Year after year, we see brilliant women and men take time out of their busy schedules to attend our Owner/President Management program. With every new class, we’re inspired by the dedication of each participant to pursue executive education along with business leaders from around the world, and by the diverse paths that brought these accomplished business leaders to us.

We sat down with five recent Owner/President Management program graduates to learn more about their motivations for enrolling in the program. While each of their stories is unique, they share three key traits: the innate drive to work hard, to connect with colleagues, and to improve the lives of others.
“I absolutely never doubted that I could do it. I was not afraid in the big scheme of things, but I was afraid of saying no to the opportunity.”

That’s what A.J. Drexler says about her decision to leave the agency she and her business partner built from the ground up to go do it alone. That courage paid off, and now A.J. is the CEO and chief strategist at Campos, a research and strategy firm in Pittsburgh that specializes in branding, customer experience, and innovation.

A.J. exudes confidence, with a touch of lighthearted self-deprecation. She knows what she wants, and she’s not afraid to go after it. That trait dates back to her high school days working at McDonald’s when, determined to become one of the company’s “stars,” she consistently showed her value and just six weeks later was promoted to the coveted role. She realized from that point on, in the wise words of her mother: “Not everybody’s going to like you, and that’s okay. You can march to the beat of a different drummer and don’t have to worry. You can pursue things that are interesting and not be afraid of the judgment of others.”

That outlook has led A.J. to many exciting opportunities, including becoming a member of the Women Presidents’ Organization (WPO). While attending a WPO conference in 2012, she was enthralled by HBS Professor Lynda Applegate’s presentation of the Zipcar case study. When Professor Applegate announced that OPM was offering a scholarship, A.J. spent the rest of the conference filling out her application and networking with every Harvard-related member to get their referral.

By the time she had her in-person meeting, the interviewer pointed to a large stack of A.J.’s business cards and said, “It’s about time.”

A.J. was selected for the scholarship, validating her decision to pursue executive education, but she had a slightly uncharacteristic experience with OPM. She was originally accepted the year she sold her first agency, so she deferred and came the following September. Then business interrupted again.

“Before I was supposed to come back for the second round of OPM, Campos got our first million-dollar contract, so I’ve actually been in OPM 49, OPM 50, and OPM 51,” A.J. says. Despite the fact that she didn’t have a consistent OPM cohort throughout her experience, she still was looking forward to “bringing her dancing shoes” to graduation.

A.J.’s path to HBS Executive Education is characterized by internal motivation, self-discovered opportunities, and lessons learned at a young age. “Life is incredibly short,” she says. “We gotta pack it all in.”

Professor Ananth Raman describes OPM this way: “It is a third the people, a third the academics, and a third the time you get to spend in your own head.” A.J. agrees, adding: “I have been deep in my head each of the times that I came. OPM is an academic and intellectual exercise, and the opportunity to imagine taking my business forward.”
As Jen Behm excitedly tells us about her daughter’s recent qualification in a fiction-writing competition—she hopes she’ll become the next J.K. Rowling—it is immediately clear how important family is to her. Her daughter’s wins are her own wins.

Education, creative thinking, and compassion are recurring themes throughout Jen’s personal and professional life. As a child, she grew up considering the family business another sibling.

“We were always there on the weekends with my father and grandfather,” she says, although it wasn’t until she was 15 that she officially joined as an employee. “I took that as a bridge job until I figured out what I wanted to do. It’s turned into a very long bridge that I’m never getting off, because it’s 18 years later and I’m still there!”

Today Jen is the executive vice president and co-owner of Projects Unlimited based in Dayton, Ohio, the “birthplace of aviation.” Her grandfather started the business in the 1950s selling aerospace and defense products to the government. Her father took over in the late 1990s and now she and her brother run the business as the third generation, a rarity among family businesses.

The key to being successful for more than half a century, Jen claims, is “having a united front, always. We make sure that disagreements happen behind closed doors—and when we walk out of the room, we walk out with a consensus.”

