Bill Suffa

Living Histories

As Bill Suffa's father fell deeper into the disconnected, distorted, unforgiving depths of Alzheimer's disease, the doctor suggested that old photographs might help stir old memories and draw him back to reality, if only momentarily. Bill knew exactly where to go—the closet in the house his parents had lived in for over five decades. The musty space was filled with yellow boxes of old slides and one big cardboard box which the family had lovingly called the Junk Box, containing Bill's father's old film reels, canisters, and flashbulbs.

Mr. Suffa had been an avid photographer, carefully capturing the many adventures that had taken him all around the world.

When Bill began going through the box, he came across an old metal 35mm film can. Rattling it, he despaired that he'd open it to find a roll of unprocessed film doomed to remain that way because most of the processing labs have since been closed. When he pulled off the lid, however, he found a lifetime of memories he had never seen before.

Rolled-up strips of black and white negatives portrayed the *USS Missouri*, the ship his father had served on as an officer during World War II. There were photographs taken across the U.S. from when his father had taken a cross-country train trip, and images from places Bill didn't recognize at first—Rome, Istanbul, and Gibraltar just after the war, and Tangier and Capri and other far-off places. There was a photo snapped from the Chicago Tribune Tower before the bridges were built across the river, and there was the house in Providence where Bill's father had grown up.

Bill had always had a deep affinity for photography, and when he stumbled across his father's photographs, his connection to the art form deepened. Though his father was dying, he had left Bill a living history—not only of himself, but of the world. Bill resolved that that history would

keep on living. He would travel the globe himself, photographing the same scenes his father had captured all those years ago, chronicling the symbiotic balance between sameness and change over time. "It's been a multiyear journey, and I've got a lot of cities yet to go," he says today. "It's an incredibly fulfilling process to take my father's love of exploration and curiosity and make it my own in such a tangible way. I love finding out what a place looks like now and how things have grown and changed since he saw it."

Bill's father's proudest days were spent serving in the Navy during the War, and letters saved from that time recount what it was like to be on the *Missouri* when Japan surrendered. "He wrote about how airplanes of all shapes and sizes were flying overhead," Bill recounts. "The Emperor of Japan actually came onboard for a bit, looking none too happy. In 2000, my wife Cindy and I were able to send my parents to Hawaii, where the ship is now tied up at Pearl Harbor. We arranged for

them to have a private tour, and they let him have free run of the vessel in exchange for sharing his war stories. Some of the proudest moments of his life were spent serving his country aboard that ship."

When the war ended, Bill's father got his MBA in statistics at Columbia University and then moved to Washington, DC in the early 1960s, where he took a job at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. His mother had gotten her masters in education in Wisconsin and worked as a school teacher until Bill was born, at which point she stayed home to raise him and the two brothers that came after. By that time, the family had settled into their home in Alexandria, where all three boys would grow up.

Bill's father later accepted a job in the Pentagon, where he analyzed military personnel needs for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of



Defense for Manpower. His important work formed the basis for eliminating the draft, having a profound impact on the future of the country. "My father spent is whole career dedicated to public service," Bill recalls. "By the time he retired from the Navy reserves in the 1970s, he was a full commander. He spent the last portion of his career doing consulting work for US government agencies and the military, and was then appointed to the Fairfax County Board of Tax Equalization."

While the Suffa household exceedingly stable, the community around them was notably transient, with the children of civil servants and military personnel coming and going every several years as their parents were restationed in other parts of the world. This made for a culturally diverse upbringing that fueled Bill's curiosity about the world beyond. "Growing up in DC through the early 1960s during the Cold War, there was this spirit of exploration and wanting to learn," he recounts. "In elementary school, we had International Days, where kids would bring in food from their family cultures and countries. My parents and teachers showed me that the differences between people are what create a better outcome – something become that would foundational to my leadership philosophy in business later in life."

Bill's parents also encouraged him to explore and discover the world around him, which often meant tearing through the house taking apart whatever he could get his hands on to try and understand how things worked. As a young child, he would take apart stopwatches or remote controls, and even when he couldn't figure out how to put them back together again, his parents didn't get upset. "They inspired a curiosity in me that's still one of the most foundational aspects of my character," he says. "And when I couldn't figure out how to put something back together again, I'd use those parts to build other things sometimes an improvement on the original, and sometimes something better altogether. It got me in the habit early on of embracing change as a good thing."

Thanks to this supportive environment, Bill grew up loving science, chemistry, and math. He sometimes stayed after class and participated in activities that would most certainly be considered too risky or troublesome by today's teachers. He loved working with his hands, building electrical and electronic gizmos and

saving pennies to send away for an amateur "ham" radio kit. "I built a desk in my closet and sat there listening to the radio all night," Bill remembers. "In high school I loved building things in shop, working with computers, and learning astronomy in the school planetarium."

