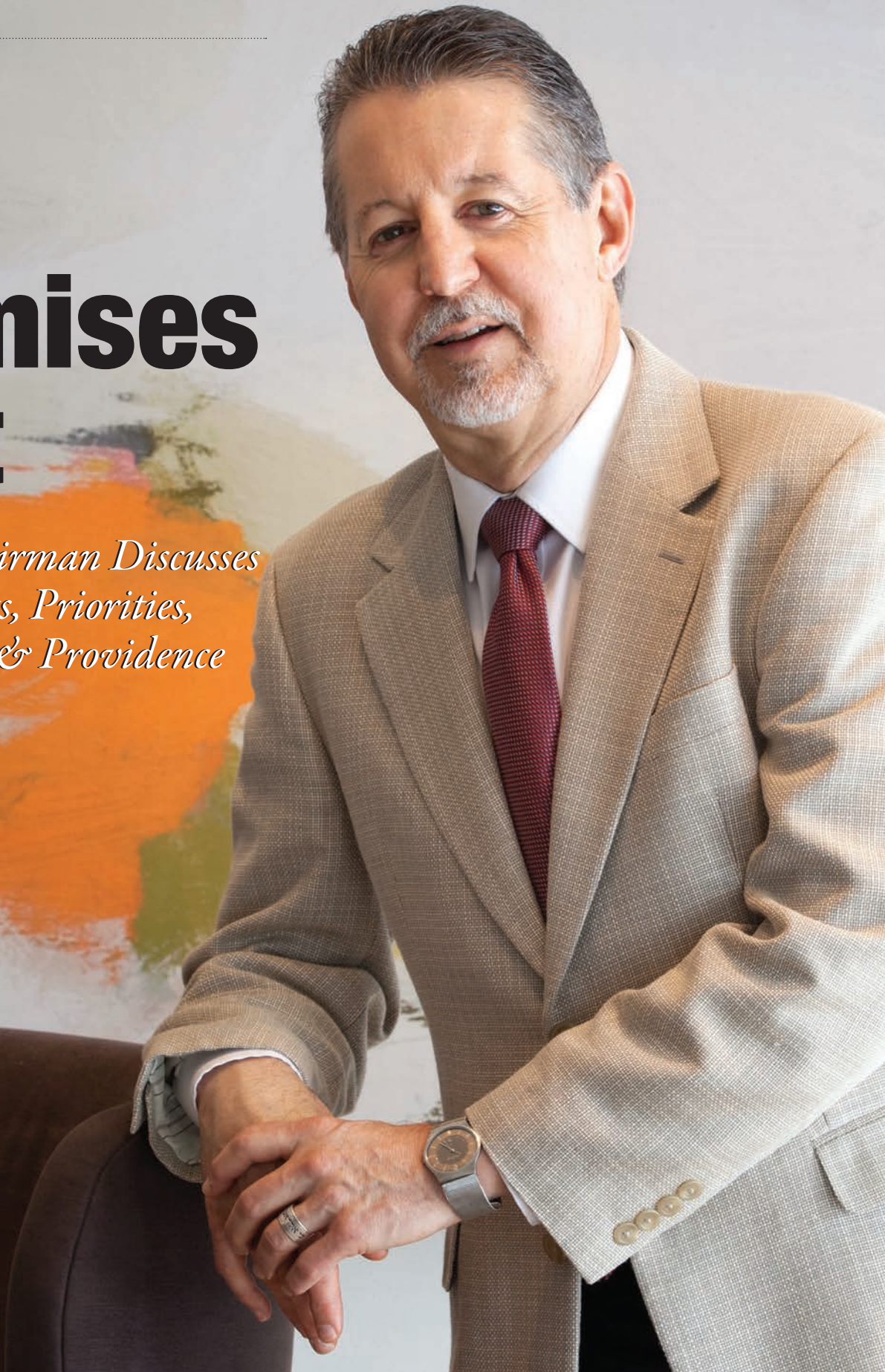


Promises Kept

*Incoming Chairman Discusses
Turning Points, Priorities,
Commitment & Providence*



When his daughters were young, incoming TSCPA Chairman **Jim Oliver**, CPA-San Antonio, CGMA, promised his wife that he wouldn't accept any more intensive Society volunteer positions until all three were grown and out of the nest. Nine years ago, his word made good, he renewed his commitment to give back to the accounting profession; he'll be leading our association for the 2017-18 fiscal year. Here he shares his professional and personal journey.

