

Conversation with the Chairman

Incoming 2018-2019 TSCPA Chairman
Says It's All About Relationships

By Anne McDonald Davis



Stephen Parker, CPA-Houston, has worked in public accounting for over 30 years, 20 as a partner in PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PwC) Houston assurance practice. He specializes in midstream energy, power, utility and nonprofit companies. In June, he began serving as 2018-2019 TSCPA chairman. As he began his term, Parker sat down to tell Society members a little bit about his professional and personal journeys.

Q: How and why did you become a CPA?

A: I sometimes talk about this with students while recruiting. When I accepted a position at PwC, I really had no idea what the future would hold. Now, I did seek out a degree with a major in accounting, but I really didn't know a whole lot about the accounting profession, about what CPAs actually did. However, I believed that accounting studies were going to lay the best groundwork for me to build whatever career I decided to pursue.

I even tell my 19-year old, who just finished his freshman year at Texas A&M University in the College of Business, "I think an accounting degree is the best foundation for whatever it is you choose to do later in life." He's the only one of my three kids who wants to be in business. I have to be careful with him, because I'm his dad and I don't want to have too loud a voice. I want him to make his own decisions.

Anyway, there I was with a degree in accounting and for me, it was time to obtain my certification. An analogy? Who goes to law school and doesn't take the bar exam? It was just the obvious next step.

Q: What do you think about certification all these years later?

Looking back, I was ignorant about the difference between not being certified and being certified, the importance of it. I had joined one of the large firms, so it was simply expected that we would pursue certification.

The young folks who are graduating today, they certainly have opportunities. With an accounting degree, they can do a lot of different things; but I'm more convinced today that there is something special to obtaining that certification.

In the marketplace, certification speaks to a person's commitment to excellence, not just technical competency. Certification represents an intention to continue one's professional education, to stay up-to-date. Certification represents a decision to join a profession that prides itself on honesty, integrity and being trustworthy. There are very important principles represented by those initials after your name. I encourage every student with whom I interact to pursue certification.

Q: You seem comfortable discussing your past uncertainties with the students you recruit.

A: I don't mind telling young people about the mistakes I made and the ones I didn't. Students these days can do so much research about our firms online that honestly, I don't spend much time talking with them about client bases or benefits or any of the information available on those websites. What I have to offer them personally is hindsight and experience.

I tell new accountants to look for a firm where the culture is a fit for them. We've all got good people, but we also have clear, distinct cultures. They need to meet the people at the firm; it will be the people who will make the processes come to life.

I don't hesitate to tell students that I picked PwC because of the four

partners I met. I didn't have a clue what I was actually going to do. I didn't even know what I was going to get paid, but I got the sense these guys would take an interest in my professional development and I was right. It's made for a phenomenal career.

Q: What do you look for when hiring for your firm now?

A: I look at someone's grade point average for about five seconds. With most candidates, you can quickly check off the box for the necessary level of technical competence. The differentiator is their personality, their passions, their skill sets outside the technical. That's what makes them who they are. I can teach someone about business and accounting or auditing, but I know I'm not going to change anybody's personality. That's what I'm really interested in. I want to get to know the person to determine whether I think they'd be a good fit in our firm.

Q: You've made the point that PwC was a great fit for you. Have there been any accomplishments or milestones of particular significance to you and why?

A: A couple come to mind. One is actually ... well, I don't want to label it a failure. It was certainly a little bit of a gut check, but it was necessary. This experience taught me so much. I was put into the partner admissions process fairly early on. About a week before the announcement, I was told that my name was being taken out.

Two things happened. One is that I gave myself a 48-hour pity party. (laughs) I'd never been knocked off the mountain before and all of a sudden, I was the guy who didn't get in.

Then I kind of grew up a bit. I learned that things happen that are unexpected. I learned that I loved what I did at PwC and the people who worked with me there. I wasn't going to let a setback or hurt pride cause me to throw everything out the window.

That's why I advise all new CPAs to give themselves a chance to fall in love with what they do. The first bad week or bad month, some of them will say: "I'm leaving. I'm looking for greener pastures." If they're constantly turning over or changing jobs whenever they hit a bump, they're never going to be at peace.

What also helped me get "back on the horse" was the number of partners who called me, who sought me out, who got in front of me and said: "Keep your head up. Don't worry about this. We've got your back. We're going to make sure that your next year is not a repeat of your last one. We're going to give you more responsibility. We're going to give you more opportunity to develop." They were just overwhelmingly committed to my continued development in such a sincere way. There was just no way I would walk away from that.

Since that time, I've been blessed to sponsor, coach, watch over and mentor a lot of new partners myself. New Partner Announcement Day on June 1 is now one of my favorite days of the year. I get thanked a lot, which is not necessary at all, because they're going to pay my pension when I retire. (laughs)

Q: What was the other experience?

A: The other memory I was going to share with you doesn't necessarily have much to do with PwC. I'm an Aggie and I've been blessed to be in recruiting most of my career, especially with Texas A&M University. In

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Stephen Parker and his wife Merita



The Parker Family: Mason, Grant, Merita, Stephen and Garrett

doing this, I had the occasion to meet and get to know many students who ultimately joined our firm and who were leaders in a group called Fish Camp.

Fish Camp is a student organization with over 1,000 student leaders. Every year, they hold sessions for incoming freshman, about six different sessions during the summer. I loved my experience back when I was a freshman. Later when I was an upper classman, I got to speak at Fish Camp, but was never a counselor or a leader.

