to work with people and understand them. Her love for people is a perfect complement to her line of work. Personal experiences taught her the importance of accepting people where they are and not making assumptions in the field of education.

◆ INNOVATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

In a study by innovation experts, positive adaptation to adversity, continuous reflection, mental resilience, and not being defeated by challenges are some of the key characteristics of innovative people. (Esade Entrepreneurship Institute (2020, December 10). *What are the characteristics of an innovative person?*. Do Better. <https://dobetter.esade.edu/en/innovative-person>). According to research findings published in the *International Journal of Innovation* referenced in the previously cited article, innovative people are also characterized as having

courage and knowing how to step out of their comfort zone; being action-oriented, and knowing how to move ideas from planning to execution; and being opportunity-focused by seeing opportunities in different situations and taking action when unexpected opportunities arise (Esade Entrepreneurship Institute, 2020).

♦ **EXAMPLES OF ELAINE'S INNOVATIVE CHARACTERISTICS**

1. Positive Adaptation to Adversity

When Maryland legislation and title industry procedures were implemented requiring that notaries public must have a license, education, and professional standards to continue conducting mortgage loan closings, Elaine promptly complied with the requirement and coordinated with industry leaders on implementation processes and procedures. She developed and presented informational seminars and classes to Maryland notaries so that they would be in compliance with the new laws, regulations, and procedures.

2. Continuous Reflection

As the notary public profession has evolved, Elaine has continuously sought ways to keep Maryland area notaries public informed, updated, knowledgeable, and educated on matters that impact the notary profession. She evaluates and modifies her notary public and title insurance producer classes to address changing and evolving educational requirements, industry rules, regulations, and laws.

3. Mental Resilience

COVID-19 had a significant impact on the real estate industry along with society in general. It forced potential clients to shelter in place and adhere to social distancing. However, the need to have medical powers of attorney notarized, the restructuring of estate plans, and the closing of mortgage loans skyrocketed. As an essential worker, Elaine conducted her notary business using precautionary measures and shared with students how to protect themselves and their clients. The shaking of clients' hands and sharing writing instruments were no longer normal practices.

4. Not Being Defeated by Challenges

Before COVID-19, Elaine taught notary public and title insurance classes face-to-face at her in-home training office and Prince George's Community College. With the challenge of COVID-19, she quickly learned CANVAS, the Enterprise Learning Management System (ELMS) tool, and Zoom, a web conferencing platform, to provide students with the best online class experience, surpassing the in-classroom experience.

5. Having Courage and Knowing How to Step Out of Their Comfort Zone

While she was still working for the MNPPC, located near the Clerk of the Circuit Court, it was commonly mistaken that the Clerk of the Circuit Court staff performed notarizations and many people were inconvenienced because of it. Elaine saw an opportunity and acted. First, she received permission from her supervisor and then made special arrangements with the Clerk of the Circuit Court's office to redirect people to her for notary services free of charge.

As a measure of courage, Elaine stepped out of her comfort zone and performed her first online remote notarization in May 2020 during the COVID-19 State of Emergency Order. Her innovative nature is also expressed by using her skill in web design to further educate and enhance the skills of notary professionals by offering free demonstrations of website development with the option to purchase an affordable website-building package plan.

6. Action-oriented

Elaine presents an annual Notary Public Conference in conjunction with PGCC to keep notaries in local and surrounding Maryland areas as well as nationwide, abreast of professional and technological developments and to recognize notaries for their hard work and commitment to the public, business, and government sectors. The conference is also supported and attended by national and local area leaders and presenters. This year's conference is scheduled for November 17 and 18, making it the 13th consecutive conference.

♦ WHAT CAN WE (YOU) LEARN FROM THEIR EXPERIENCE?

I sincerely enjoyed getting to know Elaine on a personal level and learning so much about her background and how she became the Notary Guru she is today. This interview was conducted via Zoom and Elaine was prompt, professionally dressed, and well-prepared to answer my questions with a pleasant smile at the crisp hour of 7 a.m. I quickly learned that we have common values because there was mutual trust and respect throughout our interaction which demonstrated the caliber of professionalism to which she is committed.

Elaine was excited about becoming a notary and did web designing for her community, family, and friends. As her notary business flourished, she acted when the unexpected need arose to teach web design to notaries, allowing her to use a skill that she worked diligently to learn before becoming a notary. From Elaine's experience, I learned the value of life-long skill building, having a growth mindset, and imagining possibilities.