Q: You have more than 40 years of experience working in public accounting and industry. Why and how did you choose a career in accounting?

A: Yes, I've been doing this a long time. (laughs) I started out as a reluctant engineering major. My goal at the time was law school and I was told that engineering students had an edge getting into the best ones. With my math and science background, it was a reasonable choice.

However, I quickly realized engineering didn't feel right. I wanted a career that would largely involve interaction with people and I was skeptical to what extent engineering would be a "people" career if I didn't make it to law school. I had also taken a couple of economics courses and loved those, but didn't want to be an economist either.

That's when I met Tavia, my future wife. Suddenly what became most important to me was not who I was going to be or what I was going to do, but who I was going to be with. My attention became focused on how I was going to support a family. Business school seemed like a good idea. Problem was, I had left home in Texas for a college in New Jersey ... that didn't have a business school.

So it was back to Texas and on to Baylor. Initially, I was interested in a program there that combined getting an accounting degree with getting a law degree. But accounting came naturally to me and I decided to concentrate on that.

Q: You started out in public accounting?

A: Yes, I went into one of the big firms – I was actually an auditor for several years. Tavia and I wanted to start a family, though, and I wasn't earning quite enough to make that happen. I wasn't really cut out to be an auditor long term anyway. It just wasn't a fit for me.

So I went to the partners in the firm and said: "Hey, I've decided this is not where I want to be. Can you help me find something else?" (laughs) Fortunately there was a shortage of people who were doing what I was doing at the time, so I felt fairly confident that I wasn't going to get fired the next day. The partners did try to help, but I ended up landing something on my own, in industry.

Our oldest, Mikhail, was born and for a couple of years, I was director of finance and controller with Harte Hanks in cable TV operations. It was an opportunity to do something really different, but was still not the fit I was looking for. I was working a lot of hours, still wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do and didn't have a lot of time to interview elsewhere. The simplest solution seemed to be: start my own CPA practice.

Q: You thought that would be "simple?"

A: (laughs) I might have been somewhat naïve, but that's how I became a sole practitioner. I decided to develop a tax practice, which is actually what led me to getting involved with the Texas Society of CPAs.

Q: A good resource for someone just hanging out his shingle.

A: Yes, I had people I could talk to and learn from. In fact, the committee

I volunteered for was charged with educating the public about taxes. So I had to learn more than just what pertained to my own practice and I had to learn it quickly. I eventually ended up chairing the committee.

Q: That was the start of a long history of service to the Society. You chaired and served on a number of San Antonio Chapter and state-level committees, TSCPA's Board of Directors, TSCPA's Executive Board and more. You even worked as the technical editor for this publication, *Today's CPA*, and have been a legislative key person since 2004. What are some of the volunteer experiences that stand out in your mind?

A: I had the opportunity to do some pretty interesting things. We had a statewide call-in show about taxes on public broadcasting stations. We put out public service announcements with tax information across the state. We did a symposium back in the early '90s on the whole Texas tax system involving the State Senate Finance Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee and the comptroller's office. Made some good inroads with the Legislature.

Being president of the San Antonio Chapter led to one of my more unusual experiences. *Money Magazine* tested tax preparers from all 50 states by asking them to prepare a tax return based on a hypothetical family with multiple complex tax issues. When they called the chapter, I volunteered to subject myself to what turned out to be a far more demanding challenge than I expected. The magazine ultimately declared me the winner based on being the closest to the true tax liability with fewest errors – off by \$4. It was nice publicity for us and I even got some clients out of it. It had been such an interesting exercise that I'd kept a sort of diary – a timeline of what I was doing and how I was thinking – and we adapted that for an article in *Today's CPA*.

Q: What aspects of volunteering for TSCPA had the biggest impact on you?

