

Randolph Shapiro

A Step Ahead

Randy Shapiro's father was not going to be pleased.

His father, a holocaust survivor, knew better than anyone the meaning of hard work, and after spending the majority of his life fighting against the odds for a free and stable life for his family, all he asked of his son was to do well in school. Today, however, Randy was being called into the principal's office for fooling around in class. As he waited for the principal to give him his punishment, he squirmed in his seat and thought of the disappointment that would surely be written all over his father's face.

"We can't have you goofing off in math class anymore, young man," he was told. "However, we understand you're acting out because you're not being challenged enough. So from now on, you won't attend your regular math class. Instead, you'll be privately tutored by the head of the math department."

Randy was shocked. His teachers were right, however, and after successfully completing the most advanced math classes available to him during his tutoring sessions, he was able to graduate from high school a year early. "When I got to the University of Virginia, I was only seventeen," he laughs. "At the time, the legal drinking age was eighteen, so I wasn't even pseudo-legal. I didn't mind though, and my father was certainly very proud."

Now the Managing Director of Murray, Jonson, White & Associates, Ltd. (MJW), a tax, audit, and general consulting CPA firm serving the DC metropolitan area, Randy's success in math may have come as a surprise to him in early high school, but he quickly got used to being a step ahead of the game. In addition to the local work they do for corporations and individuals, the firm of twenty-five employees recently joined The International Accounting Group (TIAG) in order to better serve their clients. "We have clients with

assets and operations all around the world, so there's a lot of activity back and forth," Randy says. "We believe international taxation is an area in which we can continue to grow, especially as that area of expertise further differentiates us from competing local firms."

Aside from their international work, MJW is unique in that it strives to gain an intimate, nuanced understanding of each client so that service can be maximized. "We like our clients to know that when they call, they can talk to the partners at any time," Randy explains. "Our firm is about knowing who we work with, and going the extra mile to be responsive." Many of the businesses the firm works with are family or privately owned, so it is imperative to the partners to be familiar with their clients in order to anticipate the next step. "A lot of the companies we work with are multigenerational, so it's nice to know the family history in the fabric."



Family has always been a priority to Randy, whether by knowing those of his clients or making time for his own. Born in Richmond, Virginia in 1956, he openly admits his childhood was free from hardship; however, his parents faced more struggles than any human being should. Both parents are Holocaust survivors who came to America for a better life. His mother had been one of four children to well-off shopkeepers, while his father had come from a larger family. Although his parents did not meet until after the war, both their families were devastated to the point that only his two parents and two of his mother's brothers survived.

After the war, his parents met and moved to Paris, where their first son was born. In 1952, they came to America. Although they knew little English, they were warmly embraced into Richmond's Jewish Community, and after a few years, his father opened up a small, local grocery

store. He was living out the American Dream, and because he was successful enough in his business to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his family, he strongly pushed education on his two sons.

His parents seldom spoke of their lives before moving to America; however, Randy felt a strong influence from their experience through the closeness of their community. Most of their closest friends were also Holocaust survivors, so many of his friends came from a similar background. Despite this strong influence, however, Randy experienced all the typical elements of an American childhood. He played on baseball, football, and basketball teams, and when he was not involved in schoolwork, he helped out at his father's store. He never had a specific dream job as a child, yet his abilities in math became evident from a young age. He lent a hand in balancing the books at the family grocery store, and after graduating from high school in just three years, it seemed only natural that he would pursue a career involving numbers. He graduated from the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce with a Bachelor of Science in Commerce.

During his senior year at UVA, Randy was interviewing for jobs with the rest of his classmates. Unlike his peers, however, he was not enamored of the "Big 8" accounting firms, mostly because of the stories he had heard from older colleagues about such large companies running their CPAs through the mill and viewing them as disposable. Similarly, he saw that in such an environment, it would be easy to be pigeonholed into only one area, thereby limiting his experience. With this in mind, he began interviewing with smaller firms and found them to be much more aligned with his own career goals and values. Around the time he was interviewing, Ray Hunt, a finance director at UVA who served on the State Board of Accountancy, put in a good word about Randy with a fellow board member, Carl Jonson, a senior partner at MJW. "I didn't know Ray Hunt," Randy admits. "But I guess he knew about me from other professors."

Hunt's good words proved invaluable, as Randy was hired by MJW for an entry-level position immediately after graduating from UVA in 1977. The company turned out to be a perfect fit for many reasons, one of which being that it granted him the breadth of experience he had hoped for. "Two or three years after graduation,

most of my friends who had gone to Big 8 companies were looking for new jobs," he notes. "One guy had been working at a big financial institution and only had experience with auditing cash, whereas I was working on small companies and tax returns. I was able to learn the whole thing very quickly."