However, every year, each camp is given a namesake, which is a great honor. In 2009, there was a Camp Parker! I like recruiting so much. I'm inspired by these students' energy and creativity, and then they gave me this gift that I was able to share with my entire family that whole spring and summer.

Q: Who has been the biggest influence in your life?

A: If I was smart, I'd tell you my wife and make you write all this great stuff about my lovely wife. It would be true, but I'll talk more about her later.

While my parents certainly laid a great foundation for me, I have worked at PwC for longer than I lived under my parents' roof. Of all my mentors at PwC ... if I had to pick one who's had the most influence, it's a guy named Billy M. Atkinson, Jr. I have learned an awful lot about life from Billy. He taught me about the importance of relationships. He taught me how to treat people. He taught me that in recruiting, and we recruit a lot of people, that you recruit one person at a time.

Billy introduced me to TSCPA. He's the guy who grabbed me by the arm and said: "I need you to come out to the Houston Chapter and help me with a five-year forecast. I need you to run the model and work it up." He's the guy who really exposed me to TSCPA, helped me understand what the organization does, gave me an appreciation for how important it is for us as credentialed professionals to give back to our profession.

What's also great about Billy is that he didn't just take an interest in me. He took an interest in my wife, as did his wife. They know all my boys. We know their kids. We know their grandkids. We consider them to be part of our family.

Another person I think about a lot is one of my uncles, my Uncle Jim, who we lost about 10 years ago to brain cancer. He was one of the best I've ever known when it comes to developing relationships. Uncle Jim was truly interested in people. Once a banker, he switched to the real estate business, because he wanted to help people find their dream homes. He just had a way of impressing on others how much he cared about them as

individuals. I'll never be as good as him, but I like the challenge of trying to get better, just in his memory. I think he'd be happy about that.

Q: How has involvement with TSCPA affected your career and professional life?

A: It's been an incredible experience for me. I started here in the local chapter helping Billy on the strategic planning committee. (I encourage all students and new CPAs to join their local chapter as soon as they can.) Then I got involved in putting on a charity golf tournament to raise money for our chapter's charity, the Make-A-Wish® Foundation of the Texas Gulf Coast and Louisiana. I have been very touched by the families I've met. My wife and I are blessed to have three very healthy boys and these families go through heartache that no family deserves. I'm in the last year of my second, six-year term on the Make-A-Wish board.

In the years since my first meeting at the Houston Chapter, I was elected to represent Houston on the TSCPA Board and of course this fiscal year, I will have the honor of serving as TSCPA chairman. It's been about a couple of decades since a representative of the Big Four served as chairman and I feel a special responsibility to get the big firms more involved again with the Society. (Editor's note: You can read more about this in the Chairman's column of this *Today's CPA* issue.)

Q: Any other professional activities or civic interests?

A: I serve on an advisory committee to the accounting department at Mays Business School at Texas A&M and on multiple committees at my church – finance committee, investment committee, administrative board, those kinds of things. I have for a long time. You have to discover your gifts. I don't know that I'm patient enough to teach a Sunday school class, but I don't mind trying to help us with our finances.

Q: Tell us about your family and other interests. What are your activities when you're not working?

A: My wife and kids are very, very special to me. My wife, her name is Merita, was class of '86 at Texas A&M. She was an education major and taught second grade for years. Luckily, I didn't meet her when I was in school. If I had, we would probably not be married.

Q: Why is that?

A: I was young then and by the time we finally connected, Merita and I had so many mutual friends, it made building a social life together very easy. She and I are the proud parents of three boys. Our oldest son is

Garrett, who just turned 25. He graduated from the College of Agriculture at Texas A&M and is working in Corpus Christi for a distributor of agricultural products. Our middle son is Grant, 22, and he just graduated from the College of Architecture at Texas A&M this May. He's going to work here in Houston for a year and then is probably going on to the University of Virginia to get his master's in Architecture. Our youngest son, Mason, 19, is in the honors program in the A&M College of Business. He's working this summer at Camp Kanakuk up in Missouri. He's really looking forward to being a counselor.

All of us are active in sports, a big outdoors sports family. The five of us like doing a lot of things together. We all enjoy playing golf, even my wife. The four guys love to fish, to be outdoors on the water. We like to play board games, any kind of competitive game.

We are also into everything Aggie. Merita and I have brainwashed them completely. In the fall of every year on Saturdays, you will find all of us in College Station for home games. Our "tailgate" was originally salami and cheese and crackers in the Suburban on the way to the game with three little bitty tots in the back. Now my boys invite all their friends and we invite ours and feed anywhere from 30 to 70 people. That's not even that big. One of my other partners probably feeds over 200 people every home game! But Merita and I do it by ourselves, and with the help from cousins, and just love every minute of it – meeting new students and our kids' friends and just spending the day with everybody.

Q: Earlier, you said "more about my wife" later?

A: She's one of the main reasons I am the person I believe I have become. I sometimes think she and Billy had some sort of side arrangement on how they were going to work me. (chuckles) I just know that when Merita married me, I had a lot more faults than I do today. My wife created a great environment at home and she's always had the courage to remind me what really matters in this life. ■

Anne McDonald Davis, ABC

is a freelance reporter, writer and editor based in Dallas, Texas.

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