Bill also loved the outdoors, camping and water skiing and doing public service projects with Boy Scouts and other organizations. His parents always made sure he had the basics, but they encouraged him to learn personal responsibility: he had to earn spending money and money for college, so he did chores around the house and then got a job at an electronics parts store in high school. His parents were children of the Depression, incredibly conscious of money and fiscally responsible, and these traits became very important to Bill as well.

After finishing high school, Bill attended Virginia Tech for its good engineering school and academic standing. He majored in engineering and set the goal of landing his dream job by age thirty, working as a consulting engineer for radio, TV, and telephone companies. To help set himself up for success, he got part-time jobs at several radio stations and did some government contract work for small 8(a) firms during the summers.

When he finished college, Bill had several job offers and decided to take a position as a field engineer the Federal Communications Commission. He started with an eight-month training program in Norfolk, where he met a lot of fascinating people and had the opportunity to analyze and solve a wide range of problems related to the enforcement of rules, regulations, and laws. He was then sent to New York City, which he loved and hated at the same time, and remembers as a learning experience. "The City was an interesting place in the early 1980s, and I got to interface with all kinds of government agencies the FBI, the Secret Service, White House communications, the U.S. Marshalls, Customs, and others that used radios for various things. I also worked closely with private radio companies, including all the broadcasting networks," Bill recounts.

He married his first wife, who worked for IBM in Poughkeepsie, and to help make life easier for her, they moved into a house an hour's train ride from the city. "I'll always remember the culture of those train rides," Bill reflects. "This was before cell phones, and once we'd get outside the

City on our way home in the evenings, one person would dash off the train at Croton Station to use the pay phone to call in a pizza order for delivery at a later stop. The pizza guy would be waiting there for us, and everyone would buy in for a slice."

After five years, Bill's wife transferred to Gaithersburg, and he joined a consulting firm in Washington, Jules Cohen and Associates. In that capacity he worked with clients on regulatory support, engineering submissions to the FCC, and international matters, focusing on technical issues but gaining significant exposure to small business management. "I started to pick up on the fact that engineering techniques can be applied to building businesses—an idea that really resonated with me," he says. "I felt myself drawn to business and entrepreneurship."

That draw grew too strong to ignore when Bill was invited by a former employee of the firm, Karl Lahm, and a colleague, Gary Cavell, to join in starting a new firm. By then, Bill and his wife had divorced, and at thirty, he was prepared to take a risk. "Karl and Gary were very much of the mind that we could build the greatest firm on earth," Bill recalls. "We were all smart, driven people with different strengths to contribute. The market was good, and I figured that if it didn't work out, I would simply need to find another job. With that, we launched Lahm Suffa & Cavell."

The new firm hired an administrative assistant and a graphics expert from the previous firm, and set to work building a strong client base through a focus on the regulatory and strategy issues facing broadcasting, spectrum users, and telecommunications. Aviation radios and other navigation systems were using the frequencies immediately above the band used for FM broadcasting, and large high-powered radio transmitters were creating interference issues for the weaker aviation radios. Bill took a big interest in resolving the problems, and he had the opportunity to travel on behalf of the FCC and CBS to Geneva as a U.S. representative to an International Telecommunication Union summit to negotiate international standards. "It was an invaluable lesson in how things are accomplished government regulatory international negotiations, and international business in general," he recalls. "We would go into the sessions and all the country representatives would argue back and forth until the moderator called a coffee break. Then outside of the session room, we were all best friends. In the end, everything got figured out during the coffee breaks. That's how our own government operated for a long time—something sorely missing today."

Bill's experiences in international business and negotiations were supplemented by his work to earn his business degree through an executive MBA program. Running the business while staying on top of the grueling coursework was the toughest challenge he had undertaken to date, but he completed the program with a stellar academic performance. He also completed his first joint venture with a fellow consulting firm out of Seattle to complete his first M&A deal, the purchase of a San Francisco company that specialized in public safety radio consulting.

All in all, Bill and his partners grew the firm to a \$2 million business through his five years there, and he himself grew in important ways as well. "Seeing I could be successful at starting my own company changed me markedly," he reflects. "It built a tremendous amount of self-confidence, and to this day, I'm not afraid to get into a new venture. Instead, I'm focused on the thrill of getting out there and exploring new things."

In 1996, Bill decided it was time to leave the firm and find his next challenge. He happened to be flying through Cincinnati shortly thereafter and grabbed dinner with a client, the CEO of the publicly traded radio company Communications. Thanks to the recent federal deregulation of the telecommunications industry, companies were no longer limited to owning only twelve AM, twelve FM, and twelve TV stations. Companies could now own unlimited stations as long as they didn't exceed a certain market share, and Randy had big plans for Jacor. "You're the smartest strategist I know," he told Bill. "We're about to engage in an aggressive expansion, so why don't you come work with us and figure out how to make that effort successful?"

