

## Katharine Wolf '98



# A Statement of Grit

**KATHARINE WOLF '98** always wanted to change the world, a vision that was almost derailed by people who told her she had big limitations. Now Katharine has launched an innovative business concept that is proving them wrong. Her company, Odetta, based in Jordan, offers clients on-demand technology solutions delivered by a remote team of highly educated and talented women who might otherwise be unemployed.

Katharine decided to base her business in the Middle East because that's where the talent pool—and the need—was. According to a 2015 Brookings Institute report, once Arab women graduate from school, they are less likely than men to get a job. For example, in Jordan alone, the report stated, “female college graduates are almost three times more likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts.”

The reason? Largely cultural, as young, highly educated women (and thus desirable marriage partners) marry and customarily start families at a young age and either cannot

find jobs, have no transportation, or are relegated to child-rearing in the home. It is these women who form a sleeping giant of talent, one that Katharine is tapping to staff Odetta, her remote data collection and analysis firm.

Odetta allows its workers the freedom to work from home, according to their schedules—taking advantage of a work force perfectly positioned to deliver top quality data analysis. The women are productively employed, yet able to honor their domestic demands through the flexible work model.

When she's recruiting talent, Katharine asks for a “statement of grit” from job candidates, which she defines as “a level of internal drive and motivation.” It helps her understand her talent pool, and it powers the success of her business.

“You can tell me where you went to school, where you were born, what you think you are good at, and I can see your resume, but part of our on-boarding process is understanding what you understand about yourself,” she

says. “The people who have a high level of grit can accomplish anything, especially if you believe that abilities are internationally distributed, as I do. Someone may have that ability and that motivation, yet they might be in an environment where they’re told they are not good enough, that they can’t do this or they can’t do that—these are the people we are attracting to our platform.”

Katharine knows that story well. Her life is her own statement of grit, starting with a childhood marked by undiagnosed ADD. “I believed for many years that I was not smart because I had teachers who told me that and standardized tests that confirmed that,” she said. “I really didn’t want it to be true, and I had amazing parents who also believed in me.”

She says her reaction was to fight back, to “overcompensate” for what others labeled as a weakness.

“In third grade I was up until midnight studying, hiding in my bathroom so I could pass the test. I had to work three times harder than anyone else and I knew that. I also didn’t know what was wrong with me. Sometimes these experiences are really favorable in having you build a compensating structure to overcome it. Sometimes you build it so strong

that you’re better than those who started out with no problems at all.”

That has fueled the rest of Katharine’s story, starting with a transfer to Groton in 1996—joining her brother and fellow quadruplet Jeffrey ‘98 on the Circle—which she says was transformational.

“I’m so happy I got to Groton ... You are surrounded by really smart people who are thinking about the world in a very big way,” she says. “That was inspiring to me—the teachers and the people in my class, unlimited big dreams and ambitions. It was shocking and amazing at first. And then it rubbed off on me.”

She credits one teacher in particular for an important confidence boost. “It was at Groton where I had a teacher, Mr. [Ralph] Giles, who changed my course,” she says. “He told me I could major in math, which I had never considered, and that simple ten-minute conversation and vote of confidence from someone I trusted opened up my world.”

Katharine went on to Middlebury College in Vermont, did graduate work at Stanford and Harvard (where she got a master’s in economics), and in between worked at Deutsche Bank as an investment banker and started a microcredit organization in Vietnam,

which may have been the genesis for what she would do later with Odetta. She ultimately landed a job at Behalf, a financial technology start-up, which she would keep for four years. She knew she wanted to work in way “that made good business sense, while making the world better.”

Katharine launched Odetta in May; within four months, she had ten clients (including Google) and fifty freelancers. She has plans to expand management, hire more, and develop a technology platform that will allow thousands of women to work simultaneously on several projects—a long-term goal she estimates will require years of focus and dedication. She admits she is still trying to prove herself, still driven by the idea that people can overcome preconceived notions of who they are. And Odetta is living proof that it’s working.

“It’s clear to me that everyone I work with has been told there is this certain limitation on what they can achieve,” she says. “And they are all out to disprove that—and to make their own money and to be independent and to be smart and to have their kids and also have their jobs and feel accomplished. That’s what we’re really all about.”

—Marie Speed

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