A: Leadership training. I wasn't at the level to receive that training when I started out at a big accounting firm nor was it part of my industry experience. After that, I was out on my own. So there had been no one to mentor me, to show me how to be a leader. Being involved in the Society gave me an opportunity to learn how to facilitate committees, to try out ideas with people, to improve my communication skills, to interact with the media and to watch experienced leaders in action. Gaining the ability to lead ultimately helped me to grow a larger practice.

I also value the friendships I ended up with, the people I got to know. I can't think of anything accomplished that didn't involve working with other members and staff. It's always a team effort. That's why when my firm finally got around to launching a website, we adopted the domain name "Team Oliver." My name was in there, but I knew I couldn't and didn't do it all.

Q: Not a superhero?

A: (laughs) No, I don't wear a cape. Want to hear about my most memorable TSCPA meeting?

Q: Absolutely.

A: In 1989, we had a council meeting scheduled for mid-October in

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Jim and Tavia Oliver in Alaska on a glacier with Mt. Alyeska (previously Mt. McKinley) in the background



Guatemala trip, in the village of Cheel

northern California. My connecting flight was delayed by fog and when I finally landed in Oakland, I went straight to get my rental car to head to Santa Rosa. But realizing it was going to be over an hour drive, I headed back into the men's room. Then I began to feel like, "Oh man, something's wrong." I felt woozy. Then I looked over and saw the sliding glass doors just opening and shutting, opening and shutting. That's when I realized, "Oh ... this is an earthquake. Hey, this happens all the time around here."

Q: Oh no.

A: Yes, I didn't realize this was the "World Series" earthquake. I tried to use a payphone right outside the airport to call my wife (this was before cellphones) and it was dead ... hmmm ... so I got in my rental and started driving north on the freeway towards the Oakland Bay Bridge on the double-decked Nimitz Freeway. I'd probably gone three or four miles when suddenly there were police cars turning drivers around.

If my plane had been on time, if I hadn't gone back to the restroom, I might have been on that freeway when the upper level collapsed on my northbound lower level, killing 42 people. To think how I was complaining about the flight delay ... fog in LA may have kept me from being crushed. Surreal, yet I could see God's providential protection in those circumstances.

Q: Wow.

A: That's what keeps going through your mind. What's next on our list? Yes, let's discuss some of the challenges facing TSCPA over the next several years.

Q: At least we don't have earthquakes.

A: What we do have is a changing demographic and increasing competition in the continuing professional education market. One of TSCPA's hallmarks has been providing quality CPE; it's one of the benefits that our members say they value most. Plenty of the CPE out there isn't of comparable quality to ours, but there are some quite worthwhile classes and seminars being offered at very low or no cost. Attorneys, for instance, offer CPE simply to promote their law firms. So how does that affect us? In what unique ways can we tailor our CPE programs to meet members' needs and maintain the financial health of our organization? Technology may provide some of the answers.

The Texas State Board of Public Accountancy recently approved nano learning ... CPE in 10-minute increments!

Q: You mentioned TSCPA's changing demographics?

A: As our senior members, baby boomers, begin to retire from the profession, how do we engage the upcoming generations? For instance, consider all the millennials out there. How do we attract them to membership and Society leadership? How do we keep them? It's going to be a challenge. A lot of organizations are having to deal with this same issue: how to stay relevant.

Personally, the new CPAs I've met at both the chapter and state levels just blow me away with how involved they want to be. I look at how young they are ... and yet they're president of this or that organization, or they're starting some charitable group. I sometimes wonder, how do they do all that? (laughs) How do they have that much energy and find that many hours in the day?

As I see it, our future as an association is bright. When meeting with Leadership Development Institute attendees in May, I realized how many of them hadn't been born when I first became active in TSCPA. Soon we will be able to pass the torch to enthusiastic and strong leaders.

That said, as I discuss in my chairman's column this issue, recruiting new members and Society leadership even farther down the road depends on convincing students, early on, to major in accounting. And when those accounting students graduate, we have to convince them to sit for the exam and become CPAs.