While business has always been a profound presence in her life, so has education. Her father attended OPM in the 1990s and applied his new skills to the business when he took over a few years later, leading the firm to profitability in every year since. This was the first time Jen noticed something special and inspirational about executive education; but it wasn’t until a few years later, when her mother signed up for the program, that the experience really moved her.

“When my mother joined OPM, I thought it was an absolutely amazing accomplishment because she had no formal education before that,” Jen says. “It really inspired me, the fact that she succeeded and thrived in the program. It made me feel that I could do it as well.”

After she graduates from OPM, Jen will be ready to apply new skills to her next endeavor—professionalizing the family foundation. “I’m really using my OPM resource now to build a vision and a strategy so that we can have a more major impact,” she says. The foundation gives back to both national and local organizations near and dear to her family’s heart, mainly focusing on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics) programs. Jen has always been a creative thinker and understands the value of balancing the cognitive with the creative. “I think outside of the box and bring in some opportunities that others would not readily think of,” she says.

Aside from the invaluable skills Jen has learned in OPM, her biggest takeaway has been the peer interactions. “The classes are wonderful, but only about half of the takeaways that I get are from them,” she says. “The other half really are from the conversations that stem from the cases or even over a meal with my fellow classmates.”

Jen’s advice to prospective OPMers: “You will only get out of the program as much as you put into it, so I suggest you completely immerse yourself. As difficult as it is, try very hard to leave your business behind so that you can focus on educating yourself.” For Jen, that applies to family as well. “I call home every day but I’ve made sure not to go home, knowing that part of the experience is being here immersed for the full three weeks.”
If you ask Jennifer Adams what brought her to OPM, she will tell you a funny story. “A random gentleman on an airplane who was shopping for extraordinarily expensive vacation homes motivated me to do it,” she says. It’s fitting, as Jennifer’s successful career trajectory—she’s the CEO and founder of Jennifer Adams Brands in Scottsdale, Arizona, and the author of *Love Coming Home* and *How High Can You Soar*—can be attributed to her humble personality, incessant curiosity, a series of wise mentors, and a little bit of serendipity.

Growing up in rural Oregon, Jennifer had few resources and an even smaller network. Her innate ambition is what helped her succeed in finding work at a young age, starting as a housekeeper, a job she maintained throughout high school. Looking back today, she sees some parallels between her days of making beds to the time she now spends designing them. She also knows what it feels like to be driven by passion rather than by a fear of returning to her cleaning days.

Another serendipitous moment in her life came when she found a flyer for a design trade school where she ultimately learned the basics of decorating and marketing. From there, Jennifer started a small interior design business and eventually assembled a team, but soon realized she was operating on trial and error rather than on well-rounded business knowledge. She already had the curiosity and motivation, but needed the mentors to help show her the way.

Just as her foray into design came about by happening upon a flyer, the opportunity to attend OPM came from sitting next to that gentleman on the airplane—a program graduate. He’d started a business from the ground up, so she asked him if there was a pivotal moment he could point to. The answer? “I went to OPM.”

Jennifer’s list of life lessons she’s learned over the years as a self-made business leader and during her time in executive education is a long and inspiring one. She has learned life is not a straight path and you have to accept that with highs come lows, that it is important to accept guidance from others who are more experienced, and that you should always be passionate about your work.

“Ask yourself: ‘If all I had was pure potential, what would I want?’ When I do that, I see a path to my most fulfilling life. Ultimately, and gratefully, asking myself this question led me to taking the leap into OPM.”

During OPM, Jennifer was able to remove herself from the “trenches” of her business and see her business from a bird’s-eye view to gain perspective and find new solutions. Most important, she found confidence in herself. In the past, being a business leader without a college degree made her feel insecure, but with OPM under her belt she is now living by her own advice: “Never limit yourself out of fear.”
“I always felt like I was different growing up,” says Susie Quesada, a first-generation Filipino American born and raised in San Francisco. Despite some cultural challenges in her childhood, she has thrived as an educator, a mentor to Filipino youth, and now as the president of her family’s business, Ramar Foods International in the Bay Area.

Ramar Foods International, started by her grandmother in 1969, picked up steam when her father took over and expanded their business from importing products to manufacturing. As the firstborn child, Susie jokes she was guilted into joining the company, although she grew to love the work.

