

BEYOND THE BUSINESS CARD

GIVING YOU THE BACKSTORY BEFORE THE FACE-TO-FACE MEETING

STEPHEN B. WILLIAMS

TITLE: Partner
COMPANY: SENTRE Partners

Stephen B. Williams, partner and co-founder of San Diego-based real estate investment services firm SENTRE Partners, said he got into real estate because he hated accounting.

Williams was born in Oakland, earned his bachelor's degree in public service from the University of California, Los Angeles, and master of business administration from the University of Southern California, and returned to the San Francisco Bay Area to take a job in accounting.

When his wife of 35 years, Stephanie, wanted to move back to Southern California, he began his career in real estate with the company co-founded by his grandfather — Coldwell Banker Commercial. They moved from Santa Ana to San Diego when Williams took a job with the Trammell Crow Co.

At SENTRE, short for Stewards and Entrepreneurs of Real Estate, Williams co-founded Bandwidth Now, a business venture that puts fiber-optic networks into SENTRE's buildings to provide bandwidth as a utility and wi-fi as an amenity for tenants.

SENTRE owns or manages more than 4 million square feet of office and industrial space in San Diego and Mexico. Between 1996 and 2006, SENTRE bought and sold four downtown San Diego buildings, the largest of which was the 596,630-square-foot One America Plaza, purchased in 2002 in partnership with General Electric for \$166 million and sold in 2006 to the Irvine Co. for \$300 million.

How and why did you transition early in your career from accounting to real estate?

That's easy. I hated accounting and loved real estate. I had two grandfathers — one was in real estate and one was in accounting — so maybe I'm a product of both grandfathers.

How did your relation to Arthur Banker, one of the founders of Coldwell Banker, play into your involvement in real estate?

My grandfather had a very powerful impact on all his grandchildren, including me. He was the best grandfather of all time and you could never tell when he was at work or at play, because he was the same person.

Oddly enough, that was also Trammell Crow. You could never tell when they were working or playing, because it was the same demeanor, the same personality. They both loved what they did and surrounded themselves with good people.

How would you describe your career path from accounting to brokerage to development and investment?

I read in a business magazine while in my last year at UCLA that a guy named Trammell Crow started out as an accountant. I did the same and ended becoming his partner in San Diego.

Your bio on SENTRE's Web site says that you are currently focused on "new clients, new concepts and new ideas." What does that entail?

We were the guys that, for example, figured out real estate was one thing but the intersection of real estate and technology was the future. We've staked out a claim. Each of the big buildings we've bought we've put fiber optics not only to the buildings, but through the buildings. We've got a reputation for technology in real estate and it helped our business.

We attracted NBC San Diego [to 225 Broadway] because they were the first all-digital studio for NBC and they needed fiber optics so they came downtown. It was similar to Rockefeller Center in New York City and they did a similar thing in Chicago. It helped them connect with their audience.

It's more important than ever before to have a high-speed network, not just on a tenant-by-tenant basis, but for the entire multi-tenant building. If you had the choice of not going back into your building this afternoon because of some situation, like a fire, rather than going back into your building you could go home and work on our network. Once you've been in an office like that you don't want to work anywhere else.

What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

Leadership and picking the right opportunities to follow. A lot of us will make the wrong decisions as to which projects to do next, so I think in turbulent times it's difficult to predict what's out there and what you should be doing now to prepare for tomorrow. It's one thing to know that and another thing to convince everyone else that's what you should be doing.

What do you see as the biggest pitfall for the commercial real estate industry today?

There's a couple odd things. One is the nature of work and the fact that how we work is changing faster than most of us realize. Tenants are renewing leases at reduced sizes.

Another thing is I think too many of us are too focused on the past and not focused on the future. I have a lot of friends who think this recession is going to last six months because most recessions do, but I don't think that's what's going to happen. This recession is much different. Once we get out of this recession the conditions could be vastly different from what most of my friends are thinking about.

Do you have a favorite deal or project that you've worked on during your career?

One America Plaza is generally considered by real estate professionals to be the best piece of real estate in San Diego. On top of the building is what's called the crow's nest. We used to take two or three people up there every week and it has a view of San Diego that most people never get to see.

It's the symbol of our skyline, the biggest office building in downtown. Everything about it is unique.

If you weren't doing this, what would you be doing?

I'd be miserable. I've always said that I was born to be in real estate and this was what I was meant to do, so one way or another I would've been in real estate.

What is your favorite vacation spot?

Glenbrook at Lake Tahoe.

What book are you reading right now?

The Splendid Exchange by William Bernstein, which is the history of world trade essentially. It is the sequel to The Birth of Plenty: How the Prosperity of the Modern World Was Created.

What's in the trunk of your car?

My road bike, an Orbea. I ride it every day.

— Interview by Mandy Jackson