Q: What if someone is already committed to majoring in accounting and sitting for the exam? What's your advice to those students?

A: First thing they should do is become a student member of their TSCPA chapter. Get involved and get to know CPAs. In fact, I would suggest that they talk to as many CPAs as they can, because I think students sometimes have a very limited view of the many ways they will be able to apply their accounting education. They narrow their focus and don't realize all the opportunities that becoming a CPA will provide. They should be talking to people in industry, people in public accounting, people who do taxes, people who audit, entrepreneurs. They should get the clearest idea possible of different CPA career experiences.

I'd also like to remind them that even once they make a choice, it



Tavia and Jim Oliver from the Greek island of Santorini in the village of Fira



doesn't mean they have to do that for the rest of their lives. Look at me! I started out on the audit side for a big firm, then went into industry and did controllership, finance, merger and acquisitions work, then came back into public practice as a tax person, then got my CFP® certification and opened a wealth management practice, then sold that off, and now I'm a partner at Calvetti Ferguson.

Another way to hear fascinating stories from CPAs with diverse experiences can be found at WhereAccountantsGo.com. The podcasts offer insight into how different each CPA's journey can be.

Internships are also a great opportunity for students. Some universities offer their own mentorship programs. I told the TSCPA leadership group in May, "I'm going to encourage students to call you. Please take their calls." I think most CPAs, as long as you don't catch them during the busy season, will talk to students. We like what we do and we want to share what we do with others.

Oh and there's one more – a simple one. Make sure they have a LinkedIn profile and try to link to CPAs. That may make it easier to get a foot in the door.

Q: Other issues facing the Society?

A: Changes in peer review – there are efforts underway to strengthen the peer review process, to make it even more real time than it is now to enhance the quality of the audit profession. Given the size of our state Society, there may even be opportunities to provide these services to some of the smaller states.

As always, it's vital that we continue our advocacy efforts on behalf of CPAs with the Texas Legislature. There's this movement toward deregulation and that could conceivably raise the question of whether CPAs should continue to be regulated the way we are at present. Should CPAs just simply be licensed, without a State Board? Should people with no formal education be allowed to call themselves accountants, people who aren't required to be tested in any meaningful way? We have to be prepared to push back, if necessary. Remember, we're less than two years from Sunset Review. It's our responsibility to ensure that no one tries to make changes that would be harmful to the accounting profession or to the public.

Q: On a personal note, I understand you and your wife are empty nesters now?

A: Yes, Mikhail is 36, Landry's 31 and Aubrey's 27 ... and we have six grandchildren between them.

Q: How do you spend all that leisure time?

A: (laughs) We like movies. When tax season was over, we hit four movies in two weeks. At some point, I'd like to just sit down and read. Books, I mean. Now I mostly read to stay up-to-date with work.

Tavia is a Bible Study Fellowship substitute teaching leader. They've got a large class, five or six hundred, so she also has some fairly substantial management duties. I've also had past leadership roles, but currently am just in a class that meets right across from my office.

We travel, mostly to see the kids and grandkids. We did our dream trip 10 years ago when we went to Athens, Santorini, Mykonos and Crete. Oh, and remodeling our house. (laughs) Hopefully, we'll be done soon; it's been an extended process taking far longer and far more money than we expected.

Q: What have been some of your personal milestones?

A: Memorable for many reasons ... 1989 ... it was not only my earthquake year, but also the year our last daughter, Aubrey, was born. When Tavia was about seven months along, we decided it would be OK for me to go on a mission trip to the Guatemalan jungle for a clean water project. Our group had no contact, no cell phones, no way to really know of anything going on in the world. The Tiananmen Square Massacre happened while we were gone. We were in the middle of nowhere with no communication. But it was life altering to see the difference it made for people to have clean water. Twenty-eight years later, I'm still involved with the pastor who took me on that mission, assisting with the financial oversight for his ministry that now does water projects in a Honduran village.

Of course, I most fondly look back on so many times with Tavia and the girls, times that are just joyful ... the girls' track meets, basketball and soccer games, weddings, our vacations and now the grandkids. If I had a highlight reel, those are the times I'd want to see again. ■

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