“I realized that my dad wasn’t just building a company and products to help the broader Filipino community. He was making livelihoods for families,” she says. Her father was a role model for her growing up, as were the soccer coaches and math teachers who pushed her to challenge herself. She learned from her father that “everything is good in moderation,” a maxim that has applied to both her career and her experience in education.

When Susie first joined the family business, she wanted to pursue an MBA, but her father convinced her she would learn everything she needed to know on the job. She remained optimistic and continued her passion for education in other ways, first working with middle school students from other cultures helping them understand their place in American society, and then as a “femtor” at the Filipina Women’s Network.

“I was the ‘femtee,’ and now I’ve become the femtor, but I never put myself in only the femtor spot,” she says. “I’m always the femtee because I’m always learning something from my femtees.”

One of her mentors, HBS professor Lynda Applegate, inspired her to pursue executive education during a Women Presidents’ Organization (WPO) conference in 2015, where she presented a case study and used a soccer analogy.

“When you’re playing soccer, you’re always looking toward scoring the goal, but sometimes it’s important to step back, pass back, and protect the core of your business,” says Susie. “It’s about collaborating toward that common goal. What Lynda said just tied the whole thing together for me.” She applied that day and received one of two scholarships for OPM 51.

Susie lives by the words, “Just show up,” which is exactly what she did at the WPO conference and OPM, despite some apprehension from her earliest memories of feeling like an outsider.

“When I first arrived, I had a lot of anxiety about going back to school, but I was most surprised by the diversity in the program,” she says. “I can share my ideas about business with people from all over the world, and I’m going to get perspectives that challenge the way that I’m thinking about my own business.”

Susie reflects fondly on how far she has come since the day in 2015 when she had to argue her case for receiving the OPM scholarship in front of 850 people.

“I talked about how we were in this transitional period, and I was trying to figure out what that meant for me,” she says. “What was I going to do, and then how do I bring my background of teaching to the company? I couldn’t quite articulate how it would all come together, but I’m finding that as I’ve been in the program for the last three years, it’s becoming clearer and clearer to me every day.”
Tasha Jamaluddin is currently a successful managing director of Epcon Industrial Systems in Conroe, TX, a manufacturing company started by her father more than 40 years ago. But running a business wasn’t always part of the plan. Prior to joining the business, Tasha worked in architectural lighting, designing for big institutions throughout the city. After receiving her master’s degree from New York University, she was on track for a PhD. But Tasha didn’t want to miss out on the chance to work with her father, whom she had always been close with growing up. So Tasha decided to leave her friends and blossoming career in New York City to spend a year in Texas.

Now, five years later, she has no desire to ever leave the business. “I don’t even change my own light bulbs in my house anymore,” she jokes. “I love what I do now.”

What she finds most rewarding is being able to see the impact the business and her decisions make on people’s livelihoods. Tasha recalled one of her first challenges, when the business was changing the health care and benefits system, and how she was able to steer through the transition without losing morale among the more senior employees.

Despite the victories along the way, loving her job has not come without challenges. “I had no pragmatic knowledge of business,” she says. “So a lot of it was just getting in and doing it. There are a few blunders when you’re doing something new and no one’s telling you what to do.”

Tasha knew that she had to gain more systematic knowledge about how to run a business, and the OPM program was a familiar one for the family.

Tasha’s father and brother both attended OPM. Growing up, she always knew the program had a big impact on their lives as well as the business. She remembers attending her father’s graduation on the HBS campus, and staying with one of his colleagues during a trip to Saudi Arabia. When Tasha realized she would be at Epcon for the long haul, she knew she had to apply.

“I really felt like if I didn’t go through the program, I wouldn’t quite have the same weight in decision-making, and OPM has given me a lot of confidence,” she says. “Not just for me, but also for my father and brother, to know that I’ve been through the same training they have. It levels the playing field and lets them feel confident in me moving the business forward.”

“Being a female business leader within a male-dominated industry can feel isolating at times,” says Tasha, but she has been able to connect with her OPM classmates on a deeper level by sharing business challenges and life stories.