With that, Bill moved to Cincinnati to work with Randy and his boss, Sam Zell, a prominent Chicago financier and the largest shareholder of Jacor. As VP of Strategic Development, he supported Randy as they expanded from twelve radio stations to over 400 across the US. Bill designed the back office for the rapidly expanding business, streamlining processes to create efficiencies. They traveled to London and the Netherlands to investigate the

possibilities of expanding internationally, and Bill himself pursued global leads including opportunities in Canada, Australia, and Switzerland. "That was a great period of time where we were at the very forefront of a changing industry," Bill recalls. "Randy was a great to work with—someone who could take ideas and really energize people."

In 1999, Jacor was acquired by Clear Channel, and Bill pitched them a plan to create a position to oversee capital investment strategy. They agreed to hire him on in that capacity as the Senior VP of Capital Management, so Bill and his then-girlfriend, Cindy, moved to San Antonio. He arrived to find a very lax system where no one really knew how much they were spending—a figure that proved to be alarmingly high once they pinned it down. Working across all divisions domestically and internationally, Bill spent time talking to people to find out what they actually needed, and then set up a budget, controls, and a structured process.

By that time, Clear Channel had amassed radio towers, hundreds of stations, amphitheaters and venues around the globe, billboards, monster trucks, and more. Bill found new ways to monetize underutilized assets. It was a fast-paced, exciting time, but after five years, Bill knew it was time to build again. He struck out on his own, picking up several projects while working to set up a music licensing business in New Orleans. When Hurricane Katrina hit, Bill and Cindy moved back to the Washington, DC metropolitan area, where he joined several partners to start a global and homeland security risk control market venture. As COO, Bill worked on M&A, structure, and finance, orchestrating a big deal to grow the company with some private financing from a London firm. He traveled to London to put the finishing touches on the deal, when the 2008 financial crisis hit. With the meltdown of the market, the deal was off, and Bill decided to take a job doing M&A deals for Raytheon's Space and Aeronautical Systems Group. While there, Bill worked on monetizing and licensing the company's IP and also helped investigate over a hundred deals, including closing its biggest deal in a decade.

In 2014, Bill decided it was time to take on a new challenge. He recognized the challenges facing large contractors in the defense industry and knew that he could make much more of a difference with a smaller company. He left Raytheon and reenergized his consulting practice. He worked with clients in a number of sectors, and in late 2015 accepted a role with a start-up firm at the intersection of several of his top-priority interests: early-stage investing, education, media and entertainment, and sustainability and social responsibility.

Now, Bill is CEO of Piranha Branding, LLC, which was founded by Gore Bolton. As an early-stage company itself, Piranha Branding operates the Piranha Tank investment events and programs. "Our goals are to educate entrepreneurs and new investors on how to do startups and how to become investors," Bill explains. "At the same time, we're focused on ventures that contribute to the Piranha Bottom Line: profits for people and the planet. We're all about making investments in companies that are focused on the sustainable, socially-responsible market."

Bill is also deeply involved in mentoring MBA students at George Washington University. He also serves as part of the venture startup and mentoring service offered through Accelerate DC, part of the DC Economic Partnership. In this capacity, he's had the opportunity to join trade delegations and to consider other ventures with George Mason University, the University of Maryland, George Washington University, and Johns Hopkins University. "It's like being a board member for some of these startup businesses, which I absolutely love," he says. "I really enjoy using my talents and experience to help them build and structure more efficiently."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Bill underscores the importance of striving to take every experience as an opportunity to learn. Hand in hand with the opportunity to learn is the opportunity to give back and share what you've learned. "Thanks to this philosophy, I learn as much from the MBA program students as they learn from me," Bill affirms. "To be successful, you have to be open. I think places like Silicon Valley and companies like Apple prove that point. Ethics is also critical. It takes years to build a reputation that can be ruined in an instance. Personal and corporate ethics are critical as there is less and less tolerance for unethical behavior."

Bill also emphasizes the power of diversity. When he left New York to move to Gaithersburg, his parting gift from his boss was a small glass pyramid, meant to remind him that one thing can be seen in many different ways. "I try to remember that each person brings a different view and perspective based on their background," he says. "By understanding and deftly using those differences, you can build something even better. It's incredibly important to respect peoples' differences and to view them as strengths."

Just as powerful as the differences between people are the differences that appear in the same person or place over time. Like his father before him, Bill tracks his own changes through still frames of moments in time: the day he fulfilled a lifelong dream and earned his pilots license, or smiles on the faces of clients when he's able to deliver results beyond their expectations, or moments he's particularly grateful for Cindy's encouraging, nurturing, positive presence in his life. Like the photographs he's retaking of his father's journey, he reconsiders the black-and-white reels of his own memory, tracking trends over time toward betterment. "In a sense, we're all

living histories, trying to understand how it all works and looking for a better way," he says.

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