In addition to learning quickly, Randy made an effort to pull more than just his own weight. Another MJW partner with a Big 8 background was in charge of audit quality control. Despite the partner's credentials, he passed most of his work off to Randy, who shouldered the extra burden for the sake of maintaining the value of the firm's work more so than to please his superiors. Fortunately, his hard work once again kept him a step ahead, and after just five years with the firm, at the age of twenty-seven, he was made partner. "Carl Jonson pulled me aside and told me it was his decision to make me partner," Randy smiles. "I had earned the respect of the senior partners, which was a great feeling. I really believe that when someone can do the work, the responsibility and recognition will follow."

At the time Randy was hired by MJW, he never saw himself becoming a Washingtonian, having spent the majority of his life in Richmond; however, the move turned out to be the best solution for him and his young family. His then-girlfriend had graduated from college a year early in order to follow him, and after he received his job offer at MJW, she enrolled at American University to work on her Masters Degree in Public Administration. The two were married, and shortly after Randy was made partner, they had their first son. Soon after, their second son followed. Although they had set up arrangements for childcare, Mrs. Shapiro found she wanted to be home with her children; thus, she has worked and volunteered from home ever since.

While the firm's growth has been slow but steady for the majority of its existence, Randy feels great pride in both his and MJW's ability to maintain close relationships with multigenerational clients. "A client may have come in initially working with one of the founding partners, and has since been passed on to me," Randy explains. "I think that sort of relationship comes from not only producing quality work, but handling those transitions well. I might deal with a client who is older than me, and a few years later that company has been passed down to someone

younger than me. It's a nice feeling to watch that process, and it's also kind of funny that in those cases, I will know more about the history of their company than they do."

Within twelve years of becoming partner, Randy was further promoted to take over as Managing Director, a role he deeply enjoys. While the idea of merging has been half-heartedly tossed around, Randy hopes to avoid such a move in order to preserve the independence of the firm. "I like being my own boss," he laughs. "The only people I answer to are my clients, which is very attractive to me."

Although he only has his clients to answer to, Randy understands that as a leader, he is responsible for the well being of his employees. "I believe the most important thing in leadership is treating people the way you want to be treated," he says. "I try to give people the opportunity to do their own thing and do it their way. I never want to micromanage a process, but I will step in now and then to make sure the quality of our product is never compromised."

In addition to looking out for his employees, Randy leverages his position as a leader to give back. In 2009, the firm celebrated its 50th anniversary, an especially significant milestone for an independent CPA firm. While such an occasion might traditionally be marked with a grand, expensive gala of some sort, the firm decided to refocus the Anniversary's energy and money towards opening a scholarship fund. Unsure of how their clients would respond to the endeavor, Randy and his partners agreed to cover the \$50,000 minimum deposit on the scholarship, should the firm's celebratory fund-raiser prove unsuccessful. Fortunately, however, MJW's clients responded strongly and generously. "We raised \$70,000 in a matter of months," he smiles. "We have checks rolling in, and we're thrilled. I especially liked getting to see a new side of my clients' personalities."

The fundraiser proved to be an overwhelming success, and MJW has since been able to help three students gain a higher education, with the fund continuing to grow today. "I was always able to provide my kids with the necessary tools to get an excellent education, but I know how rare that is," he says, paying tribute to his father's emphasis on the importance of academics. "It's especially rewarding when we get to meet those students and hear about the remarkable things

they are doing."

In addition to the scholarship fund, Randy has stayed active in supporting his alma mater, either through donations, working with his old fraternity, or being a regular at UVA football games. "We buy season tickets and have reserved the same parking spot near the dorms for years, so we always have great tailgate parties before games," he laughs. "A lot of kids will come out and join us, some of whom we've gotten to know really well over the years."

Randy knows he influences the education of more than just his own sons, so to the students he is supporting financially, as well as to all young people entering the business world, he stresses the importance of working hard and getting the most value possible from their education. "Find something you like to do that you're good at," he advises. "Don't be afraid to try different things and take risks if things aren't working out, and always believe in yourself."

Looking back, Randy credits his own success to several mentors. Early on at MJW, the partners Carl Jonson and Jack White took him under their wings, and despite their opposite personalities, he feels equally influenced by both. "Carl was the one people feared, but I respected him. Jack, on the other hand, was the nicest guy you'd ever meet," Randy explains. "I think I'm somewhere in the middle, although I think some people might say I'm too nice to run a business." Randy credits this compassion to his father, who he recalls was always willing to help a loyal customer. "He had some customers who were living paycheck to paycheck, so he was always willing to give people a little extra, and let them pay him back when they could."

Although his father passed away at a young age, Randy has continued his father's legacy by encouraging hard work and education in his own two sons, who followed his path to UVA's McIntire School and are currently working on their MBAs at Harvard Business School. "I take the most pride in my sons, and all they've accomplished so far in their lives," he beams. "I often think of how proud my father would be. He knew no English, but he passed down this drive to work hard through the generations to his soon-to-be Harvard graduate grandsons." As each generation of the Shapiro family details, education is the centerpiece of greatness—a lifelong process that keeps its devotees always a step ahead.

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